

# **Forward Progress? The Fall and Rise of an American Political Movement**

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## *Executive Summary*

Over the past 40 years, the game of American politics has fundamentally changed. American citizens have moved away from serving as active participants in a democratic process and towards a more passive consumption of heavily marketed political products. Meanwhile, a highly sophisticated and strategic Conservative movement has slowly captured incredible influence over the political process, through its often-brilliant organizational and visionary tactics.

As these trends have begun to powerfully alter the context for the American political process, the Progressive movement has been left behind. Failing to construct a sufficiently adaptive strategy, and neglecting to craft a compelling and unifying vision, Progressive organizations and leaders are finding themselves without influence, quickly losing access to the hearts and minds of the American people. In order to become successful in promoting their values, the diverse spectrum of Progressive actors will have to find a way to coordinate their strategic and visionary efforts, and to reduce the fragmentation that has limited their political aspirations. Even in light of the recent Democratic electoral victories, the Progressive agenda continues to be threatened by issue fragmentation and the absence of a broader popular movement.

The work presented here outlines the historical background for the rise of the Right and the fall of the Left, describing the trend towards consumer politics and some of the new strategies being employed to respond to it. It lays out a comprehensive theory about why the Progressive movement has become so disempowered in recent years, and it offers an innovative new solution for increasing coordination and collaboration among Progressive agents.

This research is non-partisan (focusing on analyzing the Progressive and Conservative movements, rather than any particular political party.)

## **An Altered Playing Field for American Politics**

Over recent decades, the playing field upon which the game of American politics is being played has changed in some very significant ways. In order to understand the current situation facing Progressive actors, we must understand how these changes have affected political strategies and tactics.

The first important change is the rise of the Conservative Right and the ways in which its new political strategies have altered the expectations, understandings, and interests of the American voting public. We call this section Lessons from the Right.

The second important change we will talk about is a shift to what we call the “American Political Marketplace,” a system that treats political candidates and propositions as consumer products to be marketed and sold.

## **Lessons From The Right**

Like the British Redcoats trying to use traditional and outdated tactics to defeat a new guerrilla army, the Progressive movement has only begun to recognize the incredibly effective methods that have allowed the Right to capture the hearts of the American people. Since the early 1960s, the Right has adopted a powerful strategy for taking over the imbedded cultural and political systems of this country. The Conservative movement’s success has largely resulted from its utilization of a set of ingenious institutional techniques, namely - their strategic crafting of a message coupled with their construction of a holistic infrastructure for delivering it - rather than engaging in democratic discourse over the true content of their policies. Though not a model we believe Progressives should seek to emulate in its entirety, the Right’s achievements in 1) coordination, 2) image-construction, and 3) communication provide helpful lessons for understanding the new game of politics evolving in this country. What follows is a collection of ten of these lessons; strategies that we believe Progressives must master in order to elevate themselves to positions of influence equal to those of the Right in today’s “culture war.” It is important that we discuss these lessons first and foremost, because they have redesigned the playing field of American politics...

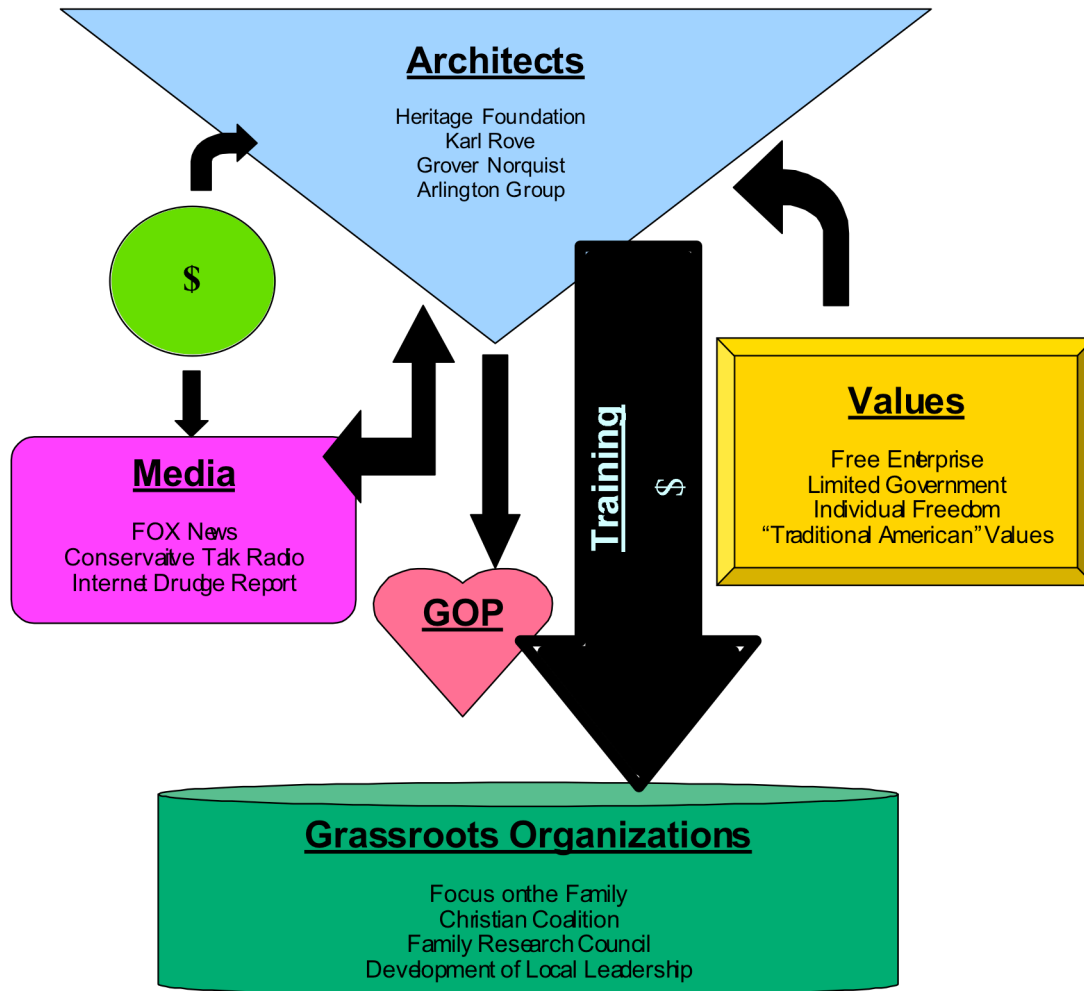
### *Lesson One: Welcome to the Matrix*

How do issues ranging from national defense spending, to school vouchers, to gay marriage, to income tax, to social security all fit under the umbrella of the Right? How have those claiming faith in the “blessed are the meek” teachings of Jesus come into alliance with the corporate powerbrokers of America?

These victories did not happen overnight, nor did they happen by accident. Over the last several decades, the Right has been busy engineering a powerful institutional infrastructure, through which they develop, reinforce, and broadcast their strategic messages. They have built an authority that is as relevant to local politics as it is to national politics; one that allows them to spread their resources strategically across issue lines. Foundations, think tanks, media conglomerates, politicians, and local activists are all integrated into this infrastructure, and they have all benefited from being part of such a long term, big picture project.

The Right’s infrastructure provides the means by which it can feed information from its think tanks to its media representatives, train its local grassroots organizations to fit into its larger strategy, and funnel funding strategically from its upper-level supporters on down. By creating a comprehensive structure with arms reaching into all arenas of American culture, the Right has ensured that its message will permeate our society.

Though we are not directly privy to the inner workings of the Right and its leadership, our research has led us to the conclusion that its infrastructural model is laid out as depicted the diagram you see here.



One of the key benefits of this infrastructure is its centralization – it constitutes a cradle-to-grave process in which key decision-makers are able to cunningly shape and control the Right’s resources and messages.

Thanks to the matrix they’ve built, the Right’s messages, introduced by the Architects, repeated on Christian talk radio and cable news, taken up by the GOP, and echoed once again by grassroots leaders, begin to appear justified and normal.

*Lesson Two: Who’s Your Daddy?*

Though there may not be any single organization or individual responsible for crafting the Right’s meta-strategy, there have certainly been a series of high-level masterminds who have aided in its creation. We call these organizations and individuals that hold top-level positions in the Right’s hierarchical infrastructure the “Architects.” They are the Daddies of the whole ingenious endeavor. In general, the Architects of movement-scale Conservative strategy are multi-million dollar foundations and financiers, like the Olin Foundation and Richard Scaife; think tanks, like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute; and elite political strategy gurus like Karl Rove, Dick Cheney, and anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. We do not know who all of these groups are, nor do we know how tightly they control the meta-strategy, but we do know that they

are aware of the infrastructure, they have deep faith that it will succeed, and they are willing to support it in addition to, and perhaps even above and beyond, the individual issues it represents. To some extent, every major organization in the Right's political family bows before the "Big Daddy" architects of its movement.

### *Lesson Three: You've Gotta Have Heart*

Conservative leaders have recognized that most people are not motivated primarily by scientific facts, complex arguments, or even self-interest, but rather by emotional pleas, invocations of morality, and personal beliefs. So highly have they valued the powerful influence of heart-based appeals, that they have built their public face out of these principles. Values such as free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, "traditional American" social values, and a strong national defense, have become the unifying themes of the Right's broader identity. By uniting themselves under these emotionally powerful narratives, the Architects have been able to identify their agenda with a certain lifestyle and an overarching morality – a clean package into which all of their issues are neatly wrapped. To be more specific, the Right has offered a set of principles that protects the "moral majority," fights for strong "family values," and promotes of a "culture of life." Though the individual items on the Right's agenda are as disparate, if not more so, than those supported by Progressives, they have convinced a large portion of the American public that their policies are all inextricably linked to the pursuit of a moral, religious, deeply American lifestyle.

In those irritating cases when the Right's agenda does not neatly fit into their heart-based rhetoric, the Right has become expert in the Orwellian habit of framing them in values-laden language. This is where we get terms like "Clear Skies" for policies that actually diminish air quality standards and "No Child Left Behind" for a standardized testing regime that decimates public education. In many ways, this debate has been taken up through the recent buzz around "framing," and we will discuss this a bit more later on.

### *Lesson Four: Hold the Presses!*

Employing an extremely well organized, multi-pronged approach, the Conservatives have successfully shifted the overall media dialogue to the Right. The first step in the Right's media infiltration was its ruthless promotion of the liberal media bias myth. This idea has been so well disseminated over the past thirty years that it is now more or less accepted as fact by a majority of Americans, including about half of all Democrats. (Brock 2004) Despite having never been proven, this charge has allowed the Right to exert incredible pressure on the media to be more "fair and balanced," forcing them to pair pundits from the extreme Right with more moderate opponents, often journalists, who were assumed to represent the liberal stance based on their inherent "liberal bias." By consistently repeating and invoking the liberal media myth, the Right reinforced its message and created an artificial informational void that it was eager and prepared to fill with its own talking points. This is the avenue through which the Conservatives have been able to incorporate a sizable swath of the mainstream media into their infrastructure.

With the sudden need to offer the Right a larger share of airtime in the name of balance, the media was quick to accept prepackaged news stories in support of the Conservative point of view. Evidence of Conservative media power abounds. Right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh, for instance, currently provides 22% of Americans with their primary source of news. An astonishing 80% of the political pundits on television were actually trained by Conservative think tanks. In

some cases, their reports may have even been broadcast directly from within think tank media studios.

Repetition is another key element in the Conservative messaging strategy. Utilizing its infrastructure, the Right coordinates its messaging such that radio talk shows, studies produced by the Heritage Foundation, political speeches, and church sermons all use the same vocabulary to talk about the same set of issues. By the time these same words come out of the mouths of television news reporters, they seem to be well supported, widely acknowledged, and objective.

#### *Lesson Five: Praise the Lord*

The effects of invoking religion in the service of a social cause are uniquely powerful to American politics. The religious argument has been invoked throughout American history, both for and against slavery, in favor of prohibition, as fuel for the labor movement, and as justification for women's suffrage. The most frequently cited use of religion to promote social change has been the influential work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his faith-based arguments for Civil Rights and desegregation in America.

The potency of the religious argument is clear, and the Bush administration has become expert at using it. However, when viewed critically, many of the policies for which the Right now stands, have little resemblance to what is described in the Bible. Many people have been convinced that the morality of our nation depends on the proper control of American social, sexual, and cultural policy. Popular televangelists, radio talk show hosts, and in-pew personalities have spread and strengthened the notion that these issues lie at the center of Christianity.

#### *Lesson Six: Sleep Around*

They say that politics makes strange bedfellows, but the Right has recognized the importance of identifying *many* bedfellows. By remaining larger than any single issue, and stressing its large-scale identity, the Right has enhanced its ability to forge strategic alliances. The Conservative movement has fostered ties between a tremendous variety of interest groups including big business, the oil and mineral extraction industries, libertarians, the NRA, home schoolers, the Religious Right, military hawks, and highly committed members of non-Christian religions. The multitude of alliances that the Right has built have been nurtured very carefully and strategically over time. A prime example of this effort lies in the Arlington Group, a small, quasi-secretive group of very powerful religious leaders within the Right, who convene monthly at an undisclosed location in Washington D.C.

While the Arlington Group works to iron out a common message among the Right's religious leaders, this group is likely secondary to Grover Norquist's now infamous "Wednesday Meetings." These gatherings, which have been convened since 1993, allow about 80, specially invited Conservative leaders to come together on a weekly basis to strategize, hammer out compromises, and agree on a unified message and agenda for the week – behind closed doors.

As an interesting side-note, Norquist has said that he isn't worried about sharing the "trade secrets" of these meetings, because he is confident that even if they wanted to, actors on the Left, in all of their fragmentation, would never be able to mimic the Wednesday Meetings.

*Lesson Seven: All Politics is Local*

While maintaining a large-scale national identity, the Right has adopted a powerful strategy of building a local presence for itself one school board at a time. It works at a variety of different levels, seeking to keep its policies relevant to local people, while remaining deeply linked with the larger, national movement. It has developed a persistent presence in nearly every state, and it has built a strong base of support from the ground up.

*Lesson Eight: Capture the Flag*

Another puzzling trick the Right has played on the Left has been their ability to link their rhetoric with patriotism, while simultaneously identifying Progressives as anti-American extremists. The connection between a love of America and Conservative political views is, in many ways, an illusion, and yet it is an image that has been widely accepted by the American public. The Right has been especially quick to promote this perception since 9/11. The clever trick they've played, in adopting the language and symbolism of patriotism – in capturing the flag and aligning their cause with it – was an absolutely brilliant tactical move on the part of Conservatives.

*Lesson Nine: Be Who You're Talking To*

We're all familiar with the old adage "know your audience," but few movements have become their audience as successfully as the Right. They have actually produced candidates that look and talk like the people to whom they are reaching out. This strategy has been so well developed that it has allowed the Conservatives to perform some impressive tricks – one of which is artfully displayed in Karl Rove's shaping of George W. Bush for his first presidential campaign.

As Bush admitted in 1989, "You know, I could run for governor but I'm basically a media creation. I've never done anything. I've worked for my dad. I worked in the oil business. But that's not the kind of profile you have to have to get elected to public office." There is substantial evidence that Rove created the George W. Bush we know in order to fit the mold of an ideal candidate; crafting him to fit the emerging specifications of the Right.

In this way, the Right has learned how to talk economics to businessmen, religion to evangelicals, and patriotism to rural America, and they are rarely accused of putting on a show. They do not pretend to be all these things; somehow, they actually are – and, as a result, have convinced a large number of Americans to believe in their policies.

*Lesson Ten: There's No Need to Fear, Underdog is Here!*

The last lesson we'd like to bring up is the powerful American tendency to root for the underdog. Although polling data and conventional wisdom support the idea that undecided voters tend to break for candidates or issues which poll higher on the eve of elections (everyone wants to be on the winning side), the same does not hold true with regard to determining base support. Rather, it appears that certain key voters prefer to support the candidate marketed as the underdog. Knowing this, the Right has become quite sophisticated at presenting itself as the victim. This is especially true on issues generally perceived as falling within the "moral values" realm. Up against a force it claims to be far more powerful than it, the Right presents itself as battling the odds for survival – a classic case of using the Underdog tactic.

### *A Word of Caution*

We do think it's important to offer a brief word of caution here. Though these lessons may begin to sketch out how the Right has changed the way that the game of politics is played in America, we believe that some of these strategies, though effective to be sure, may actually be destructive to democracy and highly unethical. In particular, manipulation of the media and religion constitute, in our minds, abuses of the public trust and misinformation campaigns that we believe the Progressive movement should only pursue with great caution, if at all.

### **The American Political Marketplace**

In addition to a rise in the influence of the Right's strategies, American politics has changed in other, more institutional ways. Our system of politics is moving away from its history as a democratic system of highly active, citizen participants and becoming a marketplace of political consumers, who perceive the next candidate for office much as they might perceive the next new and improved commercial product.

#### *The New American Citizen: Political Consumer*

Over the last 30 years, we have witnessed a significant change in the way Americans participate in the political process. A series of simultaneous changes in American culture have begun to shift what was once a highly collaborative democracy towards, what has been called a "personal democracy." These changes include a few significant shifts.

First, there has been a decrease in American membership in associations. Membership in participatory organizations like Knights of Columbus, the Masons, the Odd-fellows, and many more has fallen off significantly in the last 40 years, and has shifted the focus away from active participation in cooperative social associations and toward more issue-based, participation-through-donation.

Second, there has been a fall in social capital. Social capital roughly refers to the trust and connections between people and their communities. Data shows that political participation, civic participation, mainstream religious participation, informal social connections, and social reciprocity, honesty, and trust have all decreased markedly in the last 40 years.

Finally, advocacy has become professionalized. According to political scientist Theda Skocpol, a new form of advocacy arose with the social movements of the 1960s that was more focused on hiring professional activists skilled in law and lobbying rather than engaging large numbers of local participants on the ground. Data shows that American citizens are no longer participating in civic processes or organizations; rather, they are sending checks to professionally run advocacy groups to serve as their proxies in the process.

### *New Trends in American Politics: What is happening to the parties?*

Simultaneous to the conversion of citizens from participants to consumers, the American political system has changed as well. Influenced in part by the new form of citizenship, and in part by a shift toward more candidate-centered campaigns, direct changes to campaign finance rules, and an increasingly polarized political structure, traditional political parties have been forced to squeeze into a tighter and tighter niche.

First of all, there is general consensus among political scientists that since the 1950s, campaigns have become highly candidate-centered. As they began to stress candidates' personal traits and qualities, party platforms became marginalized. Candidates that used to rely on machine politics to bring in new constituents, no longer needed the party machinery to do so.

The second change affecting American political parties come from the effects of campaign finance reform – basically the attempt to limit money in politics. The 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act significantly changed the way political parties received and handled their financial contributions. The most important thing to understand about this legislation was that it went under immediate attack in the courts, on charges that it violated the free speech provisions of the First Amendment. In the landmark *Buckley v. Valeo* case, the Supreme Court ruled that campaign contributions were a form of free speech.” While *Buckley v. Valeo*, has not prevented the passage of campaign finance limits, it has seriously constrained what any reform can do.” The campaign finance saga regained footing in 2002, when the bipartisan McCain-Feingold legislation emerged from the halls of Congress. A loophole in this legislation led to an explosion of issue-based advocacy organizations, which have replaced much of traditional party organizing since 2004.

The third change affecting the parties is the rise of a more polarized electorate. Recent evidence suggests that despite decreasing levels of civic participation and the declining ability of parties to serve the political market, American citizens and the American political elite are more ideologically polarized than ever. In an era when the country is nearly equally divided between the two major political parties, politicians are encouraged to work on strengthening their partisan bases, rather than wooing new constituencies. According to a recent article in *The Economist*, “The upshot is that politics has become warfare. What matters most is the size and bloodthirstiness of your troops...”

### *The New Political Marketplace*

As citizens have shifted from active participation in the political process to passive consumption of its products, the American political system has responded. If there is anything that Americans are good at, it is operating in a consumer culture, and American politics is no exception. But, in a consumer society as sophisticated as ours, political products like candidates and platforms don't simply sell themselves; politics has become, now more than ever before, a no holds barred marketing war. Political parties have accepted their new role as marketers of political products, offering consumers two distinct brands. In other words, identifying as a Republican or a Democrat today may influence a citizen in much the same manner as would her identification as a drinker of Pepsi or Coke. Consumers become loyal to one political brand or the other and rationalize their preference by claiming the superiority of their chosen brand. As citizens come to relate to political candidates and issues in much the same way as they relate to their favorite soda product, they become more susceptible to party brand marketing than they were before. Thus, statistics demonstrating apparent increased polarization in the electorate might not represent changing

attitudes toward policy content or issue qualities at all, but a growing identification with one political brand over another.

## Understanding the Progressive Losing Streak

Now that we understand how the playing field of American politics has changed, we're ready to look specifically at the Progressive movement to investigate why they have been losing influence over the past few decades. As suggested thus far, elites within the Progressive movement have failed to respond to the changing political context, and they have not developed comprehensive strategies to gain influence and lasting power. There have been no concerted efforts to institutionalize coordination among the various Progressive groups, nor has any kind of unified Progressive identity been successfully developed. Instead, strategists have relied on traditional methods of maintaining a loosely connected structure of autonomous activists and organizations. We call this failure the Progressives' Strategic Deficit Disorder (or SDD).

In addition to this lack of strategy, we also argue that the modern Progressive movement has lacked vision. Its think tanks have been slow to identify the core values for which they stand and even slower to communicate them to the public.

### *The Progressive Movement's Strategic Deficit Disorder*

Our diagnosis of the Progressive movement's SDD is focused on its culture of non-coordination – which we will break down into four distinct symptoms:

- Symptom #1: Progressives Fail to Plan Holistically for a Long-Term Movement.  
Progressives have been focusing on specific election cycles, rather than building their infrastructure. They've been unable to understand the complexity of their own movement, and therefore avoid infighting and excessive competition. They've neglected to engage new constituencies, nourish their grassroots, recruit new and diverse leadership, or develop movement scale strategy by training messengers and young leaders.
- Symptom #2: The Progressive Movement Lacks an Infrastructure  
The Progressive movement is lacking an effective infrastructure, and this prevents it from developing a culture of coordination. A Progressive infrastructure would act as a system of connections to link up the individual sectors of the Progressive movement. These connections would serve as the channels through which money, ideas, and synchronization flow between think tanks, media groups, strategists, politicians, academics, funders, grassroots activists, and the general public. Without these connections, each sector works autonomously and thus inefficiently, securing its own resources for its own efforts, developing its own messages and its own strategies, and failing to harness the potential synergies of working together with other sectors. Many within the movement have recently come to recognize the problems with the movement's failure to coordinate, and many are calling for the immediate construction of a coordination mechanism on the Left.
- Symptom #3: Progressives Have Difficulty Building Trusting Relationships  
The ability to develop a culture of coordination relies upon the nurturance of trusting relationships among Progressive leaders and organizers. Trusting personal relationships

facilitate cooperation by instilling a sense of safety and patience among working partners. In building trusting relationships, individuals get to know each other and to understand each other's problems and interests. This both helps them develop new perspectives and decreases their temptation to sacrifice the interests of their colleagues. If there is indeed a lack of trusting relationships among Progressive leaders, as a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests, it will prove a troublesome stumbling block for coalition attempts. Progressive organizers, used to working solely within a particular issue area, often do not understand one another, nor do they understand each other's issues. This strikes a deathblow to coordination efforts.

- Symptom #4: Progressives Demonstrate a Severe Case of Egoism  
Nearly all Progressive efforts to work collaboratively seem to run into the infamous ego problem that plagues the movement. In their attempts to coordinate efforts and build coalitions, the tendency of Progressive organizers to demonstrate a bull-headed unwillingness to see beyond themselves and their particular organizations has too often reared its ugly head.

*The Pathogenesis: How Did Progressives Develop this Disorder?*

The first factor we must recognize in explaining how Progressives contracted their strategic disorder is tied to their inability to adapt to the changing political context just described. Because certain Progressive strategies were quite successful in the 1960s and 70s, the Left continued to use them well beyond their time. Thus they maintain a piecemeal approach to achieving electoral and policy objectives, and they have lost the true grassroots engagement that had been crucial to their advocacy efforts. Perhaps most importantly, they have neglected to respond to the increasingly consumer-oriented political culture.

The other factor leading to SDD is the Left's broken funding model. The lack of strategic funding for Progressive priorities is a major failing of the movement's infrastructure. The rise in the power of foundations, the obsession with television advertising (at the expense of the grassroots), and the lack of attention paid to both long-term and strategic planning by donors, have all contributed to the devastating story of loss and inefficiency within the movement. Donors have typically focused only on immediate and direct results, underestimating the importance of think tanks in the movement.

And before we leave the topic of think tanks, it's important to point out that there are at least two Conservative think tanks for every Progressive one, and those Progressive think tanks that do exist are outspent by a factor of three-to-one. Because Progressive donors have been so concerned with appearing neutral, unbiased, and scientific, they have neglected to play a strategically effective role in promoting the Progressive agenda.

*The Prognosis: What's Wrong with SDD?*

Now that we know how Progressives developed SDD, we want to point to four main reasons for why SDD is such a dangerous political malady.

1. Progressives are Missing Important Strategic Opportunities

By failing to coordinate, Progressives have missed out on some important strategic opportunities. Our understanding of the benefits of collaboration has developed out of our research into existing coalitional structures, such as the infrastructural organization of the Conservative Right (already analyzed in detail in Part I), the Green Group, and the Partnership Project, which we will profile more specifically later in this piece.

2. Progressives Are Wasting Money and Resources

We suspect that, without a culture of coordination that decreases competition for funding and prevents redundancy of effort, the Progressive funding model will continue to be inefficient and less effective than its counterpart on the Right.

3. The Progressive Movement Will Not Win

The final, and perhaps the most important reason that Progressives must develop a culture of coordination, is that without one, they have no movement, and without a movement, they will only have short-lived victories. Our research indicates that Progressive leaders have been more concerned with being “right” than with winning, leading to ineffective strategy and an inability to nurture a holistic movement.

What we hope you will take away from this section is that the Progressive movement did not acquire its SDD in a vacuum. In order for it to cure its malady, a new generation of solutions must be explored by open minds, and old habits must be broken. The tendency toward egoism and shortsighted organizational isolationism cannot remain.

### **Progressive Blindness – The Left’s Lack of Vision**

Along with its strategic limitations, the Progressive movement has also been lacking a strong and compelling vision. While failures of strategy may prevent Progressives from being efficient and organized, failures of vision may prevent them from winning over the hearts of the American people and inspiring change.

We want to take a few moments to illustrate the importance of vision. The power of visionary leadership has been evident throughout American history. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, was truly a leader of thought and vision, challenging the public to better themselves and their communities in the wake of the Great Depression. He assumed responsibility for leading the nation out of a time of great hardship, while simultaneously assigning collective responsibility for change. This harmonious blend of comfort and challenge is one of the hallmarks of visionary leadership; offering people the gift of a bold vision for the future, while challenging them to become better versions of themselves.

FDR was not the nation’s only president to inspire the public into collective action. John F. Kennedy did so in his 1961 announcement of Project Apollo. Standing before a special joint session of Congress, Kennedy awakened the American people from the postwar slumber of the 1950s with his promise to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. His address entwined American space exploration with the Cold War, providing the people with an aspirational and less violent way of battling global communism – and the nation rallied around Kennedy’s challenge.

Of course, principled vision is not confined to presidents alone. Martin Luther King, Jr. stirred the politics of history with his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech. King’s battle cry instilled the Civil Rights Movement with a sense of urgency. By embedding the struggle for racial equality within the broader American struggle for freedom, King was able to capture the collective imagination of the country.

Robert F. Kennedy promoted a bold and compelling vision at a time when the fabric of the nation, even the world, seemed to be coming undone. His vision inspired a generation of American youth to reject the status quo in order to strive for a more just and peaceful world. His leadership was rooted in a courageous belief in human justice – an idea for the nation that challenged rather than placated the voting public. In private, he confessed that he was running for president in 1968 in order to “save the soul of the country” – telling his speechwriter that the people are “hungry for leadership.”

It is precisely the visionary prowess exhibited by Bobby Kennedy and his brother John, by FDR and Martin Luther King, Jr., that took Americans out of the Great Depression and eventually out of Vietnam. It was vision that put a man on the moon and vision that nonviolently dismantled segregation in the South. But, as we have illustrated in the examples above, vision alone is never enough; it must be shared in a way that inspires those who hear its message to take up arms on its behalf. As these stories demonstrate, a new Progressive movement would be wise to construct and communicate a principled vision to the American people.

#### *Understanding the Progressives’ Visionary Blindness*

Since the adoption of the title “Progressive” in the late 1990s, political actors on the Left have failed to build a clear identity, to describe what they stand for, to tell the story of what they hope to see, and to explain why this matters to Americans. For over a decade, in fact, the Left has more or less allowed itself to be defined by what it is not. Now many fear that the term “Progressive” has come to mean little more than “not Conservative,” and that the Left’s policies reflect the same tendency. As a clear example of this, many of you probably remember the “Anyone but Bush” stickers that were so popular during the last presidential election.

But defining a clear, principled vision for Progressives has actually proven to be quite difficult. The first challenge has been in identifying the common principles in which the movement is grounded. Progressivism includes an impressive diversity of issues (including social justice, labor, environment, civil liberties, anti-war, etc.). This fact, partnered with the cultural diversity represented in the Progressive community, and the tendency of Left-leaning individuals to prefer autonomy and self-determination above coordination and cooperation, has thwarted efforts to agree upon a common set of overarching beliefs. In order for a single set of principles to ultimately be identified, we argue that some mechanism for coordinating actors and practicing strategic discipline must be developed.

As critical as the possession of a principled vision is, visionary ideas alone are not sufficient to provoke social change. Also critical is the art of introducing those ideas to the public. In addition to neglecting to settle upon a common vision, Progressives have not been very sophisticated in developing a means of spreading one either. They have not effectively honed their use of language; failing to harness the power of narrative or to root their ideas in values, and they have failed to create a strong “brand” for the new consumer citizenry.

## **A New Model for Progressive Coordination**

The ideas we have just presented suggest that the Progressive community must be much more coordinated in order to respond to the new political playing field. But no significant efforts exist to help increase collaboration on the Left. Based on our assessment of the problem, we have crafted a new methodology that we believe may help Progressives remedy this weakness. Focusing specifically on the issue of non-coordination and the lack of infrastructure among Progressive groups, this solution has been designed to respond to the changing socio-political environment and the non-authoritarian qualities inherent to the Progressive identity.

### *Models for success*

While the evidence that Progressives would benefit from being more coordinated is relatively well accepted, few efforts to create a strategic coordination body exist. This is largely because most Progressives do not believe such a body can exist – a sizeable portion of the autonomous and diverse Progressive community seems to think coordination is impossible. However, over the last several years, we have identified a few projects that suggest that long-term coordination among diverse actors is not only possible, but highly effective. We have used these projects as models in our attempts to craft a Progressive Coordination Network, and we'll introduce them now.

### Introducing the Partnership Project

The Partnership Project is a coalition of twenty-one of the nation's largest environmental groups. Becoming operational on September 1, 1999 with a \$5 million grant from the Turner Foundation, the nonprofit represents over four million citizens. It has now grown to provide its members with communication capabilities in phone banking, online activism, and more strategic direct mail campaigns. The Partnership Project has taken on a number of national campaigns since its inception, including Everglades Restoration, Climate Change, and the Arctic Wilderness to name a few.

The official mission of the Partnership is “to bring full measure of the national environmental community to bear on shared policy concerns (in order to) increase the priority that national policy makers place on environmental issues.” But few people, even within the environmental movement have ever heard of them. The decision to keep the coalition quiet was very intentional and quite strategic. Remaining, as one of our sources boasted, “ungoogleable,” protects the individual member groups from many of the risks associated with involvement in coalitions.

The success of the project is remarkable. As Debbie Sease, Legislative Director of the Sierra Club told us “I have been involved in many coalition efforts, but this one has been uniquely successful.” And as Bill Meadows, Executive Director of the Wilderness Society described, “I don't think we could have had any success over the past five years without the Partnership Project.”

### Introducing the Forest Stewardship Council

The FSC, first created in 1993, is an international NGO dedicated to promoting “environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests.” (FSC 2006) The FSC's governing body is a representative General Assembly, divided into three chambers

– environmental, social, and economic. Through this structure, the FSC works democratically to make decisions that are acceptable to representatives of a diverse set of constituencies, including timber producers, environmental organizations, and indigenous peoples. We have chosen to look at the FSC’s governance model because the FSC has also created an effective, collaborative working group, which acts on behalf of a shared set of values-based principles, and operates transparently under rules designed to preserve accountability.

### Introducing America Votes

Our third model is the 32-member America Votes (AV) coalition, which is comprised of some of the country’s most influential Progressive organizations. America Votes is said to be “the largest grassroots voter mobilization and education effort in America today.” Its “partner groups represent more than 20 million Americans and are the leading advocates for the environment, civil and human rights, reproductive rights and labor.” Becoming operational in the 2004 presidential election cycle, the coalition now works in nine targeted states to “increase the number of registered progressive voters, provide them with more detailed information on the issues and get them to the voting booth on Election Day.”

In 2004, the coalition was able to spur the largest voter turnout since the Civil Rights era. In 2006, America Votes coordinated get-out-the-vote activities among 33 national and 248 statewide Progressive groups – contacting over 7 million voters across nine targeted states.

### Six Conditions for Successful Collaboration

Based on our explorations of these models and further research, we have come to the conclusion that successful long-term coalitions of diverse actors possess the following six traits:

1. Good timing;
2. The presence of visionary funding;
3. Alignment around common interests and goals;
4. The development of trusting relationships;
5. A structure for self-governance; and
6. The presence of proper incentives for organizational participation.

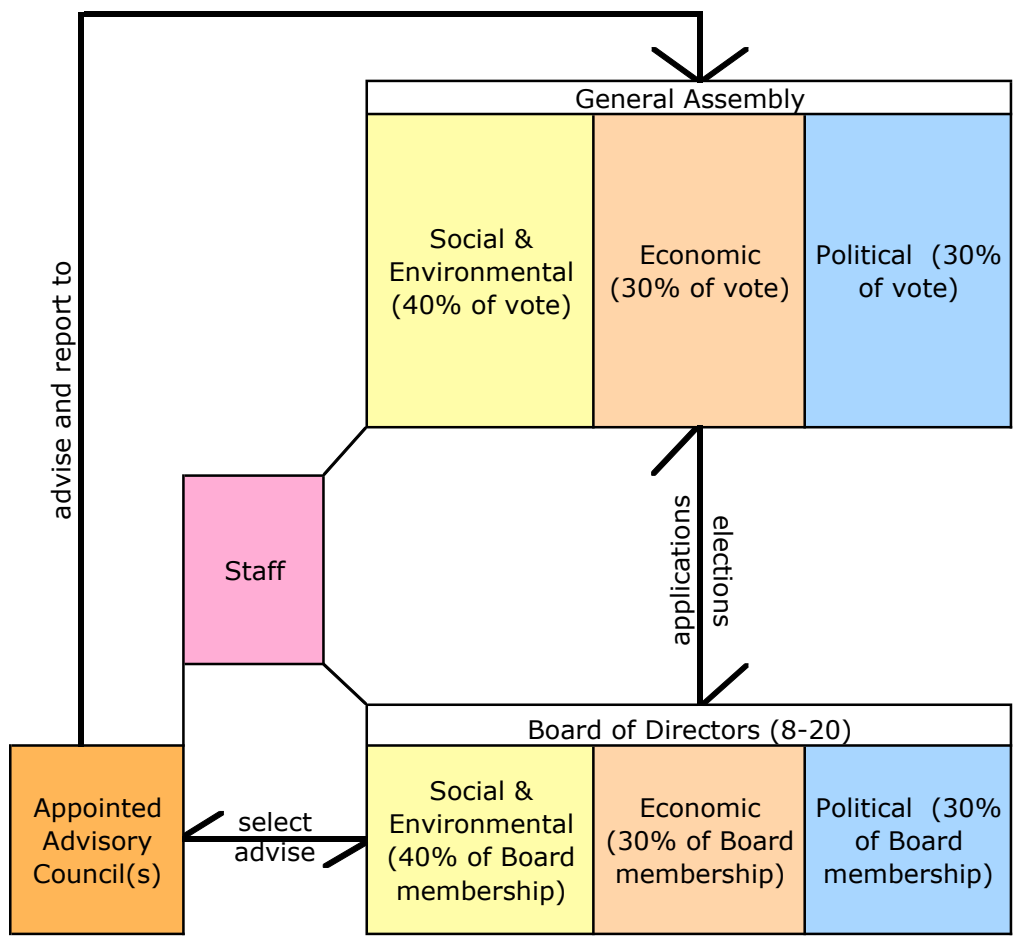
### *Introducing the Progressive Synergy Network*

Now that we have demonstrated that forming a long-term coalition of diverse Progressive actors is indeed possible, we are pleased to introduce a model governance structure that we believe can serve to encourage the kind of coordination we have prescribed for remedying the Left’s strategic and visionary ailments. Building upon the foundation of a strong structure for collaboration and a culture of cooperation, we believe that Progressive leaders will be able to organize and craft common messages, develop more efficient voter education campaigns, identify core principles for a Progressive future, reduce redundancy and fragmentation in their efforts, and more effectively reach out to the American people.

The Progressive Synergy Network (PSN) governance structure is designed to build this foundation. It exists to allow Progressives to disseminate their agenda and vision in the new American political

marketplace with greater effect than they are currently able to produce. Towards this end, the association is envisioned to consolidate and enhance member and donor lists, create strategic messaging and branding solutions, and formulate movement-wide and nationwide Progressive political strategies. The PSN structure presented here is a template for organizing that could be applied on a variety of different scales within the movement – particularly the think tank and electoral sectors.

The PSN model is a fusion of two of the governance structure models we investigated earlier in this chapter – constructed from the bylaws of both the Partnership Project and the FSC. As such, it is made up of a General Assembly of participating members, a Board of Directors, a small staff, and one or more Advisory Councils, as pictured below.



**The PSN Model Governance Structure**