

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

MEDIA MATTERS  
FOR AMERICA

# The Progressive Majority

## Why a Conservative America Is a Myth

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June 2007

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# Ideology in America

*“Republicans tend to be conservative on both [economic and social issues]. That’s been a strength in a conservative country.”*

*MARK HALPERIN of ABC News, October 30, 2006*

**H**ALPERIN IS HARDLY ALONE in his view that whether one is talking about economic issues or social issues, conservatives have the public on their side. Democrats may win an election here or there, but at its most fundamental level, conventional political wisdom assumes America is a conservative country: hostile to government, in favor of unregulated markets, at peace with inequality, desirous of a foreign policy based on the projection of military power, and traditional in its social values.

This report demonstrates the inaccuracy of that picture of America. Media perceptions and past Republican electoral successes notwithstanding, Americans are progressive across a wide range of controversial issues, and they’re growing more progressive all the time.

## **THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM**

It should come as no surprise that conservative media figures repeat the myth that most Americans share their views. Even when Democrats win, conservatives claim that their ideology is still dominant. On election night 2006, Fox News anchor Brit Hume acknowledged that Democrats were winning, but stressed that “from what we could see from all the polling and everything else, it remains a conservative country.”<sup>2</sup> He did not say what “polling and everything else” he was referring to. Glenn Beck of CNN Headline News agreed, stating the following day that despite the Democratic victory, “the majority of Americans seem in favor of classically Republican points of view.”<sup>3</sup>

But it was not just conservatives; in fact, they were simply repeating what they had heard mainstream journalists say for some time. “This is basically not a liberal country,” said John Harris, then of *The Washington Post* and now of *The Politico*, in May 2005. “It’s a conservative country.”<sup>4</sup> Previewing the Democrats’ prospects for victory three weeks before the 2006 election, CNN senior political correspondent Candy Crowley asserted that Democrats have been “on the losing side of the values debate, the defense debate and, oh yes, the guns debate.”<sup>5</sup> (Crowley presented no evidence that Democrats had been “on the losing side” of any of these debates.)

After the election, journalists found their explanation for the Democratic victory: they ran conservative candidates. “These Democrats that were elected last night are conservative

Democrats,” said CBS’ Bob Schieffer the next day.<sup>6</sup> “The Democrats’ victory was built on the back of more centrist candidates seizing Republican-leaning districts,” wrote *The Washington Post*.<sup>7</sup> *The New York Times* anticipated the election with the headline, “In Key House Races, Democrats Run to the Right.”<sup>8</sup>

### Sources for this Report

To measure public opinion on controversial issues, we turned to the most reliable, nonpartisan research available. Baseline information comes from the American National Election Studies (NES) maintained by the University of Michigan and the General Social Survey (GSS) maintained by the University of Chicago. We tracked trends through the longest period of time possible, often for decades. We also used data from the Pew Research Center and Gallup, organizations known for quality polling and free of partisan influence. Wherever possible, we used questions that were asked the same way year after year. To fill gaps with additional texture and detail, we turned to polls by organizations such as CNN and *The New York Times*.

Furthermore, instead of assessing the momentary and changing aspects of public opinion—perceptions of the two parties, opinions on specific pieces of legislation, or approval of particular political figures—we chose to examine the fundamentals. This report focuses on issues that define the differences between progressivism and conservatism, the underlying beliefs about the role of government, our economic system, individual rights, and a host of other factors that shape political debate.

In truth, however, the Democratic class of 2006 was remarkably progressive. According to a survey conducted by *Media Matters*, all 30 newly elected House Democrats who took Republican seats advocated raising the minimum wage, supported changing course in Iraq, and opposed any effort to privatize Social Security. All but two supported embryonic stem cell research and only five described themselves as “pro-life” on the issue of abortion. Thirty-seven House and Senate candidates who promoted “fair trade” rather than “free trade” won; none of them lost.<sup>9</sup> Candidates in the freshman class who were conservative on a particular issue got the lion’s share of attention, but they were a distinct minority.

The journalists straining to interpret 2006 as a validation of conservatism were following a pattern they had established long before: Democratic victories are understood as the product of the Democrats moving to the right, while Republican victories are the product of a conservative electorate. For example, the day after the Republicans’ landslide victory

in the 1994 midterm elections, a front-page *New York Times* article declared that “[t]he country has unmistakably moved to the right.”<sup>10</sup> *The Washington Post*’s front-page story that day similarly concluded that “[t]he huge Republican gains...marked a clear shift to the right in the country.”<sup>11</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed 10 years later, following the Democrats’ defeat in the 2004 election. *The New York Times* wrote on its front page, in an article titled “An Electoral Affirmation of Shared Values,” “[I]t is impossible to read President Bush’s re-election with larger Republican majorities in both houses of Congress as anything other than the clearest confirmation yet that this is a center-right country.”<sup>12</sup> Citing the purported “God gap,” a *Los Angeles Times* editorial similarly asserted that the 2004 election proved voters “don’t believe that the Democrats share their values.”<sup>13</sup> Katie Couric, then-host of NBC’s *Today*, asked whether “this election indicate[s] that this country has become much more socially conservative.”<sup>14</sup> Chris Matthews, host of NBC’s *Chris Matthews Show*, wondered: “Can the Democrats ever connect with the country’s cultural majority?”<sup>15</sup>

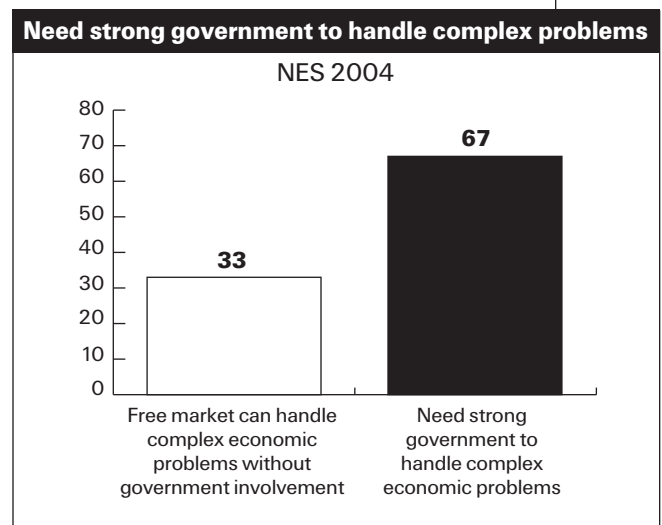
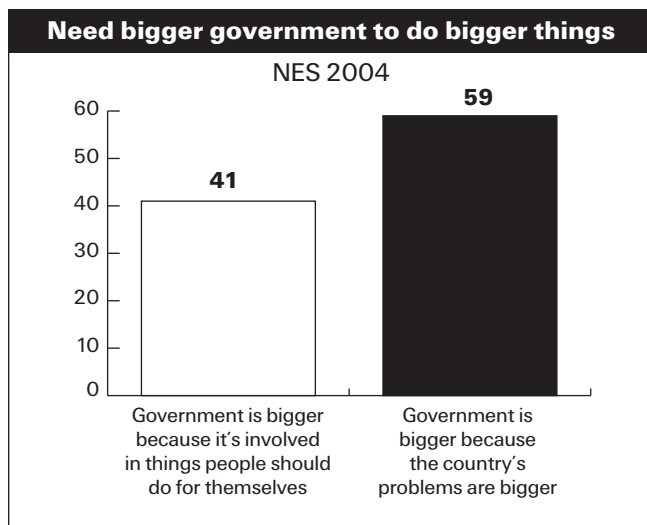
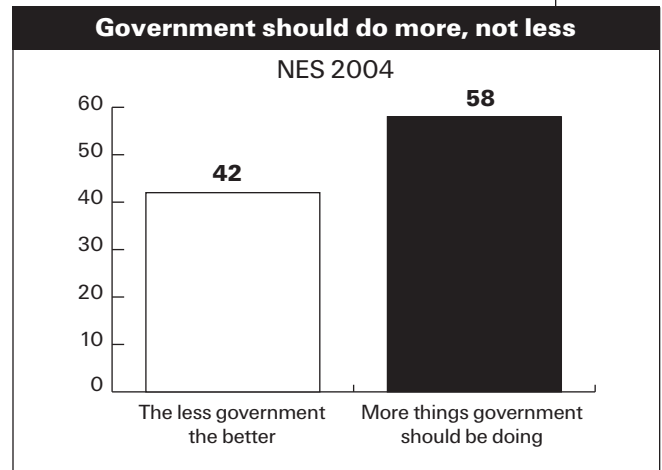
In contrast, one would have searched in vain for examples of neutral media figures opining that the 2006 results marked a shift to the left in American opinion. The idea of an American public moving to the left—or residing there in the first place—seems to be outside the imagination of much of the press. But the data demonstrate that the American public is in fact progressive, far more so than conventional wisdom imagines them to be.

Further, the movement of public opinion, particularly on social issues, seems to be in one direction: to the left. Opinion on issues such as homosexuality and the role of women has grown steadily more progressive for the last few decades, while it is difficult to find an issue on which the public is more conservative now than it was 20 years ago.

## THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

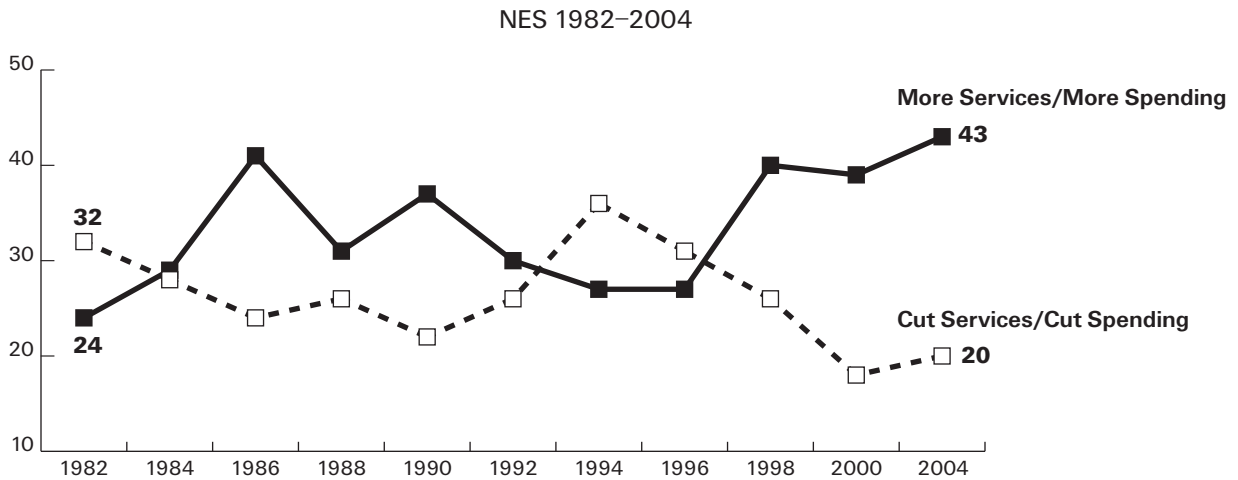
No matter what labels people use, their view of the role of government provides a window into the ideology that underlies their political views. Conservatives believe in small government; they prefer free markets and individuals to manage things as much as possible. Progressives believe in a more active government that performs more functions and provides more services.

Polling shows that the public is much closer to the progressive view. The latest survey of the National Election Studies (NES) shows, for example, a preference for a vigorous government role in a complex world. Sixty-seven percent said we need a strong government to handle complex economic problems. Nearly 58 percent said government should be doing more, not less; and 59 percent agreed that government has grown because the country's problems have grown.



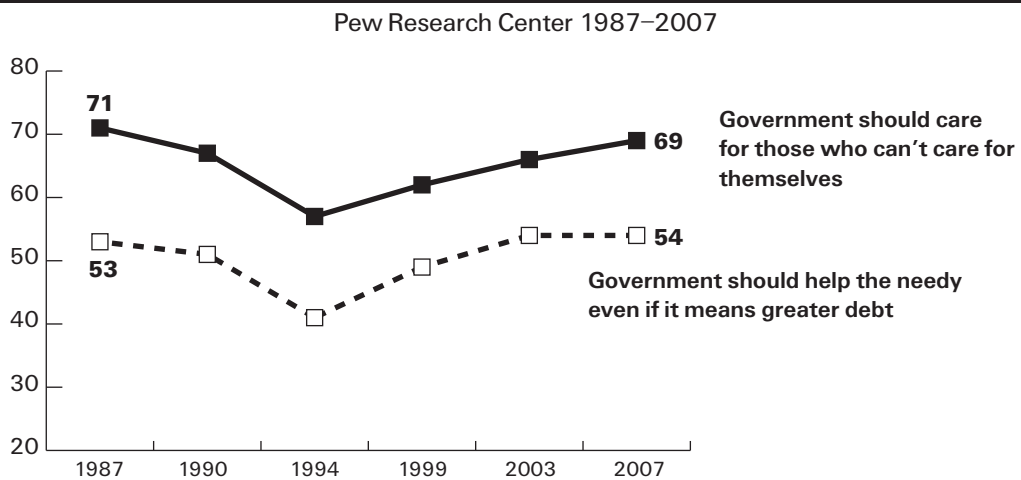
The NES has been tracking ideology in this way for many years, and this finding is stable over time. Between 1982 and 2004, the NES asked whether the government should cut government services and spending, or increase them. With the exception of a period during the mid-1990s, for more than two decades, Americans have expressed a preference for increasing the role of government. By 2004, the gap had widened to the point that more than twice as many people (43 percent vs. 20 percent) wanted “government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending” as wanted government to provide fewer services “in order to reduce spending.”

**Government should provide more services even if it means an increase in spending**



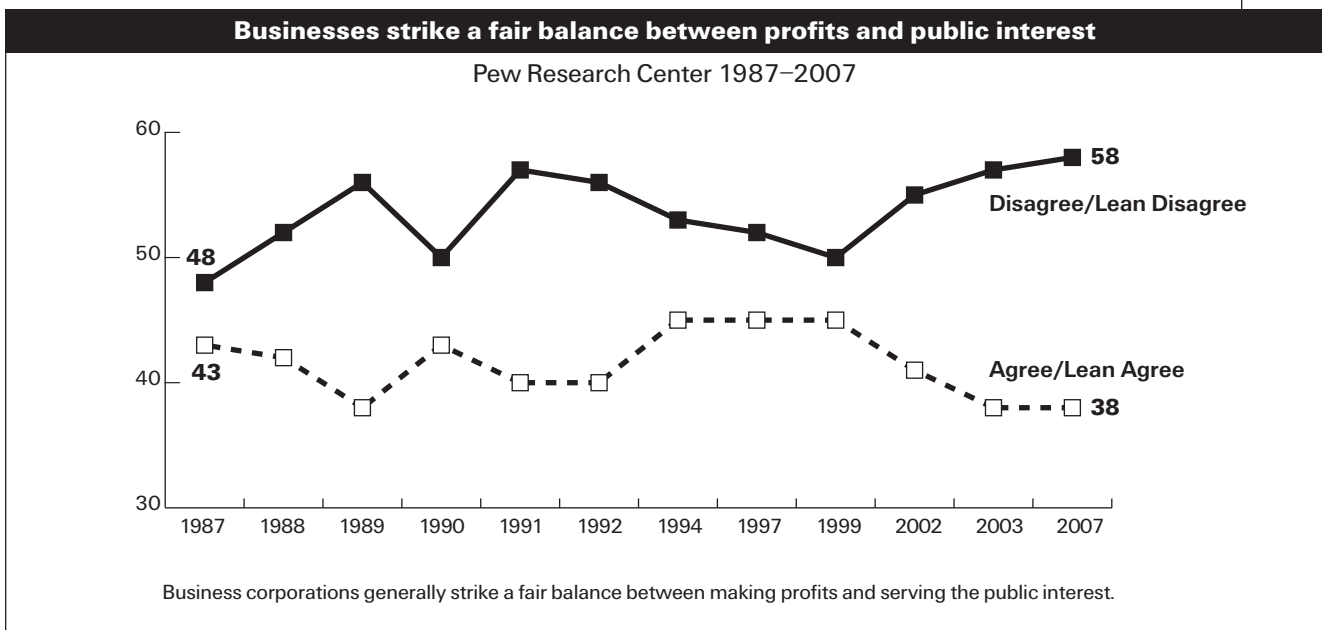
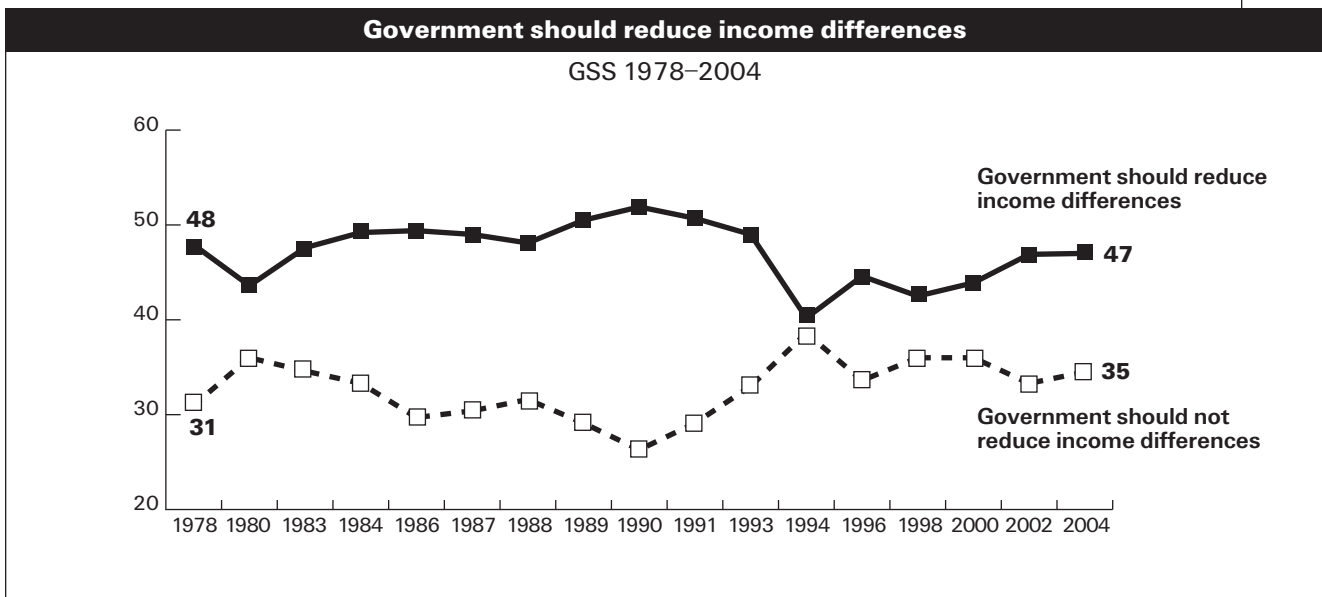
“Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” (7-point scale; solid 1-3; dotted 5-7)

**Government should care for those who can’t care for themselves**



The Pew Research Center found similar results. For the past twenty years, Pew has been tracking support of a government safety net for the poor. With remarkable stability—though a small decline in the 1990s and a small increase in the new century—it shows that people want a safety net. More than two-thirds (69 percent in 2007) believe the government “should care for those who can’t care for themselves.” They feel so strongly about it that more than half (54 percent) are willing to incur greater debt to get it done.

Furthermore, polling by the General Social Survey (GSS) reveals a strong desire for greater equity in America, and desire for the government to help achieve it. Americans certainly want to keep what they earn and expect greater work to yield greater rewards, but that’s only the beginning. GSS polling since 1978 reveals a clear and steady preference for government action to achieve income equality. With the brief exception of 1994, the year of the Republican takeover of Congress, people have expressed a preference for government action to reduce income inequality. As the chart below indicates, the average difference over the study period was more than 14 percentage points.



Americans believe in private enterprise, but they also understand that the profit motive does not always serve the public interest. Pew has been asking for the past 20 years whether businesses strike a fair balance between making profits and serving the public interest. People have consistently answered that businesses do not strike a fair balance. In 2007, 58 percent of respondents expressed doubts about business fairness and only 38 percent thought businesses strike a fair balance.



# Specific Policies



**T**HE PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION becomes even more vivid when the view shifts from broad ideological questions to specific questions of policy. Of course, no person is ever all progressive or all conservative, and some issues cut across ideological boundaries, but some policies can be understood as key indicators.

## THE ECONOMY

The economy regularly scores near or at the top of Americans' concerns. Over time, with the exception of short-term crises such as Iraq, people care about their livelihoods and jobs more than anything else.

Though opinions about whether the economy is doing well or poorly are in constant flux, there are a number of core economic issues that reflect more fundamental values and outlooks; it is those on which we will focus.

### Trade

Trade is a hot-button issue, and Americans are worried about it in a way that invites progressive solutions. The latest NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll (March 2007), showed that 48 percent of Americans believe the U.S. is harmed by the global economy. Only 25 percent believe the U.S. benefits. On an individual level, more people think that they personally, their children, and the people in their community are more harmed than helped by the global economy.

#### Americans question unfettered "free trade"

NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll, March 2007

"Do you believe that the United States is benefiting from the global economy, is being harmed by the global economy, or do you think the global economy has had no impact on the United States one way or the other?"

Benefiting %	<b>Harmed %</b>	No Impact %	Unsure%
25	<b>48</b>	14	13

"I'm going to mention several groups of people. For each one, please tell me whether you believe that group is benefiting from today's global economy or being harmed by today's global economy. If you think that the global economy has had no impact on that group one way or the other, please just say so..."

	Benefiting %	<b>Harmed %</b>	No Impact %	Unsure%
You personally	27	<b>31</b>	36	6
People in your community	25	<b>40</b>	24	11
Your children	21	<b>30</b>	34	15

"In general, do you think that free trade agreements between the United States and foreign countries have helped the United States, have hurt the United States, or have not made much of a difference either way?"

Helped %	<b>Hurt %</b>	Not Much Difference %	Unsure %
28	<b>46</b>	16	10

Pew has explored similar issues and reached similar conclusions, finding in addition that more Americans think free trade agreements cost jobs (48 percent) than create jobs (12 percent). In one Pew poll, 34 percent said that trade agreements slow the economy compared to 28 percent who said they lead to growth.<sup>16</sup>

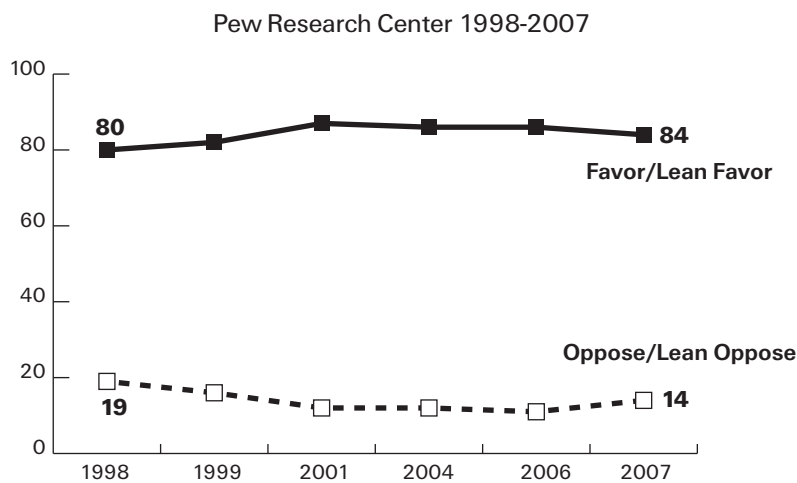
These opinions need not reflect progressive attitudes, but they do indicate that the standard position of conservatives (and the consensus establishment)—support for unfettered trade—is not particularly popular among the public. And while no nonpartisan source has polled on the issue of labor and environmental standards—something progressives nearly always advocate as part of trade agreements—at least one set of polling data suggests these enjoy wide support. When Democracy Corps, a Democratic polling group, asked whether “[w]e should enforce labor and environmental protections in our trade accords and challenge China’s unfair policies because American jobs are being lost,” or “We should sustain our current trade policies and provide training for displaced workers because America benefits if our companies can invest and expand to markets abroad,” the former statement outpaced the latter by 58 percent to 33 percent.<sup>17</sup>

## Unions

American unions are in decline, but not because of public attitudes. The American people like labor unions. Pew Research registers a 56 percent favorable opinion of unions and 33 percent unfavorable.<sup>18</sup> Gallup registers 59 percent approval and 29 percent disapproval.<sup>19</sup> Gallup also shows that 38 percent of people want unions to have more influence in the country, compared to 30 percent who want them to have less influence. In labor disputes, 52 percent of people polled said they sympathized with the union compared to 34 percent who took the side of the company.

Furthermore, Americans believe that unions benefit not just their members, but the economy as a whole. Gallup records 53 percent who believe unions mostly help the U.S. economy, compared to 36 percent who say they mostly hurt.<sup>20</sup>

### Do you favor or oppose an increase in the minimum wage from \$5.15/hour to \$7.25/hour?



Support for increasing the minimum wage is consistent and strong, not an election year aberration.

## Minimum Wage

Questions about the economy take concrete form in wages. The 2006 election campaign saw another round of an age-old debate on increasing the minimum wage, with Democrats advocating an increase and Republicans arguing that raising the minimum wage would cost jobs and harm the economy. Though the minimum wage was last increased 10 years ago, there is little doubt where the public stands on the issue. A *Los Angeles Times* poll taken in the aftermath of the 2006

election showed that 77 percent of Americans thought “Congress should pass legislation that will increase the minimum wage.”<sup>21</sup> Such legislation quickly passed in the newly Democratic House of Representatives by a margin that reflected the broad public support (315-116, including 80 Republicans). There were minimum wage increases on the ballot in six states in 2006; all passed by comfortable margins.

## Taxes

Taxes are a perennial conservative issue and one with great political import. However, the ideological attitudes of Americans are not necessarily conservative.

A majority of Americans think their taxes are too high, a conservative theme, but they don’t care about it that much. Taxes generally rank low in the list of Americans’ priorities, and taxes are never number one.

Moreover, although Americans think their own taxes are too high, they think the taxes of rich people and corporations are too low, a progressive theme. The same April 2007 Gallup poll that showed 53 percent of Americans describing their taxes as too high showed 66 percent believing that “upper-income people” pay too little in taxes. Only 21 percent said upper income people pay their fair share. Fully 71 percent said corporations pay too little and only 19 percent said corporations pay their fair share.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, although people are happy to have their taxes cut, they worry about increasing the deficit or starving infrastructure in order to do it. In 2005, a year of debate over the expiration of the Bush tax cuts, polls by both the *Los Angeles Times* and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* asked people to prioritize tax cuts against government spending. Both polls found considerable support for what most would characterize as the progressive position.

Upper income and corporate taxes too low			
Gallup Poll, April 2007			
Taxes	Too high	Too low	About right
Your own	53	2	41
Upper-income people	9	66	21
Corporations	5	71	19

Investment is better than tax cuts	
Los Angeles Times Poll. Jan. 2005	
“Which do you think is more effective in stimulating the nation’s economy: an economic agenda focused on returning money to taxpayers through tax cuts, or an economic agenda focused on spending for improvements to the country’s infrastructure such as roads, bridges and schools?”	
<b>Tax Cuts:</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>Spending:</b>	<b>60%</b>

Bush tax cuts weren’t worth it	
NBC News/ <i>Wall Street Journal</i> Poll, Oct. 2005	
“Were the federal tax cuts: WORTH IT, because they have helped strengthen the economy by allowing Americans to keep more of their own money. NOT WORTH IT, because they have increased the deficit and caused cuts in government programs.”	
<b>Worth it:</b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>Not worth it:</b>	<b>53%</b>

## SOCIAL ISSUES

The social, “hot-button” issues that conservatives like to group under the heading of “moral values” are said to put progressives at greatest disadvantage. The conventional wisdom poses a traditionalist “heartland,” where “mainstream” Americans reside, against a modernist, secular, liberal coastal elite out of touch with the beliefs of the real America.

But this view is simply wrong. In truth, majority opinion across the country is much more likely to line up with progressive values.

First, progressives are closer to most Americans in their value priorities. Many conservatives discuss issues like same-sex marriage and abortion in positively apocalyptic terms. “[S]ociety must be concerned about its own preservation and continuity into the next generation,” warned Monsignor Robert Sokolowski in the *America: The National Catholic Weekly*.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such dire counsel, only 3 percent of Americans ranked gay marriage as the “most important” issue in a January 2007 poll by AP/Ipsos.<sup>24</sup> Abortion ranked 14th among issues respondents considered “extremely important” in a May 2007 CNN poll.<sup>25</sup> Both abortion and same-sex marriage were cited by less than 3 percent of respondents to April 2007 polls by Gallup and CBS News.<sup>26</sup>

After the 2004 election, when exit polls showed “moral values” as the response chosen most often when voters were asked what decided their votes, commentators rushed to declare that social conservatives had won the election for Bush. But it turns out that voters mean many different things when they say “moral values.” When a Zogby poll taken after the election asked voters what was “the most urgent moral problem in American culture,” 33 percent picked “greed and materialism,” 31 percent chose “poverty and economic justice,” 16 percent said abortion and 12 percent said same-sex marriage.<sup>27</sup> As one pair of researchers put it, “[T]he moral values item on the issues list cannot properly be viewed as a discrete issue or set of closely related issues; that its importance to voters has not grown over time; and that when controlled for other variables, it ranks low on the issues list in predicting 2004 vote choices.”<sup>28</sup>

### Conservative “morals” alienate many Americans

“Do you approve or disapprove of Congress’ involvement in the Terri Schiavo case?”

**Approve:** 20%

**Disapprove:** 76%

CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll, April, 2005<sup>30</sup>

“Do you support or oppose embryonic stem cell research?”

**Support:** 61%

**Oppose:** 31%

*Washington Post* Poll, January 2007<sup>31</sup>

To most Americans, moral values do not mean Terri Schiavo, gay marriage, or stem cell research. To the contrary, moral values represent fundamental principles. To paraphrase Robert Fulgham, moral values are what we all learned in kindergarten.<sup>29</sup> Share. Wait your turn. Treat others as you want to be treated yourself. But even on the issues by which conservatives would like moral values defined, the public is much closer to the progressive side.

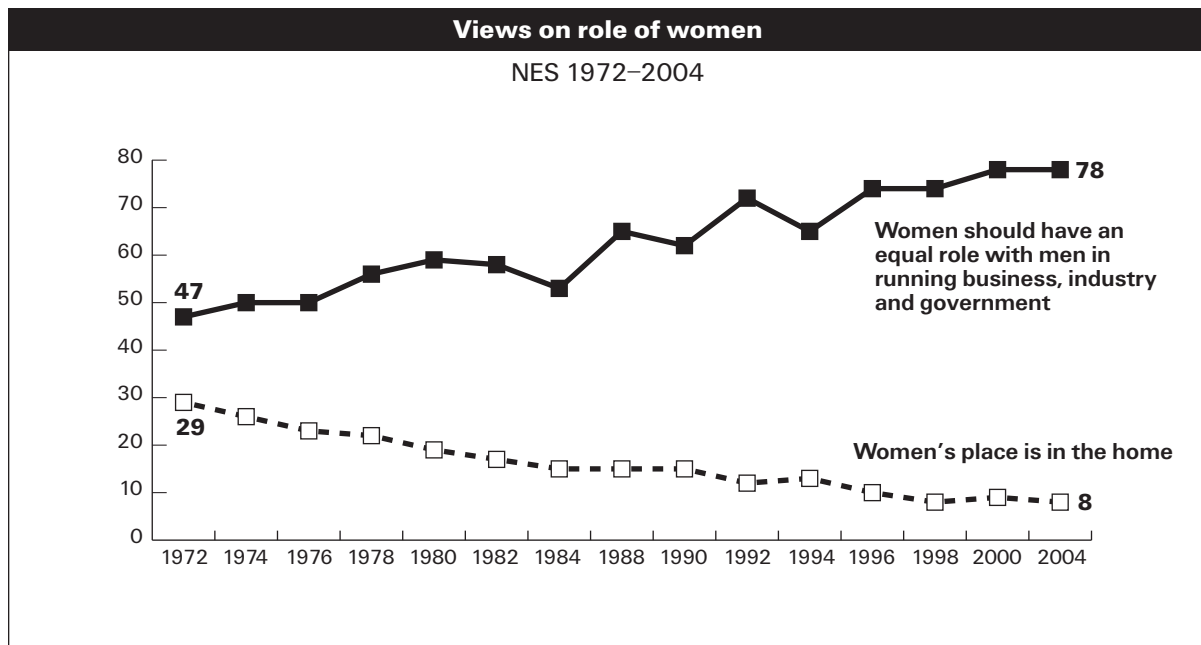
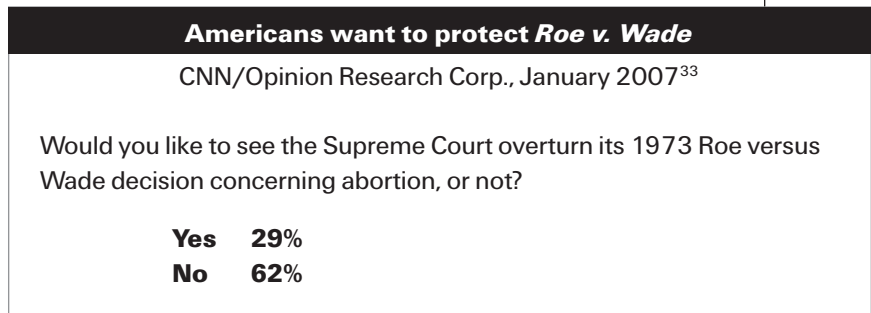
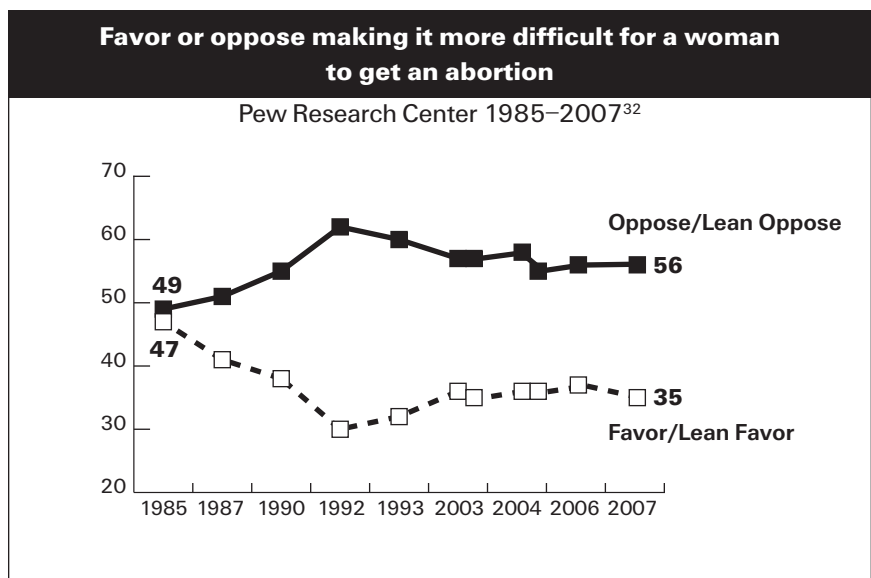
## Abortion

Most Americans oppose the idea of outlawing abortion and reject the idea of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. This opinion is well settled and has been stable over time.

Abortion remains a complex issue. Some time ago, conservatives made a strategic decision to avoid a frontal assault of reproductive rights in favor of smaller-bore, subsidiary issues that would allow a chipping away of abortion rights: parental consent, spousal consent, and limitations on a specific late-term procedure they dubbed “partial-birth abortion.” On these limited questions, the conservative position is often more popular.<sup>34</sup>

To the degree that conservatives succeed at framing the debate in terms of limited exceptions, they can win certain legislative victories. But on the more fundamental question of “pro-life” versus “pro-choice,” conservatives are in the minority. Pro-choice progressives represent mainstream America.

And we should not forget that much of what has become the contemporary consensus on social mores and gender roles reflects a fundamentally progressive worldview. A few decades

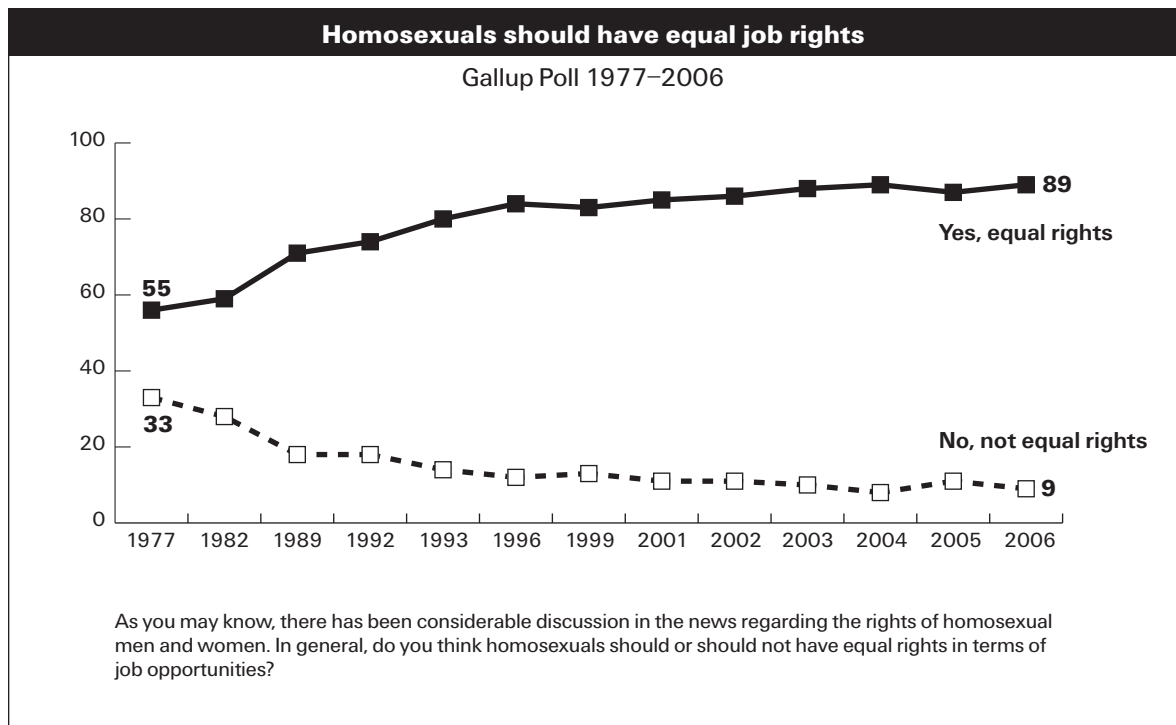


ago, the idea that women and men deserved equal job opportunities and equal pay was controversial, dividing the right from the left. Today it is acknowledged by nearly everyone. As data from the National Election Studies show, the overwhelming majority believes women should have an “equal role” in running business and government; a tiny minority thinks women belong “in the home.”

This shift in attitudes is part of a larger evolution on issues around family roles and sexuality that has found the country becoming steadily more progressive. This is not to say, of course, that these beliefs are always translated into policy. For instance, under current law any school receiving federal funds for sex education must teach “abstinence only,” an approach favored by conservatives. But this approach is rejected by the overwhelming majority of the public. When an NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University poll released in 2004 asked whether “[t]he federal government should fund sex education programs that have ‘abstaining from sexual activity’ as their only purpose” or “[t]he money should be used to fund more comprehensive sex education programs that include information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraceptives,” the more inclusive approach was favored by a margin of 67 percent to 30 percent. Similarly, more people were concerned that not providing teens information about contraception might lead to unsafe sex (65 percent) than that providing such information might encourage teens to have sex (28 percent).<sup>35</sup>

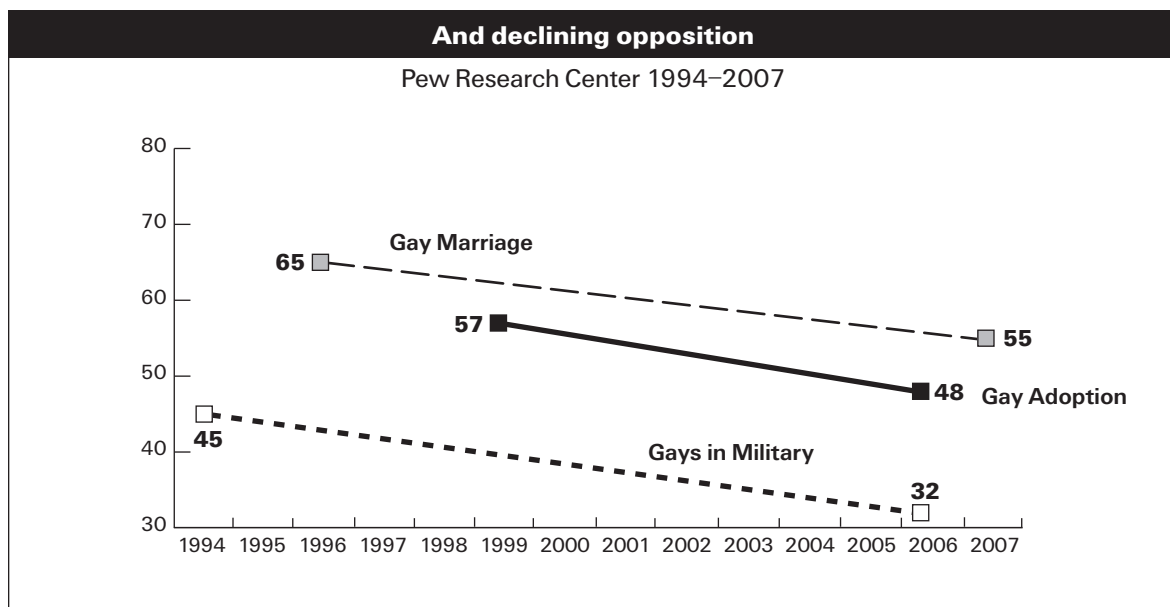
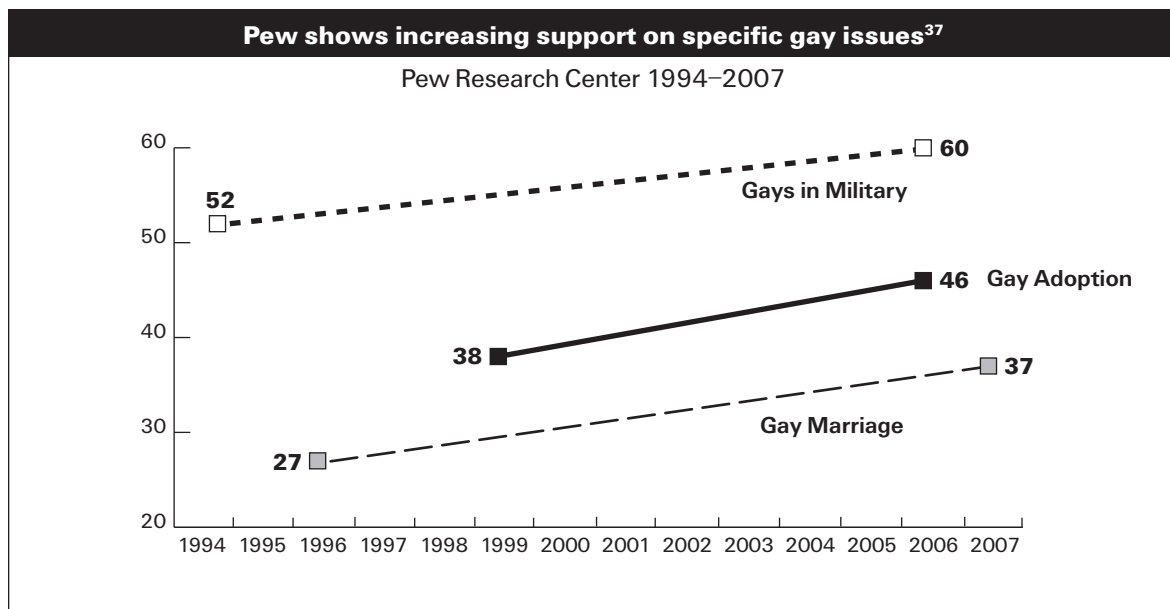
### Homosexuality

On matters of sexual orientation, conservatives are often thought to be closer to the American majority. But this is only because the nature of the questions being debated has changed so dramatically. Just a few years ago, almost no one imagined that Americans would be arguing same-sex marriage; instead, we were debating whether discrimination in housing and employment was acceptable. On those questions, a consensus has emerged in favor of equality.



More recently, the question has shifted to specific rights—marriage, military service, adopting children. It’s fair to say that homosexuality is not fully accepted in every regard. But the trend is unmistakably in a progressive direction. When Howard Dean began his presidential campaign in 2004, his support of civil unions for gays as governor of Vermont was seen as alien to American values. Today support for civil unions is the median position of the American voter, and even Republican presidential candidates claim to have no objection to a state passing a civil union law if its voters want one. Similarly, a majority of Americans (not to mention some prominent generals) now favors gays serving in the military.<sup>36</sup>

Other issues show the same pattern. In 1987, 51 percent of Americans told Pew that “[s]chool boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals.” Two decades later, the number had fallen to 28 percent. And there is little doubt about which direction public opinion will move in the future. Starting with the pre-boomer generation born before World War II, each successive generation is more progressive on the issue of gay rights than was the generation before it.



## SECURITY

Security has long been considered a conservative strength, and many an election has been won by Republicans through deft use of security issues. But the truth is that conservative attitudes on national security often run counter to public opinion.

### International

At the moment the public's views on national security are inexorably entwined with their views about the Iraq war. Although the subject of this report is long-term, fundamental beliefs, it is worth noting where the public's views on national security are at the moment, particularly since it is likely that Iraq will affect what Americans believe about these issues for years or even decades to come.

There is little doubt that the public is overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the effects the Iraq war has had on our national security. When asked by Pew in August 2006 whether the United States is more or less respected in the world than it had been in the past, 65 percent said less respected, while a scant 7 percent said more respected. By 45 percent to 32 percent, they said the best way to reduce the threat of terrorist attacks is to *reduce* America's military presence overseas, a complete reversal of what Pew found four years prior.<sup>38</sup> For the first time since 1993, a plurality of respondents to the Gallup poll say we are spending too much on our military—43 percent say we are spending too much, compared to 35 percent who say we are spending the right amount, and only 20 percent who say we are spending too little.<sup>39</sup>

When asked about their beliefs on America's role in the world, its approach to terrorism, and military force as a tool of policy, the public soundly rejects the conservative approach, at least as the Bush administration has pursued it. As a recent report from the nonprofit polling group Public Agenda and *Foreign Affairs* magazine explained:

The Foreign Policy Index has consistently shown the public broadly prefers diplomacy over force in international affairs. For example, in June 2005, 64 percent thought the U.S. should emphasize diplomatic and economic efforts over military efforts in fighting terrorism; now that figure stands at 67 percent. Half the public considers it "very important" to only use force with the support of our allies, also consistent with 2005 findings. And majorities throughout the Index have said the criticism that the U.S. is too quick to resort to war is at least "partly justified" (seven in 10 say so in our current edition).<sup>[1]</sup>

When respondents were asked to rate a series of strategies for the degree to which they would strengthen the nation's security, the top-ranking moves were "Improving the effectiveness of our intelligence operations" (with 63 percent saying it would enhance our security a great deal) and "Becoming less dependent on other countries for our supply of energy" (55 percent). Only 17 percent said "Attacking countries that develop weapons of mass destruction" would enhance our security a great deal, the lowest-scoring strategy in the group. Forty-two percent said "Showing more respect for the views and needs of other countries" would enhance our security a great deal.

Again, these and other opinions have certainly been colored by the Iraq war. For instance, Pew found in 2007 49 percent agreeing with the statement, "The best way to ensure peace is through military strength," with 47 percent disagreeing—the lowest number agreeing in 20 years, and down dramatically from the 62 percent who agreed in 2002.

Whether these opinions will shift in a more conservative direction once the Iraq war ends remains to be seen. But what we can say is that at the moment, the public doesn't just



oppose the Iraq war. In broad terms, over a range of questions, it favors a more progressive approach to national security policy.

## Domestic Security

In the domestic context, security has long been understood as a matter of crime control. This section explores ideology of two fundamental issues, guns and punishments.

### Guns

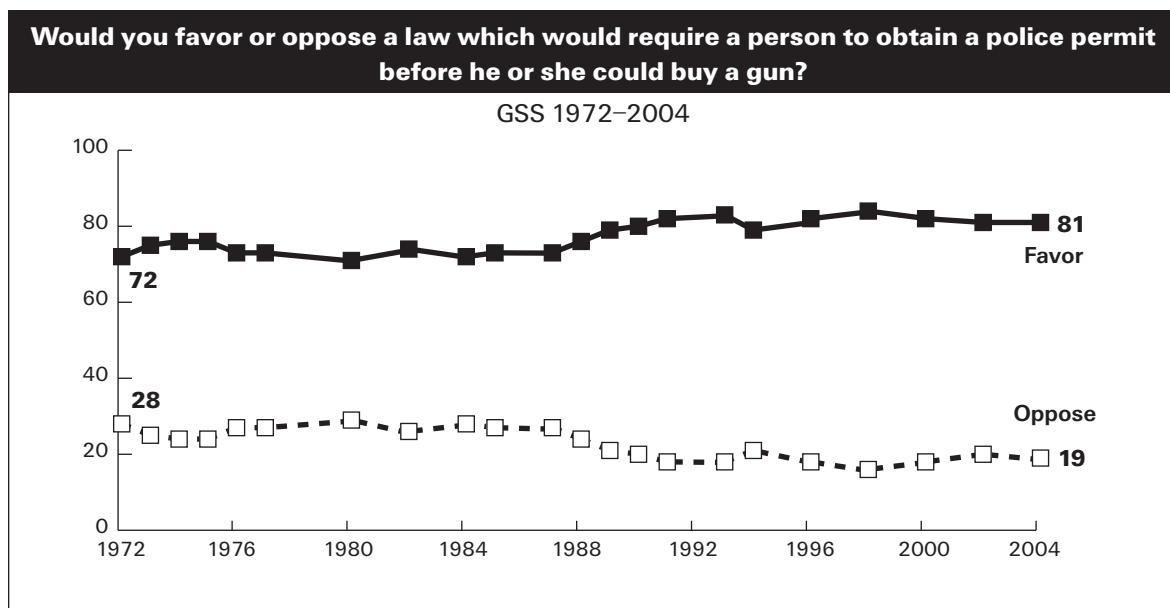
There is a vivid disconnect between politics and public opinion on guns. Gun control is considered by some Democrats to be a “third-rail” issue they should fear to approach. Even after the terrifying tragedy at Virginia Tech, many cautioned against any legislative action on gun control.<sup>40</sup>

Typical of major news outlets, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported this way:

The Virginia Tech campus massacre may reignite a national debate over gun control, but with an election year looming and a powerful gun lobby geared for battle, Democrats probably will be reluctant to push such a divisive issue that could threaten their control of Congress and effort to win back the White House.

“Democrats tend to be worried about their electoral prospects with the gun-owning public,” said Bob Levy, a senior fellow and constitutional scholar with the conservative CATO Institute, a Washington think tank. “They haven’t been particularly vocal, because they understand that people in this country want their guns.”<sup>41</sup>

This conventional wisdom assumes broad American opposition to the regulation of firearms. This is simply not the case. Although there are important regional variations and millions of Americans who like to hunt, most Americans support reasonable restrictions. For instance, a 2006 Gallup poll revealed that 56 percent of people wanted laws governing the sale of firearms to be made more stringent. In recent years, most polling on gun control produces similar results: Majorities of Americans favor at least some regulation of firearms, particularly handguns, as the data below demonstrate. The recently expired assault weapons ban was overwhelmingly supported by the public.



## Americans favor stricter gun laws

In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?

**More Strict 56%**      **Less Strict 9%**      **Kept as now 33%**      **No opinion 2%**

Gallup Poll 2006

In terms of gun laws in the United States, which of the following would you prefer to see happen—[rotate: enforce the current gun laws more strictly and NOT pass new gun laws (or) pass new gun laws in addition to enforcing the current laws more strictly]?

**Enforce current laws more strictly 53%**      **Pass new laws in addition 43%**  
**No opinion 4%**

Gallup Poll 2006

Do you think the federal government should do more, the same, less, or nothing at all about restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy?

**More 60%**      **Same 21%**      **Less 10%**      **Nothing 8%**

Annenberg Public Policy Center, June 2004<sup>42</sup>

How much effort do you think the federal government should put into restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy? Do you think the federal government in Washington should do more about it, do the same as now, do less about it or do nothing at all?

**More 58%**      **Same 21%**      **Less 9%**      **Nothing 10%**

Annenberg Public Policy Center, April 2004<sup>43</sup>

The current federal law banning assault weapons is about to expire. Do you think the U.S. Congress should pass this law again or not? (It did expire.)<sup>45</sup>

**Yes 71%**      **No 23%**

Annenberg Public Policy Center, April 2004<sup>44</sup>

Do you think the federal government should make it MORE DIFFICULT for people to buy a gun than it is now, make it EASIER for people to buy a gun, or keep these rules ABOUT THE SAME as they are now?

**More difficult 57%**      **Easier 4%**      **Keep about same 40%**

NES 2004

Would you favor or oppose... Tougher gun control laws?

**Favor 58%**      **Oppose 39%**      **Unsure 3%**

NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, March 2004<sup>46</sup>

## Punishment

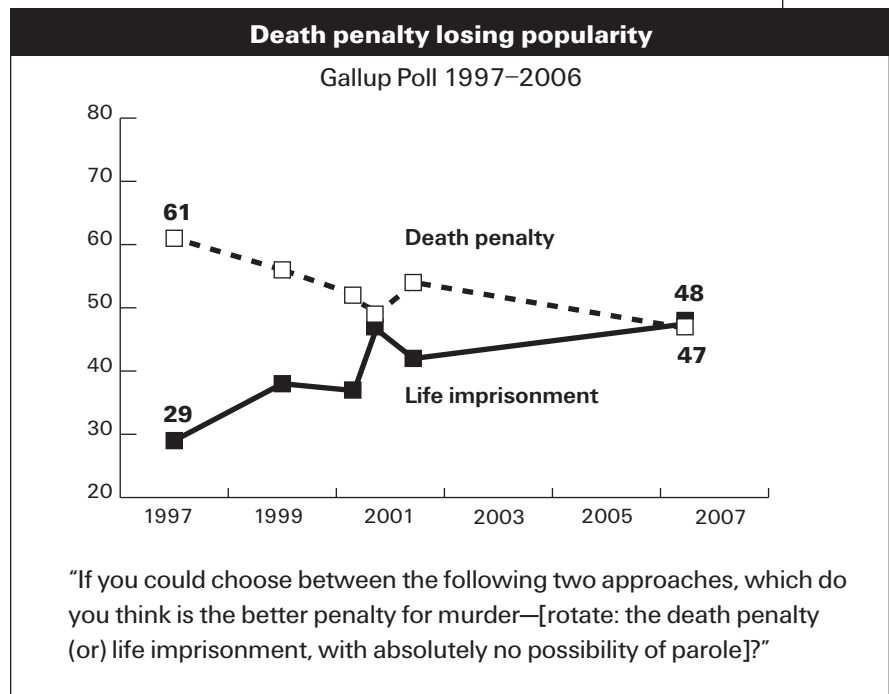
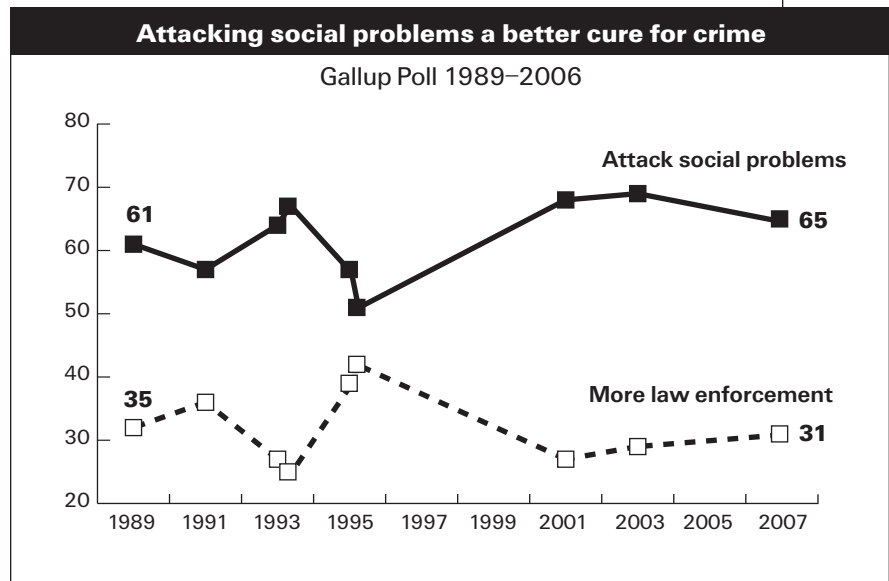
Few politicians have found their careers threatened by being “tough on crime.” But the fact that the issue of crime lends itself easily to fear-mongering and political manipulation—with the Willie Horton case that proved so damaging to Michael Dukakis’ 1988 presidential bid being perhaps the prototypical example—does not mean that conservative policies on crime have majority support. Indeed, evidence suggests striking public support for a more progressive approach to crime prevention.

Even in the early 1990s when crime was at its highest and draconian solutions found their greatest support in recent history, Americans wanted more than mere punishment. Gallup has found consistent majority support for the notion that “additional money and effort should go to attacking the social and economic problems that lead to crime through better education and job training” rather than “more money and effort should go to deterring crime by improving law enforcement with more prisons, police, and judges.”<sup>47</sup>

The sentiment can also be seen in more detailed polling on specific issues. Polling in 2006 and 2007 by Zogby International revealed:

- Eighty-nine percent of people polled believe that rehabilitation and treatment for incarcerated youths can help prevent future crime, and 80 percent thought spending money on rehabilitative services and treatment for youths will save money in the long run.<sup>48</sup>
- Seventy-eight percent supported the Second Chance Act, pending federal legislation that would allocate federal funds to prisoner re-entry.<sup>49</sup>

Opinion on the death penalty has also shifted in recent years. Although many Americans support the death penalty for murder, when offered a choice between the death penalty and life imprisonment, the two options receive nearly equal support (47 percent to 48 percent) in the Gallup poll. This



is a particularly dramatic shift: Just a decade ago, Americans preferred the death penalty over life imprisonment by a margin of more than 2-to-1 (61 percent to 29 percent). Since then support for life imprisonment has increased by 19 points, while support for the death penalty has declined by 13 points.

## THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment is a latent concern of the American public. Although it does not rise in national priorities to the level of the Iraq war or health care, Americans are concerned about the environment. People feel that the health of the environment is getting worse, and that the government is doing too little to protect it. The following chart of Gallup polls shows the levels of concern on issues ranging from drinking water to the ozone layer. The nation has clearly come a long way from the time when a significant proportion of the public believed that the environment was not something to be concerned about.

Americans are concerned about the environment					
Gallup, March 2007	Great deal	Fair amount	Only a little	Not at all	Great deal+Fair amount
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs	53	31	13	3	<b>84</b>
Pollution of drinking water	58	24	12	5	<b>82</b>
Contamination of soil and water by toxic waste	52	28	13	7	<b>80</b>
Air pollution	46	33	15	5	<b>79</b>
Maintenance of the nation's supply of fresh water for household needs	51	27	16	5	<b>78</b>
The loss of tropical rain forests	43	30	17	10	<b>73</b>
Damage to the earth's ozone layer	43	27	19	11	<b>70</b>
Extinction of plant and animal species	39	30	19	12	<b>69</b>
The "greenhouse effect" or global warming	41	24	18	16	<b>65</b>
Acid rain	25	25	28	20	<b>50</b>

Understanding that there are problems with the environment, the public also has opinions about the solutions. And the solutions are generally of a more progressive bent. More than twice as many (64 percent) think the solution to energy problems is more conservation compared to more production (26 percent). They oppose opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for drilling. They want higher emissions standards for automobiles (79 percent) and industry (84 percent), and they want the federal government to spend more money on solar and wind power, and alternative fuel sources for automobiles.

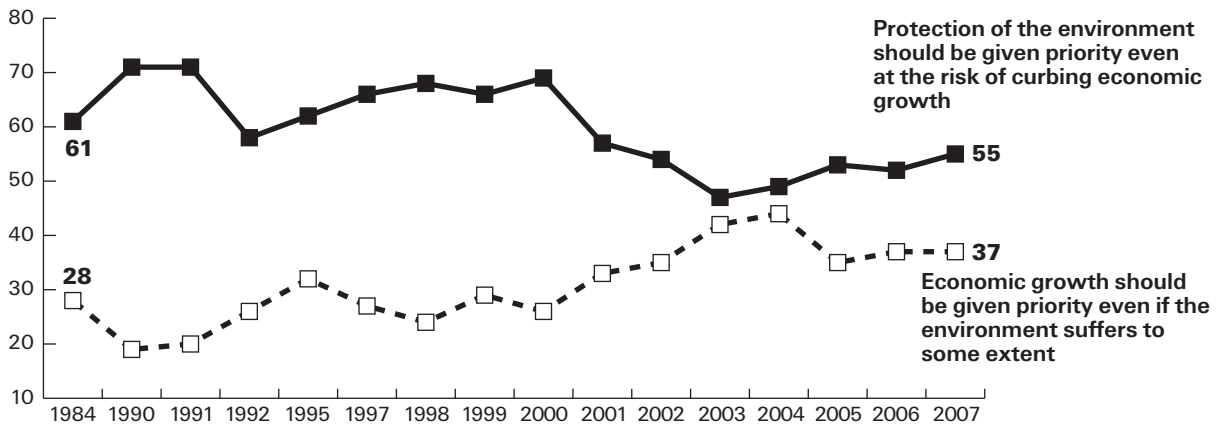
### The people want progressive solutions to environmental problems

Gallup, March 2007	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
Opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska for oil exploration	41	57	2
More strongly enforcing federal environmental regulations	82	15	3
Setting higher auto emissions standards for automobiles	79	18	2
Setting higher emissions and pollution standards for business and industry	84	15	1
Imposing mandatory controls on carbon dioxide emissions and other greenhouse gases	79	19	2
Spending more government money on developing solar and wind power	81	17	1
Spending government money to develop alternate sources of fuel for automobiles	86	12	1

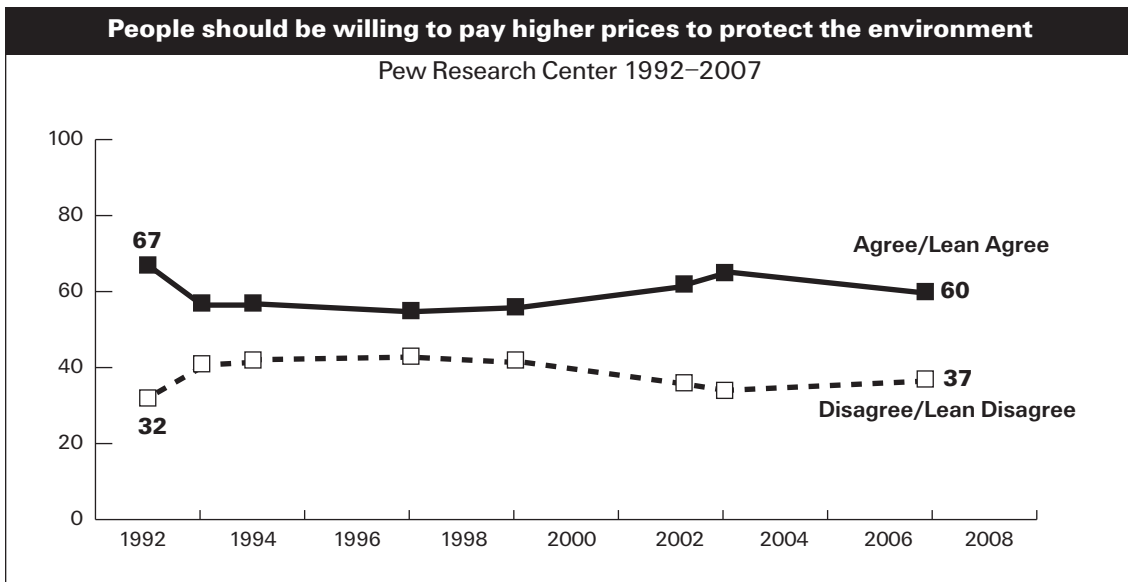
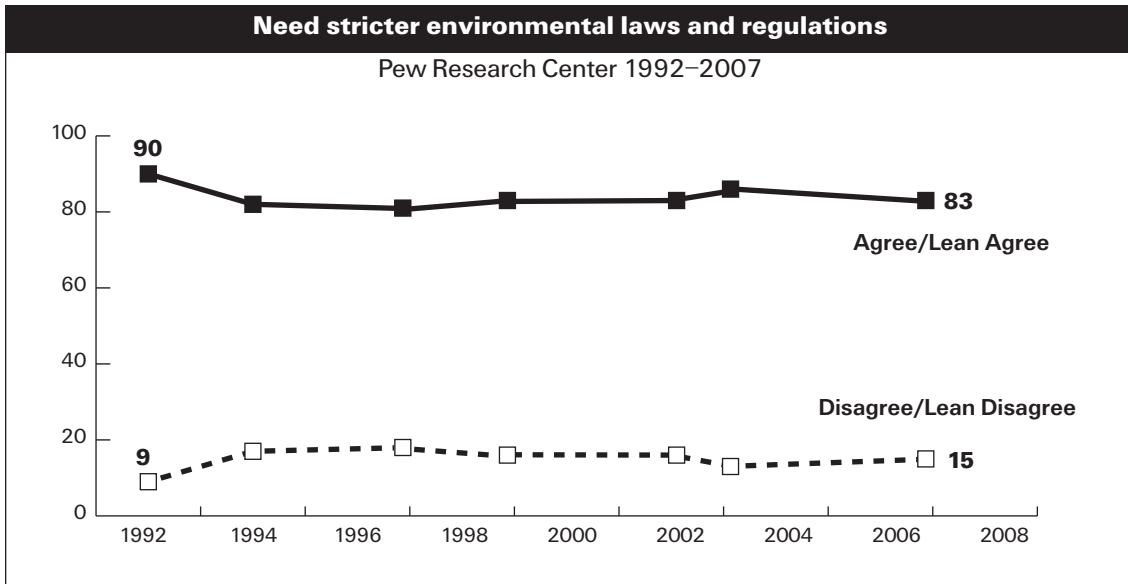
People are also willing to incur sacrifice and risk to protect the environment. The 2004 NES found that 45 percent of Americans thought it was more important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. Only 27 percent considered protecting the environment to be less important. Polling by Gallup in March 2007 found that 55 percent thought “protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth.” Only 37 percent disagreed. As far back as 1984, the public has felt a need for stronger environmental protection, and is willing to sacrifice for it.

### Protection of the environment should be given priority

Gallup Poll 1984–2007

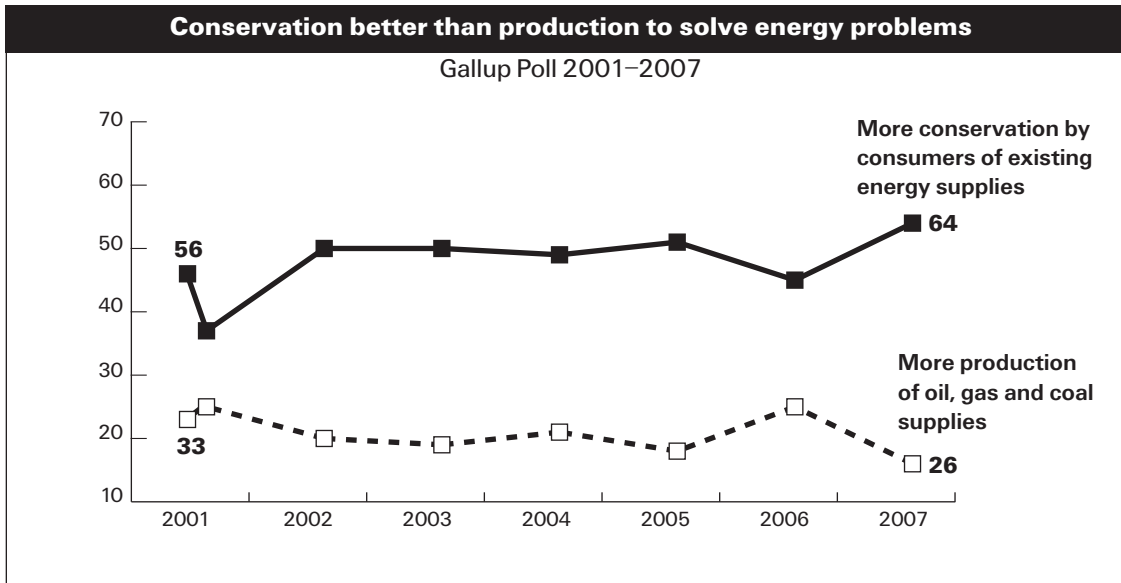


Pew has reached similar conclusions. Over time, people see a need for stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment. And they are willing to pay money to see it done. That they will even express a willingness to pay higher costs in order to achieve this end is particularly noteworthy.



## ENERGY

Not surprisingly, Americans' concern with energy rises and falls with the price of gas, but the public's latent concern about the environment becomes more urgent and concrete in the context of energy. Americans understand the relationship between energy and the environment, and they want the country to move in a progressive direction. As the figure below shows, 64 percent of the public thinks U.S. energy policy is better solved by conservation than production. A *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg poll found 52 percent of Americans believe "the best way for the U.S. to reduce its reliance on foreign oil" is to "have the government invest in alternative energy sources."<sup>50</sup> Only 20 percent said the best way was to "relax environmental standards for more drilling for oil and gas."



A variety of other polls have found similar results, such as this April 2007 CBS/*New York Times* poll.

In short, whatever else one may say about the debate over energy, it seems apparent that broad majorities of the public favor progressive approaches centering on conservation and development of alternative energy sources.

### People will pay for progress

CBS/*New York Times* Poll, April 2007

"Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes on gasoline and other fuels if the money was used for research into renewable sources like solar and wind energy?"

**Willing: 64%**      **Not willing: 33%**

"In order to help reduce global warming, would you be willing or not willing to pay more for electricity if it were generated by renewable sources like solar or wind energy?"

**Willing: 75%**      **Not willing: 20%**

"Which do you think should be a higher priority for the government: increasing the production of petroleum, coal, and natural gas, or encouraging people to conserve energy?"

**Increasing production: 21%**  
**Encouraging conservation: 68%**

## IMMIGRATION

Immigration is a complex issue that does not always divide cleanly along partisan lines. On first glance, it would appear that immigration opponents have the potential for wide support: Cable news hosts rail against illegal immigration, 61 percent of Americans in a May 2007 CBS News/*New York Times* poll said immigration was a “very serious” problem, and 70 percent said immigrants weaken the economy because “they don’t all pay taxes but use public services.” At a time of economic stress and uncertainty, immigrants are an easy target, especially undocumented ones.

But that’s not the whole story. In fact, most of the public has a favorable view of immigrants. Sixty-seven percent of Americans told Gallup that “on the whole,” immigration is a “good thing for this country today.”<sup>51</sup> The same May 2007 CBS News/*New York Times* poll revealed that twice as many Americans said that “most recent immigrants to the United States contribute to this country” (57 percent) as said they “cause problems” (28 percent). Even the impact of illegal immigration on U.S. jobs is tempered by the widespread belief that illegal immigrants “take jobs Americans don’t want” (59 percent) rather than “take jobs away from American citizens” (30 percent).

The buzzword “amnesty” for illegal immigrants has political weight, but Americans are more tolerant than the media coverage often suggests. Sixty-two percent of Americans in the CBS News/*New York Times* poll said undocumented immigrants should be given a chance

to “keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status.” Only 33 percent said they should be “deported.” Polls by Gallup and CNN show even higher levels of support for integrating people who entered illegally but worked while they were here.

Furthermore, despite media attention to building a fence on the border between the United States and Mexico, Americans show little confidence that it will do much to stem illegal immigration. Americans look more to employers as a source of the problem and a potential solution. Polling by the *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg in April 2007 showed 77 percent of people believed “employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants should be punished for their actions.” Only 18 percent disagreed. A Quinnipiac University Poll indicated 63-percent support (compared to 33-percent opposition) for communities passing local laws to fine businesses that hire illegal immigrants.<sup>52</sup>

In another poll, Pew specifically asked people to compare employer sanctions against increased enforcement such as border patrols and a fence. More people

### American opinion makes room for illegal immigrants

CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll, May 2007

“Creating a program that would allow illegal immigrants already living in the United States for a number of years to stay in this country and apply for U.S. citizenship if they had a job and paid back taxes”

**Favor:** 80%  
**Oppose:** 19%

### Best way to reduce illegal immigration from Mexico

The Pew Research Center March 2006

	Penalize employers	More border control	Build more fences
NATIONAL TOTAL	49%	33%	9%
Phoenix	45%	32%	10%
Las Vegas	46%	31%	10%
Chicago	43%	36%	9%
Raleigh-Durham	52%	31%	7%
Washington, D.C.	50%	30%	7%
Republicans	49%	36%	10%
Democrats	51%	33%	7%



concluded that penalizing employers would be more effective. This conclusion was shared by both Democrats and Republicans, and in border zones such as Arizona and Las Vegas.

In short, while there is certainly great concern about the issue, the conservative positions on immigration—deportation of undocumented immigrants, no path to citizenship, building more fences on the border—enjoy less support than does a more progressive approach.

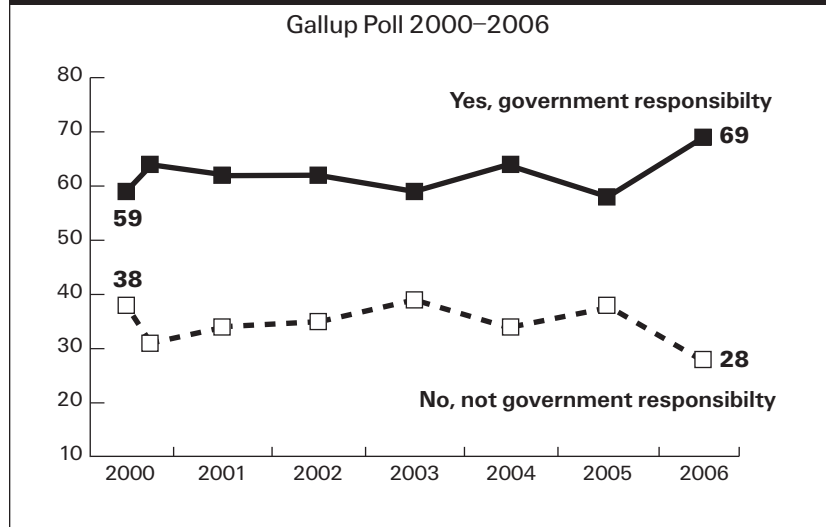
## HEALTH CARE

Health care is an issue currently receiving urgent attention. In polls of national priorities, health care consistently ranks near the top. A CBS/*New York Times* poll in February 2007, for instance, showed 70 percent of Americans considered the lack of health insurance a “very serious” problem.

Moreover, Americans are looking to the government to solve this problem. More than twice as many people (69 percent vs. 28 percent) think it is the responsibility of the federal government to make sure all Americans have access to health coverage.

Even posed against a long-standing and seemingly appealing alternative—tax cuts—Americans express a preference for expanding access to health care. More than three-quarters (76 percent) polled by CBS News and *The New York Times* in February said access to health care was more important than maintaining the Bush tax cuts—and three in five said they would be willing to have their own taxes increased to achieve universal coverage.

### Is it the federal government’s responsibility to make sure all Americans have health coverage?



### People will pay money for guaranteed health care

CBS/*New York Times* Poll, February 2007

If you had to choose, which do you think is more important for the country to do right now, maintain the tax cuts enacted in recent years or make sure all Americans have access to health care?

**Cutting taxes** 18%  
**Access to health insurance** 76%

Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what?

**Willing** 60%  
**Not willing** 34%

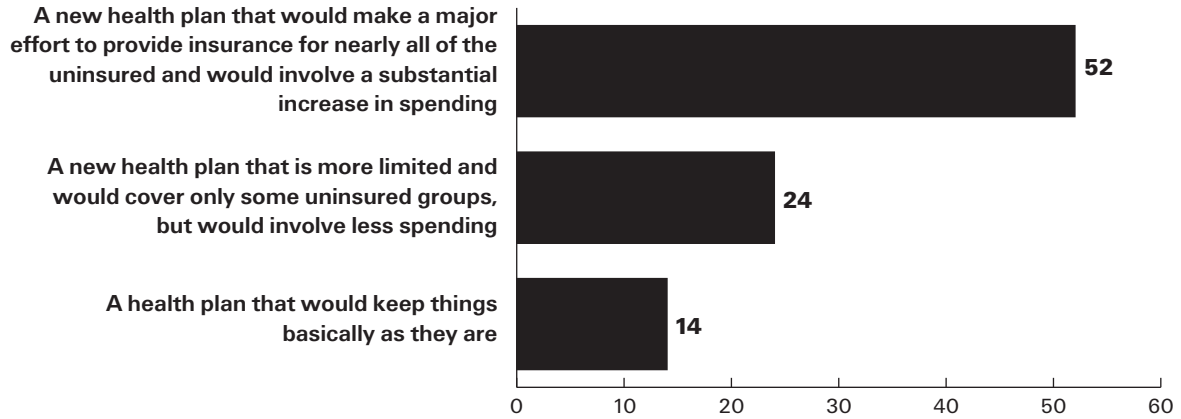
(If “willing”) Would you be willing or not willing to pay \$500 a year more in taxes so that all Americans have health insurance they can't lose, no matter what?

**Willing** 82%  
**Not willing** 6%

While there are a wide variety of health care plans currently being proposed—and no doubt more to come—the available data strongly suggest that more progressive solutions are those that begin with more support from the public.

**Americans want presidential candidates willing to propose health care for all**

Kaiser Family Foundation 2007

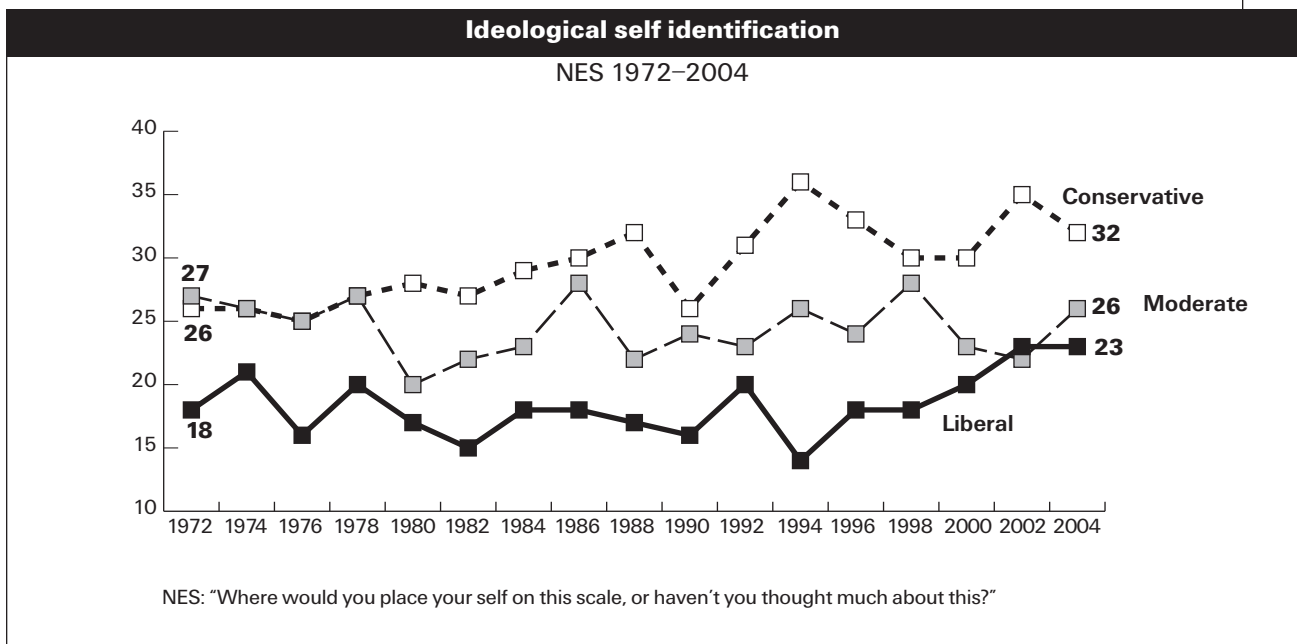


# Conclusion



## *If Americans are so progressive, why don't more say so?*

When asked for evidence, advocates of the idea that America is a conservative country will often cite the fact that polls show more people labeling themselves as “conservative” than “liberal.” This is certainly true, as data from the NES show:



Yet there are a number of reasons to conclude that the data on self-labeling tells us relatively little about the actual ideological positioning of the public. First, as political scientists have understood for more than 40 years, most Americans simply don’t think in ideological terms. To take one example, the National Election Studies has asked respondents in the past, “Would you say that either one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level?” The number answering “the Republicans” seldom exceeded 60 percent when the question was asked in the past; after a 12-year hiatus, the NES asked the question again in 2004, when two-thirds of the public, an all-time high, gave the correct answer. This means that, at a time when the parties are more ideologically distinct than ever, one-third of the public can’t name correctly which party is more conservative. If this bare minimum of knowledge is unavailable to such a large proportion of the population, it is fair to say that their self-placement on ideological scales will not be a particularly reliable gauge of their actual beliefs on issues.

There is an understandable assumption within Washington that if survey respondents answer the ideological self-placement question by choosing “liberal” or “conservative,” then their positions on issues roughly correlate with those of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively; and that if they choose “moderate,” then their issue positions are midway between those of the two parties. But in fact, this is not the case. According to the NES, 56 percent of those who call themselves moderates associate with the Democratic Party, while only 31 percent associate with the Republican Party. As one of the authors of this study wrote previously:

“And it isn’t just party identification; on issue after issue, moderates have opinions almost exactly mirroring those of liberals. In the NES survey, 64 percent of liberals say we should increase spending on Social Security, as do 68 percent of moderates—while only 47 percent of conservatives agree. Eighty-eight percent of liberals and 84 percent of moderates say federal funding on education should be increased, compared to only 58 percent of conservatives. Seventy-three percent of liberals and 66 percent of moderates want more spending for child care—but only 38 percent of conservatives agree. Sixty-two percent of liberals and 57 percent of moderates want to spend more on aid to the poor, compared to only 39 percent of conservatives.”<sup>53</sup>

Another reason people don’t use the liberal label is that the term “liberal” has been victim of a relentless conservative marketing campaign that has succeeded at vilifying liberals and liberalism. The consequence is that only strong liberals are willing to identify as such. But many people who hold liberal issue positions call themselves moderates, or even conservatives. As Christopher Ellis wrote in a recent study of ideological labeling, “[M]any conservatives are not very conservative”:

“... nearly three-quarters of self-identified conservatives are not conservative on at least one issue dimension [size and scope of government, or abortion and homosexuality], and considerably more than half hold liberal preferences on the dominant dimension of conflict over the size and scope of government. Simply put, many conservatives are not very conservative”<sup>54</sup>

When people do use ideological labels, they often apply them inconsistently. In 1967, Hadley Cantril and Lloyd Free famously observed that Americans were “ideological conservatives” but “operational liberals.”<sup>55</sup> They didn’t like the *idea* of government, but they liked what government does and can do.

As all the data presented in this report make clear, whatever Americans choose to call themselves, on issue after issue—economic issues, social issues, security issues, and more—majorities of the public find themselves on the progressive side. And on many of the most contentious “culture war” issues, the public has been growing more progressive year after year. Much of the news media seems not to have noticed. But the facts are too clear to ignore.

## Endnotes

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