

PROGRESSIVISM

What is a “progressive?” Is there a difference between a progressive and 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? Hence a definition of progressivism can be helpful to our organization.

HISTORICAL BASIS OF PROGRESSIVISM

Background

At the beginning of the 20th century America was about to become a major world power. With the technology created in the late 1800s, the nation was experiencing great advances. 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 1/10th of their children completed high school.

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 allow 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.

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. 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.

In both rural and urban areas, progressive movements spread as the gap between America’s promise and reality was no longer tolerable..

The Progressive Presidents

From 1902 through 1920 and again from 1932 through 1941, progressivism was a dominant theme in national politics. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt presided over administrations that were characterized by progressive actions. Initially it was the Republican Party that was the party of progressivism following Teddy Roosevelt’s lead. But Woodrow Wilson’s election in 1912 swung that mantle over to the Democratic Party.

The progressive principles that became compelling during this era included the following:

1. A wariness of those in power—big business and the rich—and a belief that the holder of power has an obligation to promote justice and fairness
2. A belief in the value of the government to provide a fair playing field and to regulate competition.
3. A belief in direct democracy—presidential primaries, initiative and referendum, direct election of senators, women’s suffrage
4. Protection of labor—right to organize and bargain, minimum wage, regulated working hours
5. A humanitarian temperament—it is the responsibility of all the people to lend a hand to each other and to promote basic human dignity for all
6. A belief that reform is a continual process because systems continually deteriorate and become ineffective or corrupt

Under each of the three administrations these principles played out a little differently. For example, Teddy Roosevelt believed that the consolidation of big business was inevitable and the government should counter-balance it by regulating it. But Woodrow Wilson believed that big business should be broken up and that competition should be ensured through government action.

PROGRESSIVISM IN THE CURRENT ERA

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

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. 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.”

David Sirota

The blogger David Sirota, posted on huffingtonpost.com (10/25/05), wrote the following to differentiate progressives from liberals.

“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.

George Lakoff

Lakoff is a founding senior fellow of the Rockridge Institute, a progressive think tank. 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, Lakoff goes on to posit four guiding principles of progressivism.

1. The common good—We all go up or down as one people. The common good is necessary for individual well-being. We are all in this together, not on our own.
2. The expansion of freedom—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.
4. Diversity—This forces meaningful communities and creates opportunities to lead fulfilling lives. Market diversity provides protection so that shortages can be dealt with by surpluses from elsewhere.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus

Within the House of Representatives is a Democratic 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 to fight 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 posited 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.

Progressive Principles

Pulling together the various streams described above, a progressive set of principles might look like this:

- a humanitarian temperament, a belief in the essential worth and dignity of all people and an obligation to help others**
- a wariness of large aggregations of power, particularly in the hands of corporate groups**
- a belief that government can and must be used for the common good**
- a belief that society is better served when political power is distributed more widely rather than less widely**
- 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**
- the expansion of freedom is critical to individual and societal growth**
- 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**

And the following description might be apt::

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.

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.” Conrad Tester, the new Democratic senator from Montana, supports many progressive principles, but he is a staunch supporter of 2nd 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.

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.

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.