

AMERICA: A CENTER-LEFT NATION

AUTHORS:

CAMPAIGN FOR **AMERICA'S FUTURE**



MAY 27, 2009

The New Progressive Majority

Barack Obama promised change during his White House campaign last year and ran on a distinctly liberal platform of comprehensive health care reform, investing in new energy and good jobs, ending the Bush-era tax cuts for the very wealthy, and ending the war in Iraq. Obama won more votes than any other candidate in American history, and his victory capped off several years' worth of sweeping Democratic electoral wins.

Yet almost within hours of Obama's victory, portions of the political press corps insisted America remained firmly planted on the "center-right" of the political spectrum. "This country, even with the election of Barack Obama last night, remains a very centered country, or maybe even center-right in a lot of places," NBC's Tom Brokaw announced less than one day after Obama claimed victory. Brokaw later added, "We still remain a centered country or a center-right country when you look at the geographic distribution."

Soon *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham insisted that to govern successfully, Obama had to become a center-right leader in order to match America's "instinctively conservative" streak. (The center-right press push actually began shortly before Election Day, with the late-October *Newsweek* cover story "America the Conservative.") And *The Washington Post's* David Broder warned that too many victorious Democrats in Congress had "ideas of their own about what should be done in energy, health care and education." Broder ignored the fact that surveys indicated most American *avored* many of those Democratic ideas.

From the press' perspective, the broad Democratic wins last November *did not* signify a sea change in American politics, which was how the media treated big Republican wins in 1980 and 1994. Instead, the Democratic wins last year unfolded *in spite* of voters' natural conservative leanings.

It made sense for partisan conservatives, eager to downplay their losses, to push the center-right claim in the wake of November's stinging defeats. (Karl Rove, appearing on Fox News the day after Obama's win: "Barack Obama understands this is a center-right country.") It's misleading, though, for the news media to echo that spin, since it's not factually sound. Still, months into Obama's first term, the center-right claim enjoyed widespread media acceptance.

"You could make the argument that this is still a center-right country," said Fox News anchor Chris Wallace in February, just minutes after displaying an on-air graphic that showed widespread Republican losses in recent elections. "We remain a center-right nation in many ways -- particularly culturally, and our instinct," *Newsweek's* Meacham reiterated that month. And MSNBC's Chris Matthews echoed the claim in April: "I've noted that we're right of center except when we're in a crisis, when we're left of center." In May, too: "The true north is somewhere right of center, not left of center."

The center-right trend is a familiar one. For years, the Beltway press has consistently announced, in spite of widespread issue-based polling data that proved otherwise, that America leans center-right, while implying that Democrats are electorally successful only if they're able to camouflage whatever liberal impulses they might have.

"These Democrats that were elected last night are conservative Democrats," said CBS' Bob Schieffer the day after they scored big wins in the 2006 midterm elections. It wasn't true, though. A *Media Matters* survey of the 30 newly elected House Democrats who took Republican seats in 2006 found that they advocated liberal positions, such as raising the minimum wage, changing course in Iraq, funding embryonic stem cell research, and opposing any effort to privatize Social Security.¹

For the press, Democratic victories are explained away as candidates' having moved to the right, while Republican victories are confirmed as a true expression of America's conservative pulse.

Even after the Democratic landslide victory in November -- following a campaign in which Republicans branded Obama as "the most liberal" member of the U.S. Senate -- and even after Democrats took control of both house of Congress and won governorships and state legislatures nationwide, the news media continued to propagate the falsehood that America is a fundamentally conservative country.

The strong job approval ratings that Obama has posted during his first months in office, during a period when he unveiled an often proactive and progressive agenda, undercut the claim that the country is center-right. In fact, conservative commentators, particularly those on Fox News, have portrayed Obama as so liberal that his activist agenda bordered on socialist or even Marxist. Yet according to Gallup polling, Obama's approval ratings for this first 100 days in office were higher than those of any president since Ronald Reagan and higher than seven of the last eight presidents at the 100-day mark. It doesn't seem likely that an entrenched center-right nation would reward such a liberal president with historically high job-approval ratings. However, a centrist or center-left nation would.

And all indications today are that America is becoming just that. Polling data regarding a wide range of issues, including the role of big business, health care reform, gay marriage, stimulus spending, international trade, and Social Security, indicate that Americans are increasingly receptive to and comfortable with a progressive agenda.

It would be hard, furthermore, to argue that voters were somehow fooled about what Obama's agenda would be. A Pew Research Center poll in October 2008 showed that voters identified Obama as "liberal" and roughly as far to the left as John McCain was to the right. By overwhelming numbers, voters selected the liberal candidate over the conservative one.

The idea that America is a center-right country whose citizens are skeptical of, if not hostile toward, progressive candidates and policies has long been a staple of political commentary. There would be nothing problematic in journalists' relying on this notion if actual evidence existed to support it. The truth, however, is that in most policy areas, it is progressive ideas that enjoy majority support. At a time when Democrats control not only the White House and both houses of Congress but a majority of governorships and state legislatures, as well, the picture of America as a center-right country has become particularly hard to sustain.

The term "center-right" itself is based on questionable premises. It comes from the notion that combining the "right" -- self-described conservatives -- with the "center" -- self-described moderates (or in a partisan context, Republicans with independents) -- creates the center-right majority of the country. But on issue after issue, and in growing percentages over time, nominal independents or moderates increasingly mirror the opinions of nominal Democrats or liberals. The majority is center-left; it is the right that is isolated.

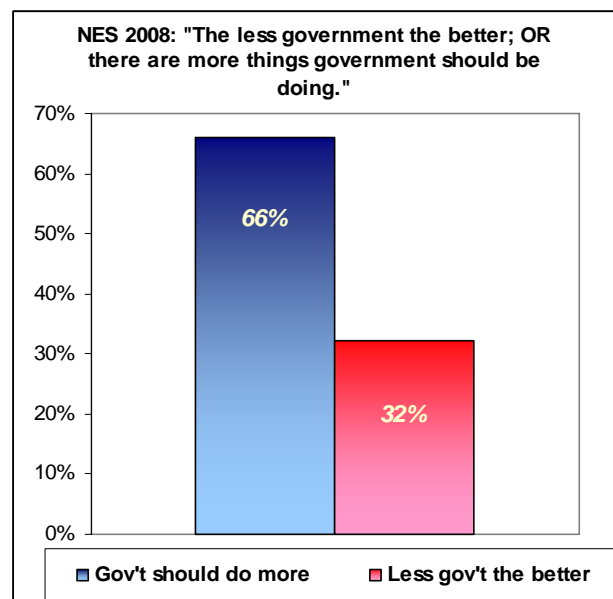
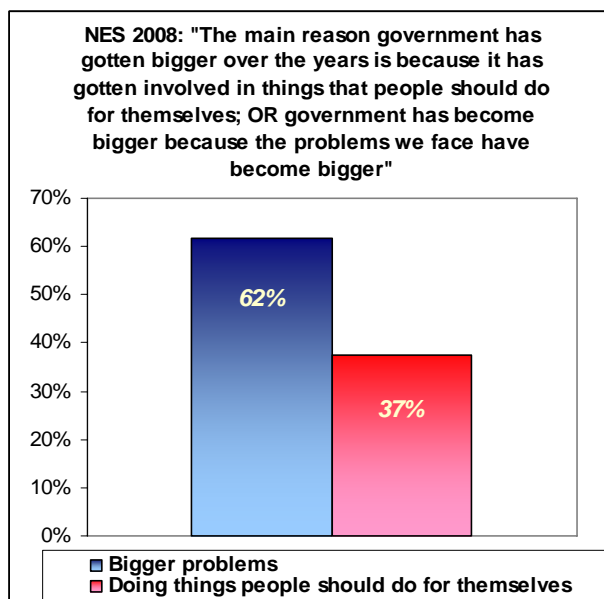
Data Sources

This report relies primarily on three data sources: the biennial National Election Studies, which are funded by the National Science Foundation and administered by the University of Michigan; surveys by the Pew Research Center; and surveys by Gallup. These were selected because of their reputations for methodological rigor and nonpartisan analysis. We also supplement these at a few points with results from relevant media polls.

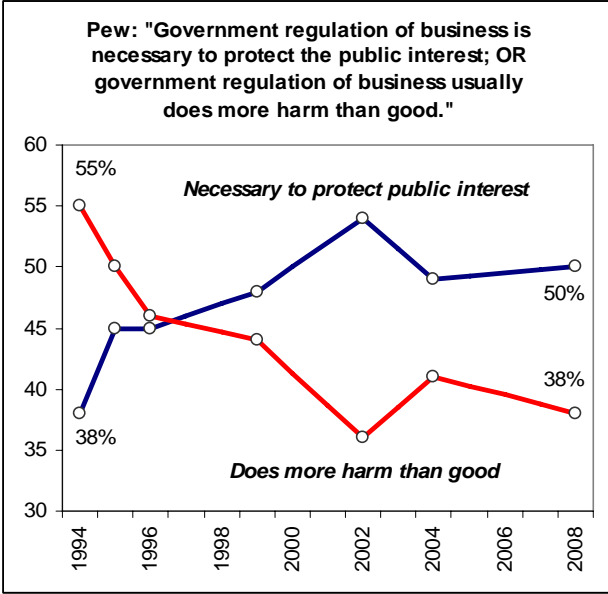
OPINIONS ABOUT GOVERNMENT

It is one of the most fundamental ideological divides between the left and the right: Conservatives purport to believe that government should be as small as possible and favor market-oriented solutions to social problems; progressives, on the other hand, see government playing a more vital role in meeting basic social needs, including infrastructure, economic security, education, and health care. As the most recent National Election Study (NES) data demonstrate, clear majorities of the public recognize the importance of a well-run and well-funded government to their lives and to the security and prosperity of the country, and, indeed, want it to do more.

On all three of the following measures, the public has moved in a more progressive direction. The number saying the government should be doing more things increased by 9 points from the 2004 study, the number saying government has gotten bigger because the problems have gotten bigger increased by 3 points, and the number saying we need a strong government to handle today's economic problems increased by 5 points.



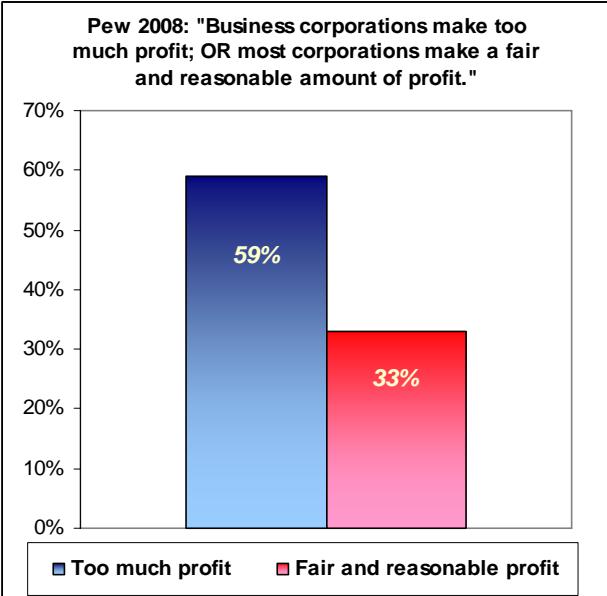
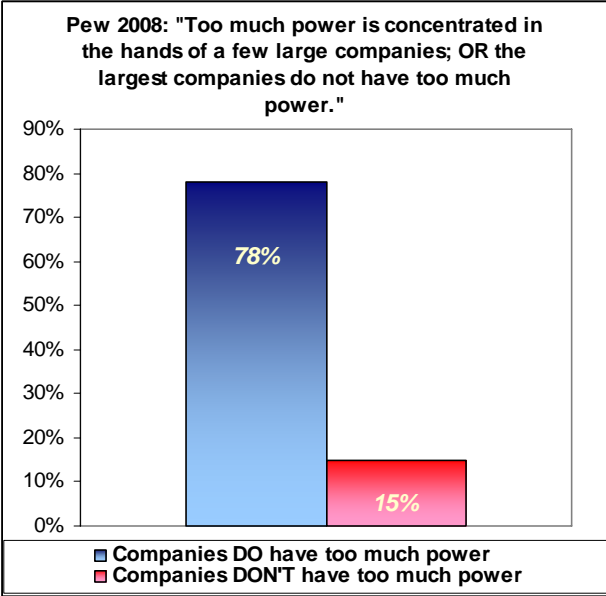
This is not to say, of course, that Americans do not harbor significant skepticism about government's *ability* to solve problems, as opposed to the necessity of trying to do so. One of the legacies of the Bush years (particularly Hurricane Katrina) was a widening belief in government inefficiency. Nonetheless, Americans continued to believe that government regulation was necessary, as data from the Pew Research Center show.



Pew has asked this question in a manner designed to probe the ideological divide. In a poll taken in October 2008, 50 percent of respondents chose "Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest," while 38 percent chose "Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good." The number choosing the former has exceeded the number choosing the latter since 1999. Whether this figure goes up or down in the near future obviously depends on the success of the Obama administration's programs, but at the moment, the public seems clearly on the side of more government supervision of industry.

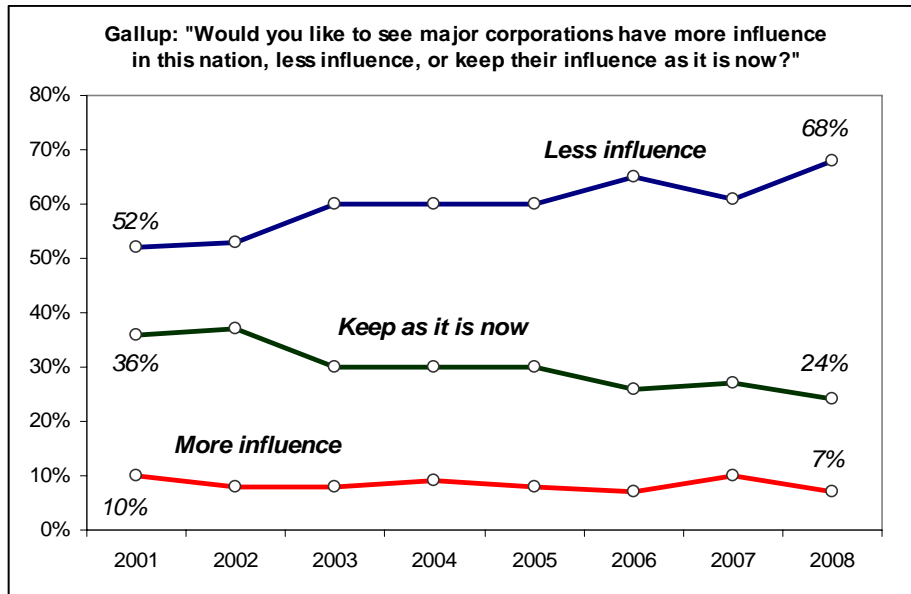
OPINIONS ABOUT BUSINESS

No one doubts that the United States is an entrepreneurial country where capitalism thrives. Nonetheless, Americans maintain a good deal of skepticism toward big business. As Pew data demonstrate, significant majorities of the public are uneasy about the profits made, and influence wielded, by large corporations.



These results can not be attributed to the recent economic crisis; in fact, the 2008 figures are extremely close to what Pew obtained when it asked the question before the downturn began.²

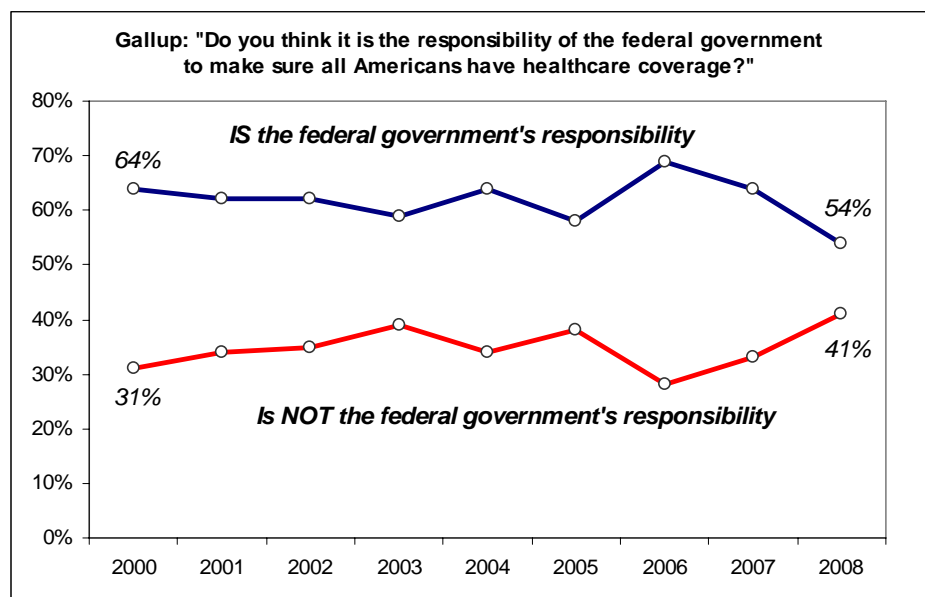
Gallup has obtained similar results. Since 2001, Gallup has asked, "Would you like to see major corporations have more influence in this nation, less influence, or keep their influence as it is now?" In January 2008, fully 68 percent wanted corporations to have less influence. This figure has been climbing steadily since 2001.³



While there are limits to how much these kinds of questions can tell us, they do help explain why populist appeals continue to be effective.

HEALTH CARE

As the Obama administration begins laying the groundwork for health care reform, public opinion data are clear not only that the public strongly favors change, but that conservatives' principal argument against such change -- that too much government involvement in health care is problematic -- does not seem to find much support. For instance, in March, Pew asked

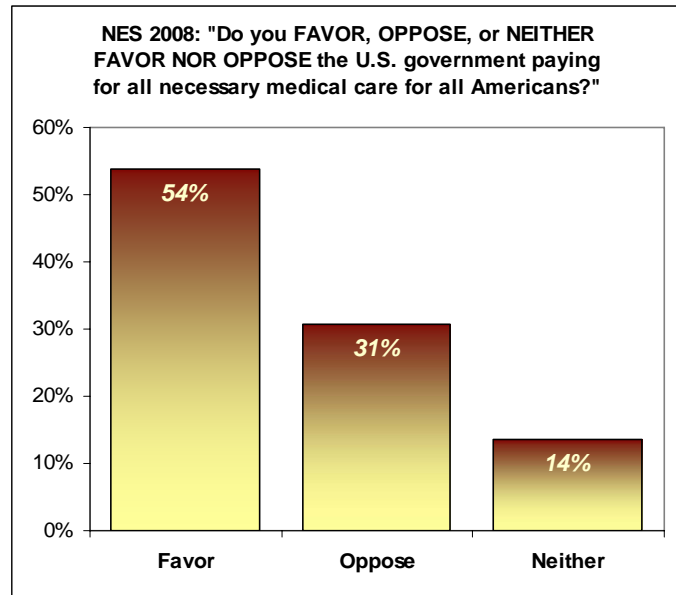


respondents whether they would favor "[t]he U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens, even if it means raising taxes."⁴ Fully 61 percent answered that they would. This result is especially notable because the question clearly presented the cost of a health care guarantee (although whether universal health

care will require a tax increase is an unsettled question). Similarly, Gallup has found for many years that a majority of the public agrees that “it is the responsibility of the federal government to make sure all Americans have healthcare coverage.”

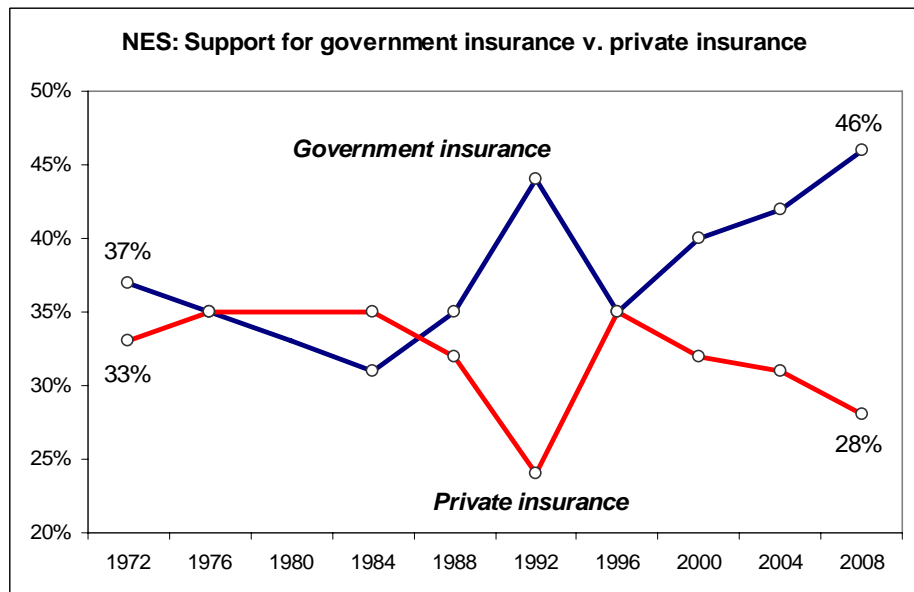
The survey also asked, “Do you think the health care system in this country works pretty well and requires only minor changes, do you think it needs fundamental changes, or do you think it needs to be completely rebuilt?” Forty percent said the system needs to be completely rebuilt, and another 36 percent said it required fundamental changes. A similar question from CBS News in September 2008 revealed 50 percent support for “fundamental changes” and 35 percent support to “completely rebuild.”⁵

Although any number of approaches could be considered “fundamental changes” or even “rebuilding,” when three out of four Americans express a desire for major reform, it would seem that public opinion is unambiguous. Of course, that is no guarantee of the outcome of the debate -- support for fundamental change was even stronger in 1993, and the Clinton administration’s effort at health care reform was unsuccessful.⁶



While there will certainly be complex efforts on both sides to frame the debate in particular ways, what we can say is that the basic idea of a significant government involvement in the health care system is accepted by most Americans. As the data presented here show, majorities believe that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure that all Americans are covered.

Furthermore, substantial numbers of Americans -- around 40 percent, according to Gallup polls⁷ -- even favor scrapping the entire private health care system and replacing it with a government-run system, despite the fact that the prospect of single-payer health care is often treated as outlandish. Depending on how the question is asked, even higher numbers of Americans support the idea of government-run health care: When the NES asked whether respondents supported “the U.S. government paying for all necessary medical care for all Americans,” they found a majority of 54 percent said yes.



This was a new phrasing; the NES has also asked a different form of the question since 1972 in which respondents are asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 7, running from favoring a “government insurance plan” to favoring “private insurance plans.”⁸ The number of people placing themselves on the “government insurance” side of the scale has been steadily rising since the two were tied in 1996; in the 2008 survey, it reached its highest point ever, at 46 percent, compared with 28 percent of respondents choosing the “private insurance” side of the scale (the remainder of respondents who answered the question placed themselves exactly between the two poles).

Survey after survey shows similar results: A clear majority of the American public supports greater involvement in health care by the federal government in Washington:

- "Do you think it's the government's responsibility to make sure that everyone in the United States has adequate health care, or don't you think so?" -- Quinnipiac University, November 6-10, 2008

Think it is	60%
Don't think so	36%

- "Should the government in Washington provide national health insurance, or is this something that should be left only to private enterprise" -- CBS News/*The New York Times*, January 11-15, 2009

Government	72%
Private enterprise	32%

- "In general, would you favor or oppose a program that would increase the federal government's influence over the country's health care system in an attempt to lower costs and provide health care coverage to more Americans?" -- CNN/Opinion Research Corporation, February 18-19, 2009

Favor	72%
Oppose	27%

- Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what?" -- CBS News/*The New York Times*, April 1-5, 2009

Willing	57%
Not willing	38%

Obviously, health care is an enormously complex topic, and the public may turn out to have different feelings about some reform options than others. But what the data show conclusively is that they favor an active role for government generally and are quite favorably disposed toward the idea of government insurance.

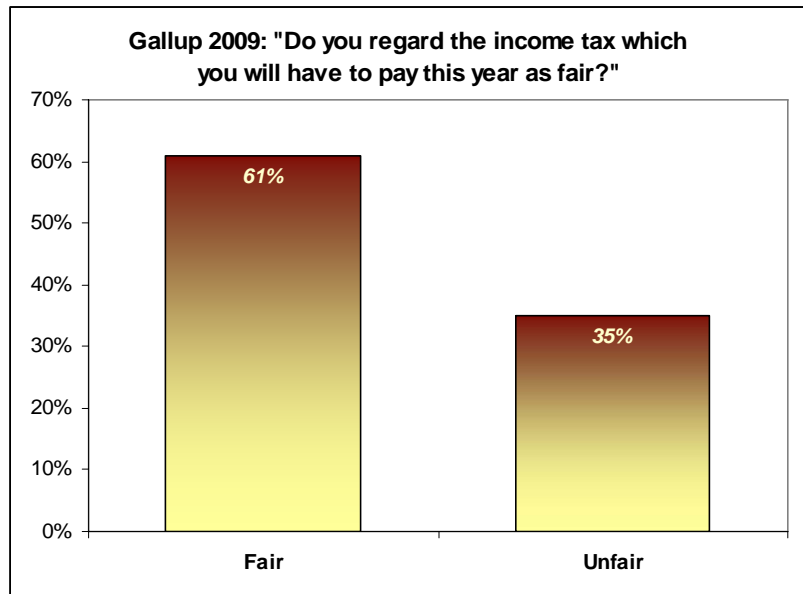
CONSERVATIVE RHETORIC GONE FLAT

As the Republican Party undertakes an internal debate on how to reverse its electoral fortunes, two schools of thought have been at odds. One says that the party needs new ideas to win voters back, while the other says that the party needs to stay true to its core principles of social and economic conservatism. While the latter school -- which essentially argues that the party's traditional appeals are the right ones -- has many vocal adherents, evidence suggests that core conservative positions are deeply unpopular.

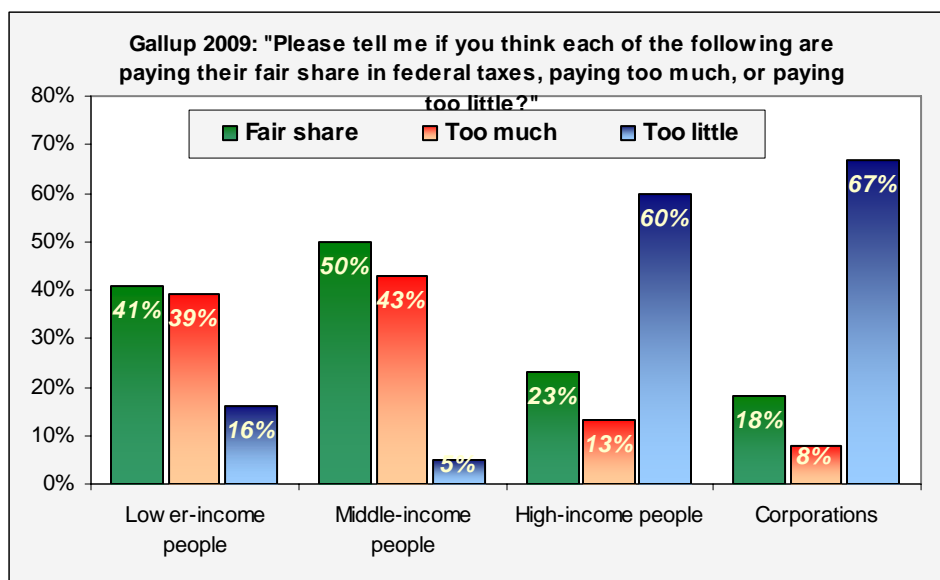
We have already seen that the conservative arguments against government are not garnering majorities of voters. Two of the other areas that have proven electorally fruitful in the past -- allegedly high taxes and culture-war issues -- also seem to have lost much of their persuasive punch.

TAXES

Just before taxes were due on April 15, Gallup released the results of a remarkable survey.⁹ The poll, it reported, “finds 48% of Americans saying the amount of federal income taxes they pay is ‘about right,’ with 46% saying ‘too high’ -- one of the most positive assessments Gallup has measured since 1956. Typically, a majority of Americans say their taxes are too high, and relatively few say their taxes are too low.” When Gallup framed the issue another way -- in terms of whether taxes are “fair” -- the numbers tilt even further away from the conservative position.



When people do complain, it is less about their own taxes being too high than it is about the taxes paid by the wealthy being too low, while low- and middle-income people are generally seen as paying something close to their “fair share” of taxes. Gallup found that Americans have very different views of how income taxes affect people of different classes. When asked about low-income people, Americans were evenly split, with 41 percent saying they pay their fair share and 39 percent saying they pay too much (only 16 percent felt they pay too little). For the middle class, the figures were similar: 50 percent said the middle class pays its fair share, while 43 percent said it pays too much (only 5 percent said it pays too little). But for the wealthy, the figures were starkly different: 23 percent said the wealthy pay their fair share, 13 percent said they pay too much, and fully 60 percent said they pay too little.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, then, a March Pew poll found that 61 percent of the public supported Obama’s proposal to raise taxes on those making over \$200,000 per year.¹¹



Conservatives have argued for many years that the wealthy pay too much; this sentiment drove the Bush administration's efforts to reduce the top income tax rate, as well as taxes on estates, capital gains, and stock dividends. The merits of those policies are debatable. What is less debatable is that the public disagrees with the perspective many conservatives bring to tax debates.

People become even less anti-tax when they see what they get for the money. Of course, people would rather have the money in their own pocket, but they are fully willing to pay their fair share toward a collective good. A majority of respondents (57 percent) told CBS News in April that they would be "willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what." Similar majorities responded that they would be willing to pay higher energy bills if the money went to cleaner air. More people told the *Los Angeles Times* that they think "an economic agenda focused on spending for improvements to the country's infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and schools" would be more effective than "returning money to taxpayers through tax cuts" to stimulate the economy and create jobs (54 percent to 33 percent).¹²

- "Which do you think is more effective in stimulating the nation's economy and creating jobs: An economic agenda focused on returning money to taxpayers through tax cuts, or an economic agenda focused on spending for improvements to the country's infrastructure such as roads, bridges and schools?" -- *Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg*, December 6-8, 2008¹³

Infrastructure	54
Tax cuts	33

- Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose ... setting limits on carbon dioxide emission and making companies pay for their emissions, even if it may mean higher energy prices? -- Pew Research, March 9-11, 2009¹⁴

Favor	59%
Oppose	33%

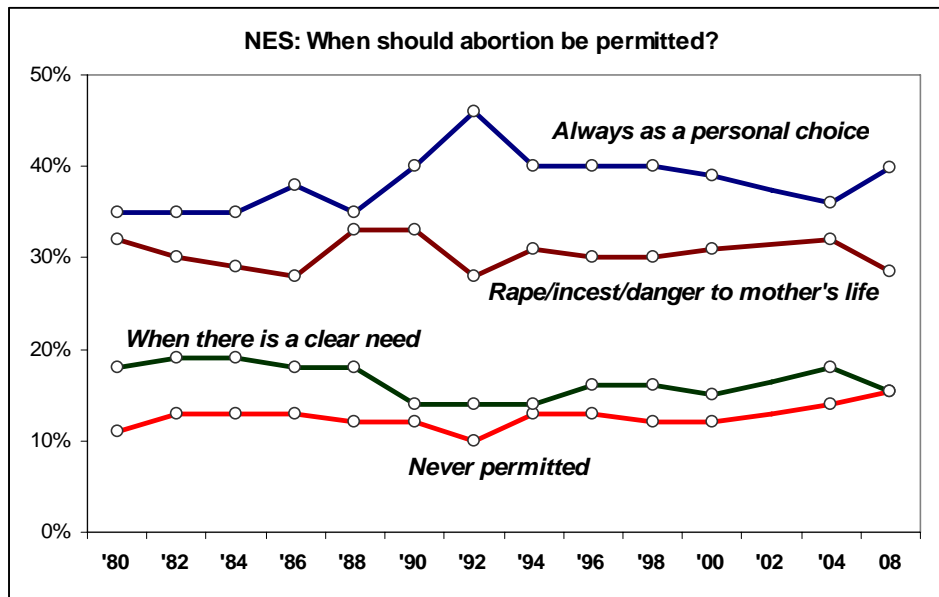
- "Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what?" -- CBS News/*The New York Times*, April 1-5, 2009¹⁵

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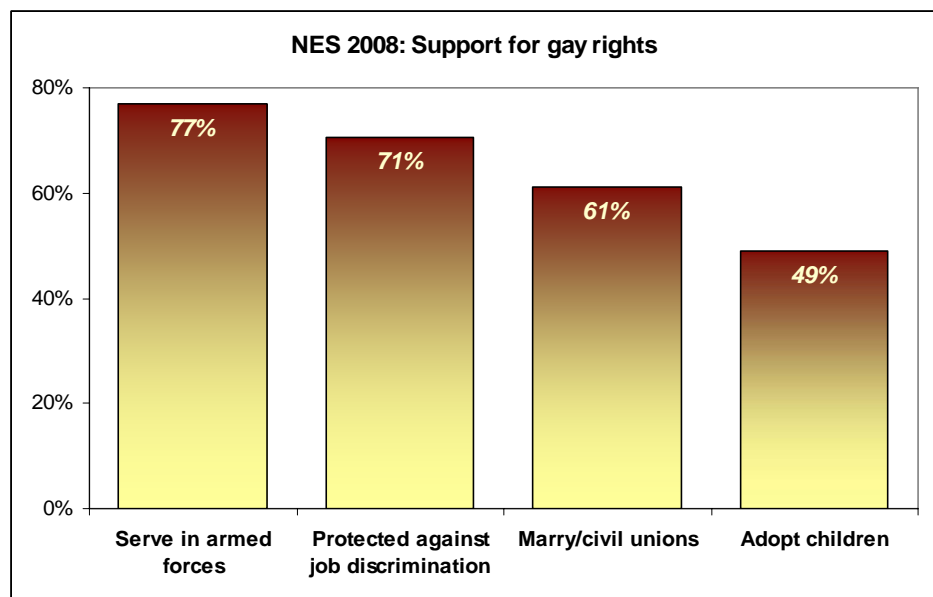
* Poll result corrected

THE CULTURE WAR

Ever since the term “wedge issue” emerged in the late 1980s, conservatives have relied on highly charged “culture war” issues to turn voters away from progressive candidates and causes. Two of these issues -- abortion and gay rights -- have been particularly strong motivators for religious conservative voters, and in the opinion of some analysts, have led to repeated electoral victories for Republicans. However, evidence suggests that these issues are losing their power, in some cases because they have dropped down the list of voter concerns, and in some cases because opinion is moving steadily in a progressive direction.

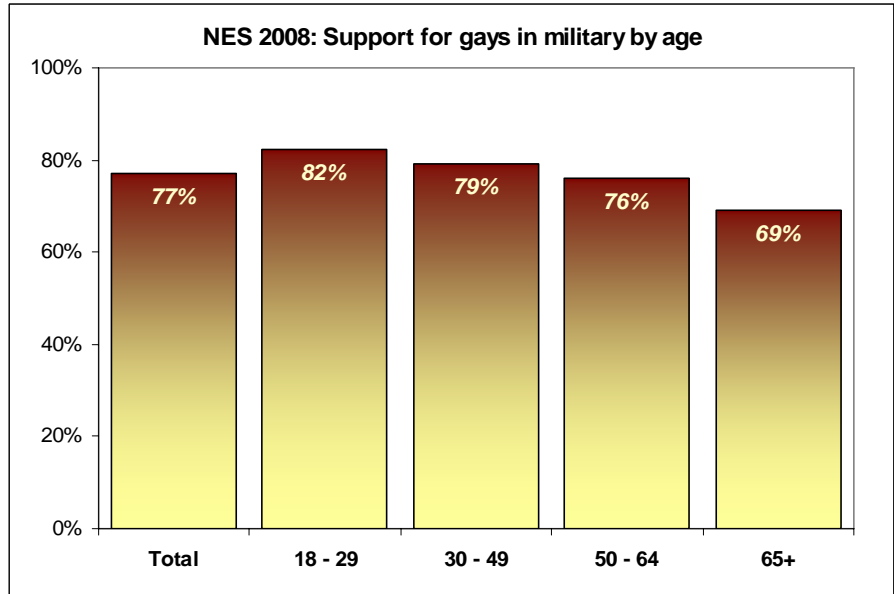


As contentious as the issue of abortion has been since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, the most notable fact about opinion on the issue is its stability.¹⁶ While one can see small variations from year to year -- and the answers to the question can vary substantially depending on precisely how it is asked -- when the same survey question is asked repeatedly, the results have not changed. For all the passion on both sides of the issue, the public’s essential beliefs are remarkably consistent. A majority of Americans consider themselves pro-choice and do not want *Roe* overturned. While many have reservations about some of the circumstances in which abortions might occur, only a small minority (about 20 percent) believes abortion should be illegal.¹⁷



In a peripherally related issue, 61 percent of Americans told *The Wall Street Journal* that they support “government funding for research” on embryonic stem cells.¹⁸ Clearly, Americans aren’t in step with conservatives’ views on these issues.

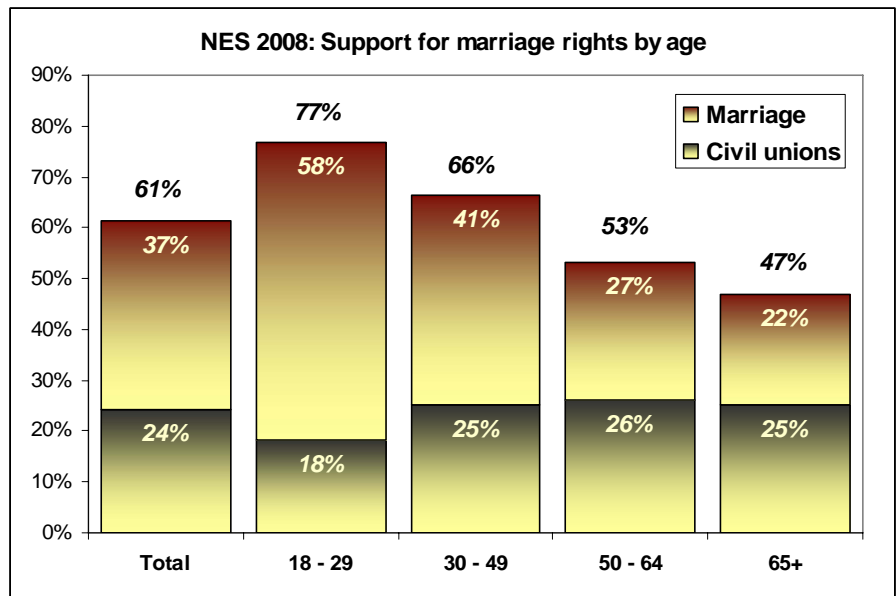
Over the past decade or so, abortion has seemingly been displaced at the top of the culture-war agenda by gay rights, especially the right to marriage equality. What is most notable about this debate is the speed at which it moves: Just in the last few months, same-sex marriage has become legal in Iowa, Connecticut, Vermont, and other states are sure to follow. If you had said even 10 years ago that in 2008, over 60 percent of the American public would support either civil unions or



full marriage rights for same-sex couples, few would have believed it. While different questions reach different results, the trend is unmistakable.

Perhaps most notable in these results is that three out of every four Americans support allowing gay people to serve in the armed forces. While President Obama has yet to act on his campaign pledge to repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy -- and when he does, the change will surely engender substantial controversy -- the state of public opinion is clear.

Moreover, the *direction* in which public opinion is likely to move on this issue is clear, as well. On every issue related to gay rights, one sees a strong association with age: Younger people are more supportive of equality than older people, with the oldest generation being the most firmly opposed. The accompanying data from NES and Pew show that the pattern could hardly be clearer.¹⁹ Unless one believes that large numbers of Americans who now support equality will as individuals move in a more conservative



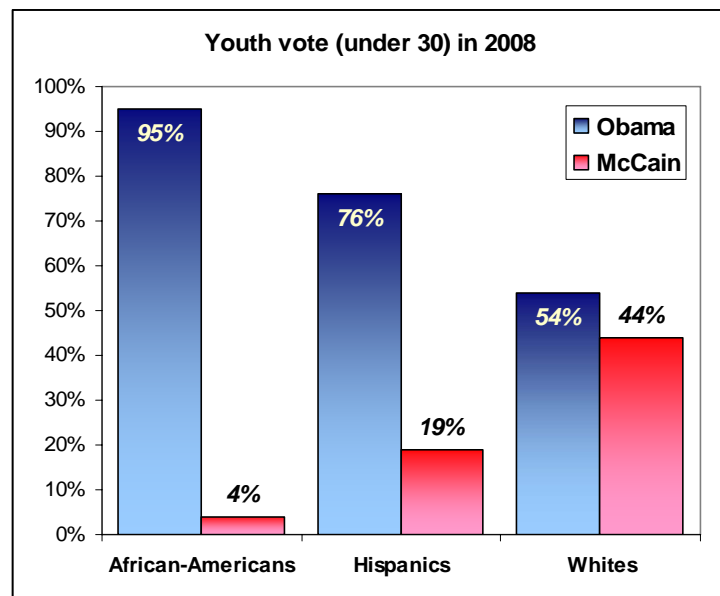
direction, or that future generations will be less supportive of gay rights than current adults are, it is inevitable that future public opinion will be even more supportive than it is today.

DEMOGRAPHICS: THE COMING PROGRESSIVE ERA

Politics are endlessly unpredictable, and it is always possible that some years from now, a new conservative generation will emerge and pull America to the right. While we have no way of knowing whether that will happen one day, what we do know is that the immediate future of American politics looks even more left-leaning than it is today, given observable demographic trends. Put simply, the bedrock voters of the conservative movement are growing older and declining in number. In contrast, the groups that make up the progressive coalition are on the rise. America is becoming more racially diverse, more religiously diverse, and more metropolitan. As Ruy Teixeira of the Center for American Progress has extensively documented, all of these trends favor progressives.

YOUNG VOTERS

An estimated 23 million Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2008 presidential election, 3.4 million more than in 2004.²⁰ People under 30 chose Barack Obama for president by a 34-point margin over John McCain (66 percent to 32 percent).²¹ Even more significant than Obama's margin of victory is the diversity of his support among the young.²² In addition to his 91-point margin among young African-Americans (95 percent to 4 percent), Obama beat John McCain by 57 points among young Hispanics (76 percent to 19 percent). He won young whites by a 10-point margin (54 to 44 percent), a strong contrast to his 14-point deficit among whites ages 45 to 64 (42 percent to 56 percent).



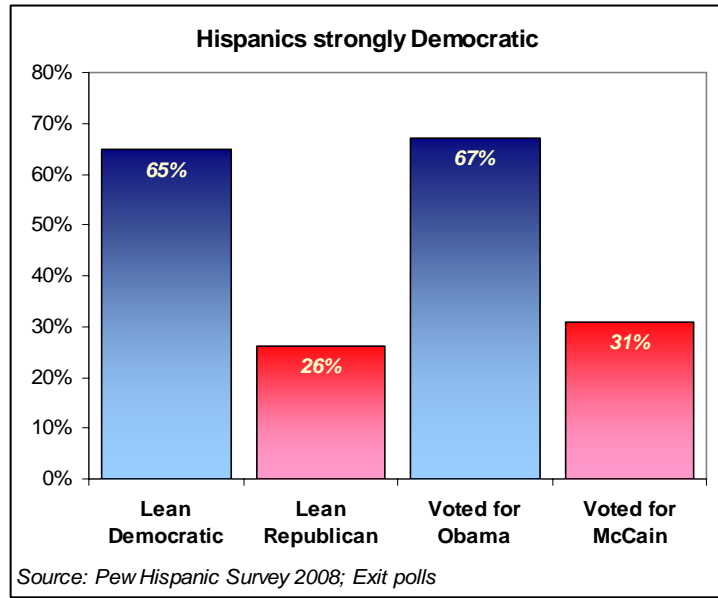
Not only are today's young voters progressive and inclined to vote Democratic, their influence will increase in the coming decades. Every year, an additional 4.5 million members of the so-called Millennial Generation -- people who were born between 1978 and the new millennium, currently 30 and younger -- will come of age and become eligible to vote. By 2012, the next presidential election, Millennials will represent 29 percent of all eligible voters.²³ The Millennial Generation is both personally diverse -- almost 40 percent are minorities -- and politically of the view that race is "no big deal."²⁴ They have grown up in an era in which gay people are visible and the traditional family structure -- Dad working, Mom at home -- is becoming the exception rather than the norm. In other words, their life experiences and outlook have led them to accept progressive values.

HISPANICS

Hispanics are the fastest-growing major demographic group, and as a consequence, both parties have sought their loyalty in recent years. In addition, many important Electoral College swing states, including Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, and Arizona, contain particularly large concentrations of Hispanic voters, suggesting that their influence will only increase.

Despite the GOP's efforts during the Bush years to court Hispanic voters, they are increasingly giving their loyalty to the Democratic Party. The wide-ranging Pew Hispanic Survey from July 2008 showed that 65 percent of registered Hispanic voters

identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party, compared with just 26 percent who identified with or leaned toward the GOP, a gap of 39 points, "larger than it has been at any time this decade."²⁵ In the 2008 presidential election, Obama won Hispanics by an impressive 36 points over McCain (67 percent to 31 percent).²⁶



AFRICAN-AMERICANS

The Obama election excited the African-American community, long a rock of progressive support, as never before. The turnout among African-Americans increased by 4.9 percentage points, from 60.3 percent in 2004 to 65.2 percent in 2008, nearly matching the white rate of 66.1 percent.²⁷ African-American women had a higher voter turnout rate than any other demographic group (68.8 percent). African-American youth, ages 18 to 29, increased their turnout rate by 8.7 percentage points to reach a higher rate (58.2 percent) than any other young group.²⁸ Whether African-American engagement will stay so high is, of course, an open question. But the political impact could be far-reaching.

MINORITIES OVERALL

America has always been a nation of immigrants, but changing patterns of immigration in recent decades have brought fundamental change to the country's racial makeup. Non-Hispanic whites currently make up 65 percent of the total U.S. population. But this group is growing more slowly than other population groups and consequently becoming a smaller share of the whole. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2030, whites will make up only 55 percent of the total population.²⁹

Hispanics are the fastest-growing demographic group. The Pew Research Center projects that this group will increase from 15.3 percent of the population to 29 percent by 2050.³⁰ Asians, the second-fastest-growing group, are projected to grow from 5.1 percent to 7.3 percent of the population over this period. African-Americans, although increasing at a much slower rate, will move from 13.5 percent to 14.3 percent of the population during this time. All three of these groups lean strongly Democratic and are increasing their proportion of the population, while the racial group that leans Republican -- whites -- is decreasing. The Census Bureau projects that whites will dip below 50 percent of the American population in 2042.³¹

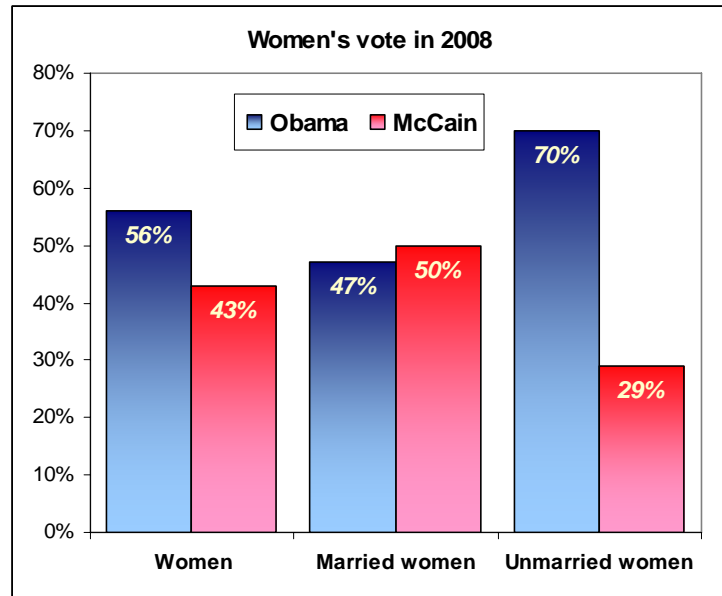
OLDER VOTERS

Senior citizens 65 and older represent only 16 percent of eligible voters.³² They tend to vote actively, but the generations are moving on. The quintessential crossover “Reagan Democrat,” who voted for Reagan at age 40, is now 69 years old. Just as many seniors who came of age under FDR were replaced by Reagan voters during the years of conservative domination, many of the Reagan voters are being replaced by Millennials -- while the more progressive baby boom generation persists. McCain won among senior citizens (53 percent to 45 percent), but the next age group down, those between 50 and 64, split almost down the middle (Obama, 50 percent; McCain, 49 percent).

WOMEN

Women as a whole tend to lean Democratic, and Obama outscored McCain among women 56 percent to 43 percent (compared with 49 percent to 48 percent among men).³³ But a more notable story was that of unmarried women, who chose Obama 70 percent to 29 percent, a stunning 41-point margin. In contrast, married women preferred McCain by a 3-point margin (50 percent to 47 percent).³⁴

Unmarried women are becoming key to the emerging American electorate. Nearly half (47 percent) of adult women are unmarried today, up from just 38 percent in 1970.³⁵ Fully 41 percent of unmarried women who are registered to vote registered between the 2004 and 2008 elections, and 20 percent cast a vote for president for the first time in 2008, compared with 11 percent of voters overall and just 4 percent among married women.



Moreover, the issues important to unmarried women read like the agenda of the progressive movement: universal health care, clean renewable energy, ending pay discrimination, raising the minimum wage, making college more affordable. Married women share these concerns -- but more unmarried women add the word “very” in front of “important” in their survey responses.³⁶

GEOGRAPHY

Proximity produces progressives. People living in close quarters tend to tolerate individual differences and to appreciate shared resources like schools, courts, and subway trains. As urban cores expand into suburbs, and as metropolitan areas prove to be dynamic, fast-growing, and desirable places to live, progressive politics will find fruitful soil in which to grow.

More than half of the country (54 percent) now lives in large metropolitan areas, defined as places with populations over a million people. Obama won these 51 regions by a 17-point margin (58 percent to 41 percent).³⁷ Another 20 percent of the population lives in medium-sized metropolitan areas with 250,000 to 1 million people. Obama carried these regions by 4 points.

Obama lost, however, in rural and micropolitan America. In small metropolitan areas with populations under 250,000, he lost by 6 points. In small towns, he lost by 11 points, and in rural America, McCain bested

Obama by 16 points. These regions look big on the map, but they account for only a quarter of America's population.

	% of US Population	2008 Result
Large metropolitan	54	Obama by 17
Medium metropolitan	20	Obama by 4
Small metropolitan	9	McCain by 6
Small towns	10	McCain by 11
Rural	6	McCain by 16

Source: These tables and all of these micro-geographical election results compiled by Ruy Teixeira of the Center for American Progress.³⁸

Similar density-related patterns of support occur within large metropolitan areas. The densely populated urban cores supported Obama by a 53-point margin. The mature inner suburbs supported him by 21 points, and the outer suburbs supported him by 15 points.

CONCLUSION

One could offer a number of explanations for the persistence of the idea that America is a center-right country. Perhaps some of those who believe it came of age politically during the Reagan years, when conservatism was ascendant; a younger generation of commentators may have been similarly shaped by the political earthquake of 1994. Of course, there are conservative advocates who both believe it and find it in their political interest to repeat it as often as possible.

But an examination of public opinion, election results, and demographic trends reveals that though America might have been center-right 15 or 25 years ago, it is most assuredly not today. Whether it is basic beliefs about government, opinions on domestic and foreign policy issues, or support for candidates of differing ideological perspectives, the public leans decidedly left. Not only has the country become progressive, it is likely to remain so for some time to come.

ENDNOTES

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² See our previous report for more details: The Progressive Majority: Why a Conservative America is a Myth, June 2007. <http://mediamatters.org/reports/progmaj/>.

³ Gallup Poll, “Would you like to see major corporations have more influence in this nation, less influence, or keep their influence as it is now?” March 27-29, 2009. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5248/Big-Business.aspx>

⁴ : Pew Research Center, “Support For Health Care Overhaul, But It’s Not 1993.” March 19, 2009. <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1491>

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⁶ See here for a comparison of 1993 and 2009 data: Pew Research Center, “Support For Health Care Overhaul, But It’s Not 1993.” March 19, 2009. <http://people-press.org/report/500/support-for-health-care-overhaul>.

⁷ See here for details: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/4708/Healthcare-System.aspx>.

⁸ The actual text of the question reads, “There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company paid plans. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” On the graph presented here, respondents choosing 1, 2, or 3 are denoted as favoring the government plan, while respondents choosing 5, 6, or 7 are denoted as favoring the private plan.

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<http://www.gallup.com/poll/117433/Views-Income-Taxes-Among-Positive-1956.aspx>

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¹¹ Pew Research Center, “Obama’s Approval Rating Slips Amid Division Over Economic Proposals.” March 16, 2009.

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¹² *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg poll, “Which do you think is more effective in stimulating the nation’s economy and creating jobs: An economic agenda focused on returning money to taxpayers through tax cuts, or an economic agenda focused on spending for improvements to the country’s infrastructure such as roads, bridges and schools?” December 6-8, 2008. <http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2008-12/43792197.pdf>

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¹⁵ CBS News/*New York Times* poll, “Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can’t lose, no matter what?” 1-5 April 2009. <http://www.pollingreport.com/budget2.htm>

¹⁶ In May 2009, conservatives began trumpeting two surveys, one from Gallup

(<http://www.gallup.com/poll/118399/More-Americans-Pro-Life-Than-Pro-Choice-First-Time.aspx>) and one from Pew

(<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1212/abortion-gun-control-opinion-gender-gap>), that showed movement to the right on

some abortion questions, including whether people think of themselves as “pro-choice” or “pro-life.” As political scientist John Sides explained in an analysis of those data and data from the National Election Studies and General Social Survey, “Pew and Gallup employ vague questions that do not easily map onto actual policy debates. Once more precise data are employed, it becomes clear that opinion strongly depends on the circumstances under which the abortion would occur. While people who are favor a legal abortion under any of the circumstances mentioned outnumber those who unequivocally oppose abortion by a factor of about 3, most people are in the middle.”

(<http://www.themonkeycage.org/2009/05/has-the-public-become-more-opp.html>) Furthermore, the Gallup sample

contains an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, making it substantially unrepresentative at a time when Democrats enjoy a strong advantage in party identification (see http://www.pollster.com/blogs/new_gallup_has_pid_tied_yep_it.php).

¹⁷ The NES data on the accompanying graph can be found here:

http://electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab4c_2b.htm; the Gallup data can be found here:

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/Abortion.aspx>.

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<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>

²³ Ruy Teixeira, "New Progressive America: Twenty Years of Demographic, Geographic, and Attitudinal Changes Across the Country Herald a New Progressive Majority," Center for American Progress, March 2009, p. 13. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/progressive_america.pdf

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²⁵ Pew Hispanic Center, "2008 National Survey of Latinos: Hispanic Voter Attitudes," 24 July 2008, p. iii.

<http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/90.pdf>

²⁶ CNN 2008 election National Exit Poll. <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>.

²⁷ Pew Hispanic Center, "Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History," April 30, 2009.

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