

# Why AMERICANS VOTE Their VALUES

In a post-material era, people seek status, purpose, and happiness—and cast their ballots accordingly.

| by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger

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

For this research to be useful, we must first understand the consensus that has emerged within the social sciences about how American values are changing and how that should affect the decisions of politicians and candidates for public office.

The first thing people in politics today need to understand is that most Americans are *post-materialists*. In the 1950s, the American psychologist Abraham Maslow famously proposed that humans have a “hierarchy of needs”—beginning with the material needs of food, shelter, security, and freedom—which must be fulfilled before we can pursue what sociologists today call “post-material needs.” These are desires for status, belonging, community, a purposeful life, fulfillment, and happiness, among others.

Thanks in large part to the success of market capitalism and postwar liberalism, the vast majority of Americans today are post-materialists. In contrast to 1933, very few Americans now worry about having enough to eat or having a roof over their heads. (This is even truer of voters than nonvoters.) This is not to say that Americans no longer worry about their material lives. They do. But they do so for post-materialist reasons and in post-materialist ways.

**American Dream.** The implications for politics are significant. Very few Americans are so poor that their material survival is in question, as it was during the Great Depression. Social mobility may objectively be harder to accomplish today than it was 20 years ago. But the vast majority of Americans continue to believe in the American Dream and tend to identify up, not down, the class ladder. Efforts to appeal to alleged material interests, therefore, are unlikely to bring white working-class voters back into the Democratic Party fold. Post-materialist Americans moved beyond such concerns decades ago. It is only unreconstructed liberal Democrats who, in their political calculations, have not. Similarly, putting poverty at the center of one’s politics fails to recognize the ways in which America remains a deeply aspirational



country that has long been more committed to greatness than to altruism.

A second and related point is that Americans neither rationally assess nor vote their material self-interest. American liberals sometimes seem to be the last people on earth who cling to the fantasy that voters (themselves included) rationally calculate their material self-interest. The last 30 years of social science research—including social psychology, sociology, and cognitive science—should have long since disabused everyone of the rationalistic fallacy. Even economics, the last

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bastion of classical enlightenment ideas about *homo economicus*, has increasingly valued the study of human irrationality.

**Materialist model.** American voters no more rationally calculated their self-interest in 1976 and 1992 than they did in 1980 and 2004. Democrats sometimes recognize this change, yet they usually return to constructing their politics around the older materialist model. They hope against hope that their explanations of why this health care plan is in the voters' interest or that tax cut is against the voters' material self-interest will win their support. But Americans support candidates and policy proposals based on

whether they resonate with their core (and often unconsciously held) values and outlook on life. Appealing to the "rational" and material self-interests of American voters will only lead to further disappointments at the ballot box.

A third key finding of social values research is that demography is no longer destiny. America's transition to a postindustrial economy has been accompanied by profound changes in American values. Americans today form their identities in far more complex ways than they did in the past. For example, being "Irish" used to entail a specific set of other identities and values, from being Catholic to being Democratic to being against abortion. Today, being Irish is far less predictive of one's place, values, and politics.

Social and geographic mobility have loosened the connection between demographic and biological identities and political identity. For example, our research shows that African Americans under the age of 20 have more values in common with whites and Hispanics under the age of 20 than they do with blacks over the age of 60. (The same holds true for whites and Latinos.) In contrast, black, white, and Latino Americans over the age of 60 hold very different values from each other. Continuing to understand and speak to Americans in demographic and biological terms—e.g., "Hispanic women" or "suburban soccer moms"—risks misunderstanding political behavior and missing important political opportunities.

In addition, Americans are demanding a more flexible and less hierarchical relationship to religion, work, and government. Americans today hold increasingly more flexible orientations toward work, family, spirituality, government, and consumption. Even conservative evangelical churches are becoming more post-materialist. Witness the enormous appeal of the megachurch minister Rick Warren and his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren is speaking directly to individual exploration and personal happiness in ways that

would have seemed bizarre to evangelical preachers a generation ago. Other Americans are seeking to fulfill their spiritual needs outside church.

Likewise, the relationship between employees and employers is becoming more flexible. While some liberals see only the downside of this trend, such as job and pension insecurity, there are also upsides, such as more purposeful, creative work, greater flexibility in work hours, and the ability to work from home.

**A new social contract.** Finally, Americans are increasingly rejecting the idea that government programs are the best way to solve social problems, and they are looking for a relationship to government that reflects changed economic and social realities. This is not to say that Americans *a priori* want less government or smaller government, though this is sometimes the case. What Americans most want is a new social contract—a different relationship to government from the kind Democrats established during the New Deal and the War on Poverty. Democrats tend to misread these forms of post-materialism either as a kind of libertarian conservatism or as an irrational failure to recognize one's true (read: material) interests. Progressives need to create and fight for programs that speak both to new demands for flexibility and to longstanding demands for accountability, whether of corporations or individuals.

Strategically, moving either to the right or to the left will not solve the Democrats' problems. The problem for Democrats is not, for the most part, that they are either too liberal or not liberal enough. Rather, the problem is that Republicans, but not Democrats, have created an agenda and a politics that is more consistent with the seemingly nonrational ways post-materialist Americans hold values, form identities, and engage in politics. The real problem is that we continue to understand American identities and values—and construct our politics and our policy agenda—in outmoded ways. ♦