



Progressives: there are two profoundly condescending assumptions that will inevitably undermine all attempts to build an independent social movement that reaches ordinary Americans. Democracy Corps' new methodology points the way to a superior approach.

By Andrew Levison

Recent events ranging from the massive recall and repeal campaigns in Wisconsin and Ohio, the protests in the streets of downtown New York and the broad progressive coalition meeting in Washington to jump-start the "American Dream" movement have all dramatically raised progressives' hopes that a new independent progressive movement might be emerging - one that will be able to successfully challenge the hold of Fox News and the Tea Party on ordinary Americans.

The hard and inescapable reality, however, is that any progressive organizing effort will quickly find itself grinding to a halt if it does not honestly and immediately confront a critical problem - the existence of two profoundly condescending and deeply destructive assumptions about ordinary working Americans that are widespread in the progressive world.

The assumptions are these:

1. That progressives naturally understand the "real" issues that face ordinary Americans without having the need to do any serious "field" research to find out how ordinary people themselves define, understand and think about the issues.
2. That ordinary working Americans are basically gullible and can be easily manipulated by the messages they get from the media.

In combination, these two assumptions repeatedly sabotage all progressive attempts to build an independent social movement that gains the support of ordinary working Americans.

Stated this bluntly, most progressives would quite indignantly deny that they actually hold these two views. But these opinions are rarely expressed this directly. Instead, they operate as unstated and often unrecognized underlying assumptions behind other kinds of assertions that are far more widespread.

An example

A recent Huffington Post article presented a typical example of how these views are expressed in progressive commentary.

Here is how the article expresses the first assumption - that progressives already know what ordinary Americans consider the "real issues" without needing any data:

[Democrats] have become convinced by the new conventional wisdom in Washington, that Americans aren't really concerned as much about jobs as they are about the deficit. If you stop and think about it for a moment, that notion is absurd on the face of it. Is it really possible that Americans who have lost their jobs or fear losing them are more worried about an abstraction -- the budget deficit in Washington -- than about the realities of their lives -- that they face a budget deficit around their own kitchen table at the end of every month when they're trying to pay their rent or make their mortgage payment on their rapidly depreciating home?

Set aside for a moment the verbal sleight of hand by which "Americans" in one sentence becomes "Americans who have lost their jobs or fear losing them" in the next. The article's implicit argument is that "common sense" alone is sufficient to prove that the American people can never genuinely view deficits to be of equal importance to unemployment. The alternative can be summarily dismissed as "absurd"

Polls or other empirical data, on the other hand, can simply be "rigged" to provide any answer the pollster wants.

Can a pollster who believes or wants to show that Americans are as or more concerned about the national debt than jobs or the economic insecurity they face every day write questions in such a way as to get what he or she is looking for? Sure. Does this reflect what working and middle class Americans feel as they watch their economic security disappear? Not in a million years.

Many progressives will be deeply attracted to this point of view on an emotional level. But when one steps back to view it more dispassionately it becomes clear that the basic assumption underlying this line of argument is that progressives can know what ordinary Americans consider the "real issues" they face by a process of simple introspection and logic. Data is unnecessary because any alternative hypothesis can be summarily dismissed as "absurd on the face of it" and could not be true "in a million years"

This view has its roots in the post-World War II conviction among both progressives and Democrats that, as the advocates and representatives of the "ordinary guys" and "Average Joe's" of the 50's, they were naturally able to understand the "real" -- essentially "kitchen table" economic --- interests of working people and reliably distinguish between the "real" issues working people faced and the social and cultural issues that conservatives continually exploited to manipulate them. A recent and particularly lyrical version of this "real issues" versus "false consciousness" notion was expressed in Thomas Frank's 2004 book "What's the Matter with Kansas"

The problem with this perspective is that it too easily leads to the rather arrogant notion that progressives can "know" what working people really want and care about by a process of deduction from what are defined as their "real interests" rather than through open-minded field research and investigation.

The same article also expressed the second assumption - that the opinions of ordinary Americans can be manipulated with relative ease:

...when leaders on one side are voicing a strong opinion -- in this case, the Republicans arguing that the sky is falling on the economy because of deficits, tax and spend liberalism, and over-regulation of business -- and the other side is either silent or echoing GOP talking points -- the average voter hears what sounds like a consensus and starts to mouth it.

Then pollsters start to pick up in their polls precisely the view they have been promulgating and elites have been putting into the minds and mouths of ordinary citizens, rendering elected officials all the more afraid of bucking what is now the conventional wisdom. And the result is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The phrases *"the average voter hears what sounds like a consensus and starts to mouth it"* and *views that "elites have been putting in the minds and mouths of ordinary citizens"* are quite clear in suggesting that the opinions of ordinary Americans can be relatively easily molded and manipulated. The alternative possibility - that ordinary Americans are expressing authentic, seriously held views - is simply not entertained.

The two perspectives expressed in this specific article above are not in any way atypical or unusual in progressive commentary. On the contrary, they are fully and entirely "in the mainstream" of progressive discourse. The near-universal arguments that say *"The Dems allowed the Republicans to control the narrative and that's why the national debate switched from jobs to deficits"* or that *"if Obama had just used the bully pulpit to insist on jobs, the American people would have supported him"* implicitly assume that media messages can quite easily shape what ordinary people think. The unstated assumption is that ordinary Americans do not have stable, thoughtfully held views on the issue of their priority between jobs and deficit reduction and can therefore be shifted relatively sharply toward either progressive or conservative stances depending on the media messages they hear coming out of Washington.

And notice how the two assumptions above mutually reinforce each other to create an entirely circular argument. Since progressives feel confident that they "know" the real issues facing ordinary Americans without having to study peoples' opinions empirically, it follows logically that if such people express views or priorities that are inconsistent with what progressives know their real interests to be, they must necessarily have been manipulated by conservative messages and narratives. From this vantage point, the statement that "If Democrats had only presented the genuine progressive perspective on [some issue] with sufficient energy and passion the American people would have supported them" becomes a completely vacuous assertion - one that can never be disproved - rather than an empirical hypothesis that has to be confirmed by field research about the actual opinions of ordinary Americans on a particular topic.

What traditional opinion polls can explain - and what they can't

When progressive commentators do seek empirical data to buttress their arguments, it is usually only one or two poll results that are cited. In significant measure this is due to the space limitations of 800-1,200 word op-ed commentary but it also reflects a widespread attitude among political commentators that a single poll results can actually "prove" something.

Let's be clear; they can't. A single poll result from an 800 to 1500 person sample is really a data point, not a complete research conclusion. It can be suggestive but can never by itself "prove" anything at all. This is a fact that is now quite easy to confirm by direct visual inspection if one examines the poll tracking graphs that are displayed on Pollster.com and Talking Points Memo. In cases where a particular question is very frequently polled (such as the president's approval rating) any individual poll result generally falls somewhere within a wide band of dots that that extends close to 10 percentage points in width across the graph simply because of random variation between samples.

The average of various polls is substantially more accurate. A single poll indicating a presidential approval rating of 45% is more accurately thought of as representing a range of values anywhere from 42 to 48 percent; an average of 7 or 8 such polls is much more likely to be accurate to within 2 or 2.5%

Few polling questions are asked with the frequency that provides this level of accuracy. One of the few questions that is consistently asked by a wide variety of polls, however, actually provides reassurance to progressives. Pollsters frequently ask for opinions about the "most important issues" and during all of 2010 and 2011 [Americans have reliably responded](#) that they considered jobs a "more important issue" than deficit reduction. When multiple polls produce the same result in this fashion, the conclusion is obviously far more reliable than when the result is drawn from a single survey.

But a single question like this cannot tell us what people "really" mean when they answer as they do - in this case when they say that jobs are "more important" than deficit or spending reduction. The phrasing of the question does not reveal if they see job creation and deficit reduction as antithetical goals between which a forced choice must necessarily be made or if they see them as both good and desirable goals that should be simultaneously pursued. Simply knowing that they term jobs "more important" than deficits does not distinguish between these two profoundly different conceptions.

As a result, to understand voters' real attitudes more carefully defined and targeted questions are required, questions that can probe issues like "do voters see job creation and deficit reduction as complementary or antithetical?" and "When presented with alternative Democratic messages do voters actually say they prefer those which prioritize jobs over deficits versus those that promise to seek both at the same time?"

Stan Greenberg's Democracy Corps has used two distinct kinds of questions to probe these particular issues:

In one [January 2011 opinion poll question](#) Democracy Corps used a device called an "opinion thermometer" to independently gauge voters' basic attitudes toward deficit reduction and job creation. In this kind of question respondents are asked to simply give an entirely subjective "warm" versus "cold" opinion about a given topic or idea on a scale of 0 (freezing) to 100 (boiling).

When respondents were asked to rate "a plan to invest in new industries and rebuild the country over the next five years", 57 percent of the respondents offered "warm" ratings in contrast to 16 percent who responded "coldly."

When Respondents were asked to rate "a plan to dramatically reduce the deficit over the next five years" 52% of the respondents expressed "warm" ratings of the idea in contrast to 20 percent who responded "coldly".

In short, both job creation and deficit reduction were given strongly positive evaluations with majorities favoring both goals.

This result has been reconfirmed three additional times since January - in May, June and August of 2011. In total, over 2,000 people were surveyed by Democracy Corps using this precise question wording.

In a [second series of opinion survey questions](#), Democracy Corps presented their respondents with several different Democratic messages about jobs and deficits and asked them which ones' they found more convincing. The study found the following:

"The strongest arguments tested in this survey focus on Democrats demanding that the budget process begin with wasteful spending and accountability. Arguments that imply a lack of interest in the right cuts score less well, as do arguments that downplay the importance of the deficits.

Voters want a plan for both growth and deficit reduction and it is important for Democrats to acknowledge the important of deficit reduction and put progressive solutions on the table"

The limits of opinion polls

For most progressives, this result is unbelievably frustrating. From a Keynesian point of view it is simply flat-out wrong -there is not a single reputable econometric forecasting model that predicts that deficits can be cut during a deep recession without causing a loss of jobs. For progressives the notion is therefore almost by definition an example of conservative propaganda befuddling ordinary Americans. Since progressives begin with the conviction that the "real" choice can only be either one or the other, the desire for both is seen as simply politically meaningless wishful thinking.

Having decided that this is a "fact", progressives not illogically dismiss survey questions that allow a "both" response as "misleading" and focus on questions where the two are posed as a forced choice and these kinds of questions have historically tended to produce pluralities in favor

of jobs. Those results that do not fit the pattern can then be dismissed as random "outliers" or the result of measurement artifacts (biased questions, false choices etc.).

This allows progressives to argue that -- based on the set of questions that reflect their implicit assumptions -- ordinary Americans do "really" think like progressives and are simply being tricked by conservative propaganda. Progressives are not being dishonest or "rigging" the questions when they do this; from their own perspective they are quite sensibly ignoring questions that do not honestly present the alternatives. The problem, of course, is that conservatives use the same approach in order to reach opposite conclusions.

This is the way debates about public opinion between progressives and conservatives have traditionally gone ever since the 1970's. Every year progressives produce "our" surveys showing the American people are basically progressive while conservatives produce "their" surveys which show them to be conservative. There are often significant differences in the quality of the data used in these surveys, but basically for many years now this intellectual trench warfare has resulted in a stalemate. Each side chooses the questions and the implicit assumptions built into them that suit their underlying positions and release dueling reports year after year.

The fundamental challenge progressives and Democrats now face is to move beyond this dead end. In order to radically improve their ability to communicate with ordinary working Americans, progressives must seek to genuinely understand why ordinary working people think the way they do - why, for example, they see job creation and deficit reduction as complementary rather than antithetical. Do they understand these ideas in essentially Keynesian terms and directly reject Keynes' conclusions or are they actually expressing a completely distinct view having nothing at all to do with concepts like "purchasing power" and "aggregate demand"?

To seriously analyze questions like these, there is a need for a very substantially more in-depth approach than traditional opinion polling, one that studies opinions "in the field" and which attempts to map and analyze the larger conceptual frameworks into which individual opinions are organized.

Democracy Corps Innovative Approach

The organization that has taken the most systematic and innovative steps in this direction is Stan Greenberg's Democracy Corps, a project run by the international polling firm Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosen. Democracy Corps periodic Strategy Memos are frequently quoted in the media and often play an important role in debates within the Democratic coalition but what is not equally well recognized is the increasing methodological sophistication the group has employed in recent years to go beyond conventional polling in the investigation of political attitudes.

Democracy Corps has an unusual organizational philosophy - it is deeply partisan but firmly objective at the same time. Most "partisan" polling, in contrast, is quite consciously and intentionally manipulative - it is done with the objective of producing a dramatic headline ("e.g. Most Jews Dislike Obama") or inflating the actual level of support for a policy (e.g. "99.9999% of Americans Reject Immigration Reform"). During the Bush years Fox News and Rasmussen

polls were particularly well-known for asking outrageously misleading and flamboyantly manipulative questions that were designed to produce these kinds of results.

Democracy Corps, on the other hand, seeks to measure public attitudes accurately and does not shy away from publishing data that reflects unfavorably on the Dems. The purpose of their research is not to produce politically useful headlines but rather to use the data they collect to guide the comparison and testing of alternative political messages in order to find the ones that most effectively promote a Democratic perspective.

Democracy Corps was one of the earliest political polling firms to incorporate focus groups into their set of research techniques and in their recently announced "Economy Project" they have incorporated an even wider set of information gathering tools.

The motivation for the Economy Project was the recognition that conventional economic statistics like the unemployment rate and economic growth rate were providing a profoundly misleading image of the conditions and hardships average Americans were experiencing. The "unemployment rate" suggests the image of a distinct group called "the unemployed" separate from other working Americans while the media focus on the monthly economic growth rate suggests the view that Americans experience economic hardship as either improving or worsening on a month to month basis and shift their political loyalties as a result.

The Economy Project integrates data from five different sources - in-depth interviews, focus groups, dial meter response testing, traditional political opinion surveys and newly designed polling tools that probe respondents personal experiences with economic problems like job loss, reduced wages, lost health insurance or defaulted mortgages. By combining the data from these five sources, Democracy Corp's most recent studies produce a uniquely deep and detailed picture of the economic experiences and political attitudes of non-affluent, average Americans - with particular attention to the views of non-college "working class" whites who remain a crucial swing group in American politics.

The [two major recent studies](#) reveal five major clusters of attitudes that do not show up clearly in conventional opinion polls

1. Ordinary Americans do not see the crisis as "high unemployment" - they see instead a massive decline in living standards that has destroyed any hope for a "middle class" life.

- In contrast to the standard image of the unemployed as a distinct minority group, the D-Corp research shows Average Americans perceive instead a much larger social and economic crisis that includes people having to accept lower-paid, lower-status jobs, more temporary jobs, no jobs for youth, increased reliance on multiple jobs to make ends meet, reduced wages or hours on the job and the loss of health care and other fringe benefits even after years of service. Taken together these conditions have caused a massive decline in ordinary Americans' standard of living and has led them to conclude that the "middle class" life of their parents' generation has permanently disappeared. It is this larger picture that represents the "economic crisis" for most Americans and not simply official defined unemployment.

- The extent of this decline is stunning. The Democracy Corps studies show that during the last two years between 37 and 40 percent of Americans reported experiencing reduced wages or benefits; between 35 and 41% reported losing at least one job; 22 to 27 percent reported losing their health insurance and 13 to 22 percent reported falling behind on their mortgage.

- The respondents in the Democracy Corps studies saw no relationship between the monthly fluctuations in the unemployment rate or growth in GNP and their personal economic conditions. They saw instead a massive and permanent economic decline, one that had been developing for decades but which became even worse with the deep recession of fall 2008.

2. The initial reaction to the crisis was shock. Now it's fatalism. The cynical view has grown that "no-one is going to help me; I'm completely on my own".

- As the Democracy Corps studies expressed it "Last year, the impact of job loss was described using the vocabulary of shock: —"everything went downhill", "everything went to shit", and "it was crazy".|| By contrast, this year respondents feel lucky to have jobs--any jobs--and express a kind of willful pride in their ability to make things work despite dramatically changed circumstances...Their attitude is best described as 'stoic resolution.'"

3. People are deeply angry at corporate America but think nothing can be done

- The Democracy Corps studies note: "A lot of blame and in many cases, anger, is aimed squarely at the rich, CEOs, big business, and the greed that many believe infects our economic system. This is further enhanced by blame for the state of the economy with nearly one-third of all respondents saying that banking was directly responsible for where we are and almost half saying banks and/or big business."

- Outsourcing and job export are particular sources of anger. In the interviews and focus groups many of the people interviewed spoke with disgust at the fact that Corporate CEO's received big bonuses and lavish stock options when they downsized plants, shipped jobs overseas and shuttered American factories.

- There is a profound cynicism about corporate America. Despite this, the respondents simultaneously expressed a deep pessimism about the possibility that any change might occur. Large corporations were seen as so powerful and so remote that ordinary people had no hope of changing their behavior. The executives and decision-makers who run Wall Street and corporate America were perceived as living in a completely separate and insulated upper-class world of their own where they were able to write their own rules and completely ignore the problems of average Americans.

4. People are even more profoundly angry at government than at business because government is supposed to represent "the people." The level of anger, cynicism and disgust is almost impossible to overstate.

- As the Democracy Corps studies explain "Government has emerged as uniquely illegitimate--as the nexus of money and power that spends excessively and without good will. The tax system

disadvantages the middle class and loopholes are rigged for lobbyists and most privileged. A nexus of money and power means there are secret rules that determine what government will do and which disenfranchise ordinary citizens."

- In this bitter vision, Congressmen are seen as no more than paid shills for campaign contributors and lobbyists. Congress is seen as a vile cesspool of corruption rather than a source of solutions. Spending - any kind of spending -- becomes illegitimate in this vision because by definition it will not be used to help ordinary citizens or the country.

- The participants in the Democracy Corps studies do not trust either party to do the right thing. Neither has stepped up in a way that has restored trust in government. As the reports note, "This is a dangerous stew for both political parties. No politician, political party, or corporation seems to be making things better."

5. People want better times and better jobs but they are deeply opposed to increasing government debt, deficits or spending because they don't think such actions will produce these results.

- o The respondents in the Democracy Corps studies simply do not believe that "spending" creates good, "real" jobs. Government spending programs can create temporary "leaf raking" jobs like the WPA in the depression or the various manpower programs of the 1960's and 1970's. Government spending can also direct money to particular projects and companies. But, in the respondents' view, "leaf-raking" public jobs accomplish nothing in the long run and big government projects just end up being pork-barrel "bridges to nowhere." There is virtually no confidence that a hopelessly corrupt government has the ability or the integrity to create stable, decent jobs or to direct money to the projects and investments America actually needs.

- o The national debt is not viewed as a vague abstraction that is free of cost or consequence. The participants in the interviews, focus groups and surveys believe that the debt will be passed on to the next generation of children and grandchildren, creating a burden on their economic future and leaving the country at the mercy of the Chinese. The sense of lost control of America's economic destiny is a tremendously powerful current of opinion and is closely linked to the concern about the loss of American jobs and the disappearance of the decent wages of the past.

- o Deficits are not visualized by average Americans as "stimulative" tools for injecting purchasing power into the economy, On the contrary, they are seen as symbols of government irresponsibly, the waste and misappropriation of taxpayer money and the failure of congressmen and congresswomen to responsibly budget for the future to meet the real needs of their constituents.

- o Even when informed that the bailouts of the financial and auto industries had been paid back, many people in the D-Corps' studies remained skeptical about the corporate greed and excess that necessitated the bailouts in the first place and the decision to help the wealthy and large corporations instead of ordinary Americans. The principle of providing taxpayer dollars to big corporations (with mentions of golden parachutes/executive compensation) was viewed as morally unacceptable.

o In a profoundly prescient 2007 article in the American Prospect, Stan Greenberg summarized years of D-Corps research on the relationship between public attitudes toward deficits and spending on the one hand and broader attitudes toward government in general:

"Although people may favor government action on critical issues like health care, education, and energy, their lack of trust in government's capacity to spend money properly means that their first priority actually is to cut wasteful spending and make government more accountable. People are desperate to see accountability from Washington--not just in the spending of tax dollars with no discernible results, but also in politicians' behavior. Two-thirds believe that politicians put their own interests before the public's...

...Democrats will not make sustainable gains unless they are able to restore the public's confidence in the capacity to act through government... To have any chance of getting heard on their agenda, Democrats need to stand up and take on the government--not its size or scope, but its failure to be accountable--and deliver the results that people expect for the tax they pay."

This brief summary does not do justice to the full subtlety and texture of the Democracy Corps research. The two main reports include numerous direct quotations from the individual interviews and focus groups that succeed in capturing the emotional flavor of the attitudes expressed as well as their cognitive structure.

What the Democracy Corps study shows

The picture that emerges from this research reveals a complex mix of attitudes that does not neatly fit into either the standard Democratic or Republican narratives. Yet, at the same time, it presents a perspective that is instantly recognizable as extremely typical and widespread. As such, the Democracy Corps research provides a profoundly important foundation and context for analyzing and interpreting the results of individual opinion polls and questions.

There is no way this kind of insight can be gleaned from polls alone. It is the combination and integration of cross-validated data from individual interviews, focus groups and polling on economic conditions and experiences that gives the Democracy Corps data a level of credibility and plausibility that conventional opinion data by itself simply lacks.

On the specific issue of understanding public attitudes on job creation versus deficit reduction the Democracy Corps multi-dimensional research approach provides a dramatically deeper and different understanding of popular opinion. The interviews and focus groups reveal not a narrowly Keynesian economic conceptual framework for thinking about the issue but a broader ethical and social one that is profoundly shaped by attitudes toward government, corruption, reward for work, justice and other factors.

Progressives can reasonably say that in a narrowly economic sense ordinary Americans are technically "wrong" when they endorse both deficit reduction and job creation at the same time, but the D-Corps research dramatically illustrates that ordinary Americans attitudes cannot be dismissed as simply the mindless parroting of Republican clichés.

What the Democracy Corps studies most fundamentally demonstrate is that ordinary Americans have real, substantive opinions that progressives must take seriously and not dismiss. Those opinions may include beliefs that are factually wrong, but they express a perspective that is entirely authentic and rooted in the realities of daily life - a perspective that is meaningful and "true" to these voters and citizens and which progressives must try to sympathetically understand even when they disagree.

This framework of basic views imposes very clear limits on the degree to which media messages can influence public opinion. Media messages can shift attitudes where no deeply held views are involved, but such messages cannot change the opinions of ordinary Americans if those messages conflict with the basic framework of underlying views such as those that the Democracy Corps Economy Project research reveals.

Conclusion:

If progressives wish to make real progress in winning the support of ordinary Americans it is urgent that they abandon the two utterly condescending attitudes that now represent profound obstacles to building an independent progressive movement. The Democracy Corps research has two vitally important implications:

1. Progressives cannot know what ordinary Americans consider the "real issues" and what they "really" believe about major issues without doing serious, extensive and sustained field research.

Progressives cannot know what working people really think simply by deduction from progressive principles, from introspection or from single poll results.

There is, for example, simply no way that many ordinary Americans' view of the complementary nature of jobs and deficits or the way that their support for deficit reduction grows out of distrust of government rather than a rejection of Keynesian economic theory can be deduced simply on the basis of deductions from progressive principles or by reading isolated poll questions. Results like the complementary nature of jobs and deficits necessarily appear as if they simply must be the result of confusion if one does not understand the underlying conceptual framework that produces these views.

The conclusion progressives must draw is clear. What ordinary working people think is an empirical question that must be investigated with patient, hard ethnographic fieldwork, not introspection, not slogans and not single poll results as data.

Rhetorical assertions that progressives know and care about the "real issues" and emotional appeals to the inherent progressivism of ordinary Americans are entirely valid and appropriate in impassioned speeches and rousing calls to action. They are, on the other hand, utterly inadequate for intellectually serious political analysis and strategic planning.

The recent Democracy Corps studies conducted as part of the economy project have presented a clear model for how serious research can be done. Democrats and progressives need to make a firm commitment to base their strategy on hard data of this kind.

2. Ordinary working people are not simply gullible and easily manipulated by media messages. They have complex and coherent beliefs and opinions that underlie their views. Progressives must learn to understand these views and how to engage with them emphatically even when they disagree.

There is nothing inherently conservative rather than progressive in the views that the Democracy Corps studies unearthed. Those views reflect the reality of life for ordinary Americans today and express an anger, frustration, alienation and discouragement that is fundamentally justified. What the Democracy Corps studies most fundamentally demonstrate is that ordinary Americans have real, substantive opinions that progressives must take seriously and not dismiss. Those opinions may include beliefs that are factually wrong, but they express a perspective that is entirely authentic and rooted in the realities of their daily life - a perspective that is meaningful and "true" to these voters and citizens and which progressives must try to sympathetically understand even when they disagree.

Casually dismissing these views as the mindless parroting of "conservative clichés" or gullible acceptance of "conservative propaganda" is not only objectively false but is also the most powerful driver of the widespread sentiment among many ordinary Americans that progressives are indeed "condescending elitists" who are completely out of touch with the realities of life for hard-working families.

The "condescending elitists" accusation is not simply a charge manufactured by Fox News and talk radio commentators. Ordinary Americans directly perceive it to be true when they hear the progressive discourses that describe them as the gullible victims of conservative propaganda rather than as Americans with thoughtfully held views. The conservative accusation resonates with them because there is a reality they can directly perceive that supports it.

It is, in fact, resentment against the two implicit progressive views -- that *"the only reason ordinary Americans don't support progressives is that they have been brainwashed by conservative messages and media"* and that *"progressives know what policies ordinary Americans really need"* -- that most directly fuels the popularity of pseudo-populists like Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh and the host of others who make challenging progressive "elitism" the core of their political message. Conservatives like these are far more adept than progressives at framing their policy prescriptions in such a way that those policies seem to mirror and reflect the cynical and frustrated but not necessarily conservative underlying attitudes that many ordinary Americans do genuinely hold.

The Democracy Corps research illustrates how progressives and Democrats can combat and defeat this approach. Progressives and Democrats must first begin by seriously studying and understanding the real attitudes of ordinary working Americans. On this basis they can then seek the most effective ways to present their policy prescriptions - ways that ground those prescriptions in the underlying framework of attitudes of ordinary Americans and that present those prescriptions as reasonable and sensible solutions to the real problems Americans now confront.

The first step, however, is to firmly and categorically set aside the two profoundly destructive notions that are now a central roadblock preventing progressives and Democrats from being able to communicate with ordinary Americans.