

# PROGRESSIVISM 1

What is a “progressive?” Does a progressive differ from a liberal? Does it matter?

I think so. For one reason, as issues arise we in SCPD will be faced with alternatives for dealing with them. Understanding a progressive philosophy will help guide our decisions. Which solution for health insurance is progressive? What is a progressive response to school vouchers?

For another, as candidates come before us for support, we need a way to assess their “progressiveness.” At national levels this may be relatively clear. At local levels it may be less clear. In what ways can a mayor or councilperson be progressive?

On a more fundamental level, we also may want to explore the nature of our own organization. Is SCPD a progressive organization, a group of progressive individuals within an organization, or an activist arm of a liberal Democratic party? Hence a definition of progressivism can be helpful to our organization.

In researching progressivism I used numerous sources: a standard college history textbook; publications from the Rockridge Institute, primarily George Lakoff; information from the Congressional Progressive Caucus; Wikipedia; writings from progressive blogger David Sirota; and additional selected journal articles.

In order to make this paper a reasonable length, in the historical section I have focused on the administrations of key progressive Presidents. This helps organize the information but it also oversimplifies it. Progressivism was driven not only by strong Presidents, but by dedicated interest groups. Farmers, labor unions, authors and others all were driving forces and volumes could be written about each of them. I have not tried here to identify the credit due each of them, but to capture the major themes of the era.

Text in boldface highlights principles and philosophy of progressivism as expressed at various times in both past and current eras.

## HISTORICAL BASIS OF PROGRESSIVISM

### **Background**

#### *Business and Labor*

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America was about to become a major world power. With the social and

technical advances made in the late 1800s, the nation was experiencing great changes. The progress made by industrialization and the growth of urban areas established a basis for unprecedented material wealth and power. During the first decade of the century, significant increases occurred in the number of people in the U.S., their average age, and their average per capita wealth and income. Yet while technology advanced, rural ways of life and habits of mind persisted. Wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of the few, while the promise of individual liberty and dignity was not fulfilled.

Those who were already rich were both the agents and the beneficiaries of the industrial expansion and consolidation that was occurring. By 1909, 1% of all the business firms in the nation produced 44% of all its manufactured goods. The “consolidators” became some of the richest and most powerful men in the country. They guided the process of investment; they controlled the boards of directors of the great American banks and industries; and they guided the policies of big business.

At the other end of the scale were the American poor. In 1910, the total population of the U.S. was 92 million. The nonagricultural labor force consisted of more than 30 million men and 8 million women. Between 1/3 and 1/2 of this working population lived in poverty. Less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> of their children completed high school. Four million laborers worked between 54 and 60 hours per week. At least half a million worked between 60 and 72 hours per week. A family of five in New York City might live in a single room tenement, sharing a bathroom with several other families.

Skilled laborers fared better. The crafts-union movement made significant gains such that between 1900 and 1914 membership nearly quadrupled from 548,000 to 2,000,000. They were able to win bargaining agreements, higher wages, shorter hours and safer working conditions. These unions preferred to rely on their own power rather than on legislation to reach their goals. Thus they pretty much ignored the unskilled workers and even feared that management would try to hire them in order to replace skilled workers. This led the unions of the time to oppose the hiring of immigrants and to support Jim Crow laws to keep blacks out of the workplace. In short, unions at this time did no more than management to help the majority of workers.

### *Farmers*

The new century also brought new prosperity to American farmers. The prices of farm products and the value of farmland nearly doubled within a decade. Yet the farmer was still suspicious of bankers and finance, of cities and foreigners.

Farm organizations pressed for political reforms designed to give voters a more direct voice in the government. They hoped these reforms would help them obtain public policies that would aid agriculture—better roads, cheaper credit, more electrical power, assistance to cooperatives, lower land taxes, and tariff

adjustments that would facilitate sales abroad. Though these motives were based on self-interest, they also supported the voices of reform.

### *Protest*

At the same time, artists, journalists and social workers were exposing the conditions of filth and misery which violated the ideals of middle-class Americans. Theodore Dreiser used his novels to describe the barren life of the poor. Upton Sinclair, in his book The Jungle, exposed the crooked and poisonous world of the Chicago meat-packing houses. In magazine articles and books, social workers documented that between half and two-thirds of all working class families had incomes too small to buy food, shelter and clothing.

Perhaps the most influential group was the “muckrakers” who published sensational exposes in magazines. Ida Tarbell wrote a devastating account of the business methods of Standard Oil. Lincoln Steffens exposed the corruption in government of half a dozen cities and states. Ray Stannard Baker wrote indictments of railroad management, labor-baiting in Colorado, and race discrimination in the South.

### *Early Progressivism*

Democratic government had failed most blatantly in the cities. Now, reformers succeeded in winning home-rule charters and authority for public ownership of vital services. Experiments in new forms of government, such as a commission form or a city-manager, were tried.

A wave of reform began in the agricultural Midwest in Wisconsin with the election of Robert M. LaFollette as governor in 1900. He made his administration a model of honesty and efficiency. At his urging, the state passed laws providing for a direct primary, civil service, restrictions on lobbying, and conservation.

Progressivism won similar victories in industrial states, with the impetus coming from the middle class of cities and suburbs.

**These progressives had several significant characteristics: faith in pure democracy, hostility to large aggregations of private power, confidence in public regulatory agencies, and a humanitarian temper.** These characteristics cut across the various groups that propelled progressivism—populists in the agricultural states, liberal intellectuals of the cities, and middle class businessmen who formed the ranks of the reformers.

## The Progressive Presidents

### *Theodore Roosevelt*

Upon the assassination of William McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt became President in 1901 at the age of 42, the youngest chief executive in history. He brought with him an energy and a joy that captured the imagination of the people. He saw the Presidency as being a steward of the people and having a responsibility for defining and solving the great national problems of the time.

His initial focus was on the problems posed by the great trusts—the large organizations under which major portions of key industries had been consolidated. He soon brought a suit against the Northern Securities Company for violating the Sherman Anti-trust Act. Northern was a mammoth holding company for several railroads in the Midwest and West. The government won the suit and Roosevelt then brought similar actions against 44 more corporations.

**But Roosevelt believed that splitting up the trusts was not constructive for the nation. He thought that the growth of industry was natural, unavoidable, and beneficial. His real goal was to establish the authority of the federal government to regulate big business.** He therefore set about creating a system to do so, which included the creation of a new Department of Commerce and Labor, with the power to gather information about industry and to then regulate it.

During a strike of coal miners in 1902, the Eastern railroads, who owned most of the mines, would not negotiate with the union and one railroad president stated that, “God in His infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests” to the directors of large corporations. This attitude invited public antagonism and Roosevelt threatened to use troops to produce the coal. The miners’ union cooperated with Roosevelt during the strike and a federal commission awarded them a 10% pay increase along with better working conditions. These actions stamped Roosevelt as a friend of labor. However, in other labor episodes T.R. resisted calls for a union shop and other more radical union proposals. He acted in a way that was advanced but not radical, cautious but not timid.

Roosevelt’s landslide victory in the election of 1904 gave him a mandate to continue reform. His primary focus was reform of the railroads. He convinced Congress to give the Interstate Commerce Commission the power to regulate railroad rates, which shippers had complained were unfairly high. He then went on to achieve legislation for a pure food and drug bill, a federal meat inspection bill and numerous acts aimed at improving conservation. For example, he added 17 million acres to the national reserves for protection from development.

**Roosevelt's messages to Congress in late 1907 and early 1908 set out a "map" for progressive reform. He called for federal regulation of all interstate business, federal regulation of the stock market, limitation of injunctions against labor, compulsory investigation of labor disputes, extension of the eight-hour workday for federal employees, and personal income and inheritance taxes. He condemned "predatory wealth" for its follies and unscrupulous opposition to measures for honesty in business. He did all this with a faith in progress that conserves; a belief that power properly inheres in the federal government rather than in any private group; and a conviction that the holder of power has an obligation to promote justice and enforce orderly and moral behavior.**

In the international arena, Roosevelt believed that every powerful nation had a stake in world order and an obligation to preserve it. He continually reminded Americans of the oneness of the world. To that end he preached preparedness and heartily supported reform of the military. He urged construction of a modern navy strong enough to protect American interests and to further his large view of national obligations.

Consistent with his philosophy, T.R. actively intervened around the world. He put down an insurrection in Cuba. He warned Germany to stay out of the Caribbean. And he supported an insurrection in Panama in order to force the sale of land to the U.S. for a canal there. Most Americans condoned his action in Panama, though it was a case of blatant imperialism. Further, his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine asserted the right of the U.S. to intervene in Latin America to preserve stability there.

Roosevelt believed in a balance of power among the great nations that would preserve peace. He was an active diplomat in helping mediate several conflicts between major powers. When war broke out between Russia and Japan, his work in mediating it won him the Nobel Peace Prize.

### *Woodrow Wilson*

In the election of 1908, Roosevelt endorsed William Taft as his successor, believing he would continue the mantle of progressivism for the Republican Party. Taft won, but he was untrained for politics and was by nature a conservative. Through a series of missteps, Taft alienated progressives and angered Roosevelt. In the election of 1912, progressives in the party bolted, formed their own third party and ran Roosevelt again. This split the Republican party and allowed Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win. Wilson's victory, combined with the showing of Roosevelt's Bull Moose party and the nearly one million votes for the Socialists, reflected an expectation among the people that progressive reform should be a primary objective of the government.

**Although he lost the election, Roosevelt's progressive platform laid out a charter that would serve for years to come. It advocated the familiar**

**devices of popular democracy—presidential primaries, women’s suffrage, the initiative and referendum, and direct election of Senators. It also advocated a comprehensive social welfare program—conservation of natural and human resources, minimum wages for women, restriction of child labor, workmen’s compensation, social insurance, a federal income tax, and the limitation of injunctions in labor disputes. Finally, it called for expert federal commissions to adjust the tariff and to regulate interstate business and industry.**

Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic victor, had been a progressive governor of New Jersey. The son of a Presbyterian minister, he believed men were individually responsible to God for their actions and that guilt in business affairs was also personal guilt and should be punished as such.

**Where Roosevelt believed that big business was inevitable and that it required big government to regulate it, Wilson believed that capitalism could only work if the government protected and fostered competition. This meant the government should help small business get started and break up the big monopolies.**

A major triumph for Wilson soon after his election was a new tariff bill that significantly reduced tariff rates on iron, steel and other products of the big business trusts. This tariff maintained the concept of protection of American products at home but reduced tariff rates. The result permitted healthy international trade.

A second major triumph for Wilson was in banking reform. Many progressives had become convinced that there existed a “money trust.” Southern and Western agrarians had longed believed there was a bankers’ conspiracy against their interests. Wilson guided to passage the Federal Reserve Act, which created regional banks under a central authority, the means to provide flexibility for short-term credit (which was critical to the farmers), and more public control over banking.

To address concerns about big business, Wilson pushed legislation which created the Federal Trade Commission and which dealt with unfair trade practices. The FTC was empowered to prevent unlawful suppression of competition. These laws did not go as far as Wilson wanted, but they established a foundation for later improvements.

Wilson had been drifting toward a more conservative approach, appointing conservatives to the Federal Reserve Board and blocking bills that outlawed child labor. But the midterm elections reflected a steady support by the people for reform and Wilson adjusted his approach to get back on a progressive track. He supported passage of a federal farm loan act and a child labor act. He also supported creation of a tariff commission to prevent the dumping of unprotected goods in the American market. Labor solidified its support of Wilson due to these and other actions.

**In the international arena, Wilson believed the force of America was a moral one, which led him to rule out imperialism and war.** He negotiated treaties with numerous countries calling for submitting all disputes to investigation and to suspend any action toward war for at least one year, as a cooling off period.

However, revolution in Mexico pulled Wilson into that country in order to protect American interests. This included sending an armed force into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa. After some minor skirmishes the two countries agreed to a joint commission to resolve their differences.

At the same time, a war in Europe erupted after brewing for a decade, with Germany and Austria on one side and France and England on the other. Most progressives thought they could best serve the world by concentrating on reform at home and serving as an impartial mediator for Europe. Wilson insisted that the U.S. be treated as a neutral nation with rights to trade and use of the oceans. But both sides pressed the U.S. for support and arms. And both sides interfered with American shipping business. The U.S. began reluctantly preparing for war and in 1916 Wilson doubled the size of the army and increased the building of the navy. Eventually America entered the war.

As the war came to and end, Wilson pursued a liberal and enlightened peace. He announced Fourteen Points that should guide the armistice. These points were idealistic and included free and open seas, reduction of armaments, the return of lands seized during the war, and formation of a general assembly of nations to support political independence and territorial integrity.

Wilson was heavily involved in the peace negotiations and fought valiantly for the establishment of a League of Nations to keep the peace in the future. The Senate debated the final form of the treaty and the Democrats realized that they would have to compromise in order to win over enough Republican votes to gain ratification. But Wilson saw this as a moral issue and refused to compromise. Some people honestly believed the League was a threat to the national sovereignty. In the end, the Senate rejected the treaty and the League was deprived of the moral force of the U.S. The country, in turn, had been shocked by the brutal actions of the war and retreated into a period of isolation.

### *Progressivism Wanes*

By the time of the election of 1920, progressivism had waned as the people succumbed to fatigue, fear, and selfishness. Policy makers turned to the past. Organized labor fell out of favor and the executive branch began to favor management. Business had launched successful campaigns to associate all labor with radicalism while strikes had crippled industry. The public was tired of it and also fearful of any form of radicalism, partly fostered by the events of the Russian revolution.

From 1920 to 1932 progressivism receded in the administrations of Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Many accomplishments of the progressive movement were rolled back. Management people were put on the regulatory boards of the government. Businesses rolled back wages. Injunctions were used to break strikes. Calvin Coolidge's motto was, "The business of America is business." Coolidge worshipped wealth and those who possessed it. Material success marked the elite and to them should be left the important decisions about society.

The result of these administrations was an optimism about the future and high levels of speculation. Everyone saw others getting rich and thought they could get on that bandwagon. People borrowed from banks in order to invest in the stock market. Ignoring signs that things were getting out of control, speculators continued to borrow and invest. In 1929, the stock market collapsed and The Depression ensued.

As banks collapsed and industries shut down, the toll on Americans was horrendous. By mid-1932, industrial production had fallen 51% from what it was in 1929. Unemployment reached 11 million people by 1932. Average manufacturing wages dropped 60%. Total farm income declined from \$11.9 billion to \$5.3 billion. Gloom and fear replaced the optimism of the 1920s. Belongings were pawned, shoes were worn thin, and standing in bread lines replaced going to work. Over 5000 banks failed and depositors stood in lines to withdraw their money from those that still existed.

### *Franklin D. Roosevelt*

The Republicans had no chance in the election of 1932. FDR entered office as an economic conservative and a social liberal. His huge margin of victory gave him a mandate for change.

**Progressivism to this point had been primarily a philosophy of social welfare rather than of economic growth, and progressives had no better ideas than anyone else about how to handle the Depression. FDR entered with an attitude that positive government actions could bring about economic recovery. His brain trust believed that economic concentration was inevitable, and therefore control over the nation's economic life could not be safely left in private hands. Central planning, much as had occurred in the World War, was seen as the solution to the problems of the time.**

In Roosevelt's first Hundred Days there was a flurry of legislation passed that gave the nation hope. He immediately declared a banking holiday, cut federal expenses, and repealed much of the Prohibition act.

Passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act provided relief and reform for farmers. Their per capita income had decreased from \$162 to \$48 annually. Farm prices had fallen 55%. Mortgage debt weighed heavily on them. As

farmers put more produce into the market, it drove prices down further. The AAA addressed some of these problems by controlling production through payments to farmers who agreed to regulate their planting. It also gave the government power to withdraw land from cultivation through leasing and to regulate the release of commodities through quotas. The AAA administration immediately plowed up 10 million acres of cotton; it bought and slaughtered 5 million pigs. And as production decreased, farm prices rose again.

In the industrial sector, the National Industrial Recovery Act allowed trade groups to collaborate and be exempt from anti-trust rules, so long as they competed fairly. It also guaranteed the right of unions to organize and bargain collectively. It established a Public Works Administration to provide work for laborers and to build projects that would benefit communities. It also set standards for minimum wages and working hours, which helped improve the wage-cutting spiral.

**These laws are only a sample of those the administration put forth for enactment, but they demonstrate the activist mind-set of FDR and the direction progressivism was taking—a government that was an integral part of the economic activity of the country.**

By 1935 the policies had ended the despair but had not yet produced recovery. And the Supreme Court by then was declaring major portions of the Hundred Days legislation to be unconstitutional.

**FDR needed a new policy direction. He brought a different set of people into his brain trust. These advisers did not accept the inevitability of business concentration. They believed that “size begets monopoly.”** The Wagner Labor Relations Act gave new authority to the National Labor Relations Board and provided reliable guarantees for collective bargaining. The Social Security Act set up the social security system. The Public Utilities Holding Company Act broke up the concentrations of utilities. A new tax law set up a graduated business tax, favoring small businesses.

As these laws passed, business became increasingly alienated. Many saw the “New Deal” as steps toward a totalitarian state. There developed a wide split between the forces of individualism (allow businessmen to manage as they saw fit) and the forces of reform (the government should step in and develop structures and systems that would correct the problems).

Once again the Supreme Court reviewed the New Deal legislation. In 9 cases that it heard, it ruled parts of the legislation unconstitutional in 7 of them. FDR then tried to change the composition of the court by offering a bill to expand the number of justices on the court—his famous attempt at “packing”. This gave further concern to those who thought he was trying to destroy the American system. As the bill was debated, the Court changed direction and affirmed several of the pieces of legislation it had been ruling against. FDR was able to withdraw his bill and still move forward with his reforms.

Progressivism also had to fight within the Democratic Party. The party was splitting between liberals from the north and conservatives from the south. The conservatives objected to the setting of minimum wages and controlling hours of work, complaining this would increase labor costs. They disliked activities on behalf of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Some forces in the country were clearly not hospitable toward progressivism.

**The Depression had induced despair, but it also compelled change. The status of structure and prestige was disrupted—people from outside the business community were now in power. Labor gained respectability. Members of once marginal groups—tenant farmers, old folks, intellectuals, women—now had chances for fulfilled lives. Those who thought they were forgotten found they could still make a place for themselves. The electrification of rural areas transformed the countryside. The nation had rejected laissez faire capitalism without embracing socialism. The government had acquired the obligation to underwrite the economic and social health of the nation.**

**The New Deal showed a middle way was possible. The state abandoned efforts at central planning but business had to accept ground rules for competition. Human welfare was to be protected through various forms of public insurance. Limited and piecemeal government intervention in economic life was possible. Government could assure economic and social security but not create a dictatorship.**

WW II became part of the domestic dynamic. While FDR was equally active on the international front, this activity was driven much more by the demands of the war than by progressive philosophy. Therefore, this period is outside the scope of this paper. It should be noted that many consider the spending on the war to have been a significant factor in improving the U.S. economy and therefore helped the progressive programs succeed.

### *WW II to 2000*

To sum up, by 1945 there was a body of principles and ideals that comprised progressivism as it had evolved over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These included:

- a humanitarian temperament—that it is the responsibility of all of us to lend a hand to each other and to promote basic human dignity of all people;**
- faith in pure democracy—power should be distributed among all the people;**
- wariness about large aggregations of power in any group, especially the rich and those in positions of authority, since they already had power to begin with;**
- confidence in the ability of government to regulate disproportionate power and to “level the playing field”;**

**--a conviction that the holder of power has an obligation to promote justice and fairness;**  
**--embrace of a moral dimension to social and governmental behavior; one should strive to do what is "right" both domestically and internationally;**  
**--belief that the power of government must be applied not only to create a just social order but also to create economic progress;**  
**--belief that reform is a continual process and is the only way to build a strong and fair country because systems continually deteriorate and become ineffective or corrupt.**

After the war, America was a different place. Women had taken on many non-traditional roles while men were absent from the home front. Blacks returned from the war having experienced more freedom and responsibility than they had enjoyed at home in many cases. Business was booming. The nation entered a conservative period as soldiers returned home and only wanted to settled down and raise a family.

But undercurrents for reform were still operating. Blacks were tired of repression. The *Brown* case in 1954 outlawed segregation in schools. By the early 1960's demonstrations for civil rights were spreading across the south and into the north.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the youths of the baby boom generation were entering college and rebelling against the conformity that their parents had sought after the war and the depression. They were exploring many alternative lifestyles.

From the period of 1945 to 2000 there were several main currents flowing through American society. One was materialism. Americans had more and spent more than ever before. Technology provided many comforts and many opportunities to escape manual labor. A "culture of affluence" developed and the middle class became the center of society. A second current was the continuation of consolidation. Large organizations were still dominant. And this increased the potential for the individual to be squeezed. For example, by 1960 in 95% of American communities newspaper ownership was a monopoly. Theater and films had been geared to large audiences, thereby diluting their art in order to appeal to the greatest number of people. Growth and consolidation of business meant people became nameless cogs in the machinery of vast organization structures. All of these currents militate against progressivism.

At the same time, other streams supported, if not fostered, progressivism. People searched for ways to enhance individual identity. Groups that previously held little power have become more powerful—racial minorities, women, the elderly. The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Medicare Act were all in the progressive tradition. Powerful coalitions formed to support reproductive rights, rights of the disabled, and rights of the poor. Many of the ideals and programs of the New Deal become accepted as the role of

government, though there is still on-going debate about the liberal philosophy in government.

### PROGRESSIVISM IN THE CURRENT ERA

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century is a much different time than that of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Teddy Roosevelt led the charge into progressivism. On one hand, technology allows citizens access to much more information faster and more thoroughly than ever before. At the same time, the overload of information can be overwhelming and cause citizens to shrug their shoulders because they can't keep up with what's going on.

Life is much easier than 100 years ago, and income is more evenly distributed. There is a very large middle class, though significant pockets of poverty remain..

More groups have access to power than ever before, but unless people act collectively they sometimes have difficulty exercising their power. Labor has won many concessions from management and these are now taken for granted, though the formal power of labor has waned as the percentage of workers that are organized has dropped drastically over the past few decades. In 1900, a black person who was a slave at the age of 20 when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued would have been 57 years old at the turn of the century. Now black citizens are elected as governors and senators.

Progressive thought has changed as the world has changed. To capture the essence of progressivism today is a challenge. It is easy to differentiate between progressivism and conservatism, but it is more difficult to differentiate between progressivism and liberalism.

### **Liberalism**

Progressivism holds many of the same values as liberalism and might be considered to have branched from liberalism. The on-line encyclopedia Wikipedia says this about liberalism.

“Liberalism in the United States of America is a broad political and philosophical mindset, favoring individual liberty, and opposing restrictions on liberty, whether they come from established religion, from government regulation, or from the existing class structure.<sup>[1]</sup> Liberalism in the United States takes various forms, ranging from classical liberalism, to social liberalism, to neoliberalism.”

“Liberals share a belief in individual rights, free enterprise, representative democracy, and the rule of law. In this sense, almost all Americans accept

liberal ideals, so much so that it is easy to forget how revolutionary these ideals were when the American Constitution was written. Within this broad definition of liberalism, there are several competing philosophies.”

### **On-line sources describe progressivism**

Wikipedia notes this about progressivism:

“From the New Deal to the 1960s, the progressive movement was largely subsumed into modern American liberalism. After the 1960s, however, progressives grew increasingly unhappy with the direction of the liberal movement and the leadership of the Democratic Party. **On the one hand, progressives agreed with many of the concerns of the New Left, such as environmental conservation. On the other hand, they preserved their commitment to the original progressive issues, such as workers’ rights, which liberals grew less interested in. And, finally, progressives also began advocating entirely new ideas—for example electoral reform (including proportional representation) and campaign finance reform.** As many American progressives felt disenfranchised from the contemporary American liberal movement, they sought to establish their own separate political organizations. Two prominent examples are the Vermont Progressive Party, and the environmentalist Green Party.” (Emphasis added)

Other excerpts from Wikipedia state

“Progressives see progressivism as an attitude towards the world of politics that is far less black-and-white than conservatism vs. liberalism, and as an attempt to break free from that false and divisive dichotomy. . . Liberalism is ultimately founded on a concept of natural rights and civil liberties, and the belief that the major purpose of government is to protect those rights. . . American progressives tend to support interventionist economics: they advocate income distribution, and they oppose the growing influence of corporations. . . (they) support organized labor and trade unions, they usually wish to introduce a living wage, and they often support the creation of a universal health care system. Yet progressives tend to be more concerned with environmentalism than mainstream liberals, and are often more skeptical of the government, positioning themselves as whistleblowers and advocates of government reform. . . (they) tend to feel disillusioned with any two-party system, and vote more often for third-party candidates.”

The website “Campus Progress” is a project of the Center for American Progress, a progressive organization. Student remarks included the following:

“Liberalism--In contrast to progressivism, liberalism, in the domestic application emphasizes social justice issues, often without addressing the core economic injustice underpinnings of worker, racial, gender and sexual discrimination. Solutions sought in the liberal paradigm more often are exemplified in legislation or legal remedies to restore or improve rights and equal access. In contrast, **progressivism typically seeks systemic change or reform, again with first emphasis on economic justice.**” (Emphasis added)

And the website of the Center for American Progress, itself, a progressive think tank, includes the following statement:

*“Who is a progressive?”*

Founded on the ideals of the progressive movement at the turn of the century, today’s progressive movement believes that an open and effective government can improve the lives of everyday Americans by playing an active role in solving social and economic problems.

*In other words, a progressive is someone who is idealistic enough to believe that things can be better and pragmatic enough to get it done.”*

The themes from these comments might be crystallized as follows: **Modern progressivism is less an ideology, such as liberalism, and more a pragmatic set of principles. It focuses more on structural and systemic reform that addresses causes rather than on legislative solutions targeted at symptoms. “Reform” is necessary for long-term improvement rather than merely solutions which resolve current problems. It departs from early progressivism in that it sees government as a potential remedy for many problems but is also skeptical of big government. Liberalism is more about protecting rights, progressivism is more about fixing systems.**

### **David Sirota**

The blogger David Sirota, posted on huffingtonpost.com (10/25/05), wrote the following piece to differentiate progressives from liberals. See how it compares to the key points above:

“I often get asked what the difference between a "liberal" and a "progressive" is. The questions from the media on this subject are always something like, "Isn't 'progressive' just another name for 'liberal' that people want to use because 'liberal' has become a bad word?"

The answer, in my opinion, is no - there is a fundamental difference when it comes to core economic issues.

It seems to me that traditional "liberals" in our current parlance are those who focus on using taxpayer money to help better society. A "progressive" are those who focus on using government power to make large institutions play by a set of rules.

To put it in more concrete terms - a liberal solution to some of our current problems with high energy costs would be to increase funding for programs like the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). A more "progressive" solution would be to increase LIHEAP but also crack down on price gouging and pass laws better-regulating the oil industry's profiteering and market manipulation tactics. A liberal policy towards prescription drugs is one that would throw a lot of taxpayer cash at the pharmaceutical industry to get them to provide medicine to the poor; A progressive prescription drug policy would be one that centered around price regulations and bulk purchasing in order to force down the actual cost of medicine in America (much of which was originally developed with taxpayer R&D money).

Let's be clear - most progressives are also liberals, and liberal goals in better funding America's social safety net are noble and critical. It's the other direction that's the problem. Many of today's liberals are not fully comfortable with progressivism as defined in these terms. Many of today's Democratic politicians, for instance, are simply not comfortable taking a more confrontational posture towards large economic institutions (many of whom fund their campaigns) - institutions that regularly take a confrontational posture towards America's middle-class.

We can see a good example of this hesitation from Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) in his "health care to hybrids" proposal. As the Detroit News reports, Obama is calling "for using government money to relieve Detroit automakers of some of their staggering health care obligations if they commit to improving fuel economy by 3 percent a year for 15 years."

Here's the thing - we all want to see autoworkers' health care preserved, and we all want to see better fuel efficiency standards for cars. But is this really the road we want to go down as a society? I'd say no. The fact is, the auto industry should be forced to produce more fuel efficient cars through higher government fuel efficiency mandates, without taxpayers having to bail out the industry. It's not like those mandates would be asking the industry to do something that doesn't make good business sense - demand for higher fuel efficiency cars is skyrocketing.

Paying off corporations to do what they already should be doing sets a dangerous precedent - it sends a message to Big Business that they can

leverage their irresponsible behavior into government handouts. In this case, the auto industry would be leveraging its refusal to produce more fuel efficient cars and preserve its workers' health care into a giant taxpayer-funded subsidy.

To be sure, Obama has solid motives in pushing his proposal, and it is a creative cross of issues (health care and energy/environment). But the general unwillingness of Democrats to consistently push for more sharp-edged progressive solutions is a big problem right now. The "free market" conservatives have so dominated the political debate over the last two decades that our side seems only comfortable proposing to pay off different economic players, instead of forcing those players to behave themselves. It's time for that to change. The government has a job to play in protecting Americans from being ripped off, and that doesn't mean just handing the economic bullies a bribe. It means pushing back - hard."

## **George Lakoff**

Lakoff is a founding senior fellow of the Rockridge Institute, a progressive think tank. His book, Don't Think of An Elephant, has become a popular progressive guide for "framing" issues. His newest book, Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision (2006), is subtitled "A Progressive's Handbook."

Lakoff emphasizes that, "Nothing is more substantive than a candidate's moral worldview—and whether he or she authentically abides by it." He describes the conservative moral worldview as based on a "strict father" model, while the progressive worldview is based on a "nurturant parent" model.

The nurturant parent model has two underlying values: *empathy* and *responsibility*. Empathy is the capacity to connect with other people, to feel what others feel, to imagine oneself as another and hence to feel a kinship with others. Responsibility is acting on that empathy—responsibility for yourself and for others. From these two core values, a set of progressive values follows.

- protection (for people threatened or under duress)
- fulfillment in life (so others can lead meaningful lives as you would want to)
- freedom (to seek fulfillment you must be free)
- opportunity (leading a fulfilling life requires opportunities to explore what is meaningful and fruitful)
- fairness (unfairness can stifle freedom and opportunity)
- equality (empathy extends to everyone)
- prosperity (a certain base amount of material wealth is necessary to lead a fulfilling life)
- community (nobody makes it alone, and communities are necessary for anyone to lead a fulfilling life)

From these values, Lakoff goes on to declare four progressive political principles:

1. The common good—We all go up or down as one people. The common good is necessary for individual well-being. It provides for the values of protection and fulfillment. We are all in this together, not on our own.
2. The expansion of freedom—Progressives demand the expansion of fundamental forms of freedom, such as voting rights, workers' rights, and public education.
3. Human dignity—Empathy requires the recognition of basic human dignity, and responsibility requires us to act to uphold it. Thus, torture is not acceptable; we should intervene to prevent genocide; support programs to meet the basic needs of the poor.
4. Diversity—This forces meaningful communities and creates opportunities to lead fulfilling lives. Discrimination has to be combated. Market diversity provides protection so that shortages can be dealt with by surpluses from elsewhere.

From these values and principles, Lakoff can then describe specific progressive positions. For example, he states,

“But a dangerous shift in decision-making power is taking place. This is being driven by the conservative emphasis on privatization and deregulation. HMOs and drug companies, for instance, are deciding what type of medical care people will have and how much it will cost. Car companies are deciding how much carbon dioxide we can put in our atmosphere and how fuel-efficient cars will be. The energy industry determines what type of energy we have access to, its impact on the environment, and how much it will cost. . .

These are moral decisions that affect the common good. As such, they should be publicly discussed, and the decision makers should be known and accountable to the public. In short, they should be made by democratically elected government, not corporate government, so they are ideally made in the interest of the public (though government can be manipulated to benefit special interests). But when government functions are privatized and industries are deregulated, these decisions are made in boardrooms for the benefit of stockholder profits. Because corporations are legally bound to maximize profit for their stockholders, and since spending on public safety and other aspects of the public good takes away from profits, corporate governments have an incentive not to work for the common good.

Privatization and deregulation constitute the outsourcing of *democratically elected government with a moral mission* to corporations that have a profit-making mission. The effect is to turn *democracy* into *corporatocracy*.

One can see the principles of the common good and diversity in this position.

One caution: Lakoff appears to differentiate progressives from liberals mostly by noting that some liberals want to move closer to the center, to moderate their progressive positions. So to him, a liberal is someone who starts to move toward a more conservative view. There are only progressives and “moderating liberals”. He does not really write about differentiations between liberals and progressives.

One other important point from Lakoff: In his view, there are no “moderates.” People in the “middle” are what he calls *biconceptuals*—they hold some progressive values and some conservative values. Thus, Joe Lieberman holds progressive views on reproductive rights, environmental protection, and labor rights. But he holds conservative views on the war in Iraq, school vouchers, and faith-based initiatives. He does not hold any of these views in “moderation.” The combination of them makes him biconceptual, not moderate.

Lakoff states that swing voters are also biconceptuals and the way for progressives to win them over is to appeal to the progressive values they hold and ignore the conservative values they hold. (And, thus “moderating” one’s progressive positions is really futile since those in the middle are not moderates themselves and one will not be able to appeal to them in this manner.)

Lakoff and Sirota appear to confirm the principle that progressives support systemic reform rather than merely striving to resolve current problems. To them, structural changes are important for a progressive outcome. However, neither of them addresses the issue of government itself being a challenge to progressive principles. As with any other system, government has the potential for corruption and inefficiency.

## **The Congressional Progressive Caucus**

Within the House of Representatives are three “ideological caucuses” of the Democratic Party (there are additional caucuses based on other interests than ideology). One is the conservative “Blue Dog” caucus. This group is primarily conservative on economics (balanced budget, limited government spending) and on the war in Iraq. It is generally progressive on social issues and income equity. Their website states, “The Coalition has been particularly active on fiscal issues, relentlessly pursuing a balanced budget and then protecting that achievement from politically popular “raids” on the budget.”

A second Democratic caucus is the centrist New Democratic Coalition. They take middle-of-the-road positions on many key issues, believing that Democrats must get elected in order to have impact, and to get elected a candidate must appeal to the “center”. Hence moderate positions are the key to ruling. They list

their key principles as economic growth, national security, personal responsibility, and technology development.

The third group is the Progressive Caucus. Its web page includes a statement of its vision, titled, "The Progressive Promise: Fairness for All." This lists four fundamental priorities, each of which has six sub-points.

1. Fighting for economic justice and security in the U.S. and global economies
  - Sub-points include universal access to affordable healthcare and the right of labor to organize
2. Protecting and preserving civil rights and civil liberties
  - Sub-points include protecting personal privacy from unbridled police powers and fighting corporate consolidation of the media
3. Promoting global peace and security
  - Sub-points include bring U.S troops home from Iraq as soon as possible and encourage debt relief for poor countries
4. Environmental protection and energy independence
  - Sub-points include free the economy from dependence upon imported oil and eliminate the environmental threat posed by global warming

These priorities reflect the values posed by Lakoff and also reflect systemic reform, not merely band-aiding current problems. As such, they are very consistent with the principles of progressivism described in this paper and serve to illustrate them in a real-world way.

## SUMMARY

Each reader can draw his or her own synthesis and conclusions from the material presented here. I offer my summary here as one viewpoint.

There are several concepts or principles that seem to run through progressivism from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to today. These include:

- a humanitarian temperament, a belief in the essential worth and dignity of all people and an obligation to help others**
- there is such a thing as the common good and it must be pursued; people acting collectively can foster it better than people acting only in their own individual interests**
- a belief that government can and must be used for the common good**
- a wariness of large aggregations of power, particularly in the hands of corporate groups**
- a belief that society is better served when political power is distributed more widely rather than less widely**
- the expansion of freedom is critical to individual and societal**

**growth**  
**--belief that a moral dimension should infuse political decisions;**  
**fairness and justice should be key criteria in decision-making**  
**--reform on a systemic and structural basis is an on-going**  
**requirement in order to meet these other principles**

So, to return to the questions posed in the first paragraphs of this paper—How do we determine if a candidate is progressive and what is a progressive position on political issues?

## **Candidates**

Regarding candidates, I suggest it is relatively easy to identify progressivism at national and state levels. For example, we could use the Lakoff principles and the priorities of the Progressive Caucus to assess a candidate. But we must come to grips with how many progressive principles a candidate holds. No one is “pure.” For example, Sherrod Brown probably subscribes to a very large number of progressive principles, yet he voted for the Military Commissions Act of 2006, the “torture bill.” Jon Tester, the new Democratic senator from Montana, supports many progressive principles, but he is a staunch supporter of 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment gun rights.

At the local level, let’s apply these principles to a mayoral candidate. In what ways might a mayor demonstrate progressive principles? I suggest the following examples:

1. Establish a citizen advisory board to provide guidance and feedback to him/her on a quarterly basis.
2. Urge the city council to pay a “living wage” to city workers
3. Establish mechanisms to receive and examine complaints and grievances from city employees so that fairness can be infused into the city workforce
4. Require his/her cabinet to demonstrate diversity in hiring and promotions in their departments
5. Establish rules for his/her administration regarding nepotism, conflict of interest, and fair bidding for city contracts
6. Require every city department to establish “green” operating procedures and to identify and implement ways to further a healthy environment
7. Spread power rather than concentrate it --Work collaboratively with the city council so that the representatives elected by the people participate in key decisions; seek advice from more than just powerful special interest groups that wield strong economic power; require each department to have some mechanism for obtaining citizen input into significant decisions

8. Wherever possible, address problems by examining the underlying causes and reforming systems rather than only removing the symptoms

Any mayor might do one or two these things. A progressive mayor would have an administration characterized by them.

For another example, consider a local judgeship. Here are some ways a judge might demonstrate progressive principles:

1. Ensure fairness in judicial decisions by applying the law in a principled manner to all cases regardless of the status of the individual person involved
2. Seek improvements in the structure of programs under the jurisdiction of the court—the probation system, diversionary programs, counseling for offenders, mediation to reduce trials. Such improvements might include such things as better training for those who run the programs; skill and knowledge requirements for those people; program guidelines that provide appropriate guidance with flexibility.
3. A commitment to do what is right (moral) within the confines of the law.
4. Presenting to legislators proposals for improving the law, within the judicial canon of ethics.
5. Meeting with community groups to discuss their perceptions of the justice system and how to improve it. Engaging citizens in appropriate participation in the judicial system.
6. Meeting with rehabilitation personnel to improve the way the system operates.

## **Issues**

For an issue such as the Iraq war, the progressive position is pretty clear. It might be a bit less clear regarding war in Afghanistan, though I would submit that the values of “protection” and “freedom” would support prosecution of that war.

The issue of “free trade” presents a bit of a challenge. On the one hand, free trade as it has been recently practiced has resulted in loss of jobs, abusive labor practices in other countries, and environmental problems in other countries. But, it can open up opportunities for more jobs to be created in the U.S. and can provide more business opportunities for many companies in the U.S. So, in that way, free trade done carefully could meet progressive principles (opportunity and diversity). In addition, free trade done right also provides opportunities to workers in other countries. To me this indicates that there are nuances to such issues and simply accepting or rejecting a program based on its topic can be narrow-minded. A free trade agreement should be judged based on the specifics of the proposal. The concept of “fair trade” embodies many of these principles.

A similar issue is alternative schools—vouchers, charter schools, etc. As practiced currently these tend to be anti-progressive. They drain funds from public schools, they provide the potential for class and racial segregation, and they put in corporate hands decisions that should be made for the common good by government. However, public schools today in many communities are not serving the students well. They are resistant to change and they are not always motivated to improve their performance. They are a monopoly and in some cases (certainly not all) they treat “customer service” as most monopolies do—with little attention. They have some of the same traits as other large organizations—impersonal, not responsive to their clients, and slow to adapt. A creative and thoughtful program for “competition” or alternatives could be constructed that would include progressive principles such as equality, common good, human dignity and opportunity.

If this paper helps the reader think more carefully about progressivism and what a progressive stance is, and helps the reader assess candidates and issues more carefully, it has served its purpose.