

In Praise of the Values Voter

Political scientists and liberal reformers once clamored for more ideological fervor in American politics. Now they want to push highly charged moral issues to the sidelines. But what is the purpose of politics if not to address fundamental moral questions?

BY JON A. SHIELDS

THEODORE LOWI, ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS political scientists of his generation, wrote darkly in his 1969 classic, *The End of Liberalism*, of a politics devoid of conflict over moral principles.

He saw midcentury America as a demoralized democracy in which legislators drafted vague laws and left it to bureaucratic agencies to work out much of the substance offstage with contending interest groups. A bewildered public, in Lowi's grim final sentence, had been left paralyzed by a "nightmare of administrative boredom."

Lowi spoke for the many Democratic Party activists and intellectuals in the consensus-oriented period after World War II who longed for a more ideological politics. Above all, these reformers wished for a more issues-based Democratic Party, one less bent on merely retaining power and acquiring patronage jobs at the expense of larger principles.

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They vehemently rejected the "end of ideology" celebrated by postwar thinkers, who favorably contrasted the pragmatism of American politics with the ideological politics of Europe and the horrors of totalitarianism. In cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, middle-class reformers struggled to wrest control of the local Democratic Party machinery from working-class ethnics, most of whom were Catholics. On the national stage, the reformers sought to weaken the power of party bosses over presidential nominations. Political scientist James Q. Wilson described the "essence of this reform ethic" in *The Amateur Democrat* (1962) as "a desire to moralize public life."

Beyond the political trenches, academics and intellectuals nurtured similar ambitions for a sharpening of partisan differences. A special committee on party reform convened by the American Political Science Association concluded in 1950 that the "ailment" of American parties was their absence of ideological cohesion, a condition that had dangerously



The news media zero in on dramatic conflicts such as this 2006 face-off between pro-life and abortion rights demonstrators in Washington, D.C., but far from the media spotlight activists who want to succeed are busily engaged in the work of grassroots rational persuasion.

slowed “the heartbeat of American democracy.” When the New Left emerged in the early 1960s, Tom Hayden and other leaders expressed their hope, in an open letter to the student community, that American democracy would be “vivified by controversy” over fundamental moral questions. Only moral warfare could combat the looming specter of civic apathy.

These liberal efforts culminated in a dramatic remaking of American political institutions. After the 1968 presidential election, Democratic Party reformers succeeded in creating a commission, first chaired by Senator George McGovern (D-S.D.), that effectively transferred control over the selection of presidential candidates from pragmatic party bosses to party activists by radically increasing the number of state primaries, from 16 in 1968 to 28 in 1972. The commission also imposed racial and gender quotas for convention delegates, a development that dra-

matically increased the influence of feminist organizations in the party. More generally, the open selection process strengthened the hand of upper-middle-class, issues-oriented reformers at the expense of working-class voters, who tended to participate in primaries at lower rates. The Republican Party, meanwhile, became more plebiscitary as well, since state laws governing primaries tended to apply to both parties. Years later, evangelical activists used the primary process to push the Republican Party to the right.

Changes outside the Democratic Party were just as important. With reformers such as Ralph Nader leading the charge, new advocacy groups, including Greenpeace and the National Organization for Women, challenged the traditional power of labor unions and organized business. As political scientist Jeffrey Berry has found, approximately half of all the advocacy groups in existence today were created

between the mid-1960s and the early '70s. These public-interest groups also enjoyed more power thanks in part to new laws, such as those allowing citizens a role in the federal regulatory process. Cumulatively, these changes in the parties and government were so dramatic that some political scientists began to speak of a "new American political system."

One might suppose that present-day conservatives would have declared war on this new system. However, it is liberals who are leading the charge, mounting a counterattack against their own revolution. They decry the moral conflict their predecessors longed for. They see single-issue advocates as a kind of democratic cancer. Above all, they are committed to pushing moral issues and passions to the margins of American political life.

Some liberal observers profess to be puzzled by people who vote their convictions rather than their pocketbooks. They want to put economic self-interest back at the center of national politics. "Unassuageable cultural grievances are elevated inexplicably over solid material ones, and basic economic self-interest is eclipsed by juicy myths of national authenticity and righteousness wronged," complains journalist Thomas Frank in his inquiry into the political soul of his home state, *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (2004).

Others hope to remove controversial moral issues such as embryonic stem-cell research from politics by placing them in the hands of scientific "experts." In his best-selling book *The Republican War on Science* (2005), for example, journalist Chris Mooney criticizes what he regards as the politicization of science by liberals and, especially, conservatives. Echoing the early 20th-century Progressives who hoped for government by supposedly apolitical elites, Mooney contends that "scientific expertise and consensus" should direct our political choices rather than our moral or ideological commitments.

Most critics, however, hope to enlist centrist voters against divisive moralists. In a strange political turn, they have embraced what President Richard M. Nixon called "the silent majority" as the source of their salvation from 1960s liberalism. They have

become the new conservatives. *Washington Post* columnist and Brookings Institution fellow E. J. Dionne argues that "ideological battles" have left a "restive majority" with the sense that politics does not address their real concerns, such as child care, school reform, and health care. Ideological battles, he says, have destroyed a once consensual and deliberative republic in which "people resolved disputes, found remedies, and moved forward." Political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady likewise embrace centrist citizens when they lament, in their study of political participation, *Voice and Equality* (1995), that American religious institutions have tended to "distort citizen activity" by mobilizing followers around social issues—particularly abortion—rather than "an economic agenda focused on the less advantaged." More recently, political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have argued that American politics has moved "off center" as "most voters sit on the sidelines watching a political blood sport that plays out with little concern for what the moderate center of opinion thinks." And Stanford political scientist Morris Fiorina and his coauthors dedicated their widely read and scathing criticism of activists in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (2004) to "tens of millions of mainstream Americans."

Yet there is remarkably little evidence that average citizens have become disaffected from politics as a result of ideological warfare. It is true, as critics charge, that political elites are more polarized than ordinary Americans. But they always have been. As political scientist Gary Jacobson of the University of California, San Diego, demonstrates in *Polarized Politics* (2000), since the 1970s ordinary Americans have grown more ideological at the same pace as their party leaders.

At the same time, the divide between the parties has indeed widened: For many years, pollsters have regularly asked American voters to locate themselves on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale, and since the 1970s those who identify with one of the two major political parties have moved about 1.2 points farther apart. But the parties are not out of step with public sentiment. When the same people are asked to locate the parties on the ideological scale, the vast

majority indicate that their party's position and their own are about the same. About 30 percent of the voters place themselves somewhere between the two parties ideologically, but that number has not changed since the 1970s.

Another argument marshaled by critics of ideological politics is that it has alienated American voters and reduced political participation. Yet reports of declining voter turnout since the 1970s are exaggerated. True, when turnout is reckoned as a percentage of the voting-age population, there appears to be a decline. But the political scientists who report these figures fail to account for the growing number of people who are ineligible to vote, notably felons and illegal immigrants. When turnout is calculated as a share of the *eligible* population, the story is quite different. An average of just over 56 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in presidential elections between 1972 and 2004. Contrary to what critics would predict, the contentious presidential elections of 1992 and 2004 produced higher turnouts—more than 60 percent. That is unusually high by 20th-century standards, and unmatched in any election since Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, and George Wallace squared off in 1968, an election year not known for its political consensus and moderation.

Political polarization has improved civic life in two other respects, just as political scientists of the 1960s hoped. Lowi and his contemporaries saw the widespread willingness of individual voters to split their tickets—to cast ballots for presidential and congressional candidates from different parties in the same election—as a major symptom of the sickness of America's political system. Voters, Lowi complained, were not being offered a real choice. "The similarities between the Republican and Democratic administrations greatly outnumbered and outweighed the differences." Today's voters are

significantly less likely to split their tickets than they were in 1972, a fact that further suggests citizens are not growing disenchanted with partisan politics.

In the miasma of mid-20th-century politics, moreover, opinion surveys revealed that many American voters did not identify with the party that best represented their values, instead choosing on the basis of the past performance of candidates or their own economic self-interest. That, too, is changing. According to Jacobson, the increasing coherence of the parties' ideologies has made "it easier for voters

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to recognize their appropriate ideological home." It has provided citizens with "a much clearer idea of how their collective choices will translate into congressional action."

Overall, American voters are more involved and more attuned to how well leaders reflect their political beliefs than they were just a few decades ago. Yet many political analysts are just as unhappy as Lowi and his contemporaries were. If civic disaffection cannot explain their repudiation of ideological politics, what does?

The chief answer is that they lost their enthusiasm for "values voters" because those voters turned out to have the wrong values. One of the great political ironies of the past few decades is that the Christian Right has been much more successful than its political rivals at fulfilling liberal thinkers' hopes for American democracy. Liberals built an array of well-funded public-interest groups such as Common Cause, Environmental Defense, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. But most of these organizations asked little more of their supporters than checkbook activism, and some were entirely supported by foundations. The Right, on the other hand, built gen-

uinely grassroots organizations, including Operation Rescue, the Christian Coalition, and Concerned Women for America, whose members mobilized millions of disaffected evangelical citizens through church-based networks. In his famously despairing account of Americans' civic involvement, *Bowling Alone* (2000), Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam conceded the point, without appearing to find much solace in it: "It is, in short, among Evangelical Christians, rather than among the ideological heirs of the sixties, that we find the strongest evidence for an upwelling of civic engagement."

This was not the way things were supposed to turn out. The New Left had imagined that an America roused to greater ideological awareness would be dominated by debates between liberals and socialists. Political scientists, as Hacker and Pierson note, also based their enthusiasm for more ideologically coherent parties on the assumption that "liberal Democrats would

benefit from the hardening of party differences."

These were not unreasonable expectations. The ideological activists of the 1960s were overwhelmingly liberal. Even the pro-life movement's early campaigns of civil disobedience in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) were led by leftist Catholics who had cut their teeth on the antiwar movement. Conservatism was thought to exist more as a kind of pathological disorder of the nation's passive mainstream masses, an affliction of Nixon's silent majority. Now, however, many liberal thinkers see silent, ordinary Americans as a bulwark against an ideological politics that tilts to the political right.

Yet if the critics of ideological politics have mixed motives, there still might be a good case for trying to push moral issues and passions to the edges of American politics. But that is not easily done. Even those who vehemently call for the marginalization of moral issues hold hard positions on those issues that they



At a 1963 rally against racial discrimination in Detroit, civil rights demonstrators laid claim to their share of the American dream. Like many leaders of contemporary social movements in the United States, civil rights advocates learned that to persuade moderates they must win minds as well as hearts.

either conceal or fail to recognize. Nowhere is this clearer than in the debate over abortion.

Recall Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady's claim that religious groups "distort" American politics by focusing on abortion rather than "the least advantaged." While this may strike some as a perfectly reasonable argument, it assumes that the human embryo has no moral status. If this assumption is wrong, if the fetus does have a claim to protection, it is precisely "the least advantaged" that the right-to-life movement is defending.

Although critics fault pro-life advocates for focusing too much national attention on abortion, they do not criticize the Supreme Court for creating a national abortion policy that is badly "off center." Some of the new champions of middle-of-the-road Americans try to answer this criticism by insisting that *Roe v. Wade* represents mainstream opinion. In *Culture War?* Fiorina and his coauthors commend the Court for instituting a "broadly acceptable compromise" on abortion. A majority of Americans are "pro-choice but" (i.e., in favor of abortion rights but with qualifications), they say, and therefore "oppose the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*."

But that majority is not nearly as solid as Fiorina suggests. It rests on Americans' great ignorance of what *Roe* does and does not allow. As sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia has shown, the vast majority of Americans imagine that *Roe* is far more restrictive than it actually is. For example, some 80 percent of Americans do not believe that abortion is available through all nine months of pregnancy. Such "mass legal illiteracy," according to Hunter, explains why "Americans want to keep *Roe* intact, but . . . also favor proposals that would restrict (some severely) what it currently allows, if not undermine it altogether." They wrongly assume that the United States is simply in step with European practice, even though most European democracies, including Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, limit abortion access to the first trimester.

Ironically, abortion only became a volatile political

issue when the Supreme Court attempted to take it out of politics with the *Roe* decision. Before the Court intervened, the states were steadily revisiting their abortion laws through the normal political process, and the door to subsequent argument and revision remained open. After *Roe*, pro-life activists were left with few political outlets. Their campaign of civil disobedience began when their political options were

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suddenly reduced to amending the Constitution or radically changing the makeup of the Court. If liberal thinkers are alarmed by activist radicalism and truly believe in the centrist majority, the obvious course would be to support a reversal of *Roe*, allowing ordinary political conflict to sort the issue out through the democratic process in state legislatures. But that proposition has not found many takers.

The fact that we cannot escape moral conflicts in politics does not doom American democracy to endless political warfare. Even the most passionate religiously inspired social movements learn to moderate their appeals in order to win over middle-of-the-road citizens. As historian Eric Foner concluded in his study of 19th-century politics, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970), abolitionists enjoyed more success once they began to emphasize constitutional arguments and the pragmatic concerns of ordinary citizens, such as their fear of a racial bloodbath in the aftermath of slavery. As Foner put it, such arguments were "far more effective politically than mere moralizing about slavery." The Women's Christian Temperance Union and its successor organizations ultimately succeeded in their campaign for prohibition by taking a similarly moderate course. The WCTU's remarkable president, Frances Willard, directed her activists to "be of a teachable spirit

and tolerant of those opinions which differ from ours, while we still strive to show the reasonableness of ours.”

In the early 20th century, the Catholic Church’s crusade against eugenic sterilization rested squarely on public reason. As the historian Sharon Leon found, Catholic activists labored to appeal to non-Catholics by “emphasizing scientific objections to the procedure, legal arguments about appeal and due process, and, finally, social justice issues raised by the racial and economic status of the targeted population.” More recently, the civil rights campaign in the South was a model of a

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disciplined social movement. And despite the media’s attentive vigil over the culture war’s most outrageous and marginal characters, most conservative Christian activists today quietly labor to engage those who disagree with them in a civil and reasonable way. Stand to Reason, an organization that trains some 40,000 Christian activists annually, teaches citizens to avoid religious language and engage others in reasoned debate on substantive issues, such as the moral status of the fetus versus the newborn.

It is precisely this moderation within social movements that breeds uncompromising and even violent militants at the fringes. There were violent abolitionists, ax-wielding temperance crusaders, disciples of Black Power in the civil rights movement, Weathermen in the New Left, eco-terrorists in the environmental movement, and abortion clinic bombers in the Christian Right. But radicals also tend to inspire further moderation within social movements. This has been especially true in the Christian Right, where leaders are trying to escape the long shadow of fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell and Randall Terry (of Operation Rescue fame). Most advocates who

want to win over mainstream Americans are not interested in losing strategies.

Yet leaders in all social movements know that they must also fire up their followers and potential recruits even as they instruct them to engage the public with reason and civility. They must simultaneously excite and educate democratic passions, a tradeoff that brings us directly to the fundamental tension between the competing democratic values of participation and deliberation.

The Founders appreciated this tension far better than most of today’s observers. In their view, deliberation was only possible in institutions that were insulated

from public passions. For that reason, for example, the Constitution provided that members of the Senate would be chosen indirectly, by state legislatures. In addition, the Founders drew congressional districts sufficiently large that the bonds connecting the

districts’ citizens would be weak. Their strategy was to sacrifice participation for the promise of deliberation and freedom from majority tyranny. As the late Wilson Carey McWilliams summarized their philosophy, “Liberty requires that we be kept weak.”

Yet experience has shown that the tradeoff between participation and deliberation is not nearly as stark as the Founders imagined. The genius of American social movements is that they have both engaged citizens *and* educated their moral passions. But they do still more. Social movements draw us out of our own self-interest by attaching us to other citizens and causes greater than ourselves. They demand our sacrifice, solidarity, and attention to politics. In this way, social movements help solve one of the central problems of democracy, which is the tendency of citizens to tirelessly pursue their own happiness without regard to the public weal. Such movements are a bulwark against the emergence of a consumer republic in which citizens, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s ominous words, simply indulge “their petty and banal pleasures.” America’s culture wars, in other words, are one of the best antidotes to the individualistic consumer culture liberals tend to loathe. ■