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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

**A SPECIAL TDS-DEMOS
ONLINE FORUM:
PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND
THE MEANING OF AMERICAN FREEDOM**

**IN COLLABORATION WITH THE
MAJOR PROGRESSIVE INTELLECTUAL CENTER
DEMOS, TDS PRESENTS
A SPECIAL ONLINE FORUM.**

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RECLAIMING THE IDEAL OF FREEDOM FOR PROGRESSIVISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

This item by John E. Schwarz is the opening and framing essay in an online forum cosponsored by Demos and TDS entitled: “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom.” Responses to this essay, and other thoughts on the subject of progressivism and freedom, will be featured here.

John Schwarz is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Demos, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Arizona, and the author, most recently, of *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*¹.

Standing on the steps of the capitol, just before the House voted on its health-care reform bill last November, House Republican leader John A. Boehner proclaimed: “This bill is the greatest threat to freedom I’ve seen in the 19 years I’ve been here.” He used the very same terms four months earlier when he declared war on the Obama cap and trade bill: “The fight we have between the two (political parties),” he said, “boils down to one word—freedom: the freedom to allow the American people to live their lives without all these extra taxes and all this bureaucracy. I say to my colleagues... let’s trust the American people, let’s allow America to flourish, and, most importantly, let’s allow freedom to flourish.”

That is the core of the conservative message, and it has strong legs. Consider what happened to the single-payer plan in the health-care reform debate. President Obama and most progressives believed a comprehensive single-payer system provided the most effective foundation for reform, and they often said so. However, they also knew it was politically out of the question. So they settled for a “robust” but optional public plan instead. That already represented a substantial compromise for them, more than half a loaf. Yet, what they got in the House was far weaker still, a public option so eviscerated that a mere 2-3 percent of Americans would be eligible, most of them with such poor health conditions that insurance companies didn’t want to cover them anyway. They ended up with nothing in the Senate. An opposition asserting the cause of freedom and raising the specter of big government, as much as anything else, brought that result about. The cap and trade bill that Boehner attacked as an assault of coercive government on freedom is currently experiencing a similar fate.

Polls show that individual freedom is a highly potent value for Americans across the ideological spectrum, among strong partisans of both sides and independent swing voters as well. (Center for Policy Alternatives, “Findings From a Nationwide Survey,” Lake Research Partners, November 2006; p.31-32;² Center for American Progress, “The State of American Political Ideology, 2009: A Study of Political Values and Beliefs,” p. 40)³ We see our country as the land of the free. We identify ourselves as the free and the brave. Freedom has been the battle cry behind the adamant reaction that has grown against raising taxes. It has been the clarion call in town halls and tea parties everywhere across the country. By rallying around the contrast between individual freedom and government oppression, the Republicans are advancing an emotional appeal with deep and powerful resonance.

¹ John E. Schwarz, *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

² <http://www.lakeresearch.com/news/cpa/06pre.CPA.pdf>

³ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf

The same message has worked with profound effects many times before. For decades, conservatives hit liberals over the head as uncaring about individual freedom and personal responsibility, given their repeated advocacy of big governmental programs and regulatory planning. The attacks succeeded with such thoroughness that not only were liberals put into a perpetually defensive position, but the word “liberal” itself actually became an unmentionable political pejorative—the “L” word. Unless President Obama and the Democrats learn how to counter the opposition’s call for freedom effectively, it will continue to delimit them and the country in advancing the nation’s agenda over the years to come no differently than it proved able to demonize liberalism, emasculate the public option in the health-care reform bill, and make increasing taxes to finance government practically prohibitive.

What is supremely ironic here is that President Obama and the Democratic majority actually are the real defenders of American freedom. It is they, not the Republicans, who represent the true ideal of American freedom. They need to make that case strongly, for all to see, both for their own success and for the nation’s ability to build the stronger foundation required to move forward effectively. They must defeat the opposition on what it has come to presume is its own home turf.

They do not have to look very far to find the alternative theme and narrative they need. It is already spread throughout the speeches and writings of the incumbent President. Though not yet fully employed, it is contained in hundreds of President Obama’s statements that align closely with his actions. Together they cohere into a remarkable vision, a paradigm. We might call it “the Obama Doctrine.” Its single overriding aim is the very goal that the opposition claims as its own: to enlarge and expand the freedom of Americans here at home.

In seeking that goal, however, the Obama Doctrine calls us back to an ideal of freedom that is more faithful to the Founders’ beliefs, and to Abraham Lincoln’s, than is the conservative way of thinking about freedom that currently prevails in our politics. Here is the crucial difference. Obama shares with the Founders and Lincoln an ideal of freedom that, building upon personal accountability, also embraces certain mutual responsibilities toward one another and shared sacrifice for others and the common good as crucial obligations of freedom. By contrast, except for the realm of national security and defense, such mutual obligations and shared sacrifice have had a far lesser place in the highly individualistic conservative notion of freedom that is politically supreme today.

Similarly, what distinguishes the Obama Doctrine from conservatism is its positive recognition of the need for governmental activism to effectuate the obligations we have toward one another that are imbedded in the Founders’ and Lincoln’s ideal of freedom. Because they are obligations of freedom, and not options, government is the proper arena to address them and assure that they are carried out. At the same time, in doing so, government must maintain discipline and carefully control itself so that it not exceed its own legitimate bounds. A government that fails this test will not retain public support.

In the eyes of the Founders and Lincoln, the prevailing conservative view of freedom is mistaken at its core. Nonetheless, it has dominated both our politics and public policy for much of the past three decades, with severely damaging results that the Founders might well have predicted. The grave economic consequences that a great majority of American families have experienced, and the urgent need for an alternative capable of reversing them, will become

clearer in the pages to come. Ultimately, the Obama Doctrine not only advances the most fundamental political value that has inspired Americans through the ages, including its connection to shared sacrifice for others and the common good. It not only builds upon basic principles that Americans intuitively understand and accept. At the same time, it promotes the most deep-felt economic interests of everyday Americans—crucial to both Democratic and independent swing voters alike, and many Republicans too—that the flawed individualistic conception of freedom has so egregiously abused for nearly two generations now. It is an exceptional political combination.

The Bedrock Value

Closing his Inaugural Address⁴ in January 2009, President Obama proclaimed: “Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.” *A New Birth of Freedom* was the Inauguration’s theme. Two years earlier, he had closed the speech declaring his candidacy⁵ for the presidency with the very same sentiment: “Together, starting today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this earth.”

What is this new birth of freedom that Obama urges and how is it relevant to America? Indeed, *what does a rebirth of freedom in America even mean?* How does America, of all places, require a rebirth of freedom? Those are the questions that the President raises. His answers open the possibility of a fundamentally different way of understanding our bedrock value of freedom that, in reconnecting us with the vision held by our forefathers, brings us home again to the vision of freedom that we hold down deep within ourselves.

For Barack Obama, the decisive words in the American heritage are the ones that heralded the nation’s birth: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Those hallowed words represent the starting point for all Americans, himself included, Obama emphasized in *The Audacity of Hope*. (AOH, p.53)⁶ Everything springs from them; they comprise “the substance of our common creed.” (AOH, 53) In the 2004 Democratic Convention address⁷ that vaulted him to national attention, he opened directly on that point: “Our pride is based on a very simple premise, one summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago. That simple premise,” he said, “is the genius of America.”

The ultimate principle behind the American genius for liberty, he elaborated in *The Audacity of Hope*, is the notion that: “The very idea of these... rights presupposed the equal worth of every individual.” (AOH, 86) It is because of that equal worth—the innate dignity of every person—that all individuals have a right to be free and to determine their own ends. No one should ever be used as a mere means towards the ends of any other person. For Obama, as for most Americans, this proclamation of “equal freedom,” built upon the premise of the equal and inviolate dignity of every person, is what makes the Declaration of Independence transcendent.

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?_r=1TF8&s=books&qid=1271860620&sr=1-1

⁵ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/10/politics/main2458099.shtml>

⁶ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, Vintage Books, 2008

⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html>

Freedom, today, is often understood to convey a “me-first,” “self-interest,” or “anything goes” kind of attitude, none of them a transcendent goal. Something morally crucial is missing in the prevailing view. What is lacking is the recognition of our duties and obligations to each other. The prevailing view fails to recognize that freedom, when rooted in the premise that each person has innate dignity and equal worth, carries with it profound moral responsibilities toward others precisely because we are all equals in our right to freedom. Those responsibilities require that we act towards all others with a level of concern that can demand more from us than even the Golden Rule does in asking us to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves.

Instead, notwithstanding how we would like to be treated ourselves (say, for example, we believe that we made it on our own and, therefore, so should others), and notwithstanding our own immediate self-interest, freedom requires us to support others’ interests and needs whenever it comes to assuring the full worth of *their* equal freedom. Individuals cannot be truly free to secure a living, for example, if jobs are not available for all who are willing to work. If freedom genuinely is our aim, then we have a responsibility as a nation to ensure that a suitable choice of jobs and reasonable transitional assistance are available to those individuals.

That is what a community of equal freedom requires. For this reason, Obama reminds us, we need to see the Golden Rule “as something more demanding, [as] a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes.” (AOH, 66) In the same spirit, Obama often invokes the biblical duty that “we are each our brother’s keeper, we are each our sister’s keeper.” As he stated in his Inaugural Address, our responsibility to share with other Americans as our “brother’s and sister’s keeper” means something very specific: What each of us owes to others is a commitment to meet the obligations necessary to ensure that they, too, can obtain the full worth of their equal freedom.

The Historical Roots

For most of his critics, the President’s ardent emphasis on the obligation to share and on collective action through government toward that end has nothing to do with freedom. To the contrary, they contend that this worldview disavows the nation’s most cherished principles of freedom. That’s what the angry tea-party protests have been about. That’s what John Boehner and virtually every Republican opponent have been saying. They regard the individualistic understanding of freedom as our nation’s founding ideal, and on that basis they hold it to be sacred.

Yet, their view reflects a basic misreading of both our history and the idea of freedom. There is nothing more characteristically American than the principle of sharing as a core obligation of freedom, and using government for that purpose, particularly if the purpose is to assure the availability of widespread economic opportunity and security for all. No precept in the American tradition, starting from the nation’s birth, has deeper roots.

Were he alive today, Thomas Jefferson, like Obama, might well be labeled a “socialist.” The author of the Declaration believed that every person, being equal and thus free, had a natural right to the conditions to attain “independence.” “Independence” meant the right of every person to be able to provide decently for himself by means under the individual’s own control. As Jefferson saw it, the earth was held in common at the start, in the state of nature. All

individuals had access to it to secure a customary living through their labor and to reap the fruits of their own hard work. In forming civil society, Jefferson maintained, those twin opportunities of freedom had to remain open and available to all. The right under freedom to the unequal individual ownership of private property could not go so far as to violate this basic level of opportunity to which every individual had a prior and overriding claim.

Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration proclaimed not just that "All men are created equal," but that "All men are created equal and independent." For Jefferson, the principle that every individual who is free and equal has the right to be independent held true by definition. Jefferson was echoing the same principle set forth by George Mason only weeks earlier in the path-breaking Virginian Bill of Rights, whose very first lines proclaimed that "All men are by nature free and independent." Remaining faithful to that principle, Jefferson was a staunch advocate of dividing up public lands, proposing that all individuals who had never owned property be granted 50 acres of the public domain—enough land to support every family adequately and assure their independence.

John Adams' prescription for instituting and protecting freedom was much the same: "Make the acquisition of land easy to every member of society," he wrote, "so that the multitude may be possessed of landed estates." James Madison wrote that freedom can survive only through some form of shared distribution resulting from "the silent operation of laws which, without violating the rights of property, reduce extreme wealth toward a state of mediocrity and raise extreme indigence toward a state of comfort." None of the leading Founders thought in terms of free trade alone as freedom. They were crystal clear that the proper role of government was to provide opportunity to those who were poor.

The Founders, equally, were fervent advocates of government spending and investing in order to extend opportunity still further through the expansion of commerce and growth of the economy. Madison, for example, supported the creation of a national university and the building of the Erie Canal. Jefferson, too, proposed not only the public construction of schools, canals, roads, and many other projects, but also what was perhaps the largest public investment in American history, the Louisiana Purchase. The combination of those varied actions of government, Jefferson hoped and believed, would ensure sufficient economic opportunity for all Americans for "thousands upon thousands of generations" to come.

Indeed, had the Founders actually believed in a minimalist government, wouldn't they have kept with the Articles of Confederation they first created? There, after all, was the pure definition of minimalist government. In writing the Constitution and forming the federal government in 1789, the Founders stood specifically against minimalist government and instead engaged in a substantial increase in both the strength and reach of government.

Abraham Lincoln came from the same lineage. A great admirer of Thomas Jefferson, Lincoln advocated a broad range of public interventions in order to widen opportunity and create the possibility of economic independence for all. During his second year in office, in 1862, he signed the Homestead Act that carried out Jefferson's idea for ensuring the opportunity for independence. Opening up hundreds of millions of acres of public lands, it granted 160 acres, enough to secure independence, to every American willing to work the land. Similarly, from building railroads to creating land-grant universities, Lincoln promoted spending on a series of other government initiatives that were intended to further broaden commerce and opportunity.

In those times, the economy was predominantly agricultural. The ownership of land was the chief means for Americans to gain and maintain economic independence. That was soon to change, however. During the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, our economy became dominated by manufacturing and industry. The frontier and its available lands eventually closed. As that transformation took place, the ideal of freedom built upon owning landed property and farming became increasingly unrealistic for most Americans.

That development required a new practical approach, capable of translating the historic ideal of freedom held by the Founders and Lincoln into the realities of an industrial market economy grounded in wage-earning employment. Opportunities for satisfactory wage employment, supplemented when necessary with the assistance of public programs, had to replace land ownership as the means to sustain the independent living required for freedom.

That became the objective of the New Deal, adopted in the wake of the Great Depression. The New Deal set up a whole series of job-creation and job-training programs. It introduced the minimum wage and established pillars for the development of the middle class, such as collective bargaining rights, Social Security, unemployment insurance, and housing assistance.

All of those measures attempted to apply the ideal of freedom as understood by the Founders and Lincoln to the changed economic circumstances of a wage-earning majority. They were aimed at generating sufficient decent-paying jobs, combined with assistance and insurance programs tied to prior work, that together would make opportunities readily available for all to secure a dignified living based upon their own industry.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt made clear his thinking behind the New Deal when he proclaimed: "Liberty requires opportunity to make a decent living according to the standard of the day, a living which gives a man not only enough to live by, but also something to live for." He went on to say,⁸ "True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence." Creating conditions to support that independence and security within an industrial economy was the professed purpose of the New Deal and its economic and social programs. That goal followed in the long legacy of freedom that had inspired the Founders at the birth of the nation and Abraham Lincoln at the time of the nation's renewal.

The same rich legacy also defined the goal of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which reached a ringing crescendo with the "March for Freedom" on Washington DC in 1963 and Martin Luther King's timeless declaration: "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last!"

Particularly over the decades thereafter, however, the Democratic Party has turned its focus away from emphasizing the value of freedom. Richard E. Burke, the longtime assistant to the late Senator Edward Kennedy, the nation's leading contemporary liberal, capsulated the Senator's thinking this way: "The crux of his [Kennedy's] philosophy is that the fortunate should help the less fortunate to bring equality to all facets of society." Michael Gerson,

⁸ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16518>

President George W. Bush's chief speech writer, observed in his book⁹ *Heroic Conservatism* that: "Liberals today barely talk any more about liberty."

It is true, mention of freedom has nearly disappeared from the speeches of most Democrats, except when the issue is civil liberties. Even so, despite two generations during which conservatives have emphasized their view of individual freedom while liberals have not, almost 60 percent of the American public still prefers¹⁰ the deeper and more expansive view of freedom that Obama sets forth. Imagine how Americans might come to feel were Democrats actually to focus on the value.

Freedom and the American Promise

For Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and the struggle for civil rights, the idea of freedom never simply meant the absence of external restrictions in the lives of individuals. It was also tied inexorably to the positive availability of economic opportunity. That is the tradition Obama follows. "At its most elemental level," Obama observed in *The Audacity of Hope*, "we understand our liberty in a negative sense. As a general rule, we believe we have the right to be left alone... But we understand our liberty in a more positive sense as well, in the idea of opportunity." (AOH, 54) Without sufficient opportunity, individuals cannot be free and masters of their own fate. The same idea of freedom defines the promise at the heart of the American Dream: that satisfactory economic opportunity will be available to every person who is willing to work and act responsibly.

The Meaning of the American Promise: That promise, therefore, is a bottom line for Obama. We must "ensure opportunity," he said in accepting his party's nomination for president, and we must do so "not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who is willing to work. That's the promise of America... That's the promise we need to keep." Note as well his emphasis on every American. For, if freedom is to extend to every person, opportunity must also be available to every person. "America is America," Obama said¹¹ before a NASDAQ audience on the campaign trail, "because we believe in creating a framework in which all can succeed." (emphasis added).

What, however, does the idea that "all can succeed" really mean? At one level, surely, it means that any person in America, as Obama did himself, can rise from lowest to highest based upon performance, will power, and discipline. Obama has often cited the example of his own life story of success.

But the American Promise also conveys something fundamental that is more than the sheer ability of any person with unusual skill or drive to advance to the top. Crucially, it also means that a floor of opportunity exists that is accessible to every willing individual—the opportunity for every person both to provide a secure living through work and to get further ahead by improving on the job.

In conversations with voters during his successful campaign for the U.S. Senate, Obama learned that this belief in a floor of opportunity for every person lies deep in the American

⁹ Michael J. Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism*, Harper Collins, 2008

¹⁰ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf

¹¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/17/us/politics/16text-obama.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

psyche. No matter where he was talking with folks, and whatever their race, religion, or class, Obama found that, “Most of them thought that anybody willing to work should be able to find a job that paid a living wage.” He said, “They figured that people shouldn’t have to file for bankruptcy because they got sick. They believed that every child should have a genuinely good education—that it should not just be a bunch of talk—and that those same children should be able to go to college even if their parents weren’t rich. They wanted to be safe, from criminals and from terrorists; they wanted clean air, clean water, and time with their kids. And when they got old, they wanted to be able to retire with some dignity and respect.” (AOH, 7) The promise is, as Obama summed it up in a speech¹² at Cooper Union, “that if you work hard, you can support a family; that if you get sick, there will be health care that you can afford; that you can retire with security and dignity and respect that you’ve earned; and that your children can get a good education.”

The Huge Gap Between the Promise and Inherited Reality. This widely accepted principle that a minimum level of opportunity for success should be available to every willing person who plays by the rules and does his or her part would seem to be a nearly unobjectionable, almost obvious proposition. Nonetheless, it differs profoundly from the way our economy actually performs. That is so even when the economy is running at full steam, let alone during hard times. By the standards of this basic promise, as Obama often points out, the American economy and American families have been in a condition of serious recession for a very long time, not just over the past year.

A living wage is the pay it takes for workers, when employed full-time, to provide a standard of living within the boundaries of the American mainstream, that is, at the bottom level of the way ordinary Americans live. Studies checked against opinion polls place a living wage at least at about \$11 per hour. That amount comes to approximately 55 percent of the current average hourly wage for American workers, which was \$19.80 in 2008.

In 2006, when the economy was humming and running up record straight quarters of growth, more than 30 million employed Americans—nearly one-in-every-four—were paid below the level of a living wage. Of the millions of Americans working beneath a living wage, many of them had gained at least some college education beyond a high school degree.

On top of that, the median wage—the wage received by the average American worker adjusted for inflation—had remained essentially flat for the prior 30 years. The median wage stagnated despite a whopping 70 percent increase in the amount that workers produced per hour of work during those years. Notwithstanding their improved performance, workers on average were unable to get ahead. Except during the second Clinton term and a few years thereafter, the gap between faltering compensation (even including health benefits) and rising worker productivity widened continuously throughout the period. After 30 years, the gap had become a chasm that stands in sharp contrast with the prior three decades from 1949-1979. Then, the compensation level of the average worker had kept much in line with the growth of their productivity. From the late 1970s onwards, inversely, advances in compensation generally bypassed average Americans. Instead, increases so massive as to nearly match the size of the gap, totaling in the many hundreds of billions of dollars annually, went to those who were at the very top.

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/us/politics/27text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>

The average American, in effect, has been struggling for three decades in what can be called a “*confiscatory market*”—a market that confiscated virtually all compensation increases from the rising productivity of workers and delivered them up to the top. That occurred not through any fiat of government but simply through the operation of the market itself. In the past, workers’ compensation had generally amounted to about 60 percent of their overall productivity. Following the late 1970’s, total compensation paid to workers kept rising at about 60 percent of improved productivity. (Calculated from Frank Levy and Peter Temin, “Inequality and Institutions in 20th Century America,” 2007, pp. 3-5 and Lawrence Mishel et al., *The State of Working America*, 2008-2009, p. 161) However, save primarily during the second Clinton term, the average worker’s compensation increased hardly at all because nearly all compensation increases coming from the productivity growth went to the very top. Not even a college education provided much of an escape. The gains in compensation from productivity growth were shared so narrowly that median earnings even for workers with college degrees, as a group, were significantly abated. It stands as the most dismal performance for the wages of the average American worker ever recorded in U.S. history.

In addition to an economy containing large numbers of poorly paying jobs and stalled wages for average workers despite their improved performance, 45 million Americans (and rising) had no health insurance coverage, millions more were undercovered, and expenditures for health care became the leading cause of family bankruptcy, even for those families with insurance. On their part, American schools from grades K-12 suffered from continuously poor student results in international comparisons while the cost of a college education rose increasingly beyond the reach of average American families.

Compare those conditions to the American promise of the availability of opportunity for every person to make a decent living through work and get ahead through individual improvement. Whether during good economic times or recession, one thing is evident: the economic realities facing Americans have been far removed from the level of opportunity required to satisfy this basic promise of freedom. That has been the case for many years, indeed for thirty long years—a time, it must be said, of Republican and conservative ideological dominance. From 1979-2008, Republicans controlled the presidency for about two-thirds of the years and one or both houses of Congress for a similar length of time.

In turn, the political implications of the collapse in opportunity have been substantial. With barely any improvement in the real compensation of the average worker for three decades, to take one example, resentment has naturally grown among hard-pressed voters. They have become increasingly resistant to any hike in their taxes, understandably so. For Republicans and Tea Partiers, creating a vicious backlash against taxes has been like shooting fish in a barrel. In opposing tax increases and promoting tax cuts, they are appealing to tens of millions of working and middle-class Americans for whom the confiscatory market has already taken away virtually all of their real gains in compensation for almost two generations now.

Contrary to what many Republicans and conservatives proffer, the competitive free market contains no internal mechanism to realize the promise of sufficient opportunity. One needs to look no further than the disturbing record of the past 30 years to demonstrate that point. Competition is intended to bring about the economy’s efficiency, not a sufficient level of opportunity for every person.

That is why, as Obama reminds us¹³, “the American experiment has worked in large part because we have guided the market’s invisible hand with a higher principle.” The economy needs guidance, he emphasized in his Inaugural Address, precisely “to extend opportunity to every willing heart.” That is the higher principle. And, it is in the name of that principle that Obama has called for public action to share prosperity and spread growth. Only through such action can the Promise of America, and the promise of opportunity for success that freedom calls for, be made real in the lives of all Americans, whether for low-wage workers or for the average worker, whether for the working class or the middle class. The private market cannot be counted upon to produce that result naturally or, indeed, anything even close to it.

A substantial part of Obama’s broad policy agenda is directed at leading the free market in order to widen prosperity as just described, not simply during recession but also in the normal operation of the economy. He had been advancing much of the agenda long before the economy’s meltdown in 2008. To extend opportunity to every willing heart, his agenda has called for lifting the federal minimum wage modestly and connecting it to inflation; raising and broadening the Earned Income Tax Credit; enacting universal health-care coverage and instituting controls to constrain rising medical inflation so that health-care costs facing families as well as government funding obligations remain within our means; protecting Social Security and tightening regulation to ensure private pension payouts; promoting the creation of new well-paying infrastructure, cutting-edge technology, and clean-energy manufacturing jobs; instituting workforce development and neighborhoods of opportunity initiatives; enacting small business tax and loan incentives to encourage new business start-ups and job creation; updating unemployment insurance and trade adjustment assistance; expanding family medical leave; raising the child and dependent-care tax credit; increasing the progressivity of taxes; instituting a set of plans to secure more effective education for all from pre-school through grade 12; expanding assistance for innovation in and access to higher education; supporting equal pay for equal work; and enacting labor-law reform to facilitate more effective bargaining.

An overriding goal attaches to all of those actions. Every one of them attempts to share prosperity delivered through the competitive free market in order to ensure that opportunities to make a decent living and to advance through individual improvement will extend to each and every American. Taken in combination, they amount to a broad employment program focused on restoring jobs and wages to working and middle-class Americans, as sufficient opportunity for freedom requires.

Thus, lifting and indexing the minimum wage and raising the Earned Income Tax Credit, together with subsidies for universal health insurance, will effectively set the minimum hourly wage for working families at close to a living wage while also including affordable health-care coverage. Workers well up the pay scale will feel positive income benefits. Facilitating more effective collective bargaining intends to raise the compensation of workers further to keep it more in line with improved productivity, while raising dependent-care support and medical leave assistance aims to relieve the growing burdens of work-related costs on families. Broadening college assistance will improve the families’ ability to pay the costs of higher education. Expanding aid and bringing innovation to the 5,000 public schools with the highest dropout rates seeks to optimize educational opportunity for the most deprived today. That, in turn, addresses the leading reason why the nation now does relatively poorly in international comparisons of students. Supplemental workforce development and neighborhoods of

¹³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/17/us/politics/16text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>

opportunity initiatives are intended to focus more employment and wage growth in central cities and other disadvantaged locales. The promotion of infrastructure renovation, climate control and energy efficiency, and cutting-edge technologies holds the promise of generating many millions of needed new good-paying jobs, just as government investments and innovations in jet aircraft development, computer and microchip technologies, the internet, optics, and satellite communications did in the past and still do today.

The Economy's Collapse: An Explanation and a Solution

Obama regards the fundamental assurance of sufficient economic opportunity, first and foremost, as an absolute moral imperative for a nation that proclaims the ideal of equal freedom. Beyond that, it also follows from an economic theory about what a competitive free-market economy requires to generate sustainable growth that will endure in the future. Over the past three decades, the prosperity and productivity gains of the American economy were shared very narrowly. In the absence of wage gains over all those years, the only way left for most families to get ahead and improve their standard of living was to spend down savings they might have had and assume ever more debt.

The savings rate for the nation stood at about 9 percent of income in the 1970s. By 2008 it had dropped almost to zero. At the same time, family debt had doubled as a proportion of income. The drop in savings and the doubling of debt became, in effect, the engine of our economy, generating well over \$1 trillion annually in new consumption. Consumption accounts for 70 percent of the economy. To keep consumer demand growing, the American economy had become tied not to rising wages that kept in line with improved worker performance, but instead to artificial demand coming from reduced family savings and rising consumer debt. In essence, the economy relied upon families increasingly living beyond their means.

That is a highly disturbing trend whose dire long-term consequences we are now beginning to understand. An economy whose foundation for continued prosperity rests upon depleting savings and ever expanding debt cannot last. Such a weak foundation will eventually collapse. In Obama's words in an April 2009 speech at Georgetown:¹⁴ "It is not sustainable to have an economy...based on inflated home prices, maxed-out credit cards, overleveraged banks and overvalued assets. It's not sustainable to have an economy where the income of the top 1 percent has skyrocketed while the typical working household has seen its income decline by nearly \$2,000. That's not a sustainable model for long-term prosperity."

Rather, he argues, ours must be "a future where prosperity is fueled not by excessive debt, or reckless speculation, or fleeting profits, but is instead built by skilled, productive workers, by sound investments that will spread opportunity at home and allow the nation to lead the world in the technologies and innovations and discoveries that will shape the 21st century." He is here describing the more solid foundation, "the house built upon a rock" in his words, that the nation and economy must have in order to be successful in the future—precisely what he intends the combination of proposals previously outlined to accomplish.

Expansive borrowing, of course, required the willingness of lenders to take on increasingly riskier debt. The way had been paved for that crucial development by the prior three decades of financial deregulation, propped up by the housing bubble it had helped spawn. Starting in the Reagan presidency, and for two decades thereafter, New Deal restrictions on mort-

¹⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/14/us/politics/14obama-text.html>

gage lending were eliminated, financial institutions were allowed vastly increased leveraging, consumer lending standards were relaxed, and newly invented financial instruments, such as credit default swaps, went unregulated. Deregulation allowed massive pools of money to engage in far riskier lending and borrowing than had existed before, leading ultimately to the collapse of financial houses and to economic havoc when the housing bubble burst.

Along with policies designed to enhance opportunity and share prosperity, therefore, healthy and sustainable growth in the economy also requires restrictions to guard against damaging economic behavior. “Our free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it,” Obama said to NASDAQ.¹⁵ “And so... we have to put in place certain rules of the road to make competition fair, open, and honest. We have done this not to stifle prosperity or liberty, but to foster those things and ensure they are spread as widely as possible.”

Here, again, Obama was not speaking simply about a theory of economic prosperity as something distinct from the larger goal of freedom. He was reminding us instead that the regulation of license never restricts liberty but instead fosters it. We are never at liberty, morally, to engage in license. As John Locke—the 17th century English philosopher and father of the moral idea of individual freedom as much as any thinker ever—wrote: “But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence... though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions..., no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” Among equals, actions that amount to license are not freedom. Instead, they are a violation of others’ equal freedom, and as such become the proper subject of regulation. A community of freedom has an obligation to restrict or eliminate such violations.

Some actions that violate freedom come from individual perpetrators acting with malicious intent, such as outright theft or fraud by individual persons or by companies. Other harms have collective causes where there is no single perpetrator. The harms result instead from collections of individuals acting independently of each other, usually with no malice. Problems such as air pollutants from automobile exhaust that cumulate to threaten life or health emerge in that way.

A free market alone cannot effectively deal with the serious harms inflicted by such individual and collective actions. Addressing them requires external governmental intervention at some level—whether, for example, to discourage fraudulent actions by companies like Enron and the financial houses that deregulation helped foster or to deal with the problems of collective behavior, like the consumption of fossil fuels, that end up causing harmful pollution.

The distinction between freedom and what constitutes behavior harmful to others meriting regulation by government is crucial, yet conservatives fail to appreciate the distinction in quite a few areas. In health-care reform, for instance, most of the major reform bills obligate every individual to purchase health insurance on pain of being fined. In response, the Senate’s No. 2 Republican, John Kyl, asserted that the requirement for every individual to purchase insurance coverage represents “a stunning assault on liberty.” It is governmental paternalism of the worst kind, he claimed.

¹⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/17/us/politics/16text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>

To the contrary, it is Senator Kyl who doesn't understand what freedom means, at least so long as mandatory insurance is kept clearly affordable to individuals who are required to purchase it. Our idea of individual freedom never included allowing individuals the right to choose to go without insurance if the consequence is to leave hospitals and everyone else to pay their bills should they need major medical care. That is precisely what John Locke would classify as license, not freedom.

Individual Responsibility and the Role of Government

The Obaman approach calls for public action that deviates from the operation of the free-market solely for purposes germane to securing the conditions that are appropriate to freedom. Those conditions, as described above, involve three areas in particular: first, attaining sufficient economic opportunities for all that freedom calls for and guarding against the development of a confiscatory economy; second, protecting against the imposition of individual or collective harms antithetical to freedom that are beyond the individual's and the market's capacity to redress; and, third, producing public goods that cannot be supplied optimally by a free market operating on its own, such as military security and defense, the infrastructure, basic research and its resultant technology, and a stable economy.

Those are the areas that Obama has in mind when he says, referring to the proper role of government, "We can be guided throughout by Lincoln's simple maxim: that we will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and privately." (AOH, 159). The operating principle of such a government is not small government in its absolute sense. Active, engaged, energetic government will be a necessity, as Lincoln and the Founders well recognized. The correct measure, instead, is government that limits itself to pursuing the aims that are appropriate to freedom, which attends to the full requirements of the aims, and does so by employing the least costly and restrictive means capable of successfully reaching those aims.

Apart from the crucial areas of public action subsumed in Lincoln's maxim, Obama is not kidding when he says: "I'm a pro-growth, free-market kind of guy. I love the market." The Obaman approach venerates individual responsibility coupled with access to sufficient opportunity (Obama repeatedly criticized old-style welfare assistance because it too often encouraged dependency and the failure to take responsibility for one's own mobility) (AOH, 180). His approach, indeed, insists upon individuals taking responsibility to make their own way within the context of sufficient opportunity for all. It extols hard work and respects the progress and level of affluence that only a competitive free market makes possible.

In line with this, the Obaman approach emphasizes the need for government itself to keep both costs and regulation at the lowest levels needed to attain the aims of freedom appropriate to government, that is, it accents disciplined and restrained government. Freedom suffers whenever government spends or regulates more than is required, even for ends otherwise legitimate to freedom. Regarding fiscal responsibility, similarly, taxes must be kept to the lowest level capable of meeting the costs and balancing the budget for actions necessary to reach the ends of freedom. The sole exceptions—important ones—when budget deficits become appropriate are when economic downturns call for budget imbalances to stabilize them, when productive investment for the future is the purpose, or when national security necessitates.

For this reason, just as Obama has been strongly criticized for promoting big government and socialist programs, he has been harshly attacked from the left—for example, on the size of the stimulus, the elements of health-care reform, regulations regarding financial institutions, and cap and trade—for not going nearly far enough. The steps the health-care reform initiative takes to pay its own way so as not to add to the budget deficit are themselves suggestive, standing in sharp contrast to the approach of the Republican opposition when they held power. Their reform of Medicare to cover prescription drugs, costing \$700 billion over the coming decade, never made any mention of how it would be financed.

Calling for a new “Era of Responsibility” in his Inaugural Address, Obama was speaking not only of the responsibility individual Americans have to play their part and the responsibility of the collective society through government to implement public actions required for individuals to be able to assume responsibility effectively. He was also referring to the responsibility government continually has to discipline and control itself even while taking actions that are strong enough to do the job.

Achieving those two objectives is surely difficult, and Obama has not always gotten them right. That, in turn, has cost him and his Administration dearly in public support over the long term. For example, the economic stimulus was likely smaller than required to deliver a recovery able to produce serious new job creation with any reasonable speed. Similarly, TARP needed tougher regulations on how financial institutions could spend public money temporarily granted them that was necessary to avert their collapse and the collapse of the overall economy with them. Using taxpayer funds to make sound loans to Main Street, for instance, deserved strict mandatory priority over the handing out of bonuses. Yet, however difficult it may be to reach both objectives, attaining them together is the ultimate task. There has been a long history of debate among liberals regarding, broadly defined, government-centered or market-centered approaches to reform. Whether governmental activism should take the form of direct public control or instead programs that operate more indirectly through the market and private enterprise should depend upon the aim of freedom involved and the strength of action required in order to attain that aim successfully. Precautions necessary to guard against particular actions if they might have a compromising effect on governmental officials, or might lead government to overstep its bounds, must also be considered.

The Change Americans Need

Rooted in our nation’s paramount moral value, the historic vision of freedom offers a powerful governing philosophy. It clearly represents the President’s own perspective, the place where his heart lies. It remains something of a mystery, therefore, as to why Obama has failed to emphasize it and instead has left it sitting in the background. He has had many opportunities to make it more explicit and express it forcefully, yet he has declined to do so. That is true not only regarding economic matters but also in other areas to which Obama’s thinking about freedom and the historic American ideal applies equally forcefully, from foreign policy and national security all the way to immigration, social issues, including choice, and the need to reform the way our politics works here at home.

Possibly he fears that today’s “self-interested,” “me-first” interpretation of freedom has sufficiently captured our contemporary understanding that the more historic meaning, despite its deep roots and acceptance by a majority of Americans, would confuse more than help. Or,

possibly he feels that, once making the philosophy explicit, he would be held too tightly to its principles or the perfection of its ideals. He might rather achieve what's politically possible and avoid being held back if he is unable to meet each demanding stricture. He is perhaps trying to avert what he often derides as "letting the perfect become the enemy of the good."

Whatever his motive, there is a terrific cost. For one, the philosophy is required to be able to win the crucial debate about the meaning of American freedom, ending the opponents' control over this pre-eminent value.

Recall how his opponents' rhetoric about freedom de-capitated the public option in health-care reform. During the debate on the House floor last November, virtually every Republican invoked the loss of freedom as the reason why they opposed the reform. By contrast, barely a single Democrat uttered the word. The one notable exception was when Henry Waxman, responding spontaneously to the litany of Republicans in a brief, angry reaction, said: "37 million Americans are without health insurance because they can't afford it, their employers don't offer it, or they have a pre-existing condition. We want the same coverage for them that Republicans speak of in such glowing terms. Don't tell me they have freedom. Don't tell me they are free, they are not free!"

Yes, they are not free. That's the real issue in the health-care debate. Not just the freedom of those completely left out or badly undercovered, or who have preconditions, but of those whose coverage can be arbitrarily rescinded, those who will lose their insurance if they change jobs, and all the rest of us who soon won't be able to find affordable insurance if skyrocketing costs are not contained. In every one of those cases, Americans' freedom to secure an essential needed for a decent life is under threat. Whenever the private market is delivering choices that confine the ability of individual Americans to attain the essentials of a decent life even if they do their part, or restrict the ability of individuals to get ahead no matter their improvement, freedom is at stake.

That's what the Obama agenda is about: the attempt to recover and protect the freedom of Americans which for years has been under serious direct threat. An agenda grounded in the historic ideal of freedom, with its obligation to share toward that common purpose, couples advancing the strongest moral value that Americans respond to together with asserting their most vital material concerns. Those concerns include the most deep-felt economic interests of Democratic Party base voters as well as independent and persuadable voters, and also large majorities of otherwise eroding Democratic constituencies in the blue-collar and middle working classes. It is a political combination with few peers.

The same applies with virtually all issues relating to the availability of sufficient economic opportunity, protection against the imposition of individual or collective harms that are beyond the market's ability to address, the production of public goods, and securing revenues required to balance budgets for these proper aims. They are all areas where today's extreme individualistic idea of freedom has been thwarting actions required to solve growing national problems, sometimes for decades, that a refashioned idea of freedom can begin to reverse.

The stakes are high. The individualistic view of freedom is entirely comfortable with the functioning of a confiscatory economy that takes compensation increases resulting from the productivity gains of workers, diverts them from everyday workers and their families, and

channels nearly the whole of them up to the very top. As long as the flawed individualistic view of freedom continues to hold sway in our politics, there will be no fundamental change in the way the economy works. We have all been left diminished, as individual Americans and as a nation.

Defending the true idea of American freedom through government that is responsible and disciplined is where the focus should lie. It articulates the ultimate American narrative, one that reaches to the heart of the nation's soul. To continue to win national elections and be able to govern capably thereafter, Democrats must have a mobilizing vision for the nation. That vision needs to include a compelling case for the role of government. It must be a case that Americans will positively embrace as essential to realizing their most cherished moral values and to attaining their most fundamental self-interests. The case must simultaneously place the opposition squarely on the defensive. It must effectively refute a principled conservative call for smaller government, lower taxes, and weaker regulation. It must persuasively repudiate both conservative economics (that the free market on its own will deliver widespread prosperity) and backlash conservative populism (that the activism of big government is the problem).

Those conditions have to be met in order for the Democratic Party to keep its 2008's winning coalition, build upon it and expand it, and revitalize enthusiasm behind a stirring national purpose. That is what reclaiming the true American idea of freedom—progressive freedom—has the power to do.

WHY DOES “FREEDOM” MATTER TO PROGRESSIVES?

This item, the second in the TDS/Demos forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by Demos Senior Fellow Lew Daly, the co-editor of this forum. It is intended to raise questions of immediate interest to progressives about the “Ideal of Freedom” as it affects practical politics.

The national elections of 2006 and 2008 suggested a powerful political realignment and raised hopes for a revival of progressive ideas about government and society. War-weary, disengaging from the culture wars, and reeling from economic collapse, the American electorate voted decisively against the failed conservative policies and incompetent governance of the George W. Bush years. Yet today, an explosive combination of media and activist engagement on the right has defined the terms of key national debates in ways that have made it difficult if not impossible to advance progressive policies in Washington. There may be rosier edges to this scenario in the distance, given deeper voting trends driven by demography and cultural change, but the political process for achieving strong progressive policy goals seems very much in disarray.

Among several key reasons for this, from the faltering economic recovery, to ever-more blatant lobbying influence, to Senate voting rules, far too little attention is being paid to thematic and ideological dynamics and how these dynamics shape political identification and public opinion on issues and policies. Today more than ever, with so many major challenges confronting us, we should be paying closer attention to the thematic and ideological dynamics that are shaping our politics and indeed distorting our politics in dangerous ways.

It has always been the case, and it remains so today: the central theme in the ideological dynamics of American politics is freedom. Yet the political struggle for freedom is completely one-sided today: Conservatives—and especially free-market conservatives—own the term, and their definition of the idea is dominant. They deploy it tirelessly and in unison with political leaders; and they are all working in concert on a polarization strategy that hinges on branding progressive policies and those who support them as enemies of freedom.

Yet, the truth is that progressives, not conservatives, stand closer, much closer, to the vision of freedom held by America’s founders and developed by the two greatest presidents who followed them, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Progressives, not conservatives, understand and seek to advance American freedom, as traditionally understood.

Even though the meaning of American freedom is being hijacked by the right, little is being done to expose their distortion of values or to revive the truth about freedom and what it requires. We have developed this online forum to help progressive thought-leaders, strategists, and activists address this problem and change the political environment into one in which progressives once again own this most powerful thematic and ideological ground.

We hope that participants can help address several questions of immediate importance to progressives:

1. How does the progressive “freedom” theme fit in with other progressive themes such as “a common national purpose,” “equality,” and “fairness”?
2. Is this progressive concept of freedom resonant with the public’s understanding of freedom?
3. (A) Is a progressive “freedom” agenda particularly appealing to constituencies and to major voting blocs (such as the white working class) that are particularly up for grabs? (B) Is the progressive “freedom” theme consistent or inconsistent with a progressive “populist” message? (C) Can the “freedom” agenda effectively challenge the current conservative populist backlash?
4. What are two or three banner areas of domestic policy in which progressives can most emphatically identify themselves with the defense of freedom?
5. What concept of the proper role of government is most consistent with a systematic progressive concept of freedom? What are the most effective ways of communicating that concept of government to the public?

We hope to have a lively discussion on these and other topics.

FOR CONSERVATIVES, FREEDOM'S JUST ANOTHER WORD

This item, the third in the TDS/Demos forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by Matt Yglesias, a Fellow at the Center for American Progress, a prolific writer at thinkprogress.org, and the author of Heads in the Sand.¹ Matt’s post is a response to John Schwarz’s earlier essay in this series.

I was a philosophy major in college, and as such I came to appreciate the importance of the controversy between the libertarian conception of “negative liberty” (the absence of state coercion) and the modern liberal idea of “positive liberty” (the presence of opportunity). And John Schwarz has given us a brilliant tour of how these contrasting conceptions of liberty—or, to use the more Anglo-Saxon term, “freedom”—can illuminate certain high-level disagreements of principle about public policy matters and how this dispute has played out in the history of American political rhetoric.

So far so good. But I think this issue is *much* less relevant to actual political practice than he seems to believe. In particular, I seriously doubt that Republican Party success at mobilizing freedom-rhetoric has much of anything to do with Barack Obama’s falling poll numbers or public hostility to Obama’s health care or cap and trade proposals. After all, these proposals existed during the 2008 campaign and were described then as threats to American freedom, but at the time those arguments had little purchase. On one level, the reasons behind the change are complicated. On another level, they’re simple—the poor performance of the American economy has eroded people’s trust in incumbents in general, Obama in particular, and the public sector writ large. There’s good reason to believe² that this will turn around if the economy turns around, but not otherwise.

Beyond narrow electoral considerations, I also think it’s a mistake to too-closely identify the right’s freedom-rhetoric with the formal philosophical conception of libertarian-style negative liberty. It is, rather, a slogan that’s invoked as a gesture of ideological identity and solidarity that’s largely devoid of semantic content—it plays a role similar to the one “yes, we can” (itself an echo of the United Farm Workers’ “¡si se puede!”) plays for Obama’s supporters.

Consider that the proponents of right-wing “freedom” are not even slightly inclined to back elements of a libertarian agenda that conflict with conservative identity politics. When John Boehner says “most importantly, let’s allow freedom to flourish” he’s not suggesting we should open our borders to more immigrants or drop the vestigial Selective Service system or allow gay couples to marry or let Latin American countries sell us more sugar or reduce military expenditures. Indeed, the very same critics who castigate Obama for limiting Americans’ freedom also accuse him of being insufficiently eager to torture people, unduly hesitant to detain suspects without trial, and too eager to take the side of black professors subject to police harassment for the crime of trying to enter their own home.

¹ Matthew Yglesias, *Heads in the Sand*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008

² <http://people-press.org/trust/>

Which is just to say that Boehner is a conservative. He sides with the military, with law enforcement, with the business establishment, and with the dominant ethno-cultural group in the country. In the United States of America, people who adhere to these values like to talk about “freedom” but this has nothing in particular to do with any real ideas about human liberty.

Back in September of 1960, the leading lights of the nascent conservative movement met in Sharon, Connecticut to found Young Americans for Freedom and they proclaimed that “foremost among the transcendent values is the individual’s use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force.” A naive person might read that and conclude that William F Buckley, Jr was a strong proponent of federal anti-lynching legislation and other civil rights laws since, clearly, it was African-Americans in the Jim Crow South who were most subject to “restrictions of arbitrary force” and general lack of freedom. In the real world, a couple of lines down the Sharon Statement is talking about state’s rights, “the genius of the Constitution—the division of powers—is summed up in the clause that reserves primacy to the several states, or to the people in those spheres not specifically delegated to the Federal government.” In 1962, YAF gave its Freedom Award to none other than Strom Thurmond, and in 1964 they helped organize the GOP nomination victory of Barry Goldwater, spearheading the party’s turn away from its historic support of liberty for black people. Somewhat similarly, the far-right parties in the Netherlands and Austria are both called “Freedom Party.”

Which is not to say that invocations of “freedom” circa 2010 are really about racism. It’s just to say that in 2010 as in 1960 they’re *about conservatism* in all its splendor and horror, and have little to do with serious disagreements about the nature of liberty.

THE CHALLENGE OF CONNECTING FREEDOM TO GOVERNMENT ACTION

This item, the fourth in the TDS/Demos forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira, senior fellows at the Center for American Progress Action Fund. Teixeira is also a Founder and Co-Editor of The Democratic Strategist.

John Schwarz’s introductory essay provides many important insights about the philosophical framework of contemporary politics and offers a compelling overview of the continuity of progressive and liberal notions of freedom from Jefferson and Lincoln to FDR and Obama. We wholeheartedly agree with his assessment that the White House and progressives need to make this worldview a centerpiece of their public education and communications efforts. This is sound advice and the clear ideological markers laid out in the President’s speech¹ on the economy at Georgetown would be a good place to start.

We disagree with Schwarz’s conception of the political challenge, however. Looking at the data, progressives do not have a problem with public resistance to their conception of freedom. Despite all the hype around the tea parties, extreme libertarian individualism is a much tougher sell in this country than FDR’s deeper conception of liberty as consisting of freedom of speech and religion coupled with freedom from want and fear.

Our research² on political ideology last year found that by a 19-point margin, Americans agree more with a progressive vision of freedom similar to the one outlined in the essay over a more libertarian ideal put forth by Ayn Rand, Glenn Beck, and the tea partiers: 57 percent of Americans agreed that, “Freedom requires economic opportunity and minimum measures of security, such as food, housing, medical care, and old age protection,” versus 38 percent who believed 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.” In numerous public polls and our own work, Americans also express a clear desire for tolerant policies that treat people equally and allow for diversity of thought, lifestyle and worship. They do not want the agenda of social conservatives. And even with the hostility to Obama and progressives that emerged over the course of the past year, the American public still believes in the core aspects of progressive government—regulation of the economy, support for the vulnerable, and public investments in education, infrastructure, health care, defense, research and energy transformation—although, in some cases, at lower levels than existed at the beginning of the Obama presidency.

The problem for progressives is not their conception of freedom as encompassing robust government actions to increase economic opportunity and social protections for people. The real problem for progressives lies in the severe public distrust that government can actually perform effectively and accomplish what Americans want it to do.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/14/obama-economy-speech-majo_n_186559.html

² http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/political_ideology.html

The recent Pew finding³ showing only 22 percent of Americans trusting the federal government—one of the lowest marks in half a century according to their analysis—is broadly indicative of this challenge and part of a larger issue of eroding public trust in large institutions ranging from Wall Street to the media. Looking at the data more closely, the stated reasons for this distrust are instructive. First, the massive divide between conservatives/Republicans and liberals/Democrats over the size and function of government presents an unavoidable reality. Progressives must accept that they are in titanic battle with conservatives over the proper role of the state and the individual in society and the economy—a battle that has been going on more or less for a century and is not likely to subside anytime soon given the internal structure of conservative politics and the asymmetry between conservative and progressive media.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Pew finds that majorities of Americans—*across party lines*—believe it is a major problem that the federal government is often wasteful and inefficient, does too little for average Americans, and has policies that unfairly benefit some groups. This is the deeper and more difficult challenge for progressives.

In order for a fuller conception of liberty to take hold—one that encompasses both negative freedom from undue coercion and effective freedom to live a full and materially secure life as John Dewey and FDR postulated—progressives must undertake a more elaborate project. They must take far more aggressive and sustained steps to defend government itself, despite its current unpopularity, and make clear to people exactly how government enables individual freedom and the common good. They must deliver on their promises and ensure that expanded government action measurably improves the lives of working- and middle-class citizens and leads to growth and shared prosperity. They must get far more serious about purging corporate influence in government and reforming the political system so that government actually works for the people in an equitable manner. And they must systematically challenge the selfish and hollow conservative notion of freedom that amounts to little more than helping rich people avoid paying taxes and allowing corporations to do whatever they want regardless of the consequences for the nation.

Put simply, progressives need to constantly argue that government plays a vital role in promoting human freedom and advancing national prosperity. Individuals are capable of making tremendous advances in their own lives. But they cannot stop financial markets from crashing. They cannot stop jobs from being eliminated or wages from being cut. They cannot stand up to health insurers on their own. They cannot direct national resources to key public needs like education, infrastructure, defense, and energy production. Americans need an advocate and a supporter and a means to express their voice in key debates and in support of common purposes. The private sector needs a public counterbalance and communities need mechanisms to advance larger goals and aspirations. This is why we have government. In order to promote genuine human freedom and opportunity, government must perform its role properly by ensuring full and equal rights for all people, defending the nation, guarding against undue corporate influence in policymaking, protecting people from market failures, and investing in public goods. This is the time-honored American vision of freedom and government that dates to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

³ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1569/trust-in-government-distrust-discontent-anger-partisan-rancor>

If progressives articulate the case for government clearly and confidently, and ensure that their actions and policies live up these principles in practice, they will be successful. If conservative anti-government ideology goes unchallenged, and reform efforts stall or get turned into half measures, the hopes of building a long term political environment conducive to progressive policies and expansive notions of human freedom outlined so well by Schwarz will be severely diminished.

TAKING LIBERTIES

This item, the fifth in the Demos/TDS forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute.¹

Freedom, says John Schwarz, is too important to be left to conservatives. No argument there. For too long, liberals have been flummoxed by conservatives’ success in posing as defenders of liberty against government encroachment. This stance has given the conservative cause a simple, reductive logic and ideological coherence that liberals lack – and often envy. It has enabled the right to tap the deep strain of anti-statism that really does make American politics exceptional.

Modern liberals have chafed at the constraint that this classically liberal understanding of freedom imposes on their social vision. For decades, they’ve struggled to articulate a countervailing principle that can trump the power of what Louis Hartz² called America’s underlying “Lockian” consensus.

Arriving in Washington just after Ronald Reagan’s election, I’d often ask shell-shocked liberals to define their first principle. The invariable, deflating answer: “affirming a positive role for government.” This trope reflected a confusion of means with ends – and it goes a long way toward explaining why only about a fifth of Americans³ have been willing to call themselves liberals since the early 1970s.

The story of how liberalism came to be linked with social engineering and redistribution, with tax and spend, and with rights and entitlements to favored groups is too familiar to need rehashing here. Suffice it to say that liberal efforts to expand government’s role to advance worthy social goals have often crossed lines that are important to many if not most voters. These lines mark the boundaries between individual and collective responsibility, and between government’s legitimate efforts to assure equal opportunity as opposed to equal outcomes.

So Schwarz’s diagnosis is right: the public’s abiding suspicion that expansive government means contracting freedom tends to stack the political deck in conservatives’ favor and keep liberals on the defensive. His ideas for reversing the presumption in liberals’ favor, however, fall short.

When it comes to freedom, liberals face an inescapable dilemma. They can never be as simple-minded as conservatives. They can’t simply counter conservatives’ classic-liberal conception of freedom with a social liberalism that aspires to greater equality and social justice. Mid-century liberals succeeded by keeping these often antagonist approaches in equipoise. Modern liberals have lost the balance, and with it, the ability to persuade a majority of Americans to their point of view.

¹ <http://www.progressivefix.com/>

² Louis Hartz, *Harcourt, The Liberal Tradition in America*, Brace & World, 1955

³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/123854/conservatives-maintain-edge-top-ideological-group.aspx>

Here it's important to distinguish between Democrats and liberals. Most liberals are Democrats, but most Democrats are moderates (and another 17 percent say they are conservative). The outlook of moderate-to-conservative Democrats remains anchored in the classic liberalism of the American creed. Liberal Democrats incline toward social democracy, especially the Nordic model.

If liberals are very far from a majority, Democrats are achingly close. This suggests that we shouldn't exaggerate the talismanic power of the right's paeans to personal freedom. They didn't prevent Democrats, first under Bill Clinton and now Barack Obama, from staging a political comeback. They didn't stop Obama and his party from finally realizing their oft-deferred dream of universal health care, though it was a close-run thing.

Plus it's arguable that, on the cultural front, Democrats already hold the high ground of freedom. Where morality is concerned, conservatives are all about government coercion; they want more legal prohibitions on individual behavior, not less. Liberals, to their everlasting credit, have fought to defend the individual freedom of minorities, women and gays against discriminatory laws and customs. Often they've paid dearly, as when the New Deal coalition splintered over civil rights. Over time, however, the right has been losing ground in the culture wars (to take the latest example, it won't be long before the Pentagon retires "don't ask, don't tell"). No wonder Republicans are now turning from social issues to confront big government, big deficits and President Obama's supposed plans for a government takeover of economic life.

This is the crucial battleground. Of course, the GOP's "socialism" canard is ridiculous. But independents and moderates do worry that Democrats are insufficiently respectful of economic freedom and individual initiative, unwilling to discipline public spending, too trusting of central bureaucracies and regulation, and too focused on distributional equity at the expense of growing the economic pie.

In proposing ways for Democrats to allay such qualms, Schwarz is at his least convincing.

Conveniently, he discerns in Obama's speeches the antidote to the GOP's invigorating freedom elixir. This "doctrine," he says, harks back to a richer conception of freedom shared by the Founders and Abraham Lincoln. It "embraces mutual responsibilities and shared sacrifice for others and for the common good as crucial obligations of freedom." The Obama doctrine also entails the "positive recognition of the need for governmental activism to effectuate the obligations we have toward one another."

These are attractive propositions. But they're hardly new or unique to Obama – they sound, in fact, a lot like Bill Clinton's mantra of "opportunity, responsibility and community." And it's a bit of a stretch to ascribe such civic republican sentiments to the Founders, who were mainly Lockean liberals intent on limiting government's reach to preserve the widest possible scope for individual liberty.

They were schooled in what Isaiah Berlin called "negative liberty" – freedom as non-interference. From a liberal or progressive perspective, the problem with negative liberty is that it locks in unjust political and economic arrangements. How can people be truly free if they live

in poverty, lack opportunity or face structural obstacles, such as class or race discrimination, to personal advancement?

Good question. In response, progressive reformers have posited a more expansive concept of “positive liberty” as encompassing economic and social rights, such as the right to a job, or health care, or a decent pension. In its benign, democratic form, positive liberty leads to the New Deal, the mixed economy and the social welfare state. But as Berlin notes in “Two Concepts of Freedom” (1958)⁴, liberals should not delude themselves that positive liberty is simply a more enlightened or highly evolved version of negative liberty. In fact, they stand for competing values:

To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely; but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not in some circumstances, ready to make this sacrifice. But a sacrifice is not an increase in what is being sacrificed, namely freedom, however great the moral need or the compensation for it. Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.

...it is a confusion of values to say that although my ‘liberal’, individual freedom may go by the board, some other kind of freedom – ‘social’ or ‘economic’ – is increased.

This gets to the heart of my problem with Schwarz’s ideas for closing Democrats’ freedom deficit. No rebranding exercise is going to change the way most Americans understand freedom. Limited government, personal responsibility, and free enterprise are encoded in our political DNA. Instead of trying to splice genes into unfamiliar combinations, Democrats should pay due deference to these bedrock principles, while at the same time counterposing to them other political values – equal opportunity, moral reciprocity, civic duty – that Americans also care deeply about.

For a model, look no farther than to Bill Clinton’s “New Democrat” renovation of the conventional liberal agenda. He inherited a party fixated on wealth distribution and refocused it on economic innovation as the main driver of job growth and U.S. competitiveness. He dismantled a welfare system widely despised for fostering dependence on the state and replaced it with a compact that linked the individual’s responsibility to work to society’s obligation to make work pay.

In a challenge to the prevailing mentality of one-way entitlement, Clinton created a national service system to enable young Americans to give back to their communities in return for student aid. As the economy boomed on his watch, he reduced the size of government and tried to “reinvent” torpid, unresponsive bureaucracies. With innovations like charter schools and job training vouchers, he injected choice and competition into the delivery of public services. He balanced the federal budget, while making space for new spending on health care, anti-crime initiatives and college aid.

To this day, many liberals profess to see no deeper logic at work here than triangulation or accommodating the reigning conservative ethos. Artful dodger though he was, Clinton also

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy, ed., *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 2002

was striving for something more ambitious – a new political synthesis of classic and modern liberal ideas to cope with the rise of global markets and a new technic shaped by information technologies and the internet.

Obama for the most part is continuing along the same pragmatic course, which explains why the left seems chronically disappointed in him. Take his signature domestic initiative, health care reform. Nevermind a single payer system; Obama wouldn't even go to bat for the public option. Rather than demanding universal coverage as a social right, he stressed the prosaic goal most Americans care about: restraining runaway health costs.

Despite the hysterical reaction on the right, Obama's plan is a classically American approach to universal coverage. It is decentralized, relies on private insurance, offers individuals choice, demands personal responsibility (through the individual mandate) and confines government's role to subsidizing insurance for those who can't afford it and barring insurance company practices that undermine the risk-pooling rationale for insurance.

In response to the financial crisis, Obama resisted liberal demands that he nationalize big banks, kill off derivatives altogether, or otherwise regulate our woozy financial system back into the staid 1950s. It's true that he took a controlling share in General Motors and spent prodigiously to prop up the banks and goose the economy. These are the main exhibits in the conservative's "socialism" indictment. But now he's laying the groundwork for pivoting to deficit reduction and perhaps Social Security reform next year, as employment picks up. That's going to be a jarring transition, but Obama knows that a failure to return America to a sustainable fiscal path will jeopardize our prosperity and economic sovereignty.

Realism and moderation also mark his approach to energy and climate change. Obama is pushing for a price on carbon, the economic game-changer that will unleash large-scale private investment in energy efficiency and clean technologies. But he's also endorsed nuclear energy and offshore drilling, both to bring Republicans on board and because it will be decades before renewable fuels can come anywhere close to meeting our energy needs.

Maybe Schwarz can find a new paradigm for liberal governance in all this, but damned if I can. In any case, the immediate challenge for Democrats is not to promulgate new doctrines, but to govern effectively. Fortunately, the Obama administration finally has begun to get traction with its hard-fought victory on health reform, the new disarmament pact with Russia, Obama's nuclear security summit and the likely passage soon of a major financial reform bill. The Republicans, meanwhile, are abandoning the center as Tea Party inmates take over the asylum.

On the minus side, independents have defected in droves from Obama's winning 2008 coalition. According to Gallup Poll, Democrats' big edge in party identification has shrunk to near parity⁵ for the first time since 2005.

The political challenge is to win independents back, and Democrats won't do that by pushing ideas that make those voters even more apprehensive about big government. But independents would take to a Democratic narrative that stressed expanding opportunity rather than government.

⁵ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/127499/Party-Affiliation-Gap-U.S.-Narrowest-2005.aspx>

The key to expanding opportunity is jobs, and the key to creating jobs is innovation. Fixing Wall Street is important, but what the country needs even more is a progressive opportunity agenda that emphasizes technological advances, business start-ups, modern infrastructure, fiscal discipline, better schools and freedom abroad.

The United States needs to create 12 million jobs in this decade to replace those lost during the recession and meet workforce growth. Over the last 30 years, firms less than five years old have accounted for nearly all net job creation in the United States⁶, according to the Kauffman Foundation. Democrats need new policies that foster an entrepreneurial climate and accelerate the next wave of innovation. These include more public spending on research, especially non-health related; a light-handed approach to regulating and taxing small enterprises; dramatic improvements in K-12 education, especially science and technology; and an immigration policy that gives preferences to skilled immigrants.

Making America the world's clean tech leader is another urgent priority. We need an energy industrial base as robust as our defense industrial base (in fact, the two overlap considerably). This won't happen as long as fossil fuels remain cheap, so Democrats must keep fighting for some kind of carbon cap or charge. But they should also break the old taboo on expanding nuclear power. More nuclear energy can help us through the transition to renewal fuels, while also reducing the amount of carbon the United States pumps into the atmosphere.

Democrats should also get behind an aggressive infrastructure initiative. Washington must reverse decades of neglect and double spending aimed at modernizing America's again and inadequate public infrastructure. Even that, though, won't be nearly enough, which is why Democrats need to get serious about funding a national infrastructure bank to leverage private investment in high-speed rail, intelligent transportation systems, a smart electricity grid, and next-generation broadband.

Restoring fiscal discipline will be a tougher, but vital, task for Democrats. Too many liberals look at calls for fiscal restraint as a ploy to permanently downsize progressive ambitions. The problem is, most voters (and especially independents) see it as a sine qua non of responsible governance. Democrats need to get back in touch with their inner Jefferson and learn to love "economy in government." Besides, that's the only way to carve out space in the federal budget for the party's big initiatives on innovation, infrastructure and clean energy.

Liberals also need to quit taking evasive action on entitlement reform and embrace progressive ways to trim promised benefits in Social Security and Medicare. But centrist Democrats too will have to screw up their courage to raise the revenues we need to stop America's heedless borrowing from abroad.

Finally, Democrats should stand more forthrightly for freedom in the world. In the wake of George W. Bush's disastrous foreign policy, a kind of neo-realism or cultural relativism has crept into the party's thinking. Through this lens, simple affirmations of liberty and democracy look like arrogance, a dangerous moralizing that could drag us into one conflict after another. Best to ignore what goes on inside other countries and cut deals with them based on mutual interest.

⁶ <http://www.kauffman.org/newsroom/high-growth-firms-account-for-disproportionate-share-of-job-creation-according-to-kauffman-foundation-study.aspx>

This is, to put it mildly, an overreaction. We've already learned that a more humble American *mein* doesn't make rogue actors like Iran more tractable. They're more likely to interpret our modesty as weakness. And Democrats of all people shouldn't repudiate ignore one of liberal internationalism's most trenchant insights: there's a close link between how countries are governed and how they behave in the world. It's no accident that tyrants who are unaccountable to their people are the biggest threats to international peace and security.

That's why Democrats should resume the work of the great midcentury liberals who created new global institutions to underpin a liberal world order. For those liberals, freedom was, in Arthur Schlesinger's phrase, a "fighting faith." That's another liberal tradition Democrats would do well to reclaim.

FREEDOM IS MORE THAN A FRAME

This item, the sixth in the Demos/TDS forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by Mark Schmitt, executive editor of The American Prospect.

While I’m often impatient with a progressive conversation about “values,” abstracted from practice (I’ve sat through enough meetings where half the time gets spent filling a whiteboard with lists of our shared values and nothing of actual value gets done) in this case this forum’s long opening essay by John Schwarz gets well beyond the vacuousness common to such exercises, and it will provoke an important conversation with its claim that “mention of freedom has nearly disappeared from the speeches of most Democrats, except when the issue is civil liberties.”

Matthew Yglesias, in the first substantive response in the forum, points out that attempting to reclaim the word “freedom” from the right wouldn’t necessarily have any value in electoral politics, because the right’s use of the word was never meant to be taken literally – it has about as much meaning as “the American Way.” And of course, there is a deep strain of authoritarianism in the Tea Party right – it’s the freedom of states to deny health coverage or welfare, or of parents to spank their kids, that they would protect. But even if a liberal claim on the word won’t suddenly make the right shut up and go home, it’s worth thinking about whether a richer language of freedom would give a stronger sense of purpose to liberalism, not just for political reasons, but because we actually care about it.

Schwarz’s main argument, bolstered by a thorough reading of American political rhetoric with a particular emphasis on Lincoln, is a classic defense of “positive liberty” – the familiar concept that real liberty requires not just the absence of state interference, but a minimum set of goods that get one to the starting line of life – basic sustenance, shelter, education, and, in Schwarz’s proposal, job retraining – to ensure “that satisfactory economic opportunity will be available to every person who is willing to work and act responsibly.” Schwarz calls it “a community of equal liberty,” which he contrasts with “individualistic liberty.” In this sense, the document is of a piece with “communitarian” critiques of rights-based liberalism, such as Michael Sandel’s¹, which were valuable correctives in the 1990s.

As a political strategy, what this amounts to, then, is mostly reframing by renaming – make basic minimal egalitarianism more politically acceptable by calling it freedom, rather than letting the right call it socialism. That’s accurate, of course, just as the principles and metaphors that stem from it – such as that government should guarantee equality of opportunity but not of result, or the image of an even starting line – are generally agreeable, comfortable aspects of both conservative and liberal rhetoric. But they don’t make political problems or conflicts go away – there’s rarely agreement about where “opportunity” ends and “results” begin, or where in life the “starting line” is found.

¹ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge University Press, 1982

It's also a surprisingly thin vision of freedom, casually setting aside much "individualized freedom" in favor of "mutual obligation and shared sacrifice" and minimal economic equality. Schwarz says that liberals don't talk about freedom "except when the subject is civil liberties," but how much falls into that poignant "except"? Freedom of expression, freedom to love who you want to love, freedom from unjust imprisonment, privacy rights, the right to leave an oppressive marriage, the right to worship as you please or not at all— these are "individualistic" forms of freedom, to be sure. (They are also "negative freedoms," in that they are infinite – everyone can possess them without choices about allocating resources.) But they are absolutely central to any progressive vision of freedom, just as they are to a political party that has built its coalition on individuals whose first claim was to freedom, on waves of immigrants who came to the U.S. seeking freedom and often had to fight for it, and on women's rights. A robust vision of "freedom" has to build on those individual rights, and show a passion for them, in the manner of the Four Freedoms, not just dismiss them and replace them with a common economic vision.

The real opportunity to take the language of freedom back from the far right is to recognize the distinction between an optimistic, bright vision of human possibility and fulfillment in all dimensions of life – material and non-material – versus the narrow, dark vision of freedom from an oppressive government. The right's language of "freedom," in their fight against the modest Obama agenda, is all the dark side – "freedom from" government rather than the Reaganite vision of vast human possibility. The progressive alternative, then, is not a comparably small vision of freedom from economic scarcity and desperation, but a bigger, optimistic vision of what people can achieve – individually and together – when their rights and dignity are protected, and with a base of security that allows them to take risks. (As a text for this vision, consider John Maynard Keynes' lovely and eccentric 1930 essay, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren," which is really not about economic possibilities at all, but the possibility that a future generation might have enough abundance to get beyond the problem of scarcity and "to live wisely and agreeably and well.")

As recently as a few years ago, conservatives tried to draw a contrast with liberalism in which they stood for *opportunity* while liberalism stood only for *security* – liberalism was for society's losers, the people who needed protection, while conservatism was for winners, who took chances and dreamed big. Social Security privatization was their most aggressive bet at putting this contrast into political practice, but its failure in 2005 showed that voters were smart enough to understand that a certain measure of security was essential to creating opportunity.

Now the right has fallen back on a cramped, fear-based vision of freedom in which takes refuge in the security of the status quo. However much we dislike what we have, this rationale goes, whatever government offers can only be worse. This fear-based vision of freedom creates an opening for liberals to reclaim a vision of freedom that is not based on blind optimism – hard to sustain at this moment anyway – but a clear vision of economic growth and opportunity for individuals to make the most of their talents and dreams, protected both by rights and by public goods that help everyone, not just the very poor.

Real positive liberty isn't just a guarantee of a safety net for the poor. My old boss, Senator Bill Bradley, used to quote in almost every speech a line from D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*²: "It is never freedom until you find something you positively want to be" –

² D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Ezra Greenspan, ed., Cambridge University Press, 2003

a vision of freedom that's not just about minimal economic well-being, but about aspiration and purpose. Lawrence may have been as eccentric as Keynes, and neither one is as American as Lincoln, but theirs is the appropriate language for the left in American politics, not just because freedom is a political winner, but because we actually care about it.

ENHANCING FREEDOM BY GOVERNMENT ACTION

*This item, the seventh in the Demos/TDS forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” is by Hilary Bok, Luce Professor in Bioethics and Moral and Political Theory at Johns Hopkins University, and author of *Freedom and Responsibility*.¹*

I agree with Matt Yglesias that it’s a mistake to try to locate a coherent conception of liberty with which the Republican Party is genuinely concerned. We are, after all, talking about a party whose most recent president claimed the right to detain American citizens indefinitely without charges or trial and to disregard duly enacted laws at will; a party which applauds Arizona’s new law allowing the police to ask people to prove their citizenship or face arrest; which tries to use coercive state power to prevent the terminally ill from choosing the manner of their death; which seeks to prevent members of the LGBT community from marrying the people they love; and which regularly courts the votes of people who look back fondly on the days when blacks were second class citizens. No party with this record can be described as supporting liberty.

That said, I differ with Matt on the utility of challenging Republicans’ claims to champion liberty. For one thing, even if this does not in fact change many minds, I’d rather not give up on the possibility that it might change some. For another, while people’s views of political parties don’t change as quickly as I’d like, they do change eventually. Republicans have already forfeited their reputation for competence and fiscal discipline. I suspect that they are in the process of losing much of the credibility they once had with the military, though I expect this to take a while. If there is any justice in the world, their claim to support liberty will eventually become as obviously risible as their claim to be responsible stewards of the economy. Since I care about liberty, I want to do whatever I can to help this process along.

In his introductory essay, John Schwarz suggests that Democrats embrace an ideal of freedom that has less to do with government inaction than with independence and opportunity: with “the right of every person to be able to provide for himself decently by means that are under the individual’s own control.” People are not free just because the government does not directly interfere with their choices. They need to have a decent set of alternatives available to them so that, in Bill Clinton’s words, “if you work hard and play by the rules, you ought to have a decent life and a chance for your children to have a better one.”²

If freedom involves having a decent set of alternatives available to us, then government action can enhance our freedom even if it involves restraints on conduct that would not otherwise violate anyone’s rights. Consider traffic laws. Those of us who drive are constantly subjected to government dictates telling us what we can and cannot do. We can only drive on one side of the street. We have to stop at red lights and stop signs even when no one else is around. If freedom means only that government should not tell us what to do, then the traffic laws are a massive intrusion on our liberty.

¹ Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility*, Princeton University Press, 1998

² <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25528>

I suspect that most people don't see things that way, though. They probably agree with Elizabeth Anderson, from whom I have taken this example:

To be sure, in a state of gridlock, one has the formal freedom to choose any movement in one's opportunity set – which amounts to being able to rock forward and back a couple of inches from bumper to bumper, getting nowhere. Some freedom!³

Normally, the point of driving is to get somewhere. The traffic laws enable us to get where we are going much more quickly and safely than we would if each of us had to decide for him- or herself which side of the street to drive on. The traffic laws do not tell us where to go. They leave the choice of destination, and for that matter the decision whether to drive at all, entirely up to us. They simply tell us which side of the road to drive on, that we should stop at various points, and so forth. By taking away our freedom to drive on the left, or to blast through busy intersections, they grant us much more freedom in the form of a greatly enhanced ability to get wherever we want to go quickly and safely.

Anyone who thinks that the traffic laws enhance our freedom should acknowledge that in some cases, including this one, government action can enhance our freedom, even if that action takes the form of restrictions on what we can and cannot do. An enormous number of questions about which (other) forms of government action might enhance our freedom would remain to be answered, but the fact that some government policy involves either a more active government or new restrictions on our action would not, by itself, imply that it diminishes our freedom.

Will Marshall thinks that such an account of freedom isn't really freedom at all; that in cases like this, I give up liberty in order to obtain not more liberty, but something else altogether. He quotes Isaiah Berlin:

To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely; but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not in some circumstances, ready to make this sacrifice. But a sacrifice is not an increase in what is being sacrificed, namely freedom, however great the moral need or the compensation for it.⁴

If I sacrifice my liberty in order to avoid 'glaring inequality or widespread misery', then I am indeed giving up freedom for the sake of something other than liberty itself. But this does not show that there are no cases in which we might sacrifice some liberty in order to achieve more. Note that 'glaring inequality or widespread misery' are not states that one would normally be tempted to describe as necessarily involving a loss of freedom at all (assuming that the inequality in question is inequality of wealth or income, and that it does not, for instance, translate into a loss of equal political representation for some.) They involve bad outcomes, not an absence of opportunity. In this respect they differ from the kinds of cases I am interested in. Traffic laws, for instance, leave me free not only to decide whether to travel at all, and if so where to go, but to make stupid choices that prevent me from taking advantage of the opportunity to travel quickly and safely. I can, for instance, decide to ignore the warning lights

³ http://left2right.typepad.com/main/2005/06/so_you_want_to__1.html

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy, ed., *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 2002

on the dashboard, or forget to fill up my gas tank; if I do so, the traffic laws will not step in and fix my mistake. They remove impediments to my getting where I want to go in a reasonable period of time, thereby increasing my freedom of action, but they do not compensate for my stupidity.

Similarly, many programs that liberals support arguably increase our liberty – our freedom to decide what kind of life we should lead from among a reasonable set of alternatives, and to have a good shot at living a decent life if we are willing to work hard and play by the rules. Providing all children with a decent education and good health care obviously enhances their freedom, as do lead paint abatement programs. Adopting macroeconomic policies that foster the creation of good jobs enhances the opportunities available to adults. Providing good health insurance for everyone will not prevent us from getting sick, but preventive care might allow us to avoid some illnesses, and might lessen the severity of others by enabling people who become ill to seek treatment promptly without having to ask whether or not they can afford treatment. This would blunt, to some extent, the assault on our freedom that serious illness often involves. And insofar as our ability to make a decent life for ourselves if we are willing to work hard and play by the rules is diminished if we are vulnerable to unforeseen and undeserved catastrophe, the fact that having health insurance means that illness will not bankrupt us enhances our freedom.

Actually justifying these programs by appeal to such a conception of liberty would, of course, involve showing that they do, in fact, have the consequences I have claimed for them, and that whatever costs to liberty they might involve are outweighed by their benefits. But there is no reason to think that no such justification could possibly be offered, or that it could not be based on an appeal to liberty.

Postscript: I agree with John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira that even if we appeal to this conception of freedom, and even if most of the electorate accepts it, Democrats will be unable to translate this into popular support for any actual government program so long as people distrust government. People might be willing to support all sorts of Democratic goals, but so long as they believe that government programs in general are ineffective or corrupt, they will not believe that any actual program will achieve those goals. They might, for instance, agree in principle that it would be better if everyone had decent health insurance, and even that they would be willing to pay for it, but also believe that any health insurance program implemented by our government will involve higher taxes, bloated bureaucracies, and burdensome regulation, but will not actually provide better health insurance for anyone. So long as they believe that, their lack of support for any concrete health care plan should not surprise us.

FREEDOM, POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT: A SUMMARY OF THE “FREEDOM FORUM” SO FAR

By TDS Managing Editor, Ed Kilgore

For those who have been following the Demos/TDS forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom,” and for those just tuning in, I’d like to offer some observations about the discussion as it is unfolding, and about points of convergence and disagreement among our distinguished group of essayists.

John Schwarz’s introductory essay was based on two core convictions: that “freedom” is a very powerful concept in American politics which conservatives have come to “own” and identify with their own “negative liberty” ideology; and that a positive progressive vision of freedom can and must be aggressively articulated just as the Founders, Lincoln, FDR, and—until recently—Barack Obama did.

There’s some disagreement among our essayists about the first argument: that, as Lew Daly puts it, “the meaning of American freedom is being hijacked by the right.” Matt Yglesias argues that the right’s freedom-rhetoric is transparently empty and hypocritical, and is not terribly important to contemporary political battles. The erosion in the faith in government that’s become so prevalent of late is, Yglesias suggests, mainly attributable to the country’s economic problems, and is likely to abate if and when the economy revives. The immediate challenge for progressives is to expose the agenda of conservatism “in all its splendor and horror,” and arguments over the true nature of freedom do not necessarily contribute to that task.

Mark Schmitt also doubts debates over “freedom” will have immediate political resonance, but thinks it’s worth talking about for a more fundamental reason:

[E]ven if a liberal claim on the word won’t suddenly make the right shut up and go home, it’s worth thinking about whether a richer language of freedom would give a stronger sense of purpose to liberalism, not just for political reasons, but because we actually care about it.

John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira come at Schwarz’ hypothesis from a different angle: they contend, based on their own research, that robust majorities of Americans actually do embrace a progressive definition of “freedom,” but deeply mistrust government as an effective instrument for pursuing it. It’s this mistrust that progressives need to do something about most urgently:

They must take far more aggressive and sustained steps to defend government itself, despite its currently unpopularity, and make clear to people exactly how government enables individual freedom and the common good.

Will Marshall accepts the political salience of freedom, but argues that to be credible progressives must admit that their goals do involve the balancing of freedom with other values of equal importance to Americans. Instead of “rebranding” freedom in congruence with

progressive policy aims, he suggests a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the validity of public concerns about overreaching government and focuses on “expanding opportunity rather than government.”

Hilary Bok weighs in on the side of those who think it’s important and achievable to contest conservative freedom-rhetoric:

[W]hile people’s views of political parties don’t change as quickly as I’d like, they do change eventually. Republicans have already forfeited their reputation for competence and fiscal discipline. I suspect that they are in the process of losing much of the credibility they once had with the military, though I expect this to take a while. If there is any justice in the world, their claim to support liberty will eventually become as obviously risible as their claim to be responsible stewards of the economy. Since I care about liberty, I want to do whatever I can to help this process along.

She also argues that the distinction between “positive” and “negative” concepts of freedom can be misleading, since government action is sometimes essential to enhance freedom generally, even in such simple forms as traffic laws. Beyond that:

[M]any programs that liberals support arguably increase our liberty—our freedom to decide what kind of life we should lead from among a reasonable set of alternatives, and to have a good shot at living a decent life if we are willing to work hard and play by the rules.

Schwarz’ second main theme, which lays out a distinctive progressive vision of freedom, has also attracted some commentary. Yglesias, Marshall and Schmitt all emphasize the importance of certain “negative” freedoms that progressives are far more likely to defend than do conservatives.

Mark Schmitt offers a broader definition of the freedom progressives should fight for, particularly as it relates to issues that go beyond the pocket-book, and argues for “an optimistic, bright vision of human possibility and fulfillment in all dimensions of life—material and non-material,” as opposed to the “narrow, dark vision of freedom from an oppressive government” that conservative so often present.

Will Marshall is more skeptical than other essayists about the political salience of a “positive freedom” agenda that involves expansion of government, and also argues that progressives should reclaim their own legacy of promoting freedom internationally.

All seven essays offer distinctive perspectives from a common starting-point, and provide serious food for thought, not just by professional “thinkers” but by people engaged in practical politics and government who must deal with the consequences of both progressive and conservative freedom-rhetoric.

We anticipate new essays next week from Paul Starr and Orlando Patterson and perhaps others, and will then work towards distilling the discussion to draw out points of consensus.

THE POWER OF FREEDOM: A RESPONSE

This item is by John E. Schwarz, who wrote the introductory essay for the Demos/TDS online forum on “Progressive Politics and the Meaning of American Freedom.” It is his response to the other essays submitted to the forum.

Let me say how impressed I am with the many different angles of this important topic that the respondents have spoken to and the thoughtfulness of the responses. Summarizing the forum, Ed Kilgore points out that two kinds of issues have been dominant. I'd like to take up each of the two issue areas and the respondents' comments about them in turn.

The first general area has to do with how significant freedom actually is. One issue, voiced by Mark Schmitt, is that focusing on freedom amounts mainly to simple “reframing by naming,” that is, it is little more than merely rebottling the same product. I see the purpose very differently, not as cosmetic but as absolutely essential. At bottom, the purpose is to identify the foundational value that progressives actually believe in; to recognize what that crucial value means and requires, reaching back to the Founders; and, to advance that basic value against false libertarian representations of it. On that basis, it also serves as an umbrella transforming what now is a series of different and discrete individual policy elements into an overarching, coherent, and inspiring vision.

An allied concern, raised by Will Marshall, is that the progressive ideal of freedom has only limited political salience because Americans don't and never will understand freedom in the expansive way that progressives do. In this view, the conservative notion of freedom as small government and free enterprise is encoded in our DNA. Yet, the introductory essay (and Halpin and Teixeira as well) cite strong evidence contesting this conclusion and indicating, to the contrary, that a sizeable majority of Americans in fact do instinctively support the progressive ideal of freedom (see Center for American Progress, “The State of American Political Ideology 2009: A Study of Values and Beliefs,” p. 41).¹

Even so, Halpin and Teixeira and also Hilary Bok raise the problem that the progressive ideal of freedom, with its call for governmental activism in the economy, is seriously weakened to the extent that Americans distrust government. They contend it is crucial to address the substantial misgivings that many Americans presently have about government. I agree.

There are a number of approaches to build on which in combination can move successfully toward that more favorable attitude. Effectively articulating the goals of programs in terms of protecting and expanding our freedom (and the security that comes with freedom), rooted in the thinking of the Founders, should moderate the feeling that government is going far beyond its proper bounds, which is a major component of today's misgivings about government. It is also a way to show how and why progressives care about getting budgets under control—and have the record, relative to conservatives, to prove it.

¹ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf

Beyond this, we can usefully build upon present attitudes. For example, most Americans already have a positive view of government in numerous areas, such as the military, the police, firefighters, garbage and recycling disposal, water utilities, weights and measures, food safety, roads, national parks, Medicare, and Social Security, among many examples—all of them government operations and all of them viewed as competently run. Words like “public institutions” (as opposed to “bureaucracy” and even “government”), “majority rule,” and “revenues” (as opposed to “taxes”) all have positive connotations in the public mind.

In addition, Americans today positively embrace the need for government to protect us from unaccountable private power and the unbridled greed of others. There are also excellent analogies and metaphors, for example the need for forceful traffic regulations to make traveling freely on the road even possible, as Hilary Bok pointed out. Regulations are not necessarily opposed to individual freedom but often instead are necessary for that freedom. There are many fruitful approaches available to build upon, indeed. And, if the public wants government to work effectively and deserve their faith, is it not crucial to select people for office who fundamentally believe in government, unlike today’s conservatives and the “Brownies” of this world—people who recognize a proper need for government and the importance of competent, disciplined, and responsible government?

Whatever success takes place in this area, it remains true as two of the respondents suggest that how effectively the economy is doing—rather than an ideal or vision—is likely to be the most direct determinant of outcomes in upcoming elections. Nonetheless, a strong theory or narrative is still necessary in order to make any promise of continuing economic success plausible, let alone credible, in the eyes of the public. The conservative idea of freedom as simply small government contains within it the libertarian assertion that less regulation and taxation will boost economic growth and general prosperity. That basic proposition has attracted many adherents. There is no similar theory or narrative at the moment showing how governmental activism along progressive lines is essential to promote more powerful economic growth and prosperity. That places progressives at a disadvantage. The introductory essay attempts to set forth a theory and narrative to this effect, built from the progressive ideal of freedom, along with an understanding as to how and why its application is indispensable to the economic advance of a substantial majority of Americans, including the broad middle-class. That theory and narrative then stands in sharp contrast to the three-decade long economic disaster wrought upon ordinary Americans by the ascendancy of the libertarian notion of freedom.

A final argument about the utility of focusing on freedom contends that conservatives themselves don’t really believe in freedom (as their call for big government in the personal lives of Americans demonstrates). Instead, Matt Yglesias argues, conservatives support the dominant economic and ethno-cultural groups in the country. In this view, the real debate between progressives and conservatives isn’t actually about liberty at all.

Even though conservatives clearly do emphasize a libertarian notion of freedom regarding economic matters, Yglesias’s concern obviously has some truth in it. Yet, as Hilary Bok has responded, the fact that conservatives couch their positions in terms of freedom and liberty gives their views considerably greater power. Freedom and liberty, because they are what

this country is about, achieve a very powerful political resonance. Detailed polls of American beliefs and opinion carried out by different research organizations confirm this conclusion. (See Center for Policy Alternatives, “Findings from a Nationwide Survey,” Lake Research Partners, pp.31-32;² Center for American Progress, 2009, p. 40)³

A second broad area of respondents’ concerns deals with the meaning and content of the progressive value of freedom. Mark Schmitt suggests that the ideal of freedom as described in the introductory essay is too weak, that it is thin and doesn’t go very far. I respectfully disagree.

One basic requirement of the value, the availability of sufficient opportunity for all, enables individuals who do their part not simply to reach at least a customary level of well-being (which is substantially greater than subsistence, as Schmitt interprets it). It also enables them to fulfill the dreams they have for their standard of living grounded upon their own efforts and improved productivity.

As the introductory essay extensively documents, all of that stands a long distance from contemporary reality in our nation, far removed from what has actually been possible for many years now for most average, let alone poor, Americans. The same value goes substantially beyond economic matters, as well. It involves a robust understanding of all the personal rights and civil liberties to which Schmitt refers. The introductory essay does not discuss those personal rights and liberties solely because it was focused on the economy.

The progressive ideal of freedom—of being able to live a life of fulfillment, as each individual defines it—extends to both the material and non-material sides of our lives. Indeed, freedom is the indispensable operating principle behind the progressive call for activist government in economic matters conjoined with small government related to our personal beliefs and how we lead our personal lives. Governmental activism is essential to assure sufficient opportunity, protection from wrongful harm, and the promotion of common goods. That, combined with small government in our personal beliefs and lives, is what lets freedom thrive. Being able to make this key distinction, in turn, brings the indefensible conservative contradiction of big government in our personal lives yet de-regulation in our economic lives into greatest relief.

Another potential limitation of freedom for advancing progressive causes, Will Marshall suggests, is that the meaning of freedom would seem to be opposed to both equality and social justice in the sense that they are essentially zero-sum objectives. One must be sacrificed in order to be able to gain the other. The introductory essay and Hilary Bok in her response argue otherwise. To give an example, the assurance of sufficient economic opportunity for every individual is an essential element of freedom, equality, and social justice, all at the same time. The progressive ideal of freedom embraces equality and social justice on many levels as an essential part of freedom itself-- sufficient economic opportunity, equal standing under the law, and an equal vote are but a few illustrations. The same meaning of freedom also identifies limits and boundaries to equality that nearly all progressives embrace. For example, there is no call for complete equality of wealth for every individual.

One final consideration Marshall points to is the question of whether progressive policies are too diverse in their application to fit into a recognizable paradigm. After describing a series of

² <http://www.lakeresearch.com/news/cpa/06pre.CPA.pdf>

³ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf

policies and programs (health-care reform under Obama, TARP, energy and climate change—including nuclear energy and off-shore drilling—and, under Clinton, health care, crime prevention, college aid, charter schools, and balancing the budget), Marshall suggests that there is no paradigm that can be found that spans this great array of actions. But I believe there is. Most of the programs he identifies fit the progressive ideal of freedom outlined in the article. That is, they are intended either to assure the availability of sufficient opportunity for individuals or to protect against external harms done to individuals, utilizing government in order to attain those ends. In doing so, they tend to seek the lowest level of direct governmental control and public cost consistent with successfully attaining the ends while endeavoring to secure revenues for them and practice effective and appropriate budgetary discipline over the long term.