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Social Values Research and Politics

April 2006

Social values research was born from an effort to understand the explosion of new values and identities in the post-scarcity consumer societies that emerged after World War II. It builds on breakthroughs in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology. For 20 years corporations have used social values research to re-position old brands and create new ones. These tools are now available to progressives looking to take advantage of changing social values trends.

For this research to be useful we must first understand the consensus that has emerged within the social sciences about how American values are changing.

1. **Most Americans are postmaterialists.** In the 1950s the American psychologist Abraham Maslow famously proposed that humans have a "hierarchy of needs," beginning with the material needs of food, shelter, security and freedom, which must be fulfilled before we can pursue what sociologists today call "postmaterial needs": desires for status recognition, belonging, community, a purposeful life, fulfillment, happiness, etc. Thanks in large part to the success of market capitalism and post-war liberalism, the vast majority of Americans today are *postmaterialists*. In contrast to 1933, very few Americans anymore worry about having enough to eat or having a roof over their heads. (This is even more true of voters than nonvoters.) This is not to say that Americans no longer worry about their material lives. They do. But they do so for postmaterialist reasons and in postmaterialist ways. The implications for politics are significant. Very few Americans are so poor that their material survival is in question, as it was during the Great Depression. Social mobility may objectively be harder today than it was 20 years ago. But the vast majority of Americans continues to believe in the American Dream and tend to identify up, not down, the class ladder. Efforts to appeal to alleged material interests are unlikely to bring white working-class voters back into the Democratic fold. Those postmaterialist Americans moved on from such concerns decades ago; it is only unreconstructed liberal Democrats who have not. Similarly, putting poverty at the center of one's politics fails to recognize the ways in which America remains a deeply aspirational country that has long been more committed to greatness than to altruism.

2. **Americans neither rationally assess nor vote their material self-interest.** American liberals sometimes seem like the last people on earth to cling to the fantasy that voters (themselves included) rationally calculate their material self-interest. The last 30 years of social science research, from social psychology to sociology to cognitive science, should have long since disabused everyone of the rationalistic fallacy. Even economics, the last bastion of classical enlightenment ideas about *homo economicus*, has increasingly valued the study of human irrationality. American voters no more rationally calculated their self-interest in 1976 and 1992 than they did in 1980 and 2004. Democrats sometimes recognize that this is the case but usually return to constructing their politics around the older materialist mental model, hoping against hope that their patient explanations of why this health care plan or that tax cut are in or against the voters' material self-interest. Americans support candidates and policy proposals based on whether they resonate with their core and (often unconsciously held) values and outlook on life. Appealing to the "rational" and material self-interests of American voters will only lead to further disappointments at the ballot box.
3. **Demography is no longer destiny.** America's transition to a post-industrial economy has been accompanied by profound changes in American values. Americans today form their identities in far more complex ways than they did in the past. For example, "being Irish" used to entail a specific set of other identities and values, from being Catholic to being Democratic to being against abortion. Today being Irish is far less predictive of one's place, values and politics. Social and geographic mobility has loosened the connection between demographic and biological identities and political identity. For example, our research shows that African Americans under the age of 20 have more values in common with whites and Hispanics under the age of 20 than they do with blacks over the age of 60. (The same holds true for whites and Latinos.) In contrast, black, white and Latino Americans over the age of 60 hold very different values from each other. Continuing to understand and speak to Americans in demographic and biological terms – e.g., "Hispanic women" or "suburban soccer moms" — risks misunderstanding political behavior and missing important political opportunities.
4. **Americans are demanding a more flexible and less hierarchical relationship to religion, work and government.** Americans today hold increasingly more flexible orientations towards work, family, spirituality, government and consumption. Even conservative evangelical churches are becoming more postmaterialist. Witness the enormous appeal of the megachurch minister Rick Warren and his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren is directly speaking to individual exploration and personal happiness in ways that would have seemed bizarre to evangelical preachers a generation ago. Other Americans are seeking to fulfill their spiritual needs outside of church. Likewise, the relationship between employees and employers is becoming more flexible. While some liberals see only the downside, such as job and pension insecurity, there are also

upsides, such as more purposeful, creative work, greater flexibility in work hours, and the ability to work from home. Finally, Americans are increasingly rejecting the idea that command and control government programs are the best way to solve social problems and are looking for a relationship to government that reflects changed economic and social realities. This is not to say that Americans *a priori* want less government or smaller government, though this is sometimes the case. What Americans most want is a new social contract — a different relationship to government than the kind Democrats established during the New Deal and war on poverty. Democrats tend to misread these forms of postmaterialism either as a kind of libertarian conservatism or as an irrational failure to recognize one's true (read: material) interests. Progressives need to create and fight for programs that speak both to new demands for flexibility and to long-standing demands for accountability, whether of corporations or individuals.

5. **Moving either to the right or to the left will not solve the Democrats' problems.** The problem for Democrats is not, for the most part, that they are either too liberal or not liberal enough. Rather the problem is that Republicans but not Democrats have created an agenda and a politics that is more consistent with the seemingly nonrational ways postmaterialist Americans hold values, form identities and engage in politics. Democrats are trapped in a false debate between industrial-era liberalism and so-called centrism. Centrists tend to blame the failure of Democrats on their being too liberal. Liberals tend to blame the failure of Democrats on their not being populist enough. Centrists tend to mistake the postmaterialist rejection of industrial-era, command-and-control liberalism for an embrace of libertarian conservatism. Liberals tend to deny or ignore the emergence of postmaterialism in post-industrial America. The real problem is that we continue to understand American identities and values — and construct our politics and our policy agenda — in outmoded ways.

New Research for a New Politics

Some progressives have recognized these social, economic and cultural trends since the 1980s. What we haven't had until now are a set of tools to take advantage of them. The Strategic Values Method is a way of taking the culture and the values of postmaterialists living in post-industrial America seriously while staying true to our core social and philosophical goals.

American Environics was co-founded by the political strategists Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger and Environics, Inc., one of Canada's largest market research firms. The two are today developing Strategic Initiatives on economic, energy, health care and poverty issues. In early 2007, Houghton Mifflin will publish their book, *The End of Environmentalism and the Birth of a New American Politics*. Their work has been featured in a variety of U.S. publications, including the *New York Times*, *NPR*, *Salon*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The American Prospect*, and *Glamour Magazine*. The two are also co-directors of the Breakthrough Institute (www.thebreakthrough.org).