

# UPHOLDING COMMUNITY VALUES

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Between the defeat of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency, American conservatives forged a cogent and effective political narrative. The signature policies of the conservative movement – tax cuts, privatization, deregulation – were grounded in a simple set of guiding principles: freedom is the highest public value; competition is the engine of progress; markets are intrinsically fair and rational; big government constrains liberty and fosters dependency. These principles, in turn, rested on a starkly individualistic worldview that emphasized the autonomy of the self and the voluntary character of society. While conservatives did not win every battle, they succeeded in establishing their ideology as the norm; it became the default position in American politics, giving the Right a structural advantage that proved decisive over time.

After more than quarter-century, the conservative chokehold has begun to loosen. The obvious part of the story involves a disastrous war, a deteriorating economy, and an unpopular president. Conventional political analysis (unable to see beyond the obvious) would have the next administration use its mandate to advance policies with broad, poll-tested support – “low-hanging fruit” left over from the Bush years – instead of questioning the foundational principles that have defined our public discourse for the past generation.

But that would be a profound misreading of the public mood. Underneath the disenchantment with the Bush Administration lies a widespread if inchoate sense that the go-it-alone ethos has been taken too far, that a conception of public good solely based on competition and consumption is lacking some essential moral dimension. Even conservative elites express disquiet and creeping doubt about where their ideas have led. This is precisely the moment to challenge the ideological underpinnings of the conservative revolution and frame an alternative

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vision that, like the right-wing narrative, proceeds from values to principles to policies.

For the past three years, the Center for Community Change has been working with leaders from more than a hundred grassroots organizations to construct a political story rooted in their own aspirations and experiences. American communities, with all their diversity, embody a common ethical ideal. In a healthy community, people feel connected to each other. They care for each other and take shared responsibility for the future. They are willing to sacrifice personal interests for the common good. Everyone has something of value to offer. Everyone is included. Everyone belongs.

When these norms are universalized and applied to the body politic, we refer to them as community values. Interdependence, mutual responsibility, shared fate – this communal ideal has deep roots in American culture, where it has lived in creative tension with the ideal of self-reliance that is also a part of our national heritage. All of our best moments as a nation have reflected a marriage of these two ideas --

personal liberation and collective uplift. The radical individualism of the conservative ideologues destroyed that generative balance. After thirty years of exile in the wilderness, community values need to be restored to their central place in our politics, not in a stealthy, furtive way but openly and forthrightly.

What does embracing community values tell us about the world as it is and the world as it should be? From hundreds of conversations with grassroots leaders, five overarching principles have emerged:

1. Our shared quality of life is more important than the open-ended accumulation of wealth. In the standard economic story, wealth-seeking investors and entrepreneurs get almost all of the credit for growth and innovation. As long as this core assumption remains in place, any proposal to limit the pursuit of wealth or distribute income more equitably

can be dismissed as illegitimate or counterproductive. To change the terms of the debate, we must:

- *Tell a different story about wealth creation and economic growth, one in which all of us – workers, communities, caregivers, teachers, public servants – play a central role.*
- *Develop policies that go beyond redistributing income and regulating corporate behavior to changing the operating rules and assumptions of business enterprises.*

2. Patterns of racism and inequality are deeply embedded in our nation, and will only be erased through deliberate, targeted efforts. We are all in this together, but we don't all start from the same place. There are legacies of discrimination, exclusion, and violence whose destructive impact on our collective life cannot be healed simply by instituting color-blind or gender-blind policies. To create a genuinely inclusive American community, we must:

- *Face our history squarely, not to stir guilt or recrimination but to create a shared recognition of the ways in which past injustices have shaped the current patterns and structures of our society.*
- *Combine “universal” social programs with policies designed to heal the communities most affected by the destructive legacies of the past.*

3. Government is an essential tool for doing together what we cannot do on our own. Few Americans believe in government as an abstraction. When the debate is cast as one over the appropriate size or scope of government, the outcome is rarely in doubt. The question we need to be asking instead is whether the fundamental things we value as a community -- shared responsibility and shared sacrifice -- can be achieved without a strong role for government. The answer is clearly no, but to carry that point we must:

- *Be explicit and persistent about the failure of market mechanisms to deliver a society where everyone has a good*

*education, good health, decent income, decent housing, and a sense of security and opportunity.*

4. Democracy means having real voice and power in all of the institutions that affect our lives. As John Dewey and other progressive pioneers long ago recognized, democracy is not just a process; it is an ethos animated by the ideals of inclusion, individual worth, and collective responsibility. By identifying democracy with the act of voting, we have lost touch with this ideal and helped make Americans deeply cynical about the gap between democratic rhetoric and reality. To reanimate the democratic spirit we must:

- *Restore the credibility of our political process through root-level reforms (a topic addressed elsewhere in this document).*
- *Begin to apply democratic principles to the full range of institutions that govern our lives, including neighborhoods, schools, and business enterprises.*

5. The security and prosperity of Americans is inseparable from the security and prosperity of other nations. Progressives have been inconsistent about the role of the United States in the world, appealing to moral universalism and altruism on some issues (foreign aid, human rights), and to isolationist, “America-first” sentiments on other issues (trade, military intervention). Our failure to resolve this tension has come home to roost in the immigration debate, creating deep fissures within the progressive community and making it very difficult to articulate a coherent alternative to the current system. To get out of this box, we must:

- *Be clear and unapologetic in saying that the actions and policies of the United States have had profound effects on other nations, and that it is neither morally nor practically feasible to address our national problems in isolation from the rest of the world.*
- *Develop policy initiatives that embody the deep linkages between migration, trade, and economic development, that build on recognition of our shared fate in an interconnected world rather than on appeals to charity or national chauvinism.*

In 2009, progressives have a unique opportunity to offer a vision of the nation's future that is consistent with our deepest beliefs. We must seize this moment, when the public is thirsting for change, to challenge the radical individualism of the conservative revolution and resurrect the ideal of community, with its core values of interdependence, inclusion and mutual responsibility. We must translate these values into substantive principles and be honest about their political implications, as the conservatives were thirty years ago. And we must be ready to test those principles against reality with bold policy initiatives rather than falling back into timid ideas and derivative thinking. In this way – perhaps only in this way – we can expand the boundaries of the possible and create a new moral foundation for the next era in our national life.

#### AUTHORS

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## COMMUNITY IDEAS

The principles we have articulated are not gauzy platitudes but substantive ideas with substantive implications – that is what makes them worth debating as a nation. In this debate, some Americans will immediately align pro or con, but many will hesitate. They will be attracted to community values, which are deeply rooted in our moral traditions, but question their application to practical politics. Hence, the ultimate test of these principles is whether they are a compelling basis for public policy.

The following four scenarios demonstrate what it would mean to translate community values into action.

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### STAKEHOLDER CAPITALISM

There is a fundamental conflict between community values and the idea that corporations are solely accountable to their stockholders and capital markets. The looming crisis in the economy offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between corporations and society. As we consider bailouts and rescue operations for industries imperiled by the downturn, we should implement a broad set of policies to assure that business enterprises enhance our collective quality of life rather than undermine it, including:

- *A requirement that the boards of larger corporations include community and worker representatives.*

- *Development of a shared code of ethical conduct for corporations (in labor, consumer, and environmental practices) and a system of public rewards and sanctions to encourage businesses to observe the code.*
- *Systematic support for the formation and growth of businesses that are structurally accountable to their communities via employee ownership, cooperative ownership, and other mechanisms.*

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### COMMUNITY HEALTH

In the current drive to win universal health coverage for Americans, it is easy to forget the larger goal, which is health itself. Lack of access to health care is only responsible for about 20 percent of the disparities that – to cite one shocking example – have reduced women’s life expectancy in nearly a quarter of U.S. counties over the past decade. Other critical risk factors involve education, housing, employment, nutrition, environmental quality, and the strength of social networks. As a nation, we need to commit ourselves to specific targets for improving collective indices of community health over the next decade, and invest in a range of strategies to achieve that end, including:

- *Expansion of community health centers, promotoras, and other systems that have proven effective in delivering low-cost, preventive health care.*
- *A healthy communities Superfund*

*that would make long-term investments in projects (such as clean-up of toxic hazards, expansion of recreational facilities, anti-violence programs, farmers markets) with demonstrated impact on community health outcomes.*

- *Requiring a community health assessment – analogous to an environmental impact assessment – for all major public policies.*

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### POVERTY

Sharp disparities of wealth, status, and opportunity are incompatible with community values. After a span of decades when the struggle against poverty was effectively abandoned, we need to recommit the nation to the work of addressing the economic legacies of racism and discrimination. This will require an array of strategies targeted to the most intractable problems in low-income communities of color, including:

- *A comprehensive program for bringing the unemployed (particularly young people and ex-offenders) into the workforce, including basic education, job training, apprenticeships, local hiring agreements, green jobs, and a mobile corps of paid community workers.*
- *A national housing trust fund to produce the affordable housing in low-income neighborhoods that cannot be generated by market forces alone.*
- *Redirecting investment in transportation and public infrastruc-*

*ture from promoting growth in affluent, outer-ring suburbs to the renewal of older, higher-need communities.*

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### IMMIGRATION

Rather than treating immigration as a law enforcement problem, we need to accept labor mobility as a reality of our current global economic system while working over the long term to ensure that people are not forced to migrate by the lack of opportunity in their home countries. Our immigration policy needs to work on at least three levels:

- *For immigrants who are already here, and already an integral part of our communities, we need a path to citizenship, access to higher education, and other measures to assure that they are not excluded from our democracy.*
- *For future flow, we need a regulated system of labor migration and transparent labor markets that fosters flexibility and mobility while protecting both migrants and native-born workers from the most destructive effects of job competition.*
- *To catalyze debate on the broader factors driving labor migration, we should create a demonstration program that targets infrastructure investments (water, transportation, education, health care, credit) to communities worldwide that are generating the highest rates of migration to the U.S.*