

State of American Political Ideology, 2009

A National Study of Values and Beliefs



SOURCE: AP/Susan Walsh

With large Democratic majorities in both chambers of Congress and an ambitious new president who campaigned and won election on promises of bold changes, the potential for true progressive governance is greater than at any point in decades.

By John Halpin and Karl Agne | March 11, 2009

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Report: [New Progressive America: Twenty Years of Demographic, Geographic, and Attitudinal Changes Across the Country Herald a New Progressive Majority](#) by Ruy Teixeira

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Introduction and summary

The growing progressive movement in the United States finds itself at a historic and propitious crossroads. With large Democratic majorities in both chambers of Congress and an ambitious new president who campaigned and won election on promises of bold changes—both serving a citizenry that is deeply frustrated with the status quo and desperate for new leadership at all levels of our society—the potential for true progressive governance is greater than at any point in decades. Driven by a rising generation of young 18- to 29-year-old “Millennial” generation voters whose vast numbers and unique worldview have already made a significant impact at the ballot box, our country is embracing many core progressive values and shows a real commitment to a progressive vision of government, international affairs, and economic and political policies that could transform the country in a way that has not been seen since FDR and the New Deal.

The 2008 presidential election not only solidified demographic and partisan shifts toward the Democratic Party but also marked a significant turn in the ideological landscape of the electorate. After nearly three decades of public acceptance of the Reagan-Bush model of conservatism—limited government, tax cuts, traditional values, and military strength—a broad and deep cross-section of the American public now holds markedly progressive attitudes about government and society.

Our inaugural “State of American Political Ideology” survey, which employed a unique measurement of ideological self-identification to explore a more complicated ideological landscape than typically described in other studies of public opinion, was primarily designed to assess the ideological balance in America based on responses to 40 questions equally divided between progressive and conservative beliefs. Our survey results show that Americans are solidly center-left in their ideas about role of government, the economy, and domestic politics and somewhat less so on cultural and social issues.

For years, traditional public opinion polling has broken down ideology into three distinct groupings: liberal, moderate, and conservative. Based on this categorization, there has been remarkable stability in ideological orientation, with roughly one-fifth of Americans identifying themselves as “liberal” and about four in 10 classifying themselves as “moderate” or “conservative,” respectively, according to Gallup polling from 1992 to 2008.

In this study, however, the electorate is broken down using a more expansive five-point scale of political ideology that reflects the variety of approaches people ascribe to today. Employing this more calibrated measure, 34 percent of the country identifies as “conservative,” 29 percent as “moderate,” 15 percent as “liberal,” 16 percent as “progressive,” and 2 percent as “libertarian.” After moderates are asked which approach they lean toward, the overall ideological breakdown of the country divides into fairly neat left and right groupings, with 47 percent of Americans identifying as progressive or liberal

and 48 percent as conservative or libertarian. The rest are unsure or scattered among moderate and other approaches.

Combining this five-point scale of political ideology with responses to the 40 specific ideological statements, the progressive leanings of the country become readily apparent. On the domestic front, after years of supply-side tax cuts, support for corporations (especially extractive oil and mining companies), and deregulation of the economy, large percentages of Americans increasingly favor progressive ideas centered on: sustainable lifestyles and green energy; public investment in education, infrastructure, and science; financial support for the poor, elderly, and sick; regulation of business to protect workers and consumers; and guaranteed affordable health coverage for every American. On the international front, the legacy of the Bush years has yielded to an American public far more interested in restoring the country's image abroad, fighting climate change, and pursuing security through diplomacy, alliances, and international institutions than in the continued pursuit of national objectives through the sole projection of military might.

Approximately two-thirds of Americans—reaching to 70 percent to 80 percent on some measures—agree with progressive ideas in each of these domestic and global areas (see Table 1). Important cleavages emerge in the data, however, between non-college-educated Americans and college-educated elites. Non-college Americans are more populist and progressive than elites on some measures of government and economics and much more conservative on cultural and national security measures.

The rise of progressivism in America is reflected more starkly in direct ratings of various ideological approaches. Today, more than two-thirds of Americans rate a “progressive” approach to politics favorably, a 25-point increase in favorability over the last five years, with gains coming primarily from those who were previously unaware of the term. “Progressive” now equals “conservative” in terms of overall public favorability (67 percent, respectively).

The continuing strength of the conservative brand—if not all of its constitutive ideas—reflects the long-term success of the conservative movement over decades. Despite electoral setbacks and larger proportions of Americans now adhering to progressive ideas about governance and society, the conservative worldview remains appealing to many Americans and creates important cleavages in the electorate, particularly on key cultural and national security beliefs. Conservative principles about markets, spending, national defense, and traditional values enjoy residual strength and could rise in prominence depending on shifts in the economic and political environment. Conservatives may be down but they are not out of the ideology game.

But unless and until conservatives recognize the depth of affinity between President Obama's ideological approach and that of the American electorate, conservative ideas likely will remain in secondary status. According to this research, President Obama himself—and

his ideas about governance outlined in his recent address to the joint session of Congress and his budget overview—best embodies in spirit, tone, and ideological and substantive content the emerging center spot in the American electorate today. The strong public support for President Obama reflects personal qualities and strengths that appeal broadly to Americans and genuine consensus among the public about the ideas and prescriptions necessary to navigate the country through turbulent waters.

Notably, the ideological areas of greatest consensus among Americans are all key priorities and investment targets of President Obama: renewable energy; education, science, and infrastructure; universal health care; financial support for the least well-off; public interest regulations; and reductions in inequality financed by increased taxes on the wealthy.

As the “**New Progressive America**” report by Ruy Teixeira for the Progressive Studies Program argues, these ideological trends are likely to grow over time as particular demographic groups increase in electoral importance. A companion youth survey by the Progressive Studies Program reveals that progressive attitudes about government and economics are particularly strong among those under the age of 30, suggesting the potential for further strengthening of progressivism within the electorate.

Going a bit deeper, this research shows that ideological labels do not easily map onto predetermined patterns of thought and often mask a fluidity of opinion across and within groups. Case in point: Majorities of self-identified conservatives agree with four out of five progressive perspectives on the role of government while majorities of self-identified progressives and liberals agree with conservative economic positions on things like trade and Social Security.

Additionally, self-identified progressives and liberals share many views and beliefs about government and the economy but hold somewhat differing beliefs on cultural and international concerns. Likewise, although conservatives and libertarians are frequently considered to be part of the same tribe, our research finds that self-identified conservatives look rather poorly upon the libertarian approach (only 35 percent of conservatives rate “libertarian” favorably).

Here is a brief summary of the major findings from our “State of American Political Ideology, 2009 Survey,” beginning with the composite ideology measures crafted by the Progressive Studies Program, followed by a look at our findings related to the American Dream, basic American values, ideological perceptions of President Obama, ideological ratings, and ideological self identification in American society.

Composite ideology measures

- Based on an innovative categorization of ideology, calculated from Americans’ responses to 40 statements about government and society split evenly between progressive and conservative beliefs, the American electorate as a whole records a

mean ideological score of 209.5 in the Progressive Studies Program measure of composite ideology—solidly progressive in orientation. This figure is based on a composite scale of “0” to “400” with “0” being the most conservative position on the continuum and “400” being the most progressive. Americans are most progressive about the role of government and least progressive on cultural and social values. Ideas about economics and international affairs fall in-between.

- Younger Americans (219.7) are more progressive in aggregate than older ones (200.7). African Americans (224.3) and Latinos (228.4) are more progressive than whites (203.7). Women (214.3) are more progressive than men (204.3). The east (217.6) and west (213.0) regions are more progressive than the southern (204.6) and central (207.2) regions. Urban citizens (216.6) are more progressive than suburban (205.8) and rural (198.0) ones. And people who get their news and information from Internet sources and blogs (221.1) are more progressive than those who get their news from national or local television (203.4 and 209.6, respectively).
- Two things of note emerge on the composite scores. First, American ideological attitudes tend to converge in the middle. Although there is a substantial range of ideological positions (from conservative Republicans at 160.6 to liberal Democrats at 247.1), no one group approaches the most extreme poles on either the progressive or conservative side of the continuum. Second, this middle convergence implies that Americans are not fully convinced of many ideological positions on their own side are open to ideological positions that may be different than their own.
- Despite claims to the contrary, there really is no “far right” or “far left” among the electorate in the country. It is more accurate based on this evidence to talk about “far center-right” and “far center-left.”
- Most of the ideas with the strongest consensus (approximately two-thirds total agreement and 40 percent strong agreement), are all progressive positions: the need for more sustainable lifestyles; government investment in education, infrastructure and science; transformation toward renewable energy sources; the need for a positive image to achieve national security goals; and guaranteed affordable health coverage for every American.
- Of the top 15 statements with 60 percent total agreement or more, only 4 are classified as conservative positions—the need to focus more at home, stronger regulation of sex and violence in popular culture and on the Internet, the importance of free trade, and the idea that government spending is wasteful and inefficient.
- Although support is lower than that for many progressive ideas, majorities of Americans (ranging from 55 to 58 percent) agree with a cluster of conservative ideas about markets, taxes, changes in the American family, Social Security, military force, and limited government. This suggests residual strength for many components of the conservative worldview.
- Ideas about race, labor unions, personal responsibility for the poor, patriotism,

immigration, religion, foreign aid, talking with enemies, and homosexuality are much more divided and lacking in consensus.

- Notably, compared to college-educated elites, non-college-educated Americans are more populist and progressive than elites in some attitudes about the role of government and fighting inequality and much more conservative on cultural and national security areas.

The American Dream

- The economic recession is clearly affecting many Americans. A full two-thirds of Americans (67 percent) report that their family's income is falling behind the cost of living, with 23 percent saying their income is staying even and only 6 percent saying it is going up faster than the cost of living. The belief that family income is failing to keep pace with rising costs is uniformly held across ideological, partisan, race, and income lines.
- Despite the harsh climate, many Americans continue to believe that they have achieved or will achieve their own understanding of the American Dream in their lifetime. More than one-third of Americans (34 percent) say they have already achieved the American Dream and another 41 percent believe that they will achieve it in their lifetime. Roughly one-fifth of Americans (18 percent) say they will not achieve the American Dream in their lifetime.
- Significant education gaps exist on perceptions of the American Dream. Fifty percent of post-graduate educated Americans say they have they have achieved the American Dream and only 5 percent say they will not achieve it. In contrast, only 30 percent of those with a high school degree or less say they have achieved the American Dream and nearly one quarter believes that they will not attain it in their lifetimes.

Basic American values

- Asked to choose two American political values that are most important to them, four in 10 people selected 'liberty' (42 percent) as their chief political value followed closely by a second tier of principles centered on "opportunity" (34 percent), "justice" (33 percent), and "quality" (32 percent). Occupying a lower cluster are values such as "free enterprise" (22 percent), "community" (15 percent), and "tradition" (11 percent).
- Larger proportions of Democrats and progressives rank "equality" and "opportunity" over other values while Republicans and conservatives gravitate towards "liberty," "justice" and "free enterprise" at higher rates.
- In a larger context of values, six in 10 Americans believe that "government should do more to promote the common good," versus 37 percent who feel that "government

should do more to promote individual liberty.” There is relative consensus on this sentiment with roughly 70 percent of progressives and liberals agreeing with the focus on the common good over liberty but also 62 percent of self-identified moderates and 54 percent of conservatives.

- When asked to consider the dimensions of freedom, a majority of Americans (57 percent) believes that “freedom requires economic opportunity and minimum measures of security, such as food, housing, medical care and old age protection,” compared to 38 percent who favor the idea that “freedom requires that individuals be left alone to pursue their lives as they please and to deal with the consequences of their actions on their own.”
- Much sharper ideological and partisan divides arise on these competing visions of freedom: 73 percent of progressives, 71 percent of Democrats, and 68 percent of liberals prefer the FDR-style of freedom compared to a majority of Republicans (55 percent) and a plurality of conservatives (48 percent) who prefer the more classical liberal version of freedom.

Ideological perceptions of President Obama

- Overall, the president’s overall job approval is high (58 percent total approve, 40 percent strongly approve). More than six in 10 progressives, liberals, and Democrats strongly approve of the president’s job performance. But, conservatives and Republicans express skepticism of the president’s job performance: only 38 percent of conservatives and 25 percent of Republicans approve of President Obama’s job performance.
- Overall, a plurality of Americans (49 percent) believes that the country is more divided now than in the past compared to 45 percent who believe the country is less divided. This is down considerably from the Bush years. In 2007, two-thirds of Americans said the nation was more divided than in the past according to the Pew Research Center. The remaining perception of divisions appears to be driven extensively by ideological groups—56 percent of those who believe the country is more divided are self-identified conservatives while 52 percent of those who say the country is less divided are progressives or liberals.
- This study asked Americans for their own opinions about Obama’s political perspective. Reflecting the President’s own argument that people of all stripes project themselves onto him, the study finds that plurality of self-identified progressives believes Obama is “progressive” (48 percent); liberals are more likely to say he is “liberal” (31 percent); and a plurality of moderates says he is “moderate” (32 percent).
- The major exception to this trend is among self-identified conservatives: 51 percent of conservatives believe that President Obama’s political perspective is “liberal,” indicating a strong disconnection between their own perspectives and those of the

president.

- This study also explored more qualitative understandings of the president by asking Americans to describe the president in their own words. The response patterns overwhelmingly suggest that Obama is considered most for a range of positive personal attributes (32 percent combined) and his capacity to embody change and a new direction (21 percent). Overall negative descriptions of the president are muted with the exception of conservatives and Republicans who are just as likely, if not more, to say that the president is not up to the job or cannot be trusted.

Ideological ratings

- One of the most striking findings in this study is the significant increase in public favorability towards the “progressive” approach to politics and the relative strength of the “conservative” brand in the face of this improvement.
- The “progressive” label enjoys the highest net favorable rating of any ideological approach (+46 percent) and now equals “conservative” in public favorability (67 percent favorable). Favorable ratings of “progressive” increased by 25-points from 2004 to 2009, with almost all of the gains coming from people who previously were unaware of the term or unable to rate it moving into at least a ‘somewhat favorable’ position.
- Both the “liberal” and “libertarian” labels enjoy much lower overall favorability, with only a plurality of Americans rating each positively.
- Notably, self-identified conservatives do not look favorably upon “libertarian:” 35 percent of conservatives rate the term favorably, only 10-points higher than their rating of “liberal.”

Self-identification

- This study also employs an innovative measurement of Americans’ ideological self-identification, expanding the traditional liberal-moderate-conservative test with a 5-point measure that more accurately reflects the dominant ideologies in politics today.
- Under this approach, roughly 3 in 10 of Americans classify themselves as “progressive” or “liberal” (31 percent) and “moderate or other” (31 percent), and just over one-third of Americans label themselves “conservative” or “libertarian” (36 percent). After a follow-up question that asks moderates to choose between the other ideological approaches, a roughly even left-right breakdown surfaces: 47 percent of Americans are “progressive” or “liberal” and 48 percent are “conservative” or “libertarian.”

- Looking at the underlying beliefs in more depth, it is clear that these ideological labels mask important overlaps and areas of contention across ideological groups. Case in point: self-identified conservatives agree with four out of five progressive ideas about the role of government while majorities of progressives and liberals are open to conservative ideas on the economy—particularly on free trade and Social Security. These trends suggest that although Americans classify themselves in concrete ideological terms, there is far more fluidity in terms of the actual beliefs and values that these groups actually hold.

Overall, this study shows that there is a complexity and richness to American political ideology that may be missed by the old categories and understanding of political beliefs. This conclusion, perhaps more than any other, helps us to understand the rapid rise and support for President Obama among large segments of the electorate. In addition to being a popular leader, President Obama may be the most astute political scientist in America today.

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To speak with our experts on this topic, please contact:

Print: Katie Peters (economy, education, and health care)
202.741.6285 or kpeters1@americanprogress.org

Print: Christina DiPasquale (foreign policy and security, energy)
202.481.8181 or cdipasquale@americanprogress.org

Print: Laura Pereyra (ethnic media, immigration)
202.741.6258 or lpereyra@americanprogress.org

Radio: Anne Shoup

202.481.7146 or ashoup@americanprogress.org

TV: Lindsay Hamilton

202.483.2675 or lhampilton@americanprogress.org

Web: Andrea Peterson

202.481.8119 or apeterson@americanprogress.org