

Poverty and Public Opinion

10 Lessons for Progressives

by Tom Freedman

Poverty, seemingly banished from our political vocabulary, made a bit of a comeback in the 2004 presidential primary campaign. By the end of the Democratic nominating contest, mentions of poverty had become a staple of candidates' stump speeches. But few new proposals broke through to suggest candidates had many innovative ideas about what to actually do.

Voters are ready to hear fresh approaches for helping poor Americans lift themselves from poverty. For decades, the debate has been predictable, with political parties focused on different sides of the poverty equation. Democrats stressed economic inequities and proposed government programs; Republicans emphasized family breakdown and championed the values of personal responsibility. But public opinion research indicates the opportunity for progressives to build a broader coalition for the issue by suggesting new proposals and drawing on different language to expand the base of support.

This PPI backgrounder describes recent public opinion surveys showing that voters care much more about the issues of poverty and hunger in America than conventional Washington political wisdom acknowledges, and are anxious to hear original formulations and solutions. The following analysis suggests lessons for building a new majority.¹

Among the key findings for progressives: self-sufficiency is a key and too-often overlooked goal; Democrats do not have a lock on the issue; voters want existing programs reformed; trade and economic growth are important messages; and voters do not feel they have heard enough about fighting poverty and hunger.

The research also has lessons for those who think poverty is a bad issue and are worried about

a liberal taint: voters of all types do care about poverty issues; voters will support spending more money on these problems; voters do not feel a faith-based approach goes far enough; and voters do not want existing programs cut.

The central lesson must be to combine the best elements of the right-left debate. The goal must be better living and independence for the poor, but the means must include all the weapons in society's arsenal, from self-help to nonprofit volunteerism to government aid.

Lessons for Progressives

I. Voters care a lot about the poverty issue

Pundits who argue that poverty is not an important issue to voters have underestimated the public's concern. In fact, voters in a recent nationwide poll, by a whopping 78 percent to 15 percent margin, said they were far more interested in anti-poverty policies than in gay marriage.² Almost six in 10 Americans (57 percent) believe "this country cannot live up to its ideals with so many poor and homeless Americans."³ And almost 90 percent believe the federal government has the responsibility to try to do away with poverty.⁴

Rather than being a vague notion of governmental responsibility, voters consider a candidate's position on poverty and hunger when casting their votes. Ninety-three percent say that "fighting the hunger problem" is important in deciding their vote for Congress⁵ and 74 percent say it is an important issue when deciding their vote for president.⁶

Americans sympathize with the problems of hunger and poverty and are more receptive to a

candidate's message when it includes solutions to these problems. Democratic candidates have the opportunity to reach voters by focusing on the issue and understanding its importance.

II. Voters do not hear enough about poverty

While fighting poverty is a powerful issue for progressives, it has not been fully addressed. Last year we conducted a survey of Democrats in Iowa and New Hampshire that found many voters are waiting to hear more. The poll, taken of likely Democratic caucus and primary voters, showed large numbers believed Democratic candidates for president had not spent enough time addressing poverty and hunger issues. Sixty-one percent of Democrats in New Hampshire and 48 percent in Iowa said the issue had not been discussed enough. Only 30 percent and 19 percent, respectively, believed the topic was talked about sufficiently by the candidates.⁷ There is room for leaders to argue these issues.

III. Democrats do not have a lock on this issue

Compassion for hungry people is often considered an issue that favors Democrats. But it would be a mistake for Democrats to take this support for granted. In fact, voters are split on which party is better able to handle poverty and are skeptical of the arguments on each side. When likely voters were asked whether George W. Bush and congressional Republicans or congressional Democrats are "better able to fight the hunger problem in the United States and throughout the world," the results were almost evenly split. Almost one-third, 30 percent, said the Republicans were better able, and 32 percent chose the Democrats.⁸ A final 11 percent chose "both," 10 percent selected "neither," and 17 percent said "don't know."

Skepticism of each side's presentation of the situation on poverty was also evident in the mid-1990s. For example, 54 percent of respondents believed that people who criticize welfare reform proposals by arguing many more families will become homeless were "exaggerating." Similarly, 59 percent believed that supporters of welfare reform that argued the reform would cause the

majority of Americans to become self-sufficient were "over-promising."⁹

Undecided or "swing" voters in particular distrust broad promises and accusations that paint one position or another as all wrong. Crafting an effective argument means acknowledging nuances of the opposite side, while driving the moral argument for help and reform at the same time.

IV. Self-sufficiency is the answer

Liberals have often misstated goals in their arguments to combat poverty. Respondents to polls about poverty consistently show a desire for recipients' greater self-sufficiency—not simply improvements in income or nutritional status. While voters believe that government has a responsibility to help change the conditions for America's poor, they also believe that the end goal of assistance is not permanent programs but helping people take care of themselves.

For instance, in the case of America's hunger problem, a 2002 poll showed 70 percent of the respondents agreed that "the best way to fight hunger in the United States is through programs that help poor people get better jobs that pay enough so they can feed their families."¹⁰ One year later, a new poll showed even greater results with 76 percent favoring an approach that demands "accountability and work."¹¹ When asked the best way to help hungry people in developing countries, the most popular answer was "helping poor farmers grow more food"—far outpacing "direct food assistance," "making sure children get to school," or "measures to fight corruption or expand free markets."¹²

In the case of welfare programs, a poll taken in February 2001 showed that 87 percent believe welfare reform was successful because it required people to go to work.¹³ Other polls echo this desire to put people to work and increase self-sufficiency as a way to curb poverty. While 86 percent believe that it is important for a parent to work, even if it requires leaving young children in childcare,¹⁴ 86 percent also believe that childcare assistance should be available for all low-income families so the parents are able to work.¹⁵

The data show that whatever programs are

actually implemented, the means must stress self-sufficiency as a key component as well as the ultimate goal of the effort.

V. Voters will spend money to expand coverage

Voters are willing to spend money to achieve results in fighting poverty and hunger. For example, a poll taken in February 2001 showed that 85 percent of Americans support expanding subsidized childcare; 85 percent support increasing the minimum wage; 83 percent support spending more on medical care for poor people; and 80 percent support increasing tax credits for low-income workers.¹⁶ A separate poll shows that 81 percent of Americans favor increasing Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and only 15 percent oppose such an increase.¹⁷

When asked: "Do you feel the United States government spends too much, too little, or about the right amount of money fighting hunger in the United States," 56 percent of respondents answered that too little was spent. Only 6 percent believed we currently spend too much.¹⁸

Democrats must stress public-private partnerships and the reforming of existing programs, but they would be wrong to imagine the government cannot spend money on anti-poverty efforts. Americans view poverty as an important issue, and are willing to spend more to find solutions.

VI. Faith-based programs are not enough

Americans generally support faith-based programs,¹⁹ but they do not believe these programs are a stand-alone solution to the poverty problem. Democrats can acknowledge the important role of government and accept that Americans see sharing between governmental solutions and non-governmental efforts as key to solving the problem.

The results of a 2002 Alliance to End Hunger poll show the balance voters desire between public and private solutions. Almost one-half (47 percent) say the government is "most effective" at fighting hunger—and the level of government cited as most effective is also evenly divided—with 17 percent identifying

the federal government, 16 percent local government, and 13 percent state government. Similarly, 47 percent of respondents say the private sector is best equipped to fight hunger—24 percent looking to nonprofits and 23 percent churches or religious bodies.²⁰

VII. Existing programs need reform

A key aspect to any attempt to expand anti-poverty solutions must be a willingness to embrace reform—there will be no expansion of efforts without reform, and especially without a public acknowledgement that not every project has worked as intended.

For many progressive efforts, the first step is to recognize the public desire for change. In the case of welfare, by December 1995, 93 percent of respondents (and 88 percent of people in families on welfare) believed that welfare programs needed to be "adjusted somewhat" or "fundamentally overhauled." Only 3 percent of the public believed welfare programs should be "left alone."²¹ A similar phenomenon will precede changes in other social programs—voters will signal an interest in reform, and if progressives fail to respond, voters will embrace more sweeping changes offered by conservatives—as was the case in the welfare debate.

The need for a "reform" message was clear in a NPR/Kaiser/Harvard survey of February 2001 that showed only 34 percent of Americans believe government programs that try to improve the condition of poor people make things better.²²

In terms of reforming hunger programs, the split is even deeper. A striking 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement: "we need to do more and be more effective. Government programs have not solved the problem of hungry children. We need to reform the programs to make sure every child has healthy food to eat and parents get help to do their job."²³

The opinion data demonstrate a multi-step argument is needed to convince Americans about new efforts. While voters are prepared to meet the challenge of poverty and are open to spending money on programs that will alleviate the problem, they also believe that the current programs have not been sufficiently

effective and need to be reformed.

VIII. Do not slash existing programs

Although Americans are in favor of reforming programs, they are not in favor of wholesale cutting of support. President Reagan discovered this when he ventured into the school lunch budget debate, as did Speaker Gingrich and candidate Bob Dole when the issue was used against them. The danger of opposing these programs is evident, particularly when they help children. Even amidst tight state budgets in June 2003, 83 percent agreed with the statement: “politicians should look other places to save money in their state and local budgets and they shouldn’t be cutting funds from programs that help feed hungry children.”²⁴ The same poll showed voter support for current programs that “helped children as directly as possible,” such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and school lunch programs.²⁵

IX. Economic growth and trade are key

At the root of voters’ interest in self-sufficiency and opportunity is the need for policies that promote economic growth. This is the optimistic vision Americans demand from economic policy.

Those politicians/candidates who advocate for free trade have so far failed to fully tap into the emotion of optimism or the argument that trade can help the poor. While the pro and con sides are nearly equally split on whether trade helps the U.S. economy,²⁶ voters overwhelmingly support the statement: “United States efforts to promote trade and open markets in order to create economic growth and raise standards of living everywhere” (81 percent in July 2002²⁷ and 71 percent in June 2003).²⁸

Americans see trade as being particularly helpful to poor people, with a majority arguing that cheaper foreign goods are beneficial to low-income families.²⁹ While many voters are concerned about the specific consequences of trade—and leaders urgently need to promote policies that help alleviate its negative effects—Americans also believe supporting trade is a

positive approach to addressing poverty. A 2002 Pew international survey that included the United States showed that almost 4 in 5 respondents believed “growing trade and business ties between our country and other countries” were positive for them and their families.³⁰ Even in the midst of the Democratic primary battle, when trade was frequently discussed in a negative context, the Pew poll found 79 percent of Americans thought growing trade was “good” for them and their families.³¹

X. Combine personal and collective responsibility

Progressives have an opportunity to build a compelling new political message for fighting poverty. Voters think government can be somewhat effective and have high regard for private efforts, particularly by churches, nonprofits, and volunteers. They say a candidate can influence their vote greatly if he or she takes a positive stand on the issue.³²

In the current framework, voters see red tape and the failure of programs to ultimately promote self-sufficiency as crippling the effectiveness of any effort. However, voters can consider an effective aid project if it combines direct aid with an argument for self-sufficiency. Advocates for more resources must articulate a simultaneous call for programmatic reform and point to the goal of personal responsibility.

The data reflect voter rejection of the status quo arguments—they want government aid plus individual self-help. For example, providing food *and* demanding accountability defeated food alone as a simple precursor to responsibility (81.5 percent to 14.3 percent).³³ When voters were asked about a candidate who wanted to fight chronic child hunger in the United States, but tied that to work requirements for parents and anti-fraud efforts, 80.7 percent of voters were more likely to vote for the candidate—and 38 percent were much more likely.³⁴

Conclusion

Voters view poverty and hunger as important issues, but they will be unlikely to respond to calls for more resources unless they are coupled with commitments to program

reform, and unless advocates make self-sufficiency and personal responsibility the fundamental goal. Members of either political party can advance the issue. Republicans may hold an edge on reform messages, but Democrats are expected to care more about the poor. Democrats would improve results for the poor and create a more powerful message by articulating new ideas and new messages that incorporate the best of both worlds.

In the not-so-distant past, candidates and elected officials often discussed the need to help

lift people out of poverty. Efforts like Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" or the Office for Economic Opportunity run by Don Rumsfeld during the Nixon administration attracted attention from voters and pundits, as well as new ideas from policymakers. That is no longer political reality.

More attention to these issues would not only be good political news, but it would be profoundly good news for millions of people living in poverty as well. Public opinion research shows voters are waiting to hear more.

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Endnotes

¹ Some of the polling referred to in this article was conducted by myself, Jim McLaughlin (a prominent Republican pollster, particularly for House Republicans), and Bill Knapp (who helped fashion campaign ads for notables including the Clinton and Gore campaigns of 1996 and 2000). In 1996, Mr. Knapp and I worked against Mr. McLaughlin in the Clinton v. Dole campaign. Our research was sponsored by the Alliance to End Hunger and Bread for the World.

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³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 10.