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Progressivism

in the United States of America



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Dansk Resumé: Progressivisme i USA

USA bliver generelt betragtet som et konservativt land, og værdier såsom individualisme og selvstændighed er i højsædet. Som oftest ønsker amerikanerne at lade markedets kræfter få frit spil, og holdningen til regeringen og den offentlige sektor er for de flestes vedkommende, at den skal være så minimal som muligt. Der er dog folk, som inden for de sidste årtier er begyndt at sætte spørgsmålstegn ved graden af konservatismen i USA. De mener, at amerikanerne er ved at ændre syn på specielt regeringens rolle i samfundet, og at størstedelen af amerikanere bevæger sig i en progressiv retning. Da toneangivende politiske kommentatorer kommer med vidt forskellige og modsigende bud på, i hvilken retning USA bevæger sig, ser vi i dette speciale nærmere på, i hvilken udstrækning amerikanerne bevæger sig i en progressiv retning.

I sin korte form er progressivisme både en livsanskuelse og en tilgang til politik. Den progressive tilgang til stort set alle politikker og standpunkter tager udspring i empati for medmennesket, samt et ønske om at tage ansvar for hinanden. To af progressivismens politiske mærkesager er at reducere økonomisk ulighed og en udvidelse af sundhedssektoren. Argumentet mod økonomisk ulighed bygger på, at amerikanere i de laveste indkomstgrupper ofte mangler de helt grundlæggende forudsætninger, der skal til for at leve et fyldestgørende liv, som f.eks. evnen til at betale for sygeforsikring og en ordentlig uddannelse. Statistikker viser oven i købet, at en stor procentdel af fattige amerikanere sjældent klatrer op ad den sociale rangstige, hvilket ofte sker i de højere indkomstgrupper. Argumentet for en reform af sundhedsvæsenet er, at i et moderne og rigt samfund som det amerikanske, er det ikke rimeligt, at en stor befolkningsgruppe mangler netop evnen til at betale for en sundhedsforsikring.

Vi har valgt at se nærmere på fem progressive nøgleområder i meningsmålingerne fra 1994-2008, da vi anslår, at det vil kunne ses i disse meningsmålinger, hvis amerikanerne bevæger sig i en progressiv retning.

Vi ser tydelige progressive tendenser inden for amerikanernes holdning til regeringens rolle og størrelsen på den offentlige sektor, homoseksualitet, sygeforsikring og miljøet, og vi vurderer, at der er adskillige samfundsmæssige grunde til, at disse holdningsændringer finder sted. Som eksempel kan nævnes, at på trods af økonomisk vækst stiger antallet af folk uden sygeforsikring

samtidig med, at forsikringspræmien er steget voldsomt. Derfor kan det være, at folk i stigende grad ønsker en udvidelse af den offentlige sektor på dette område. En anden væsentlig udvikling er, at den øgede fokus på konsekvenserne af forurening og klimaforandringer kan have været medvirkende til, at amerikanerne ønsker at se regeringen gøre en større indsats på området.

Resultaterne af vores undersøgelse peger i den retning, at den traditionelle konservative holdning til regeringens rolle i samfundet måske er ved at ændre sig. Amerikanerne viser i større grad empati overfor de marginaliserede grupper i samfundet, og meningsmålingerne viser, at de måske er villige til at tage et større ansvar for hele samfundets velbefindende. Dette sætter spørgsmålstegn ved den individualistiske tankegang, som ellers har kendetegnet det amerikanske samfund. Valget af Barack Obama, der gik til valg på adskillige progressive løfter, indikerer, at amerikanerne ønsker en ny politisk tilgang til de udfordringer, som landet står overfor. Vi tror dog, at de konservative træk ligger så dybt forankret i den amerikanske livsanskuelse, at de altid vil være til stede i en vis grad, skønt de dog vil blive nedtonet af de progressive tendenser, der har vist sig siden 1994. Vores speciale har påvist progressive tendenser i et ellers konservativt samfund, samt at amerikanerne er blevet mere villige til at lade regeringen have større indflydelse – i hvert fald inden for de områder, vi har kigget nærmere på.

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1 Introduction: Progressivism in the United States

The United States is said to be a fundamentally conservative nation. From its birth, the U.S. has had conservative instincts such as being in favor of minimal government intervention and a free market economy. They are comfortable with relatively high levels of economic inequality and their perspectives on social issues are largely traditional (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2004b). Especially in comparison to their European counterparts, the distinct conservative trait which is inherently American is what sets the U.S. apart. In their book from 2004, *The Right Nation*, John Micklethwait, editor-in-chief at The Economist,¹ and Adrian Wooldridge, Washington bureau chief and columnist for The Economist, portray the U.S. as fundamentally conservative and argue,

“this conservatism explains why America is different. Not only has America produced a far more potent conservative movement than anything available in other rich countries; America as a whole is a more conservative place. Americans might imagine that their politics is as varied as everybody else’s (...), but the center gravity of American opinion is much further to the right.”

(Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2004a).

The distinct conservative traits in the American society were shaped in American history and many point specifically to the days of the westward expansion where immigrants came to America attracted by the wide-open spaces and in search of fortune. At the frontier, the notion of self-reliance, hard work, and economic opportunity thrived. Today, the conservative character is still shaped by these features to some extent. The frontier closed more than a century ago but the American dream of upward mobility through self-reliance, reinvention, and hard work is still an essential part of the American consciousness. This is one of the reasons why Americans have always been suspicious of government intervention and also in favor of the notion that in America, people have the opportunities to prosper on their own merits.

¹ *The Economist* is a weekly newspaper with a circulation that exceeds 1.3 million printed copies per week. It targets educated readers and its writers and columnists include influential political scholars and business leaders.

However, there are voices in the political debate who in the past decades are beginning to argue that this inherent conservative characteristic is changing. It is being argued that Americans are growing increasingly progressive in their outlooks and are stepping away from traditional conservative views – especially in their views toward government. John B. Judis, senior editor of *The New Republic*² and Ruy Teixeira, political scientist and senior fellow at the Century Foundation,³ argue that a new progressive era is underway. This era will be marked by a positive view of the role which government can have in promoting the general well-being for all American citizens. People are increasingly favoring government intervention when it comes to equipping them with the means to succeed in today’s economy and helping disadvantaged groups in society who may be lagging behind in terms of, for example, education and health care (2002: 4-6). Outside the U.S., there are also voices that claim that a progressive America is well on its way. In Denmark, Carl Pedersen, Professor of American Studies at the Center for the Study of the Americas at Copenhagen Business School, argues in his book, *Det Andet USA* (2008)⁴, that a majority of Americans will reject the conservative policies of the Reagan and George W. Bush years, and instead support policies that are based on progressive values such as social equality and economic opportunity (2008: 165).

Progressivism today has many common traits with the original progressive movement of the early 20th century in that progressives are deeply concerned with the social and economic challenges which face millions of people in the U.S. (Judis and Teixeira, 2002: 5-6). It is the belief that government is there to help and not to be intrusive of people’s personal freedoms and choices, and that all citizens have a responsibility toward each other in making sure that no one is left behind in an advancing society (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008: 4-6).

Many of the progressive characteristics contradict the conservative viewpoints which are argued to be inherent in American society. Nonetheless, it seems that progressivism is a term which

² *The New Republic* is a liberal magazine, founded in 1914. It is published twice a month and has a circulation of 60,000 copies.

³ *The Century Foundation* is a progressive public policy institute, founded in 1919.

⁴ English title: “The Other America: Renewal and Freedom in the 21st Century US”

receives more and more attention in the political debate in the U.S.. In fact, it seems difficult to avoid the term 'progressive' when various policy discussions take place in the established political press and literature. Furthermore, political scientists and scholars of public opinion are publishing studies which also suggest the Americans are beginning to take steps away from conservative orientation and are onward moving in a progressive direction.

Indications that public attitudes are changing can be found in the opinion polls. Especially since the mid-1990s, people have continuously shifted their outlooks on a variety of issues, among others, government intervention in the health care system, helping the poorest in the American society, and increased tolerance of homosexuality. Those three issues are quite unconnected to each other, it seems, but it thus makes the matter at hand interesting. Since there have been changes in public attitudes toward a wide variety of issues, it could suggest that Americans are changing their perspectives on society in general. Most recently, there is a new Democratic president in the White House which has made many political commentators declare that the U.S. is definitely going in new directions.

For many years, the political debates have been centered on values-issues – there has even been talk of a 'culture war' in the American society (Fiorina, 2006) – but the focus seems to have shifted more in the direction of education, health care, economic inequality, and size of government. These particular issues have strong relations to core progressive issues which makes us wonder if the U.S. in fact is moving in a progressive direction. In this thesis, we will research public attitudes toward a selection of key-progressive issues because renowned political voices proclaim quite different evaluations on the matter. Therefore we want to assess to what extent the Americans are becoming more progressive in their outlooks.

1.1 Research question and structure

In this thesis, we ask the following question:

Are Americans becoming more progressive?

In order to analyze progressivism in the U.S., it is important to emphasize the key-aspects of progressivism. Chapter 2, *Introduction: Progressivism in the United States*, presents progressivism from several different aspects so as to give a broad understanding of its dynamics. We begin with the foundation of progressivism which is the core progressive theories. The theories then set the stage to progressivism in more practical terms. One of the central elements of progressivism in practice is government so we begin with the role of government and move on to economic inequality because progressives believe that one of the main goals that government should have is to reduce economic inequality. There are links between economic inequality and other aspects of society that progressives feel strongly about, namely upward mobility, education, and health care, which are presented next. The following section is also about inequality but in the context of social and cultural inequality, meaning in regard to, for example, gender or ethnicity. Progressives argue that there are still obstacles in the American society and culture today which these particular groups are faced with. We end off Chapter 2 with explaining the environment because it is an issue which receives immense attention in society at the moment, and progressives have a long history of promoting progressive environmental policies.

In Chapter 3, *Public Opinion*, we will put the progressive theories and political approaches mentioned in the previous chapter to the test. Due to delimitation reasons, we have selected five opinion polls which we believe frame progressivism the most. The polls we have chosen relate to public attitudes toward trust in government, size of government, the health care system, social and cultural inequality in terms of homosexuality, and the environment. Progressives hold distinct views on these specific areas; and therefore we should be able to spot a suspected trend in the figures.

The discussion of our findings takes place in Chapter 4. The structure of this chapter essentially follows the same as Chapter 3. Here we combine our findings in the opinion polls with the relevant theories and approaches mentioned in Chapter 2 and evaluate to what extent Americans

are moving in a progressive direction. We will include extra public opinion polls in order to supply our findings with other relevant data.

We draw our final conclusions in Chapter 5 where we also discuss the implications of our findings.

1.2 Methodology

Theory

We have chosen to focus especially on the progressive theories of George Lakoff and John Rawls. In his book, *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values And Vision*, Lakoff, professor of cognitive linguistics at University of California, Berkeley, explains the progressive morality and values and how they differ from conservatism. John Rawls, esteemed American philosopher, had a noteworthy theory which is often dubbed the “Veil of Ignorance”. This theory explains the very essence of the foundation for progressivism and complements Lakoff’s description of the progressive worldview very well.

Their theories lay the foundation of progressivism and although we include other theories as well where relevant, the theories of Lakoff and Rawls are so profoundly progressive that we have chosen to use them throughout the thesis. Their theories will be explained in further details in Chapter 2.3, *Progressive theory*.

Delimitation

In this thesis, we have chosen to primarily focus on progressivism although this term is often used interchangeably with ‘liberalism’. The general incorrect equation between progressivism and liberalism has posed challenges in regard to interpretation of analytical sources. Albeit several similarities, there are distinctions between the two terms but we have chosen not to go into much detail on this matter. We have, instead, provided a short explanation in Chapter 2.2, *Progressivism vs. liberalism*.

We have relied primarily on resources that are generally known to be or are self-proclaimed progressive authors, institutions, organizations etc. We have especially made use of the online progressive websites, The American Prospect and Center For American Progress, which have been valuable resources for progressive commentaries and articles on a number of subjects. Relying mostly on these resources should ensure that the line of thought on which we base our knowledge of progressivism is relatively consistent and well-founded.

It should also be noted that although we have aimed at keeping most of our sources and academic literature fairly recent, some of the studies and analyses that we refer to were written and published before the current economic recession intensified. For example, when we refer to studies that mention 'recent growth', it refers to economic growth prior to the current recession.

The timeframe for our research, 1994 onward, is mostly due to delimitation reasons. Going further back would require a substantial amount of research which extends beyond the boundaries of this thesis.

Also primarily due to delimitation reason, we have chosen to base our empirical data on five essential public opinion polls. We consider these polls to represent distinct key-progressive issues which will provide a basis for a broad analysis. Another reason for selecting these particular issues is that some of the progressive characteristics mentioned in Chapter 2, *What Is Progressivism?*, can be quite difficult to operationalize. For example, attitudes toward 'economic inequality', a major progressive concern, is difficult to measure via public opinion polls because the term in itself carries several different connotations.

Finding relevant and applicable opinion polls that are both up-to-date, go back to 1994, and ask the exact same question with a regular interval has posed difficulties. We primarily use statistical data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), the General Social Survey (GSS), and Gallup as primary sources for public opinion. These organizations are probably the most widely cited resources for public opinion and all have extensive time series. However, ANES has not released data since 2004 so their figures will be supplied with data from other polling organizations, such as CBS News / New York Times and Gallup. These organizations have asked identical questions in more recent years. Where relevant, we will add supplementary statistical data to our research.

Opinion polls used in this thesis have a margin of error of approximately $\pm 3\%$ which means that the total number of respondents never falls below 1000. However, figures from the General Social Survey from 2002 and 2004 are in the range of 800-900 respondents in total. Furthermore, in the time series from CBS News / New York Times Poll, only the total number of respondents from the last year surveyed is available. We have still chosen to include the polls because we consider them to be trustworthy and reliable sources. Also, the sum of the percentages may not always add up to 100, since categories like “*other*”, “*don’t know*”, and “*refused*” have been left out, or because the figures are rounded to whole numbers.

Our last comment on opinion polls is that it is important to remember that they are ‘guiding’ empirical data in the sense that there is always the possibility of people answering what they believe to be the ‘right thing to answer’ as opposed to answering in sincere accordance to their honest opinion.

Many reports and studies on progressivism in the U.S. point, among others, to demographic changes in their argumentation. We have chosen not to assess demographics in this connection because the argument in demographic changes is mostly a projection of future demographics. Our primary interest is the changes which have happened from the mid-1990s till today.

We have chosen to mainly focus on progressive economic policies that aim at reducing economic inequality. These policies are the ones that most clearly reflect progressive values, and we will therefore not include progressive viewpoints and analyses on for example, the balance of trade, free trade agreements etc.

We have also chosen not to include progressive foreign policies. The main reason is that, when looking back at American foreign policy history, there does not seem to be a coherent progressive approach. During the 20th century, there were different approaches; some have been isolationist or anti-imperialist, and some have been internationalist. Also, progressivism is primarily concerned with improving domestic conditions. Foreign policy involves too many aspects which do not necessarily have to do with domestic issues that affect everyday Americans.

Finally, this research will not be focused on policy outcomes because our primary interest is the changes which have taken place among the American people and not the policies enacted by government officials.

1.3 Timeframe: 1994 onward

Our timeframe of research in this thesis ranges primarily from 1994 until present day. Something happened, especially in the years 1994-1996, that made opinion polls show significant fluctuations on a wide range of issues, many of which are relevant to our area of research. Since our objective for this thesis is to find out if the Americans are becoming more progressive, we have chosen to set 1994 as our year of departure.

The mid-1990s in many ways marked the peak of conservatism which is evident in many public opinion polls, as we will elaborate on later in the thesis. We want to briefly pinpoint a few episodes and events that came before and may have had an influence on the political direction up until 1994. The 1980s was the decade where conservatism really grew strong in the U.S.. Ronald Reagan was president for most of the 1980s and in his first inaugural address in 1981, he proclaimed that *“government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”* (Reagan, 1981). His two presidential terms would be marked by tax-cuts, reduced government spending, deregulation, and shrinkage of government (Collins, 2007: 67-70) – policies which are at the core of conservatism. His dislike for the mix of government in business matters came to influence conservative media significantly. In 1987, the *Fairness Doctrine* was abolished. The doctrine said that broadcast stations had to cover news stories and controversial issues in ways that were fair and balanced and also present contrasting views on the matter at hand. However, as part of the Reagan’s deregulation policies, the *Fairness Doctrine* was dissolved (Limburg, 2009). As a result, many conservatives quickly realized that the radio media could be used to their advantage, and the number of conservative talk radio channels grew dramatically (Cruz, 2007).

When Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, he tried to appeal to conservatives on some issues. Many of his opinions and policies were met with fierce opposition on the right for example, his pro-affirmative action stance, his support of gays in the military, and his promise to bring about gender equality which threatened the traditional family model. It was a conservative

counter-reaction toward the societal changes that had been taking place in the U.S. since the 1960s (Jenkins, 2003: 301). Also, his wife Hillary Clinton, who personified feminism in eyes of conservatives, was put in charge of a commission set to reform the healthcare system so that it would cover all Americans (Jenkins, 2003: 301 and Davis, 2003: 544). President Clinton, in his effort to win over moderates, moved away from implementing new social programs and at the same time conservatism and anti-Clinton feelings grew in strength. The conservative movement especially made use of the abovementioned talk radio which was used to spread their anti-government message along with more personal attacks on the Clintons and their involvement in the so-called *Whitewater controversy*⁵ (Jenkins, 2003: 301 and Zinn, 1996: 633).

It was in this political climate the Republican Party took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years in the midterm elections of 1994 (Davis, 2003: 545). The Republicans saw the election as a mandate for the conservative program which was laid out in their *Contract With America* – a list of conservative key issues such as increased defense spending and anti-abortion measures (Zinn, 1996: 633 and Davis, 2003: 545). With the Republican majority in Congress and Bill Clinton in the Oval Office, it became difficult to come to agreement on a number of issues and, in 1995, this led to a shut-down of the federal government because of disagreements over the budget and the size and role of government. For example, the Republicans, led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, wanted to cut the funding for Medicare⁶ (Krugman, 2009: 153).

The mid-1990s were marked by the conservative ideology that prevailed at the time. Although President Clinton in some respect held progressive views on a number of issues, the circumstances and the political context in which he had to operate, dealing with a record budget deficit and a growing conservative movement, made it difficult for him to focus on progressive policies.

From the 1980s and onward, Republicans had pushed their conservative agenda fiercely, and

⁵ A controversy over illegal real-estate dealings in which the Clintons were involved. However, the Clintons were not charged with criminal conduct as investigators did not find sufficient evidence in their inquiries.

⁶ Public health insurance for people over the age of 65.

1994 is said to be a significant year of the conservative era, culminating with the Republicans gaining control of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Since progressivism in many ways hold contradicting views to conservatism, we have chosen 1994 as our primary year of departure.

2 What Is Progressivism?

In order to find out whether the U.S. is moving in a progressive direction, it is a prerequisite to understand the concept of progressivism: what is the underlying philosophy, who in their writings and theories have helped define progressivism as we know it today, and how is it expressed and implemented in today's society.

In this chapter we will explain the basic and some of the most significant aspects of progressivism, starting with the fundamental values and through that introduce some of the core progressive principles which we will use throughout the thesis. Then we move on to explain progressivism in more practical terms which, among others, includes the role of government, economic inequality, social and cultural inequality, and the environment.

As we go through the various facets of progressivism, the theories of several political thinkers, such as John Rawls, George Lakoff, John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Reich, and others will be mentioned in order to support our introduction to progressivism. But first, we will introduce some basic background information on progressivism: Progressive history, and the differences between progressivism and liberalism since these two terms are often mistaken as synonyms.

2.1 Progressive history

Contemporary progressivism springs from the progressive movement of the early 20th century – from approximately 1900 to 1920 – that sought to reform politics and economics in order to restore social and economic justice. It was a period of economic turbulence, and industrialization and urbanization posed many new challenges to the American society. Although it is was a period of material and economic progress, the living conditions of working people, especially industrial workers, did not improve. In order to deal with these problems, progressives introduced a range of initiatives and enacted legislation that would benefit the underprivileged (Podesta, 2008: 16-39). For example, progressives increased taxes for corporations, and, in order to improve the conditions for the many industrial workers, they enacted new state laws that regulated wages, introduced health and safety provisions, and provided for compensation for injured workers. Also, progressives put protection of natural resources and conservation on the agenda (Jenkins, 2003:

190).⁷ The progressive movement served as an alternative to extreme socialism and conservatism that prevailed at the time (Podesta, 2008: 39). It was a way of dealing with the major problems facing society by employing new methods in order to restore social and economic justice.

Progressivism today is best understood by looking at the experiences from the early 20th century. For example, progressivism is non-partisan and pragmatic, and at its core it is the belief that government has the ability to improve society. Several of the causes progressives fought for during the early 20th century are still very relevant today and include regulation of business, raising the minimum wage, environmental protection, fair taxation, and health care.

2.2 Progressivism vs. liberalism

Before we begin our research on progressivism in the U.S., we need to establish a clear definition of the term 'progressivism'. Progressivism is not easily defined, mainly because it is not as theoretically developed as ideologies such as conservatism and liberalism (Podesta, 2008: 16). Furthermore, progressivism is commonly mistaken as another term for liberalism, so in this section we will shortly line up the differences between the two.

Sometimes it seems that the two terms are used interchangeably and synonymously (Sirota, 2005). It has also been suggested that liberals only started calling themselves progressives because the political right and the Republican Party have succeeded in giving the term 'liberal' negative connotations and made it a term of abuse (Lind, 2008). The confusion may stem from the fact that progressivism and liberalism are complementary sets of ideas and because they share many values and ways of dealing with policies. They are, however, different in terms of origin and emphasis (Podesta, 2008: 16). For example, progressivism is not as theoretically and academically developed as liberalism, and, as mentioned above, it springs from the social and

⁷ In fact, Republican President Theodore Roosevelt (in office 1901-1909) has become known for his passion for nature and wildlife. More than any other president before him or after him, he put his fingerprint on American conservation. His extensive conservation efforts include 150 national forests, 5 national parks, 51 bird reserves, and 18 national monuments (Podesta, 2008: 51-2).

economic reform movements of the early 20th century. Therefore the nature of progressivism is characterized by the pragmatic approach which was used during the progressive era at that time. Liberalism, which dates back to the Enlightenment, has been more thoroughly developed over a few centuries and is more concerned with individual freedom.

Put very simply, the theoretical difference between progressivism and liberalism is that while liberalism is more concerned with individualism and personal freedom, progressivism focuses more on common purpose and collective needs in society (Podesta, 2008: 20-1). Progressivism is thus considered to be a hands-on approach that is experimental rather than ideological. Others have defined the difference as being between philosophy and action (Krugman, 2009: 268).

Finally, it is important to mention that although progressivism shares more traits with liberalism and the Democratic Party than it does with conservatism and the Republican Party, one of the progressive aims is not to be tied to partisanship and progressive Republicans are not a rare sight in the political scene. For example, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger from the Republican Party has progressive views when it comes to environmental policies and also in regard to combining the benefits of the free-market with government regulation in order to advance a new green industry.⁸

We have chosen to focus on progressivism rather than liberalism in this research paper because progressivism appears to be a concept that is gaining much attention in the press and political debate. Renowned political thinkers and economists, for example, John Podesta, political advisor and former Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton and Paul Krugman, Nobel Prize winning economist, who are highly involved in the current political scene, are self-proclaimed

⁸ It should be noted, however, that progressives are currently mostly tied with liberals and the Democratic Party. Paul Krugman, esteemed economist and political advisor, states that as long as the political parties are as polarized as they are today, progressivism stands in clear contrast to conservatism and the Republican Party on many more issues than with liberalism and the Democratic Party. Hopefully in time, political polarization will shrink and thus the need for partisanship will diminish because progressivism is a third way approach which both liberals and conservatives can adhere to (Krugman, 2009: 272-3).

‘progressives’. As we will explore, many changes have happened in the opinion polls since the mid-1990s, and it makes us wonder to what extent progressivism is gaining ground in the U.S..

2.3 Progressive theory

In this section we will explain some of the theories which make up the foundation of progressivism. These include the core values of progressivism, the ‘Common Good Principle’, and the progressive worldview from which all progressive policies and positions originate from. Throughout the thesis when we elaborate on progressivism in more practical terms, these are the theories which will be referenced to. They are the heart of progressivism.

2.3.1 Progressive values

The foundation of progressive morality is empathy and responsibility. George Lakoff, professor of cognitive linguistics at University of California, Berkeley and a founder of the progressive think tank The Rockridge Institute,⁹ has expressed empathy and responsibility very clearly and concise in his book, *Thinking Points*:

“Empathy is the capacity to connect with other people, to feel what others feel, to imagine oneself as another and hence to feel a kinship with others. Responsibility means acting on that empathy – responsibility for yourself and for others. From empathy and responsibility, a set of core progressive values follows. These are the values that define progressive thought and structure progressive positions on any issue.” (2006: 53)

Among others, the values which Lakoff refers to include equality, fulfillment in life, opportunity, fairness, and prosperity (2006: 53). To a large extent, many of these values, if not all of them, are

⁹ *The Rockridge Institute* was a progressive think tank which aimed at promoting progressive ideas and values. The institute closed in April 2008, but their website (www.rockridgeinstitute.org) states that its staff members are still very committed to their courses.

very much linked to each other. For example, a progressive would argue that it is only fair that everybody has equal opportunity to get ahead in life. A child is not in control of which family he or she is born into. It could be a wealthy family or it could be a poor family. Therefore it is only fair that the child is provided with opportunities that will help him or her to prosper and obtain fulfillment in life. Such opportunities should include but not be limited to access to good education, health care, and employment opportunities free from discrimination.

2.3.2 The progressive principle of the 'Common Good'

From the core progressive values follow core political principles that mostly are unconscious, but constantly form the basis for progressive policies, explains Lakoff. Of these principles, the one that is probably most widely cited by progressives is the 'Common Good Principle'.¹⁰ The common good, which includes schools and universities, the road system, security (police, firefighters, military), the banking and court system etc., is necessary for the individual well-being of citizens because it makes up the infrastructure that benefits everyone and contributes to the pursuit of individual goals. It is the common wealth, meaning, taxpayer money, which pays for the common good and thus creates opportunities and allows for fulfillment in life. According to Lakoff, the 'Common Good Principle' promotes fairness and equality and is based on the notion that we are all in this together. What this means is that everyone not only shares the benefits, but also the responsibilities and costs of maintaining the common good (Lakoff, 2006: 54-5).

2.3.3 The progressive worldview

Empathy and responsibility are the primary progressive values, but they can also seem somewhat intangible. Values sound noble in theory, but how can people apply them to their lives in practice and in their general worldview? One of the leading thinkers behind progressivism is the American

¹⁰ The other progressive principles mentioned by Lakoff are the 'Expansion of Freedom Principle', the 'Human Dignity Principle', and the 'Diversity Principle' (2006: 54-55).

political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002), whose most influential book is probably *A Theory of Justice* from 1971. Rawls theories are based on equality and individual rights, together with his awareness of the role which pure chance plays in our lives. Our position in life when we were born, at present day, and in the future are to a certain extent dependent on situations and events which we are not in control of or which happen upon us by chance. Some times it is 'life's lottery' that place people at the bottom of society, and Rawls firmly believed that society, and especially government, should recognize this and work to reduce unfair inequalities between people (Randall, 2003). But how can progressive thinkers make people understand the foundation of progressivism and the importance of empathy and responsibility?

John Rawls had an interesting theory on how to impact people's mindset in regard to progressive values. He developed a theory, or rather a thought-experiment, where he encourages the reader to mentally step behind what he calls a "*veil of ignorance*":

Imagine that you have no knowledge of your position, personal interests, or characteristics in life. You have no knowledge of rules, regulations, and cultural mindsets in your society. You do not know if you are rich or poor, black or white, Buddhist or Christian, gay or straight, with one leg or two. In fact, you have absolutely no knowledge of any personal traits which may characterize you in a given society. You then step into the world. What kind of world would you prefer to step into?

When people sincerely undergo this thought-experiment, they will conclude that they want to step into a world which is just and liberal, and where people treat each other with mutual respect and understanding, argues Rawls; a world where inequalities, whatever shape they may take, would be recognized and taken account of through justly designed social and political institutions. Most likely, no one would want to enter a world where they are discriminated against on elements in their lives which are inherent or happened upon them by chance (Randall, 2003).

The starting point of the progressive worldview is just that: Empathy with people who suffer hardship, and a common responsibility for one another.

2.4 The role of government

Governments have the authority to intervene in most areas of society and the power to make significant changes. The size of government and the public sector in a given society vary to a great extent, and are usually related to the ideology of the incumbent government. Conservative governments tend to prefer less government intervention, whereas liberal governments are known to favor more government intervention.

Historically and compared to many European countries, the appreciation of a large public sector has never grown strong in the U.S.. The shared belief in the American dream, self-reliance, and laissez-faire, that is, free-market economy and minimal government interventionism, is a dominant factor in the shaping of American culture (Ashbee, 2002: 33-4). A certain degree of government suspicion has always existed in the U.S., and since the writing of the Constitution in the 18th century, it has been official that Americans have an inherent cynicism toward government. In fear of losing individual rights to the federal government, the Bill of Rights was amended to the Constitution in 1791 insuring greater protection to individual citizens and the states from the power of the federal government (Ashbee, 2004: 44).

Progressivism aims to eliminate the hostile perception of government which many Americans inherently hold to various degrees. The progressive approach is positive toward the role of government because government is not an institution which seeks to take away people's money, freedoms, and individual choices. Rather, progressives believe that government is the main tool to secure greater freedom and prosperity for all American citizens. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein state in their book, *Nudge*, that progressives "*are not for bigger government, just for better government*" (2008: 14). Government is able to provide services which extend to all citizens, not just those who can afford it. Spending and investing in people, the infrastructure, and the common good in general will benefit the whole society. Some groups in society would benefit faster than others from, for example, universal health care provision or access to better education. But in the long run, society is improved because more citizens are in better health, others have less financial insecurity due to the public health care insurance, and there are more well-educated people in the workforce. The interaction between government spending and government services is thus an instrument that improves the lives of all Americans.

The essence of the progressive approach to the role of government is that government is there to help, not to restrain people's individual freedoms. Progressives want the government to set up frameworks in order to guide people toward better choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008: 4-6). An example of a progressive approach in practice could be giving high school graduates a nudge toward college: In San Marcos, Texas, high school students had to submit a college application in order to graduate high school. The goal was to increase the proportion of Latinos who moved on to college. As a result of this 'nudge' toward college, the percentage of high school students who went on to college rose from 34% to 45% within a year (p. 205-6). Progressives argue that in many cases it is about setting up 'default options' for people when they have to make important decisions in life because people tend to choose the 'default' (p. 8). The high school students in San Marcos were not obligated to actually take a college degree. They were, however, obligated to think strongly about it and to submit an application.

This is an example of a non-intrusive policy approach which could be applied to many issues. Progressives do not want to prevent people from going their own way because the freedom to choose for your self is very important. On the other hand, the government should provide the guidance which could help more people to better solutions such as, for example, a higher education (p. 5).

While more government regulation is not the main objective of progressivism, it is, however, a very important issue to address since progressives view government as the main player in furthering progressive values and policies in the American society (Galston and Kamarck, 2008: 2). This is why the role of government plays an important part in explaining progressivism.

Most progressive policies involve government action because government is the main instrument in progressive measures. However, history has proven that if the incumbent government does not have the public trust behind them, it can be very difficult to implement major reform policies. For example, political scholars suggest that one of the reasons that Bill Clinton's health care reform did not go through in 1994 was that public trust in government was historically low (Galston and Kamarck, 2008: 1-2). Lack of trust in government was most likely not the only factor in the dismissal of the health care reform, but neither is it a factor to be neglected. Since the role of

government is so central in progressivism, it is important that a progressive government enjoys the public trust.

Finally, in relation to the role of government, it is important to mention that one of the defining features of progressivism is its view of government and the market. Progressivism embraces free market capitalism but at the same time, it is also the conviction that the government cannot remain passive and expect the free market to solve the country's problems – especially those caused by the market such as overheating of the economy and recession. By use of contra-cyclical policies in order to regulate the market, such as monetary and fiscal policies¹¹, progressives argue that only the government has the ability to prevent economic crises and to solve them when they do happen (Waldman, 2008). On a backdrop of the opportunities of a free market economy together with the benefits of government intervention, progressive economic policies take form.

2.5 Economic inequality

One of the most significant tools which government can use in order to further their policies is their management of the economy. Many progressive economic policies are centered on reducing economic inequality because progressives have a strong concern for high economic inequality levels. Therefore our introduction to progressivism in regard to the economy will mainly focus on economic inequality.

Economic inequality refers to unequal distribution of wealth and income,¹² and is most often measured by the Gini coefficient.¹³ According to figures from OECD, the U.S. Gini coefficient was 0.34 in the mid-1980s and has grown steadily to 0.38 by the mid-2000s. It is only exceeded by

¹¹ Monetary policies: the control of money supply through regulation of interest rates. Fiscal policies: the use of taxation and government spending in order to influence the economy.

¹² Wealth is defined as total value of a household's assets, and income is defined as the flow of money to a household.

¹³ The Gini coefficient is measured between 0 and 1 (0 being perfect equality and 1 being perfect inequality). The higher the Gini coefficient, the more unequal distribution of income and wealth in a given country. Nearly all countries can be found between 0.25 and 0.65.

Turkey and Mexico. The U.S. inequality level is therefore relatively high in comparison to, for example, the OECD average of 0.31 and the country with the lowest Gini coefficient, Denmark, of 0.23 (OECD, 2009).¹⁴

In the following paragraphs we will explain why the issue of high levels of economic inequality, in the progressive worldview, is such a major factor in the well-being of individual Americans and the American society; why progressive values conflict with economic inequality; and which economic policies progressives suggest will change the current economic inequality situation.

2.5.1 The moral argument

As we explained in Chapter 2.3.1, the progressive approach to any issue is based on empathy and responsibility. In regard to economic inequality, progressives point especially to the values of fairness, opportunity, and prosperity – all of which are obstructed for millions of Americans due to the consequences of economic inequality. George Lakoff says that “*fairness is unbiased distribution*” (2006: 85), so this development of increased disproportionate distribution of wealth and income is not fair according to progressivism. Economic growth needs to be spread out more equally. The progressive moral argument is that society has a responsibility to do something about the fact that more and more people are living in poverty while the top-income group continues to get even wealthier. Progressives have nothing against wealthy people but they care about the millions of Americans who barely have enough money to live (“From Poverty to Prosperity”, 2009). Poverty casts a long shadow in the U.S., bringing with it lack of education, low living standards, poor health care (if any health care at all), few means for social mobility, and a general lack of opportunity and prosperity for the millions of Americans concerned (Lardner, 2005: 15-24).

¹⁴ The figures are based on income distribution after taxes and transfers, and on total population.

People with low income who need the financial resources to get ahead in life have been left behind due to the unequal distribution of wealth in the American society. It is a pressing situation for the individual person or family who experiences the consequences in their daily lives. Prosperity, self-realization, and economic opportunity are goals that many people strive for – they are the essence of the American Dream. In recent years, the U.S. has experienced unprecedented productivity growth but progressives point to figures which show that today the top 1% of wage earners hold 23% of the nation’s total income, which is the highest it has been since 1928 (Economic Policy Institute, 2008a: 2-3). They argue that according to these figures, the economic growth has mostly benefited the very few at the top of society instead of the many at the bottom. It has thus contributed to growing inequality levels instead of increasing the general living standards. The unequal distribution of the wealth, which has been created by the entire workforce – not just those at the top, has left low-income Americans with few economic opportunities and small means to improve their living conditions. The general growth of GDP has not translated into better living conditions for all Americans and that is not fair, according to progressives. The low-income and middle-class people are struggling to make ends meet and society thus has a responsibility to make sure that all citizens are provided with equal opportunities to improve their own situation (Krugman, 2009: 200-1, 244-9).

2.5.2 The economic argument

While the moral arguments against economic inequality are a major reason as to why progressives want to reduce the inequality levels, they also argue that there are several negative economic consequences of economic inequality. First, the American economy will not be as strong as it has potential to be when there is persistent neglect of the low-income groups. Economist Robert Kuttner, co-editor of the progressive magazine, *The American Prospect*,¹⁵ and co-founder of the

¹⁵ *The American Prospect* has a paid circulation of 37,000 copies and a daily web magazine with more than 1 million unique visitors a month. (www.prospect.org).

think tank The Economic Policy Institute¹⁶, argues that in order to have and maintain a prosperous economy, it requires that government invests in people so that they live up to their full potential as economic beings. These investments need to be in the shape of for example, education, health care, and job training. He says that if society does not invest in its human capital, it is, per definition, not going to be as productive as it could (2005: 228-9).

Secondly, while the low-income groups in society are being left behind, not only is the U.S. missing out on human capital, but progressives also point to the costs of the rising inequality levels. The fact that the number of people living in poverty has been on the increase in recent years – one in eight Americans now lives in poverty – brings with it significant costs on society in forms of lower productivity and earnings of poor adults, increased crime, and broken neighborhoods. Center for American Progress¹⁷ argues that persistent childhood poverty is estimated to cost \$500 billion each year which is about 4% of the American GDP (“From Poverty to Prosperity”, 2009). Finally, the fact that people in the low-income groups, and also an increasing proportion of the middle-income group, do not experience financial progress also means that their buying-power is restrained and does not contribute much to the dynamics of the economy (Krugman, 2009: 246-51).

Creating opportunities for people to climb up the social ladder is thus not only an argument for moral concerns. It would also strengthen the American economy and lower the costs which poverty poses on the American economy.

¹⁶ *The Economic Policy Institute* is a renowned think tank whose main objective is to include the interests of low-income and middle-class workers in the broader economic policy discussion. Another co-founder of the EPI is Robert Reich who we also refer to in this research paper. (www.epi.org).

¹⁷ *Center for American Progress* is a liberal think tank and was founded by esteemed political advisor, John Podesta, former Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton.

2.5.3 The progressive approach in reducing economic inequality

Progressives argue that the whole American society will eventually suffer from the negative consequences of economic inequality. This section will present some of the progressive policy solutions that will help to reduce economic inequality significantly.

In order to reduce economic inequality, Robert Reich, Professor of Public Policy at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley and Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, believes that the government should pursue a bottom-up approach and thus provide low-income groups with possibilities to improve their conditions. This, in turn, will spur economic growth (2007 and 2008a). Reich does not believe that tax-cuts for the wealthiest solve the problem with economic inequality. He argues that such tax-cuts will have the wealthiest and international American corporations invest their money wherever in the world they can find the highest returns, and where labor is cheap and output is high. In other words, the extra money provided by the tax-cuts goes out of the country when it should be trickling-down through the American society. Trickle-down policies, as seen in the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush policies, count on the spending and investments of the wealthiest in U.S. to trickle-down through society and in the long term improve the economic conditions of low-wage earners. This process is often set in motion via tax-cuts for the wealthiest groups but Reich argues that this economic policy has not proven to reduce inequality levels and improve the living conditions of all Americans (2007 and 2008a).

On the contrary, he argues that the only way to reduce economic inequality is to implement bottom-up economic policies, which stand in contrast to trickle-down economics. These kinds of policies provide low-income Americans with, for example, a higher minimum wage, affordable healthcare, and access to education – all in order for them to improve not only their own situation but also society in the longer run. As a result, not only would inequality levels decrease, but also, the buying-power of these particular groups in society would be significantly strengthened. The demand for goods and services will rise as a natural result, and American dollars stay in the American economy because lower-income groups tend to spend most of their money primarily on American goods and services (Reich, 2008a).

In order to implement new progressive economic policies that will build a strong American economy and also reduce economic inequality, the government must be willing to increase spending. In fact, a lot of the key progressive issues will require substantial public spending in order to provide for services such as education, job training, and health care. Progressives view government spending on services to be one of the most important remedies available in improving the lives of Americans and society in general. The money spent by the government is invested in people, infrastructure, and the common good in general (Reich, 2001). Progressives see progressive taxation as the best way to collect the needed revenue.¹⁸ The central argument for a progressive tax code is that it will favor especially low-income Americans because they are the ones who need it the most. However, it is important for progressives to emphasize that the tax revenue goes back to the people in forms of government investments that benefit everybody (Irons and Podesta, 2005).

Changing the American tax system could help reduce inequality while also provide the necessary money for universal health care, argues Paul Krugman. He believes that it involves undoing the tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. The tax cuts that were enacted under George W. Bush are set to expire in 2010 and letting them do so would raise enough revenue to pay for the implementation of universal health care. Undoing these tax cuts would slightly reduce top-incomes but it would help low- and middle-income Americans significantly by assuring them health care. Thus it would bring down inequality levels significantly, argues Krugman (2009: 257-8).

¹⁸ The U.S. already has progressive taxation, that is, the higher one's income, the higher proportion of rate of taxation, but American tax rates are not as high as, for example, some European countries. Progressives want to raise taxes for high-income earners.

2.6 Progressive labor policies

Another key aspect in reducing economic inequality is labor policies. Securing workers' rights is a matter of securing fairness in the workspace. More specifically, progressives point especially to a fair minimum wage and a right to collective bargaining in order to strengthen workers' position in their jobs.

2.6.1 Minimum wage

The more money working-class Americans have in their pockets, the more money they spend in the American economy, and one of the main progressive strategies is focus on the financial security of average workers, namely through raising the minimum wage. Robert Reich is primarily concerned with improving the conditions of working Americans in order to reduce economic inequality. He believes that by raising the minimum wage, government is providing low-income workers with increased economic security and thus it helps them to improve their lives (2007 and 2008b).

Critics say that raising the minimum wage will benefit low-paid workers but could easily result in increased unemployment rates because companies do not want to pay higher wages. However, as long as the wage increases are kept within a certain range, there is nothing that suggests that it would lead to noticeable job losses. Paul Krugman sees the *Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007*,¹⁹ initiated by the Democratic Party, as an important step in the right direction (2009: 262). In fact, the Economic Policy Institute has calculated that about 13 million American workers, 10% of the work force, will see an increase in their hourly wage rate in 2009 when the minimum wage is raised to \$7.25. It is especially historically disadvantaged groups and households at the bottom of the income scale who will benefit from the *Fair Minimum Wage Act* (2008b).

¹⁹ The act gradually raises the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 per hour over a two-year-period.

2.6.2 Collective bargaining

On the same note, progressives also argue government support for workers' right to unionize because unions bargain wages on behalf of workers and ensure equal pay among its members. Unions represent a counterpart – a countervailing power – to powerful businesses. The thinking behind the concept of a countervailing power, which can be applied not only in relation to unions but to most aspects of society, comes from John Kenneth Galbraith, Canadian-born American economic theorist and one of the major economic philosophers of the last century (Parker, 2006). Galbraith believed that it is dangerous to a society if one major power is too powerful. It must be balanced by a counter-power (2001: 6).

According to progressivism, this aspect is crucial in regard to protecting workers' rights. The countervailing power of unions would, for example, be very important in a situation where the supply of labor is high and the demand is low. A single worker would not have a powerful bargaining position against his employer. In order to achieve significant influence, he will have to organize with fellow workers who most likely stand in a similar situation.

Progressivism encourages workers to join unions as they did decades ago. During the two decades following World War II, American unions were strong. But since the late 1970s, employers have been opposing unionizing and accepting which ever penalty that follows when unionized workers get fired. Consequently, fewer people join unions in fear of losing their jobs. In 1970, 27.4% of all wage and salary earners held a union membership and in 2007, the figure had fallen to 11.6% with no significant fluctuations in the trends (OECD, 2008).

Progressives believe that securing the rights of workers is one of the essential areas where progressive policies should take effect first in order to provide economic security for low- and middle-income workers (Rapoport and Smith, 2004). They support unions because they function as an important countervailing power to businesses that, for example, pay highly unequal wages. Today, unions have lost bargaining power but progressives want to strengthen unions by tightening the current labor legislation so that unionized workers will have a strong position in a bargaining situation (Meyerson, 2008). A new framework will have to be set up, and the countervailing power of trade unions needs to be built up again in order to secure workers' rights (Galston, 2008). Currently, there is a piece of pending legislation, *The Employee Free Choice Act*,

which would make it easier and more secure for workers to unionize once enacted. It enjoys the support of both the Economic Policy Institute and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (“Labor Policy”, 2009).²⁰

The progressive solutions to economic inequality include a number of remedies that could change the current economic situation for lower-, and middle-income Americans. Reducing economic inequality would also spur economic growth at a much needed time. To progressives, economic inequality is more than just a money-issue. The consequences of economic inequality which will eventually affect the whole American society are too substantial to ignore.

2.7 Upward mobility

The American Dream of upward mobility is also something that concerns progressives. The dream is the notion that anyone who is willing to work hard, and who is determined and self-reliant can climb all the way up the social ladder in America – but this picture is not always to be found in the figures. Recent studies from the Economic Policy Institute have found that 60% of the people in the lowest income quintile are still there ten years later (2008a: 4). Their studies also found implications which suggest that social mobility is somewhat restricted by the income group people are born into. In other words, your parents’ position may well influence your own economic mobility in life – and especially African-American children seem to lack economic mobility: 63% of African-American children from the bottom fourth of the income scale end up staying there throughout their lives. For whites, the same is true for only half of the children (2009: 5).

Many progressives are outspoken on this matter, for example Robert D. Atkinson, Vice president at the Progressive Policy Institute²¹, who argues that to many working-class Americans, the

²⁰ As of April 30, 2009, Barack Obama has not shown much support for the passing of this piece of legislation. While having taken other steps to help workers, some progressives criticize Obama for not pushing for the EFCA which they believe would boost a much needed labor movement (Fernholz, 2009).

American Dream of upward mobility seems further and further away as inequality levels rise. Consequently, the American society may be evolving into two classes: a successful top-class and a struggling working-class. Atkinson argues that in time, the dream will simply fade away if new progressive policies do not stop the process of growing inequality (2005: 53, 62-8).

2.8 Education

The U.S. economy today increasingly demands people with college or graduate degrees. Therefore, the inability to save money for a four-year degree is a major problem to many Americans. Unless something is done to widen access to higher education, particularly for low- and moderate-income high school students who want to go to college but lack the financial resources, economic inequality may actually increase (Draut, 2005: 101).

Progressives acknowledge that this is a serious problem for people who come from disadvantaged and poor families, and particularly to people of color, who are disproportionately affected by economic inequality. As mentioned above, African-American children from the bottom fourth of the income scale are much more likely than white children to stay there. A four-year college degree is one of the only sure ways out of poverty and into the middle-class – and one of the safest ways of ensuring that people stay there (Draut, 2005: 89).

The reason why education is an important issue to progressives is that the lack of higher education brings with it many negative consequences. To the individual person, lack of higher education can lead to lack of economic opportunity and therefore also economic security, fulfillment in life, and prosperity. For example, people of color who are more likely to receive low-quality education and also less likely to get a four-year college degree have low job-satisfaction and are generally less satisfied with their lives (Wanner, 2005: 211). If the current education situation remains, it is very likely that aforementioned Robert Atkinson's predictions come true,

²¹ *The Progressive Policy Institute* is a progressive think tank dedicated to define and promote new progressive policies for the 21st century and is affiliated with the Democratic Leadership Council. (www.ppionline.org).

that the American society will develop into two classes. The upper-class with the most well-educated people will consist mostly of white people, and the lower-class will make up a majority in society, consisting mostly of under-educated African-Americans and Latinos (Draut, 2005: 101).

A progressive policy which aims at bringing better education opportunities to disadvantaged groups in society is affirmative action, which we will elaborate on below in connection with social and cultural inequality.

2.9 Health care

Social security in general and health care in particular are issues that are very important to Americans. In the present conditions, the U.S. does not provide health care for all its citizens. From the progressive point of view, universal health care would reduce inequality and remove much economic insecurity for millions of Americans. A health care reform is therefore one of the key policies that progressives want to push to the top of the political agenda (Krugman, 2009: 214-6).

Progressives also argue that although the overall American society would benefit from a health care reform, it would especially benefit people from the low-income groups when they are faced with problems that come from lack of health care. Studies have shown that people in the lowest income category are not only more likely to become ill, but also more likely to die from their illnesses than those with the highest incomes (Williams and Lardner, 2005: 104). During our research of progressivism, we have found that health care appears to be an issue to which other problems in society are often closely connected to. We will explore this finding in more depth later.

There are already health care policies that have close ties with the progressive worldview. Health care plans such as Medicare, which insures people over the age of 65, and Medicaid, which insures low-income individuals and families who meet specific eligibility requirements, were initiated in 1965. But there are still millions of people who are not covered by any insurance plan – neither private nor public. Progressives therefore strongly call for a health care reform that

would give insurance to the millions of uninsured and help the many who are heavily burdened by the financial pressure of rising health care costs (Krugman, 2009: 242).

A health care reform is a distinct progressive policy because it requires a great extension of government intervention in the business sector which is now primarily dominated by private companies such as hospitals, insurance companies, and the drug industry. It would be a huge step in the progressive direction if the U.S. decides to reform their current health care system.

2.10 Social and cultural inequality

Inequality, whatever shape it may take, is at the heart of progressivism. Based on the recognition of the role pure chance plays in our lives, the aforementioned John Rawls fought to bring the challenge of inequality to the core of progressivism. He firmly believed in a society which is built on what is right and fair for everyone – not just for yourself and people of like mind (Randall, 2003). Inequality extends beyond economic inequality, which we presented above; inequality is also found in social and cultural aspects in society.

In this section, we will elaborate on the progressive view in regard to social and cultural inequality, and point specifically to gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. These areas are strongly related to the progressive worldview that Rawls explains in his theory on the *Veil of Ignorance*: We need to step behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ where we have no preconceived knowledge of our own personal characteristics. Then we step in to the world – what kind of world would we like to step into? In relation to the present examples, most people would probably prefer a world where they were not subject to discrimination because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. It would be a world – a society – that understands and respects the fact that people are diverse by nature and that individual positions in life may have happened upon them by chance or may be inherent.

In the progressive context, the concept of ‘diversity’ has come to mean taking measures against discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation (Lakoff, 2006: 56). Historically, these demographics have been discriminated against in the U.S. and although society is moving further away from such discrimination, progressives still want to fight

for the elimination of the differential treatment that may still be present today. The progressive values of fairness, equal opportunity, and fulfillment in life are what inspire progressives to eliminate, for example, gender discrimination (Lakoff, 2006: 85, 92). Historically, women have not been treated equally to men in many aspects of American life. For example, the right to vote was not given to women until 1920 with the passage of the 19th amendment (Jenkins, 1997: 193). However, women still continued to be subject to unequal treatment in other areas. In 1963, the late Betty Friedan, one of the most famous recent feminists, pointed out in her influential and well-known work, *The Feminine Mystique*, that many women were locked in their roles as mothers and wives and therefore had to give up their own dreams. They were to some extent prevented from enjoying fulfillment in life (Zinn, 1996: 495). However, society has developed much in a progressive direction since 1963, and women today enjoy much more freedom and opportunities than they did just a few decades ago. Nowadays, most women have a professional career while also raising children. But women still face gender discrimination especially on issues such as income and career possibilities: On average, they make less money than men and they also face promotional barriers (Ashbee, 2002: 42-3).

Progressives also argue that another group in society which is facing differential treatment is people with another sexual orientation other than heterosexual. For example, same-sex marriages are not recognized by the federal government – a Supreme Court ruling in 1986 left it to the state legislatures to decide the legality of homosexuality (Ashbee, 2004: 65).²² A majority of the American states have not legalized civil unions or domestic partnerships (“Maps of State Laws & Policies,” 2009).²³ The fact the same-sex couples do not enjoy the public recognition of their relationship or the legal rights that come with marriage and civil unions contradicts the progressive values of equality and fairness.

²² It could be argued that sexual orientation is more of a private matter than a collective issue. As such and in the present example, the issue of homosexuality has a somewhat stronger association with liberalism than progressivism (cf. Chapter 2.2, *Progressivism vs. Liberalism*). As explained previously, progressivism and liberalism share several similar traits and we have chosen to include homosexuality in this paper due to the close connection this issue has with Rawls’ theory of the “Veil of Ignorance” where equality, respect, and fairness are core values.

²³ 13 states have now legalized civil unions.

Racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S. has especially been evident among ethnic minorities such as African-Americans and Native Americans. They have been discriminated against historically and progressives argue that they still suffer from discrimination today. Among others, ethnic minorities need to be given the benefits that come with higher education and better employment situations (Lakoff, 2006: 85). On the issue of both racial and ethnic inequality and gender inequality, the policy of affirmative action is an example of how progressive values and principles have been utilized in practice. Affirmative action is motivated by empathy toward those in society who suffer from discrimination which keeps them from better education, better jobs, means to move up the social ladder, and many others. Thus affirmative action is a policy that implements progressive values such as equality, fairness, and opportunity in the American society (Lakoff, 2006: 85-7).

In practical terms, affirmative action means taking deliberate measures to ensure that women and ethnic minorities are fully represented in the educational institutions and senior management positions. There are different ways by which affirmative action is implemented. For example, a company may want to ensure that a job advert is seen by women by advertising in targeted outlets such as TV channels or magazines. Others take a more firm approach to affirmative action, for example educational institutions that adopt 'quotas' for ethnic minorities to make sure that they are proportionately represented in the student body (Ashbee, 2004: 285-6).

From a moral perspective, social and cultural inequality denies the people concerned equal treatment. It is not fair that personal and private characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity, keep people from equal opportunities. From an economic perspective, progressives argue that affirmative action will help break the spiral of poverty, poor education, and low living standards for, for example, ethnic minorities who still suffer from discrimination and hardship. If society helps them to receive a proper education, they will be able to return to their communities and improve the living standards of not only themselves but their community as a whole (Lakoff, 2006: 85-7).

2.11 The environment

Climate changes, global warming, and pollution are issues which receive more and more attention in the world today. Around the world, governments are acknowledging that human activities most likely have a part to play in the present state of the environment.

In the progressive worldview, environmental issues are strongly related to the 'Common Good Principle' mentioned earlier. Clean air, water, parks, and beaches; conservation and protection of endangered species, natural resources and wildlife are areas which concern all people including future generations. As human beings, we all have a responsibility toward the environment because it is a common good. Furthermore, progressives also believe that the right to a clean and healthy environment, such as clean air and water, is a basic human right, which everybody deserves (Lakoff, 2006: 55, 78).

On the matter of environmental protection, progressives believe that government has a very important part to play. The aforementioned Thaler and Sunstein (2008), argue that government regulation on environmental issues is beneficial to society because the state of the environment affects us all. For example, polluted water and air are just a few of the negative externalities²⁴ that come from our way of life. Government needs to regulate these issues because the polluters may not take the necessary precautionary environmental measures – not necessarily in bad faith but possibly blinded by a profit motive (p. 184-5). In these circumstances, it is the responsibility of government to take action and insure that negative externalities are taken into consideration, accounted for, and kept at the lowest level possible.

Progressives also argue that many of the current environmental laws were crafted in times when knowledge of the state of the environment was far from sufficient and, consequently, the laws are outdated. As time passes, further knowledge and facts are gathered, and current regulations such as the *Clean Air Act* and the *Endangered Species Act*, which were revolutionary at their time

²⁴ An externality is an effect which was caused by one set of parties on others who did not have a choice and whose interests were not taken into account. In present case, pollution is a negative externality on the surrounding environment/society whose interests were not taken into account.

and have been effective for many years, need to be updated so that they correspond to today's challenges (Center for Progressive Reform, 2007: 1).

Previous legislation needs to be updated but, at the same time, new initiatives must also be implemented. On the matter of creating new energy policies, progressives support various initiatives. To mention a few: Cap-and-trade policies for green house gases; transformation in the transport infrastructure such as creating alternative fuels, innovating low-carbon fuels, and expanding public transportation; increasing production and consumption of renewable energies, and advancing international global warming policies (Podesta, Stern, and Batten, 2007).

Progressives argue that investing in the 'green economy' is a very effective way of creating new jobs - much more effective than, for example, military spending and investing in the oil industry. One of the arguments is that most of the spending in the green energy sector will take place within the American economy. A lot of those jobs, for example within the solar and wind energy industries, cannot be sent offshore because they have to be on-site. These jobs will especially increase the demand for more construction workers, create new manufacturing jobs, and rely heavily on research and development (Pollin, 2009). Public transportation also holds a lot of potential both in regard to job growth and environmental protection. It is a sector known for its high unionization (another key progressive issue), and producers of mass-transit goods could provide many Americans with manufacturing jobs. Furthermore, as a form of transportation, it does not pollute a lot and it saves energy (Feldman, 2009).

The progressive approach is proactive and includes both short-term and long-term strategies to the environmental challenge. An important element of the approach is that progressives strongly emphasize that their green policies will not only lead to a greener future but will also spur economic growth – at a much needed time. The argument is that implementation of green proactive policies carries with it many economic opportunities. To progressives, green technology, environmental protection, job growth, and economic growth go hand in hand (Podesta, Stern, and Batten, 2007).

Progressives connect their environmental arguments to the core principle of the common good. Access to a clean environment is a basic need for every human being – not having access is a violation of basic human dignity. And thus the environment that surrounds us – locally and

globally – is a matter that concerns all human beings. We all enjoy and make use of it, and that is also why we all have a responsibility to take care of it and clean up after ourselves. It is a common good and thus a common responsibility.

In this chapter, we have emphasized some of the key aspects in progressivism – from the historical background to the fundamental values and principles that shape progressivism; from the role of government to inequality and the environment. As cited by Lakoff at the beginning, the progressive approaches to all of these issues are defined and structured on the basis of empathy and responsibility. As the above-mentioned issues show, progressivism takes many forms.

3 Public Opinion

In the preceding chapter we outlined the key features of progressivism as defined by some of the most influential progressive thinkers. In this chapter we will present statistics and opinion polls on issues that relate to these features to test the attitudes of the American public. If the U.S. is, in fact, moving in a progressive direction, we expect to see that the ideas laid out in Chapter 2 are reflected in the public attitudes. For example, progressives hold a positive view toward the role of government, and if the Americans are becoming more progressive, we would expect to see figures in opinion polls pointing in that direction.

We have chosen to include public opinion polls because it is a recognized tool in measuring public attitudes toward specific issues. We have chosen to focus specifically on five of the main areas that we believe are very central to progressivism. These areas are: The role of government in regard to trust and size of government, health care, social and cultural inequality in regard to homosexuality, and the environment. Progressive views on these particular areas are quite identifiable and thus the opinion polls would indicate if the public opinions are aligned with the progressive ideas and values or if they, instead, are pointing in a different direction.

3.1 The role of government

Socialism and government interventionism have never grown strong in the U.S.. One of the reasons for this could be that they never saw a major socialist movement as, for example, in Europe. Socialism emphasizes the expansion of government intervention and responsibility for one another which sounds very familiar to the ears of a progressive. However, the institutional character of the U.S. political system is structured around the conservative ideologies of laissez-faire, self-reliance, and a minimal role of government (Ashbee, 2002: 9-15). Thus the Americans are said to be somewhat hostile of government and not too fond of paying taxes.

This alleged general attitude toward government does not align itself very well with progressivism. One of the major progressive beliefs is that the key tool to enhance progressive values and programs is government interventionism through measures such as spending, investment, regulation etc.

The role of government is very essential to progressivism, and therefore this chapter will explore American attitudes toward government. In doing so, we will present statistics on trust in government and size of government. The statistics will test our research question in relation to government intervention and test whether the notion of a government-hostile America can be found in the public opinion polls.

3.1.1 Trust in government

We begin our research on attitudes toward government by looking at public trust in government because it is an important factor in politics. Government makes all kinds of decisions regarding social and economic issues which have significant impact on people's lives. Making binding decisions and, among others, spending people's tax money to achieve objectives that serve society require considerable public support or else the legitimacy of the incumbent government could be questioned (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000: 239-40). As we explain in Chapter 2.4, the role and size of government is central to progressivism because government is the main tool in most progressive measures. In order to make key progressive changes in society, it is essential that the American people trust their government to make the right decisions. If Americans are becoming more progressive, we will expect to find figures that show increasing trust levels that will allow government to implement new progressive policies.

Since 1994, this has been the development of the percentage of people who have the most trust in government:

Table 3-1: Percentage of people who trust the government most of the time/just about always²⁵

Year	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007
%	21	33	40	56	56	47	32	28	24
Respondents	1769	1496	1278	1541	1312	1061	N/A	N/A	1554

Source: 1994 – 2004: Adapted from American National Election Studies (2005a). 2005 – 2007: Adapted from CBS News/New York Times CBS News / New York Times Poll (2007). Question text: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right-- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

In 1994, trust levels were low – only 21% expressed trust in government. As mentioned earlier, the political scene of the mid-1990s was characterized by controversies between the democratic president, Bill Clinton, and the Republican majority in Congress. The government shut-down in 1995 was a matter of conflicting views of the relationship between government and society. Among others, the Republican House Speaker, Newt Gingrich, wanted to phase out Medicare (public health insurance for people over the age of 65). He had a majority in Congress to see it through, but not enough vote to override a presidential veto (Krugman, 2009, 153-4). This open fight between the White House and Congress due to disagreements of the budget and role of government could very well have impacted people’s trust in government at the time.

However, as the new millennium approached, the trust levels began rising again and peaked at 56% in 2000 and 2002 – the highest figure in its category since the 1960s (American National Election Studies, 2005a). The trust figures culminate after the terror attacks of 9/11, and commentators from Gallup talk of an unprecedented support of the nation’s government where approval ratings for both Congress and President Bush went through the roof (Moore, 2002). It could be that in times of war and fear, people have no choice but to trust their government to

²⁵ ANES has not polled on this question since 2004, so we have supplied the figures with data from a CBS News and New York Times poll which has asked people the exact same question in recent years.

protect them and thus they want to show their support (Galston and Kamarck, 2008: 2-3). But this effect faded and just one year later, the trust figures were almost back to their pre-terror attack levels, and have continued their down-slope since. By 2007, the trusting proportion of Americans had decreased almost down to its previous 1994-figure, 24%. An increasingly unpopular president, a war in the Middle East which was also subject to declining public support, a government that failed to respond quickly to the disasters of Hurricane Katrina, and a huge federal budget deficit may all have been contributing factors to the declining trust in government since 2002.

Table 3-1 shows that during the 1990s, the trust figures rose to high levels, but the trend has not continued into the 21st century. Since 1994, the figures have gone from low to high to low which does not suggest that Americans are becoming more progressive in relation to trust in government.

3.1.2 Size of government

Within the question of role of government is also size of government. It is an issue that is at the center of the political debate in American politics, and Democrats and Republicans rarely seem to be able to come to agreement on the issue. Government services and spending, which includes areas such as social security, health care and welfare, is highly relevant in relation to the question about whether or not the U.S. is moving in a progressive direction. As we saw in Chapter 2, progressives believe that there are numerous areas in which the government should spend more in order to provide more services that would contribute to the common good.

CBS News / New York Times continuously perform polling on public attitudes toward size of government and amount of government provided services. In regard to assessing progressive tendencies in the U.S., this poll indicates to what extent Americans would like to see government take on a bigger role in society. More specifically, the poll asks the following question, *“If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?”* (PEW Research Center, 2009). If the Americans are moving

in a progressive direction, the figures will show increasing support for bigger government and more services.

This has been the development in the figures since 1996:

Table 3-2: Size of government and amount of services

	1996	1999	2001	2002	2003	2007	2008
% Smaller government/ fewer services	61	46	51	46	47	46	42
% Bigger government / more services	30	43	36	40	41	43	43
<i>Respondents</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>	1500

Source: Adapted from PEW Research Center (2009).

According to the figures from CBS News / New York Times, the support for bigger government and more services has been on the increase since the mid-1990s. In 1996, only 30% of the American people wanted bigger government and more services. By 2008, this figure had risen to 43%. During the same period of time, the percentage of people who favored a smaller government providing fewer services fell from 61% to 42%. However, the figures for bigger government and more services take a dip in 2001 from 43% to 36%. This is probably due to the early 2000s' recession where events like the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the terror attacks of 9/11 contributed to overall low confidence in the market and low levels of consumer spending ("Early 2000's recession", 2009). When economic outlooks are negative, people's attitude toward increased government services are likely to go in a downward direction (Hetherington, 2005: 82).

But the severity of the current economic crisis may have a reverse effect on people's attitude toward the amount of services provided by the government. As the late 2000s' recession picks up pace, the public support of bigger government and more services has not gone down. This is probably because the current economic recession is far worse than the early 2000s' recession. Former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan has said that the current recession will "surely be the longest and deepest" since the 1930s (Cooke, 2009). Unemployment rates are

drastically increasing, people are losing their houses due to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, banks are collapsing, and there could be talk of a public panic (Warsh, 2009). It could therefore be argued that the current events are so substantial that the public wants a bigger government that has the authority to intervene and turn the situation around.

In relation to whether the Americans are becoming more progressive, 2008 sees a draw between the two views of government. Although the figures are very close and only separated by one percentage point, it is the first time, at least since 1996, that a plurality of Americans favor bigger government and more services. This could be an indicator that an increasing proportion of Americans have become less rejective of government, and thus are moving in a progressive direction.

3.2 Health care

We have chosen to present public attitudes toward social security with specific focus on health care. Health care is an important issue because it affects a large proportion of Americans in a number of ways. Paying for doctors and hospital bills can ruin the economy of uninsured Americans, and, for people with small means, this could mean that they will not get any medical help at all. Furthermore, most insured people are covered by an employment-based insurance. In recent years, and especially in the midst of the current financial crisis, more people are losing the employment-based health insurance (“Health Insurance Coverage”, 2008).

Health care is therefore a very good example of progressivism because it exemplifies empathy toward those who suffer under the current system and takes responsibility to make sure that all American citizens have access to medical care. Another reason why we have chosen to focus on attitudes toward health care is that a health care reform would involve major government intervention in a sector that is currently dominated by private companies. It would require substantial government spending and the services would be available to everyone. Health care plays a central role in regard to reducing economic inequality. It would relieve many people’s financial insecurities and make them better equipped against the negative consequences that come with economic inequality.

One of the cornerstones in the progressive philosophy is social security, that is, all human beings should be insured against basic social conditions such as health problems, poverty, unemployment etc. (McLean and McMillan, 2003: 570-1). In this section, we will assess public opinion concerning social security and more specifically health care because the health care issue is a central progressive concern. First, we will draw out an opinion poll from GSS on people’s sentiment toward social security in general and secondly, an opinion poll that focuses especially on attitudes toward health care.

Table 3-3: Is the U.S. spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on Social Security?

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
% Too little	49	52	60	60	61	66	64	62
% About right	44	40	33	35	34	29	31	33
% Too much	7	9	7	5	5	6	5	6
<i>Respondents</i>	2797	2687	2656	2656	2663	2708	2865	1930

Source: Adapted from GSS (2009). NATSOC. Question text: “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some of these problems, and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. m. Social Security.”

According to the figures from GSS, the trend since the mid-1990s has been that an increasing proportion of the American people believe that the government is spending too little on social security. In 1994, 49% believed that the government was spending too little money on social security. This figure had grown to 62% by 2008, peaking in 2004 with 66%. During the same period of time, the percentage of people who say that the government is spending too much never exceeds 10% while the proportion of people who believe that the government is spending about the right amount of money on social security falls from 44% to 33%. Although the figures have dropped slightly since 2004, there has still been an increase of 13 percentage points from 1994 to 2008. This leads us to conclude that the number of people who want the government to enhance its responsibility in regard to social security has increased significantly since 1994.

With specific regard to health care, Table 3-4 displays public opinion on the extent to which the government carries part of the financial responsibility when it comes to paying for doctors and hospital bills.

Table 3-4: It is the responsibility of the federal government to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills²⁶

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
% Government should help	47	49	49	52	52	53	53	54
% Agree with both	32	34	33	31	35	31	32	30
% Take care of themselves	21	17	18	17	14	16	16	16
<i>Respondents</i>	1930	1865	1821	1836	879	868	1979	1311

Source: Adapted from GSS (2009). HELPSICK. Question text: "In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills; they are at point 1. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves; they are at point 5. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?"

Slowly but consistently, the proportion of people who believe that it is the responsibility of the government to make sure that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills has been on the increase since the mid-1990s, growing from 47% in 1994 to 54% in 2008. The percentage of people who believe that people should take care of themselves is on the decrease, falling from 21% to 16% during the same period of time. The group "in between" who agrees with both answers stays between 30-35%.

²⁶ People were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1-5. In Table 3-4, we have combined the figures from option 1 + 2 ('Government should help'), and 4 + 5 ('Take care of themselves').

Health care is a key progressive issue within the matter of social security, and progressives want to reform the health care system so that health care provision is available to all citizens. Such policy change requires government to increase spending on this area significantly, but a growing number of people still seem to support government involvement when it comes to health care provision.

According to the GSS figures, a majority of Americans is moving away from the individualistic approach to health care and is, instead, opening up to the progressive policy of increased government commitment in regard to health care.

3.3 Social and cultural inequality: homosexuality

Social and cultural inequality extends to several aspects in society. In the previous chapter, we pointed especially to gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity and the progressive perspective on these issues. Progressivism is concerned with promoting equality, tolerance, and respect for one another no matter the personal characteristics people may have. In regard to public opinion, we have chosen to focus on attitudes toward homosexuality. It is an issue that receives a lot of attention these years due to the fact that more and more states are legalizing same-sex marriages and civil unions. If Americans are moving in a progressive direction, the figures will show a trend toward greater acceptance of homosexuality.

Table 3-5: Attitudes toward sexual relations between two adults of the same sex²⁷

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
% Always wrong	68	61	59	59	56	58	56	52
% Not wrong at all	23	28	28	29	33	30	32	38
<i>Respondents</i>	1908	1778	1756	1707	897	849	1897	1273

Source: Adapted from GSS (2009). HOMOSEX. Question text: "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?"

Attitudes toward homosexuality have seen significant changes since the mid-1990s. By 2008, the proportion of people who believe homosexuality to always be wrong had dropped 16 percentage points, making up only a slight majority in the latest poll. It looks as if almost all of the people who have changed their opinion have gone in the other direction because the proportion of people who do not consider homosexuality to be wrong at all has increased 15 points during the same years. The change of opinions is found across demographic groupings. For example, there is little difference in the development of opinion among male and female respondents. In 1994, 71% of all male respondents said that homosexuality is always wrong, and by 2008, the number had decreased to 57%. For women who shared the same opinion, the figure fell from 65% to 48% during the same years. Although the figures show that women are more tolerant toward homosexuals than men, both genders have seen significant shifts in opinions, 14 percentage points for men and 17 points for women.

²⁷ People were given four answer options: "Always wrong", "Almost always wrong", "Sometimes wrong", and "Not wrong at all". Table 3-5 displays the two extremities since a clear majority place themselves in these two categories.

The GSS figures show that Americans are changing their attitudes toward a highly debated social issue, homosexuality. The trend therefore seems to go in the progressive direction which is tolerance of different sexual orientations.

3.4 The environment

As mentioned in 2.11, the state of the environment is of great concern to progressives who believe that a clean and sustainable environment is a basic need for every human being and that the government has a key role to play in protecting and improving the environment – both locally and globally. Progressives believe that the environment is a common good and thus a common responsibility, but government has the tools to take the lead and advance the current environmental policies in a more progressive direction.

Especially in recent years, the environment and global climate change have become major political issues and part of the daily political debates. Table 3-6 displays public attitudes toward improving and protecting the environment in relation to how much money the U.S. is spending on the issue. If the American people are becoming more progressive in their attitudes toward government intervention in the environmental issues, the trend will be that people want to see an increase in government spending on this particular issue.

Table 3-6: Is the U.S. spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on improving and protecting the environment?

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
% Too little	61	61	63	63	60	64	69	68
% About right	30	28	29	29	33	29	25	25
% Too much	9	11	8	9	7	6	6	8
<i>Respondents</i>	1908	1778	1756	1707	897	849	1897	1273

Source: Adapted from GSS (2009). NATENVIR. Question text: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Improving and protecting the environment."

According to GSS, public opinion is seeing a change of attitudes toward government spending on environmental issues. In 1994, a majority of 61% thought that the government spent too little money on the environment. By 2008, this majority had grown to 68%, peaking in 2006 – the year after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast – with 69%. From 1994 to 2008, fewer and fewer people think that the government is spending the right amount of money on environmental improvement and protection, and the proportion of people who believe that the government is spending too much money only rises above 10% once and that was in 1996.

The GSS figures on government spending on the environment suggest that Americans are moving in a progressive direction in regard to environmental protection, and a growing majority wants the government to increase spending on this particular area.

Since the mid-1990s, public attitudes have changed in a progressive direction on four out of the five key-areas of progressivism which we have focused on. In regard to the role of government, there is increased support for a bigger government that provides more services, and a majority of Americans now want government to increase spending on social security and to help people in paying for doctors and hospital bills. On a social and cultural issue such as homosexuality, the proportion of people who believe that homosexuality is always wrong has decreased significantly. Furthermore, a clear majority of the Americans want to see government increase spending on improving and protecting the environment. On the basis of these findings but with the exception of trust in government, we are able to conclude that public opinion in the U.S. is moving in a progressive direction. The progressive trend is not to be found in the trust figures, but as we will see in the next chapter, we have reason to believe that the trust figures may be distorted by other factors.

4 Analysis

The public opinion polls showed that attitudes toward a variety of key-progressive issues have changed since 1994. This chapter will analyze our findings from the previous chapter and suggest correlative events and processes that may have had an impact on the attitudinal developments. We will relate our findings to relevant progressive theory and also add supplementary theories and statistical data where relevant to the analysis.

4.1 The role of government

In Chapter 3, we brought attention to two public opinion polls on attitudes toward government, namely trust in government and size of government. These particular opinion polls are central to this research in that the role of government is so essential in progressivism. The progressive approach to the role of government is positive, grounded in the belief that government is there to help people improve their lives.

We will begin our analysis by considering our findings from the previous chapter in relation to trust in government.

4.1.1 Trust in government

Government plays a central role in progressivism because most progressive policies are set in motion by the government. Policies such as health care reform, environmental protection, and securing workers' rights all take their starting point in government. The role and size of government is central to progressivism but without public trust in government, it can be difficult to see the progressive policies go through. William A. Galston, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution²⁸ and Deputy Assistant to President Clinton for Domestic Policies, and Elaine Kamarck,

²⁸ *The Brookings Institution* is one of Washington's oldest think tanks, and is often ranked as the most influential and most trusted think tank. (www.brookings.edu).

Harvard Public Policy Lecturer and Senior Policy Advisor to Vice President Al Gore, say that it is important to notice that Bill Clinton's health care reform was refused at a time where trust in government was very low. While other factors most likely also played a role in the dismissal of the health care reform, public trust is a prerequisite for the implementation of major reforms in society (Galston and Kamarck, 2008: 2).

The trust figures presented in Chapter 3.1.1 do not display a consistent trend from the mid-1990s onward and do not imply that Americans are very trusting of their government. On the contrary, the development in the trust figures go from low to high to low and do therefore not display a consistent tendency toward greater trust in government. This could indicate that Americans are not becoming more progressive because trust in government is crucial for progressive policies. It is imperative to have public trust and confidence in order to implement policies that require government intervention. The trust figures could therefore be a key-argument for saying that the Americans are not moving in progressive direction.

However, we will argue that the trust figures do not display an accurate picture of American trust in government. We will make the case that the trust figures cannot be translated literally into saying that the low trust levels is the same as the U.S. is not moving in a progressive direction. We have two main arguments for our reasoning. First, the opinion poll on trust in government from ANES and CBS News / New York Times has obvious short-comings when it comes to its wording. The phrasing is very generic and as a consequence, the poll figures do not really say anything specific about 'government' after all. Secondly, the significance of the trust figures is questionable because they prove to be very correlative to government approval ratings. In this connection, we will argue that they do not show an accurate picture of American trust in government.

We want to emphasize these arguments because when trust levels are low, as they currently are, both the media and the academic world are quick to cite the figures and present the Americans as

a cynical people who are very hostile of government intervention.²⁹ But, as we will elaborate on below, these figures need to be examined more closely in order to understand what they actually tell (or do not tell) us.

Wording

The wording of a polling question is crucial and the resulting figures can easily change just a slight modification of the question. In other words, public polls can show many things but at the same time they are also subject to frailty since the exact wording of the question in hand plays a significant role in the outcome of the poll. Polls should be questioned before presented as facts. In regard to the polling question on trust in government, the exact question text is:

“How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

There are two prominent issues which we want to point out in regard to wording. First, how are we to understand “*government in Washington*”? The expression presents a challenge to the poll reader for what exactly is meant by ‘government’ in this case? The American federal political system is made up of three branches of government: the legislative (Congress), the executive (the president), and the judicial (the Supreme Court) all of which are situated in Washington. Therefore, we cannot be sure exactly what kind of ‘government’ is being evaluated. Since each of them handles different functions of government, we do not know whether people consider their answer in regard to all three branches at the same time or if they – most likely unconsciously –

²⁹ For example: CBS NEWS: “*Poll Finds Widespread Pessimism About U.S.*”, (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/10/14/opinion/polls/main4522277.shtml>); The Washington Post: “*Think Tank Urges a Trust in Government Initiative Along with Obama Agenda*”, (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/18/think_tank_urges_a_trust_in_go.html); Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn (2000): “*The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time Series Analysis*” – available on JSTOR database.

have only one particular branch which comes to mind when thinking about their answer. As a result, their attitudes toward the remaining two branches could be somewhat disregarded.

Secondly, what is “right”? It seems rather unlikely that the whole nation has the same idea of ‘right and wrong’ when it comes to national governance. What seems ‘right’ to some people can easily seem ‘wrong’ to others. When people are asked about “right” (and wrong) in such a loose manner, the question can almost tilt toward partisanship rather than level of trust in government.

In regard to wording, we argue that the trust poll has shortcomings which need to be taken into account before the figures are presented as an indicator of whether or not people trust their government. The polling question is somewhat generic and weak, and we can only assume that its results will be affected in that direction too.

The trust figures appear correlative to approval ratings

One problem we face in regard to wording of the polling question is “*government in Washington*” which is a somewhat unclear expression for the American government. Consequently, we suspect that people’s answers may be sensitive to one branch of government because of the fairly vague wording.

To put this suspicion to the test, we want to compare the trust figures with approval ratings for Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidency, respectively, to see if there are any correlations between the figures. In doing so, we may find out if trust stands alone as a separate measurement of people’s attitudes toward government as a whole, or whether trust turns out to be correlative to one particular branch of government.

We expect to find that the trust figures correlate more closely with at least one of the branches. Much academic literature argues that trust levels are highly sensitive to approval ratings, saying that distrust in government can be linked to negative evaluations of incumbent officials (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000: 240). It is possible to support this argument just by looking at the recent polls. Statistics show that while trust figures are very low, so are the approval ratings of former President George W. Bush and Congress. Some of the final approval studies for 2008

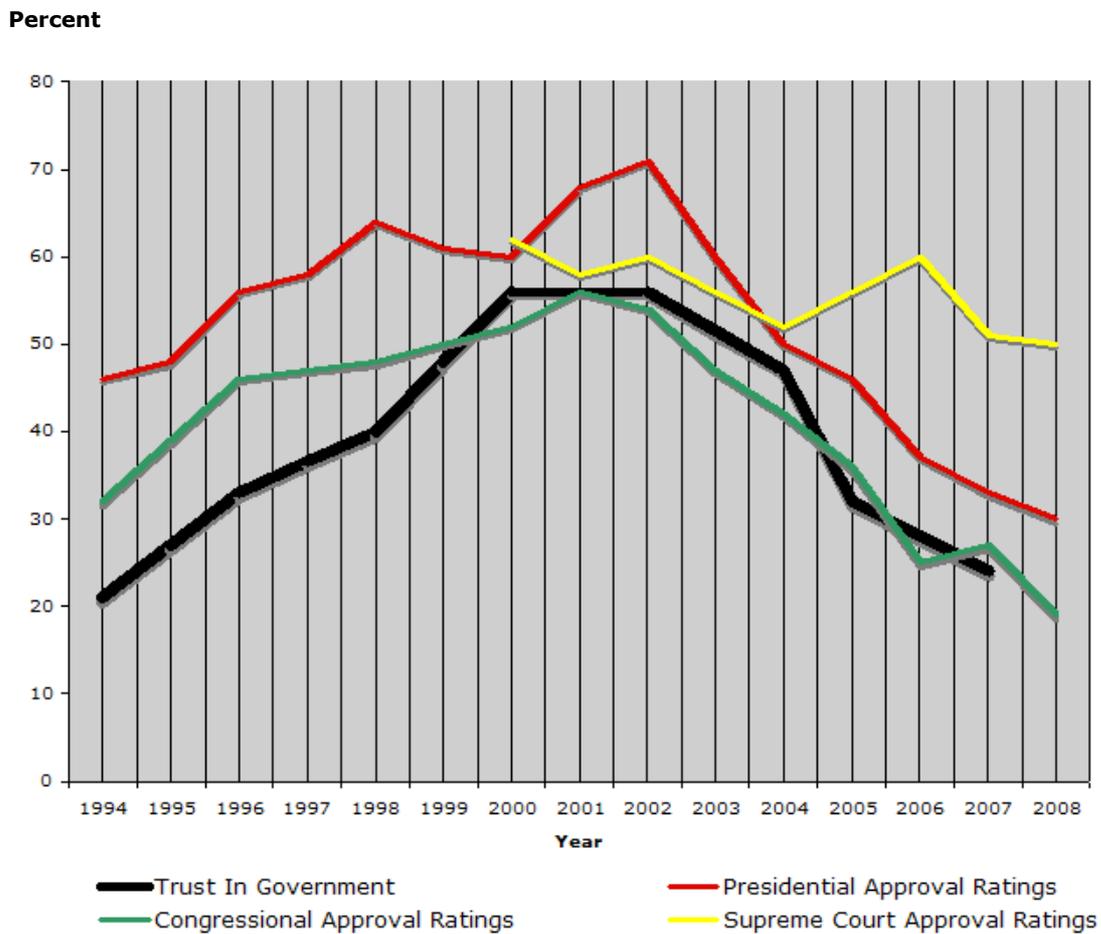
showed that only 25% approved of President Bush (Jones, 2009); while approval ratings for Congress reached just 20% by the end of 2008 (Gallup, 2009a), all the while the latest trust figure was 24% (cf. the trust figures in Chapter 3).

We want to take one step further in arguing that the trust figures appear to be correlative to approval ratings of government. By comparing trust levels with approval ratings in the same diagram, it will allow us to evaluate the relationship between the figures even more closely. More specifically, we expect to find that the trust levels appear most correlative to presidential approval ratings. The reasoning behind this is that over the last decades, the presidency seems to have received increased focus and attention in society, not just in the media. Jack Citrin, Professor and Director at the Institute of Governmental Studies of Political Science at UC Berkeley and much cited in regard to his trust research, together with Donald Philip Green, Director of the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale, argue that there is a close relationship between trust in government and presidential approval ratings. Increased presence in the media has made the president the center of attention and people are therefore more likely to place more responsibility on his shoulders (Citrin and Green, 1986: 444). In many cases, the president has become, as they put it, *“the yardstick by which to judge government as a whole”* and attitudes toward the president’s persona can therefore be linked to trust levels (Citrin and Green, 1986: 444).

In Figure 4-1, the trust figures are inserted in a diagram together with presidential, congressional, and judicial approval ratings. The main graph, which is the trust graph, is black and slightly thicker than the other graphs. The presidential graph is red; the congressional graph is green, and the judicial graph is yellow.³⁰ The fluctuations of the trust graph will be the element to which the other graphs will be compared.

³⁰ This particular Supreme Court approval rating data is only available from Gallup from 2000 onward. Some Gallup recordings of public trust and confidence levels in relation to the Supreme Court from before 2000 do exist; however, they do not correspond precisely with the polling questions and answer options which were given on the presidency and Congress job approval polls, which we use in this example. The judicial approval data is therefore not added to the graph before the year 2000.

Figure 4-1: Trust in government vs. presidential, congressional, and Supreme Court approval ratings



Source: Trust in government: 1994 – 2004: Adapted from American National Election Studies (2005a). 2005 – 2007: Adapted from CBS News/New York Times Poll (2007). Question text: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right-- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?” Presidential approval ratings: Adapted from Gallup (2009b). Question text: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way (...) is handling his job as president?” Congressional approval ratings: 1994-2004: Adapted from American National Election Studies (2005b). 2004-2008: Adapted from Newport (2009). Question text: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job?” Judicial approval ratings: 2000-2008: Gallup (2008b). Question text: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Supreme Court is handling its job?”

In overall terms, Figure 4-1 shows that, to a certain extent, all three approval rating graphs correlate with the development of the trust graph although some more than others. In regard to the judicial graph, it is the most difficult one to evaluate since we only have sufficient data from 2000 onward and thus an assessment of any long-term trends could be a long-shot. However, some of the graph's fluctuations correspond with the trust graph, namely the decrease from around 2002 to 2004, and from 2006 onward. But the judicial graph rises 8 percentage points from 2004 to 2006 whereas the trust graph continues its down-slope another 19 points during the same period of time. We thus conclude that there are significant inconsistencies in the correlation between the trust figures and judicial approval ratings.

An argument that supports this finding could be that the judicial branch of government, the Supreme Court, is not perceived by the public as being a part of the everyday political scene. According to Professor of political science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and esteemed researcher on trust in government John R. Hibbing, the Supreme Court consistently receives the highest regard among the three branches of government. He argues that it is because Americans view the Supreme Court as being beyond the quarrels and political disagreements contrary to, for example, Congress who has obvious public and often televised arguments and disputes when debating various issues. The Supreme Court, on the other hand, keeps their discussions behind closed doors which make them appear above political disputes. Not even their very disputed – and public – discussions on the Bush vs. Gore election in 2000 made any drastic impact on their approval ratings. Although the media was unusually harsh on the Supreme Court during their decision-making, the justices' involvement in the presidential election did not seem to affect public opinion significantly (2002: 235). Without underestimating the role of the Supreme Court in American politics, it could be argued that the judicial branch is somewhat perceived as being aside from the other branches when it comes to people's attitudes toward government. The trust figures do not correlate significantly with judicial approval possibly because the Supreme Court is not perceived as being part of the bickering of everyday-politics in Washington.

Moving on to the presidential graph and the congressional graph, they, on the other hand, seem to correlate with the development of the trust graph somewhat more closely. There are differences in the extent to which the various graphs fluctuate but at a glance, they by and large draw a similar pattern. For example, when the trust graph has its most significant increase from

1994 to 2002, rising from 21% to 56%, the presidential and congressional graphs are also on the increase during the same period of time. When the trust figures start to decrease from around 2003 onward, the presidential and congressional graphs also begin to decline.

However, we are surprised to find that the presidential graph is not the one that correlates with the trust graph most closely, as aforementioned Citrin and Green have argued.³¹ The diagram with the trust figures together with the approval ratings shows that the graphs that correlate with each other's development most closely are the trust graph and the congressional graph. They do not follow the exact same pattern but on several points, they intersect and also reach the same percentage figure.

Figure 4-1 indicates that although the media may portray the president as the central actor in government, people's trust in government in Washington seems to correlate most closely with congressional approval. One can only speculate as to why this may be the case since political scholars connect trust levels to presidential approval ratings. Perhaps Congress appears more 'long-term' than the presidency in regard to political influence on people's lives. Members of Congress are up for election regularly, as is the president, but most members – more than 90% – are reelected whereas the president is constitutionally limited to two terms in the White House (Ashbee, 2004: 98-100). There are possibly other and more substantial arguments as to why the trust figures correlate this closely to congressional approval ratings. However, we will not speculate further in this finding since it would require additional examination which extends beyond our field of research. Nonetheless, Figure 4-1 clearly suggests that there is a correlation between trust levels and congressional approval ratings. This finding makes us conclude that, to a certain extent, the trust figures are a proxy for Congress and the polling results most likely say more about people's approval of Congress than it does about the Americans' trust in government in Washington as a whole. Due to their close correlation, it is possible to argue that the trust

³¹ It should be noted that in a more recent research Citrin has stated that evaluations of Congress could potentially be an indicator of trust. At the same time he argues that this does not change the fact that evaluations of the president's performance and personal characteristics have a very important impact on trust in government (Citrin and Luks, 2001: 20).

figures do not show an accurate picture of people's trust in government, that is, all three branches of government as a unity.

We argue that the trust figures show an inaccurate picture of people's trust in government; first, the polling question itself poses several weaknesses, and secondly, the results are questionable because we are not sure whether they display actual trust or people's approval of Congress.

Nonetheless, trust in government is an important factor in American politics, and especially to progressive politicians, as argued in the beginning of this section. The fact that trust is very low at the moment does not, however, mean that the Americans are not moving in a progressive direction. As we will elaborate in the next sections of our analysis, there are several issues on which the Americans express desire for changes. Galston and Kamarck argue in their research paper, *Change You Can Believe In Needs A Government You Can Trust*, that low trust levels do not translate into a desire for minimal government intervention. Nor do high trust levels give a 'carte blanche' for government to implement new programs (2008: 1-2). But trust is still an important factor to take into consideration because major policy changes require public trust and confidence in government. Past disappointments may therefore very well influence today's trust levels. Public trust has gone down dramatically since 2002 and in times of low trust levels, government will have to work extra hard to regain people's trust. The fact that trust levels have fluctuated since 1994 proves that trust is dynamic and that lack of trust is not irreversible – but trust needs to be earned. Galston and Kamarck argue that in the current financial crisis, the Americans understand that government intervention is necessary. In turn, if government manages to meet this challenge with effectiveness and integrity, trust levels will begin to rise, and it will pave the way for new progressive measures such as health care reform and new energy policies (2008: 3).

4.1.2 Government and services

The CBS News / New York Times poll showed that the support for bigger government and more services has been on the increase since the mid-1990s. A suggestion as to why the figures for bigger government and more services are low in mid-1990s could be that this period of time marked the high-point of conservatism. In 1994, when the Republican Party won control of Congress, they saw it as a mandate to do away with the social programs that had been initiated under the New Deal and to put an end to 'big government' (Zinn, 1996: 633). Not only had the Republicans been railing against 'big government' since the Reagan years – Reagan famously said in his first inaugural address that “*government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem*” (Reagan, 1981). Even the Democratic president Bill Clinton was agreeing when he announced that “*the era of big government is over*” in his 1996 State of the Union address (Clinton, 1996). It is not unlikely that the opposition to 'big government' among the political elite and the ensuing small-government rhetoric may have helped activate opposition toward bigger government and more services among the American people in the mid-1990s. Political scientist William G. Jacoby argues in his study, *Public Attitudes toward Government Spending*, that politicians can “*activate different political orientations*” (1994: 358) among their constituents depending on how they present an issue. If, for example, a politician wants to cut spending on services, he or she should talk about government spending in general terms and not be specific about the areas in which they would like to see less spending or the services they would like to cut. Talking about government spending in general terms will most likely appeal to conservative preferences among voters, and therefore trigger more opposition to government spending (1994: 358).³² This view is also voiced by Paul Krugman who argues that Bill Clinton's healthcare plan could have become a reality had the Clinton administration been better at communicating their policy goals and exerted better leadership. During his campaign, Clinton did not talk about the specifics of his health care reform and there had not been any public debate on the issue and thus

³² When we choose to emphasize Jacoby and his findings on attitudes toward government spending in our analysis on size of government and government services, we take it that the word 'services' strongly implies 'spending' also. In government services is embedded government spending.

his health care reform never materialized (2009: 234). These developments along with the anti-government rhetoric may help explain why only 30% of the Americans favored bigger government in 1996.

The support for bigger government and more services increases from 1996 to 2001 which is possibly also due to the rhetoric of the political elite. In a more recent study, Jacoby found that the degree of harsh and critical talk of government services, for example health care reform and welfare, was exceptionally high in the mid-1990s. Public support for government services was correspondingly low. In the following years, the political attention devoted to such services started to go back to pre-1994 and 1996 levels which contributed to the more supportive trend in the government poll (Schneider and Jacoby, 2005: 367-70).

The support for bigger government and more services take a dip in 2001 but this is probably due to the early 2000s' recession. When people's economic outlooks are negative, it tends to show in polls on scope of government in form of decreased support for bigger government (Hetherington, 2005: 82). However, the support for bigger government and more services has in fact increased in recent years although the economic outlooks are worse than ever. This is most likely due to the fact that the current recession is being considered the worst the world has seen since the 1930s. Although the causes of the early 2000s' recession made a mark on Americans both in terms of the financial consequences of the burst of the dot-com bubble and the psychological distress of the terror attacks, the current recession has created a public panic (Warsh, 2009). In such circumstances, Americans are looking toward the government for immediate intervention in order to curb the economic crisis. This is most likely why the support for bigger government has been on the increase in recent years. In fact, 2008 was the first year since 1996 that a plurality favored bigger government and more services. Although this proportion of people exceeds with only one percentage point, it somehow emphasizes the development which has taken place in the figures since 1996; a rise from 30% to 43%.

4.1.3 Government as an abstract concept

As mentioned earlier in the trust in government analysis, the polling question itself can be very interesting to take a closer look at. This is also true for the question on bigger or smaller government. The exact question text is,

"If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?"

The question is very straightforward and people had the above-mentioned answer options and "Don't know". The wording does not elaborate on the meaning behind bigger or smaller government; nor does it specify what the term "services" implies. 'Services' can be very broad in its meaning – a service provided by the government could basically be anything. Likewise, the term "bigger government" or "smaller government" is also very open to interpretation. When asked in this nonspecific manner, the respondents are not influenced toward either answer option due to the neutral character of the question. Instead, the question leaves room for individual interpretation.

The question is asked in a generic and somewhat intangible manner and E.J. Dionne, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and Washington Post columnist, argues that Americans are quite skeptical about government as an abstract concept (1996: 13). Thus one could have expected that a greater number of people would have opposed bigger government in the poll. However, the figures show that since the mid-1990s an increasing number of Americans are in favor of a bigger government that provides more services. This finding challenges the general perception of Americans being skeptical of big government. It is possible that 'bigger government' appears more attractive when it is connected to 'more services'. Nonetheless, the trend in the figures still seems to be going in a progressive direction.

4.1.4 Government spending on specific areas

The relatively nonspecific question text in the CBS News / New York Times poll can result in different personal understandings of what is meant by 'government' and 'services'. Dionne said that Americans generally reject government as an abstract concept, but his studies have also

shown that when Americans are in fact suggested specific issues such as health care, the environment, or education, their support for government commitment in the suggested areas increase significantly (1996: 13). Therefore, in order to test Dionne’s claim, we want to include an additional poll which asks people specifically on government services, spending, and commitment to health care and education.

Table 4-1 is a poll from ANES which asks the question, "*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?*"

Since 1994, Americans have answered the following:

Table 4-1: Less government spending/fewer services vs. more government spending/more services³³

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
% Cut Services / Spending (1-3)	36	31	26	18	**	20
% (4)	24	25	26	25	**	23
% More Services / Spending (5-7)	27	27	40	39	**	43
% DK, Haven't thought	13	16	9	17	**	14
<i>Respondents</i>	1773	1711	1281	980	**	1212

Source: Adapted from American National Election Studies (2005c).

³³ The respondents were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale (1 being in favor of cutting services/spending and 7 being in favor of more services/spending). We have combined the numbers from 1-3 and 5-7 to get the total numbers of people who favor any level of cutting services/spending and more services/spending respectively. Collecting the data in this manner provides a broad overview of the overall attitudes toward the issue without having to distinguish between the different degrees of support for and opposition to the issue.

Table 4-1 shows that Americans seem to be quite supportive of government services and spending. The few times more people have supported cutting services and spending, the support quickly waned again. In 1994, 27% of Americans placed themselves at 5-7 on the 7-point scale. In 1998, this number had increased to 40%, dropping slightly to 39% in 2000, before climbing to its highest point, 43%, by 2004. Similarly, 36% placed themselves at 1-3 on the scale in 1994, meaning they want to see the government cutting services and spending. By 1998, this number had decreased to 26% and in 2000 it hit its lowest mark at 18%, only climbing slightly to 20% by 2004. Throughout the years, roughly a quarter of the American population constantly place themselves right in the middle of the scale at 4.

The services and spending figures show that the support for more government services and spending has been on the increase within the last decade. Only two years have seen a plurality of Americans supporting less government services and spending: 1994 (36%) and 1996 (31%). Beside these two years, the number of Americans who support more government services and spending has been on the increase ever since and reached its highest point so far in 2004.

Although the first-mentioned CBS / New York Times poll asks about attitudes toward size of government and amount of services, and the ANES poll asks about government services and spending, they both relate to the role of government. Although being somewhat more elaborative, the ANES question does not specify any particular programs, but it refers to services and spending in general, mentioning two examples of areas in which these services could be provided; health care and education. The proportion of people who want more services in spite of increased government spending rises 16 percentage points within a decade. This poll therefore also suggests that Americans are becoming more progressive in regard to size of government and government spending.

Furthermore, scholars have researched what people come to think of when they hear the words "*government spending*". They have found that Americans are most likely to associate 'spending' with programs aimed at underprivileged groups – especially the poor and ethnic minorities (Jacoby, 1994: 347-8, 354). An increasing number of people want more government services in spite of increased government spending in order to help especially the disadvantaged groups in society. This development suggests a significant progressive trait in the polls – empathy toward

other people which is a cornerstone in progressivism. A progressive would also argue that health care and education do not just help the disadvantaged, but America in general. Progressives see education and healthcare as areas that could provide Americans with better opportunities in life, better living standards, and less economic inequality.

Some polling questions more than others encourage individual interpretation of the question text at hand.

4.1.5 Attitudes toward taxation

On the notion of government spending, it is also relevant to take a look at public attitudes toward taxes. Allegedly, Americans are not too fond of taxes to begin with, so the fact that an increasing number of Americans favor both bigger government and more services along with more services in spite of increased spending is somewhat surprising. Needless to say, the money which is required for the government services and spending has to come from somewhere.

It could be argued that the Americans are not as fiscally conservative as they sometimes have been accused of. Statistics actually imply that Americans have a fairly progressive view on taxation. First, figures from Gallup show that since 1997, a majority of Americans have considered the level of income tax they pay to be fair.³⁴ Secondly, a majority of Americans believe in more equal distribution of wealth: Since 1990, this proportion of people has stayed between 62-68%.³⁵ Furthermore, a majority which has also stayed between 63-68% since 1994 believe that the upper-income group pays too little in taxes (2008a). These figures suggest progressive characteristics when it comes to Americans' perspective on taxes: They may not like to pay taxes but they still believe that it is a fair amount that they are paying; they believe in distribution of wealth, and they support progressive taxation – all of which are core economic progressive principles.

³⁴ With the exception of 1999

³⁵ With the exception of 2000

These figures on taxes have not seen much fluctuation since the 1990s – they have remained rather high and stable for several years, so it is not a new development – a fact that is also very interesting in this connection with the government spending figures. It challenges the alleged perception of Americans being against government spending and taxation. And, as we will explore later, when asked more specifically on issues such as health care and the environment, a majority want the government to in fact increase spending on these areas.

This development toward greater support for bigger government, and government services and spending could be an indicator that the American people generally are turning away from the conservative ideology, that is, the belief that people have an individual responsibility to make sure that they can afford services such as health care. A growing proportion of the American people would like for the government to provide more services although it increases spending. This implies that Americans are moving in a progressive direction and that they believe that the government has a part to play in making sure that some services will be available to everyone, especially to those who otherwise would not have access to them. Furthermore, statistics indicate a majority of Americans holds progressive views on taxation.

The role of government is a cornerstone in progressivism because it is the one institution that has the remedies to ensure that the benefits of the common wealth are distributed to all levels of society. Our findings on attitudes toward the role of government therefore make us conclude that Americans are becoming increasingly progressive.

4.2 Economic inequality

Progressives argue that the economic growth in the U.S. has not benefited the entire society – only a few people at the top of the income scale – and has thus contributed to the growing inequality levels. We want to test this claim and see to what extent the economic growth has had an effect on the lives of Americans. A simple measure of testing the overall development in living

standards can be to take a look at GDP per capita: In 1994, GDP per capita was \$29,741 (chained 2000) and in 2006 it was \$38,087 (“Selected Per Capita”, 2007). According to these figures, the average income per capita has increased since 1994. However, since these figures display the average GDP per capita, they do not present the whole picture when it comes to measuring living standards. The average GDP per capita is distorted by outliers such as extreme wealth. The Gini coefficient³⁶ therefore gives a more accurate picture of distribution of wealth and income in a society. As mentioned in Chapter 2.5, the U.S. Gini coefficient has grown steadily from 0.34 in the mid-1980s to 0.38 by the mid-2000s, and the U.S. is one of the most unequal societies among the OECD countries. The economic growth has therefore not benefited or improved living standards for everybody.

However, public attitudes toward economic inequality can be quite difficult to operationalize because ‘inequality’ is such a complex issue that encompasses many sub-issues, from taxation to education to moral values, as we explain in Chapter 2.5. It would therefore be a difficult task to argue that public attitudes toward economic inequality are moving in a certain direction. Nonetheless, people have been asked about their opinion in regard to the role of government in helping the lowest income groups (a progressive would argue that government indeed has a responsibility to make sure that living standards of all citizens are improved in times of economic growth). Polls from GSS show that the proportion of Americans who feel that the government should do everything possible to improve the living standards of all poor Americans, as opposed to each person taking care of themselves, has steadily grown from 27% in 1994 to 33% in 2008 (2009).³⁷ This poll implies that in times when the economic inequality level is rising, there is also a

³⁶ See also footnote no. 13 for explanation on the Gini coefficient. The Gini coefficient is based on the two relationships of the Lorenz-curve (share of income in a country against the proportion of population). This of course poses a methodological problem since the figures are based on declared income and do not include, for example, the hidden economy and holdings outside the country.

³⁷ Adapted from GSS (2009). HELPPoor. Question text: “Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans: they are at point 1 on this card. Other people think it is not the government’s responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself; they are at point 5. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you made up your mind on this?”

growing tendency toward public support for government intervention in the living conditions of poor people.

But why has the U.S. grown more unequal? The reasons are probably many but it is possible to argue that during the Bush presidency, the Republicans have pursued economic policies such as tax cuts for the wealthiest which generally promote the interests of the higher income groups. In 2007, the top 1% of the population held a share of 19% of the country's income (a historic high), while the bottom 20% held 3.4% ("The Poverty Epidemic", Apr. 24, 2007). Such economic policies enable the richer groupings to increase their wealth still further and make the gap between rich and poor grow – and progressives argue that the current tax policies need to be changed in order for the low-income groups to be able to get a fairer share of the income cake.

Another progressive suggestion could be that there is a correlation between the levels of union membership and inequality levels. Societies which have the lowest inequality levels also tend to have strong unions. For example, Denmark which has the world's lowest Gini coefficient, 0.23, has a union membership rate of 69.1%, or Sweden, which joins first place with Denmark on the inequality levels, has a union membership density of 70.8% (OECD, 2008).³⁸ It could thus be argued that strong unions contribute in keeping the wages up-to-par and in bargaining on behalf of lower-income workers. If this is the case, then the current labor legislation should be tightened so that people are not fearful of joining unions, and that unions regain a powerful bargaining position in the U.S.. However, as mentioned previously, the U.S. never saw a socialist movement to the extent which was seen in Europe, and, as we will elaborate later, the strong notion of individualism and self-reliance in the U.S. seem to contrast with the solidarity which unions stand for. Although union memberships are decreasing, statistics from Gallup show that the proportion of people who want to see unions have more influence than they have today is on the increase and has grown from 30% in 1999 to 35% in 2007 (Carroll, 2007). The support for stronger unions is

³⁸ Density is described as union membership as a percentage of employed wage and salary earners. The measure excludes people who are self-employed or work for family members.

increasing which suggests that the Americans are becoming more progressive when it comes to the power of unions and, perhaps, their role in lowering the economic inequality levels.

4.3 Upward mobility

The issue of upward mobility was not included in Chapter 3, *Public Opinion*, because it can be quite a difficult task to measure attitudes toward upward mobility. However, it is an issue which concerns progressives because particular groups in society seem to lack upward mobility. This is why we have chosen to include this issue our analysis chapter. Instead of assessing opinion polls in depth, we will look at the degree of economic mobility in the American society.

The ability to improve one's living standards and move up the income scale has become much more difficult, especially for the lowest income groups in society. The fact that prosperity and economic opportunity are out of reach for millions of Americans is not fair, argue progressives. Conservatives would argue that economic inequality is not a bad element in society. In fact, economic inequality functions as an incentive for lower-income groups to strive for more and climb the social ladder (Gersemann, 2004: 189-93). But the wider the gap, the longer the poor will have to climb. As economic inequality rises, so does the span of the income groupings people have to move into. Upward mobility can be a complex factor to measure though.

Social mobility within one's lifetime, intragenerational mobility, is common since adults tend to earn more as they age as a result of job promotions, gaining further experience and skills etc. 47% of people who were in the middle-quintile in 1996 had moved up to the fourth or top-quintile by 2005 (Pew, 2008: 26). However, the same is not true for the bottom-quintile. Studies from the Economic Policy Institute show that 60% of the people in the lowest income quintile are still there ten years later (2008a: 4). Intragenerational mobility may be quite common in American society, but it does not apply to the low-income groups.

In regard to intergenerational mobility, that is, people moving up or down from the quintile into which they were born, figures show that about a fourth of the people who were born into the second, middle, or fourth quintile stay there throughout their lives. However, 42% of people whose parents were in the bottom quintile stay in the same income group throughout their lives.

The same figure is true for those who were born into the top quintile (Hertz, 2006: 9).³⁹ The intergenerational figures show that especially for the top and the bottom there could be a correlation between the financial circumstances people are born into and where they end up staying throughout their lives.

These figures exemplify that mobility research is complex. Intragenerational mobility is much more frequent than intergenerational mobility – when economic mobility is compared between children and their parents, mobility is more limited.

When progressives argue that upward mobility is but an illusion for many, it is mostly true for the low-income groups. The figures show that both intragenerational and intergenerational mobility are much more infrequent dynamics for the lowest quintile than for the other levels on the income scale. To say that the American Dream of upward mobility is about to fade away is not the whole truth for all Americans. The dream is alive but not for the poorest Americans.

The American Dream has become a widely cited concept and in its simple form it implies that all American citizens and residents have the possibility of upward mobility, climbing the social ladder, if they are willing to work hard and be self-reliant. But the American Dream also implicitly applies an individual responsibility for your financial situation. In other words, if you are poor, it is your own responsibility because all citizens have the possibility of economic mobility (Ashbee, 2002: 33). But researchers from the Center for American Progress have found that especially education, health care, and race are important factors in upward mobility for the low-income groups (Hertz, 2006: 10-1). These findings imply that there are certain obstacles for groupings in the American society in regard to upward mobility. So when progressives argue that there is a need for, for example, better access to health care and education for poor Americans in order to help them improve their living conditions, it can be supported by the economic mobility figures.

³⁹ The figures are based on the probability of attaining each income quintile in 1994-2000 based on parents' income quintile in 1967-71 and on total household income.

There is also a growing tendency in the public opinion polls that government needs to intervene and help the Americans in regard to health care. In the next section, we will analyze the change that has happened in public opinion in regard to health care and how this relates to progressivism.

4.4 Health care

The main progressive argument for health care reform is that it would improve the life quality for tens of millions of Americans. It would take the concept of social security to the next level and it would provide health care for the 45.7 million people who are uninsured (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith, 2008: 19). It would lift the financial burden off the many who struggle to keep up with the rapidly rising medical costs and insurance premiums. Furthermore, it would calm the large group of people who are currently covered but are living in constant fear for what will happen in the future (Krugman, 2009: 242).

The figures in Table 3-4 in the *Public Opinion* chapter showed that people's sentiment toward government intervention in the health care sector has warmed up since 1994. A suggestion as to why this change is happening during recent years could be that as people's financial situation worsens, one of their top-worries is rising health care costs, and in such circumstances, people look to the government for financial aid for medical expenses (Teixeira, 2005). Figures from Gallup show that an increasing number of people feel that their financial situation is worse than the previous year. When they, in 1994, were asked to evaluate their financial situation compared to the previous year, 31% said that they were worse off.⁴⁰ As the 21st century takes off, so does the percentage of people who estimate their financial situation to weaken, and by 2008, 55% said that they were worse off ("Personal Financial Situation Index", 2008).

⁴⁰ However, as the 1990s progressed, this figure fell to 19% by 1999 probably due to the economic growth created by the IT-business. People were making more money, and were thus more likely to worry less about health care expenses either because they had enough money to pay for their health insurance themselves or because they were insured through their job benefits.

If Americans feel that they are financially worse off as the years go by, it makes good sense that they would also worry about health care costs: Figures from the Kaiser Family Foundation show that from 1999 to 2008 the overall inflation has risen 29%; workers' earnings have risen 34%, while health insurance premiums have risen a staggering 119% ("Health Care Costs", 2009: 10). This highly unequal development in earnings and health insurance costs in the midst of an economic crisis has created great concern for health care expenses. Almost half (45%) of all Americans are very worried about having money to pay for health care, and no less than 62% say that the U.S. cannot wait any longer for a healthcare reform ("Public Opinion on Health", 2009: 3).

The time seems ripe for government to move in a progressive direction in regard to the health care system. However in 1994, Clinton also thought that America was ready for a health care reform. But his health care proposal fell through, and therefore we want to compare today's situation with 1994. In Chapter 3 on the issue of whether or not Americans believe that the federal government should help people in paying for doctors and hospital bills, our year of departure is 1994. But in this comparison, we want to include 1993 also because the figures take a jump between 1993 and 1994. This remarkable change in the figures at this point of time is of importance to the analysis of public attitudes toward health care provision in the U.S.. Below is Table 4-2 which is the same as Table 3-4 in Chapter 3 but includes the figures from 1993:

Table 4-2: It is the responsibility of the federal government to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills (including 1993) ⁴¹

	1993	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
% Government should help	53	47	49	49	52	52	53	53	54
% Agree with both	32	32	34	33	31	35	31	32	30
% Take care of themselves	16	21	17	18	17	14	16	16	16
<i>Respondents</i>	1036	1930	1865	1821	1836	879	868	1979	1311

Source: Adapted from GSS (2009). HELPSICK. Question text: "In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills; they are at point 1. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves; they are at point 5. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?"

As is evident from the table above, 1993 sees 53% of Americans supporting government financial aid in paying for doctors and hospital bills. That figure drops to 47% in 1994 – the lowest among the years represented in the table above. Similar to other opinion polls in this chapter, 1994 marks the lowest point in support for progressive measures.

Besides the general conservative attitudes that dominated in the U.S. at the time, especially from 1994 through 1996, there is another interesting factor that may help explain the sudden decline in support for a health care reform. According to a study published in the peer-reviewed medical journal the *Milbank Quarterly*, what happened after Clinton's health care plan was introduced was that groups who opposed the plan got involved in the health care debate and argued that its passage would lead to a health care system that would be worse than the one already in place. This was, according to the study, one of the main contributing factors why the general support

⁴¹ People were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1-5. We have combined the figures from option 1 + 2 ('Government should help'), and 4 + 5 ('Take care of themselves').

dropped in 1994 (Altman, Benson, Blendon, Brodie and Buhr, 2006: 639-40). These days, Paul Krugman puts forth the same argument and says that, in 1994, it was the insurance lobby along with the drug industry that effectively made people believe that Clinton's health care plan would take away their medical choice (2009: 229). Opposition from the drug and insurance industry, conservatives, and other groups who do not support government-funded health care would therefore most certainly also oppose any attempt at a health care reform today.

However, the situation today is very different from 1994 when Clinton's health care plan was defeated, argues Krugman. Today, there are factors present which make it more likely that Americans will support government-funded health care. In 1994, the American economy had begun to recover after the recession of the 1980s and early 1990s and a period of slow job growth. Along with the recovery, employment started rising, and, as a result, more Americans got employment-based health care insurance and were therefore satisfied with their health care coverage. This, argues Krugman, is not the case today. Similar to the 1990s, there was a recession in the early 2000s, which was also followed by slow job growth. But contrary to the 1990s, the number of Americans with health insurance coverage did not increase as the employment rate started getting better in 2003 (2009: 230-2). All in all, figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show that in 2000 there were 38.4 million persons who were uninsured for the entire year. In 2007, it was 45.7 millions. More specifically, 64.2% of all insured Americans had an employment-based health insurance in 2000. By 2007, the proportion had gone down to 59.3% ("Health Insurance Coverage", 2008). Krugman calls this development a "slow-motion crisis" for the U.S. (2009: 224) because it has been underway for several years. It may be growing slowly but it is undeniably developing into a crisis, and the core of this crisis can be found within the changes in employment-based insurances. Krugman's assessment is therefore that in the current situation the focus of the American people will stay on health care contrary to what happened during the time of job growth in the 1990s (2009: 225, 230-2).

In regard to government intervention in the health care system, Americans are moving in a progressive direction. They look to the government for financial aid because they feel that their financial situation is getting worse every year; health care premiums have gone through the roof, and a growing number of people are uninsured. When the economy is in a state of recession, the market has not been able to solve one of people's greatest concerns: health care coverage. The

American people realize that in a situation like this, government has the tools to make sure that all citizens have access to doctors and financial aid in paying for treatment and hospital bills. A health care reform is one of the key progressive policies, and right now, public attitudes are increasingly turning in that direction.

4.5 Homosexuality

For many years, homosexuality was a subculture and a sexual orientation which was viewed with much hostility and many prejudices. But in recent decades, as the public opinion figures showed in Chapter 3.3, there has definitely been a change in attitudes toward homosexuality from 1994 onward. In 1994, 68% believed homosexuality to always be wrong, and by 2008, this figure had been reduced to 52%. The general public has become much less hostile toward homosexuality, and although it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly what has made people change their minds, there are some major events and developments in society that have taken place since the mid-1990s up till present day, which might correlate to the change in attitudes.

In overall terms, the U.S. has seen increased focus on homosexuality and gay rights. First, the 1990s saw increasing visibility of homosexual characters in the media. For example, the sitcom, *Will & Grace*, aired for the first time in 1998. The show portrays, among others, two gay men, Will and Jack. There was also the Academy Award-winning movie, *Philadelphia*, which was released in 1993, starring Tom Hanks in the leading role as a gay man who has AIDS and struggles to fight the discrimination hereof. More recently, in 2005, the movie, *Brokeback Mountain*, portrayed two men's complex romantic and sexual relationship with each other. *Brokeback Mountain* also won several Oscars. From the 1990s onward, Hollywood has become increasingly 'gay-friendly', and their messages reach a vast number of living rooms and movie theaters across the nation. This may have contributed to the pro-homosexual trend.

Another suggestion for the changes in attitudes toward homosexuality could be that it is connected to education: the higher your education, the more likely you are to be accepting of homosexuality – and the number of people who complete a higher degree of education continues to rise every year.

When the GSS figures are broken down into education categories, the connection between higher education and pro-homosexuality seems to show. In 1994, 70% of respondents with high school as their highest level of completed education said that homosexuality is always wrong, whereas 44% of the respondents with a graduate degree shared the same view. By 2008, both numbers had decreased remarkably. The figures had decreased to 56% and 26% for respondents with high school and graduate level respectively (2009). Although both groups have seen remarkable opinion shifts, there is still an obvious gap of opinion between the two. People who have a higher education are more likely to accept homosexuality – and that particular social group continues to grow: In 1995, 23% of the American population had completed a bachelor’s or higher degree, and by 2008, the figure had risen steadily to 29%⁴² (“Mini-Digest of Education Statistics”, 2009).

There seems to be a link between higher education and positive attitudes toward homosexuality. People with lower education levels are much more hostile toward homosexuality than people with higher education levels. The group of people who have high school as their highest completed education and the group of people who have graduate degrees are divided by an opinion gap of 30 percentage points, which suggests that higher education leads to more progressive views of homosexuality.

As the attitudes toward homosexuality continuously grow more positive, it is also interesting that the growing acceptance of homosexuality become an important issue in the courts and in Congress. One of the most significant rulings in regard to homosexuality is the landmark ruling of *Lawrence vs. Texas* (2003) which struck down a Texan law that prohibited gay-sex. In the Lawrence-ruling, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional right to privacy and ruled that the states cannot criminalize people’s sexual orientation (Ashbee, 2004: p. 65, 173).

Currently, the federal government does not recognize same-sex marriages,⁴³ however, in 2001, Vermont permitted civil unions, and Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex

⁴² Percentage persons aged 25 years or older

⁴³ In 1986, the Supreme Court ruled that it is up to the state legislatures to decide the legality of homosexuality (Ashbee, 2004: 65).

marriage in 2004. Currently, there are 13 states which have legalized either civil unions or domestic partnerships (“Maps of State Laws & Policies,” 2009). Although the majority of states do not recognize same-sex relationships, gay-rights have still seen a remarkable development since 1994. Sexual orientation was established as a private matter by the Supreme Court in 2003. The fact that the court system and a growing number of state governments are widening their concept of what relationships between two people consist of displays the first steps toward a progressive society which Rawls said should be guided by just designed social and political institutions (Randall, 2003). The issue of gay-rights has reached the highest instances of government, and the amount of attention that has been given to the issue might be a factor in the changes in attitudes.

Many dynamics in society may play a role in the changes in attitudes, but the fact that more and more people are accepting homosexuality and an increasing number of states recognize homosexual relationships definitely shows a shift toward a progressive direction. Homosexuality no longer seems as condemned and tabooed as it used to be because the changes in the opinion polls are significant. Increased focus in the public sphere has most likely brought with it demystification of homosexuals and a deeper understanding for people’s differences and lifestyles. As John Rawls argued in his progressive theory of the *Veil of Ignorance*, it is a move in society toward mutual respect for one another – even though people may not agree with each other, they show respect and tolerance. The changes which are apparent in public opinions about homosexuality make us conclude that Americans are moving in a progressive direction on this highly debated social and cultural issue.

In the next section we move on to our analysis on progressive attitudes toward the environment. The public opinion figures in Chapter 3.4 showed that the Americans are changing their attitudes toward the environmental issue in a progressive direction. We will analyze the figures and the implications hereof.

4.6 The environment

When looking at the figures in Table 3-6 on whether the U.S. is spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on improving and protecting the environment between 1994 and 2008, it is clear that there has been a steady increase in the number of people who believe that the U.S. is spending too little money on the environment. Only in 2002 is this pattern broken. One of the explanations why the increase in the figures suddenly dropped from 63% in 2000 to 60% in 2002 could be the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. It seems very likely that national security and terrorism became the overshadowing concerns among the American people and that other issues therefore did not receive a lot of attention. Once the worst fears about terrorism had settled and the public could start focusing on other things again, the steady increase of people favoring more spending on the environment continued to 64% in 2004. From 2004 to 2006, the figure then increased by 5 percentage points – the biggest leap seen among the two-year intervals – and reaches a record-high 69% in 2006. The reason for this leap is most likely Hurricane Katrina and the disastrous impact it had on New Orleans. The ensuing discussion about global warming and whether or not it affects the hurricane season and other extreme weather conditions should definitely been seen as factors that put the environment back on the political agenda and into the conscience of the American people.

Hurricane Katrina was a major event that probably affected the way American people thought about the environment. But there are also other factors, such as societal and political changes, that may have had an impact on the issue. One interesting development, which could be a strong contributing factor to why more people are supporting more government spending on the environment, is that environmentalism is beginning to gain support from groups that traditionally have not been concerned with the environment.

These include groups that are normally associated with the political right and the Republican Party: One of the most important Republican voter blocks – the religious right – is going green. The religious (Christian) right – many of whom are so-called Evangelicals – is a group of Republican base voters which made up no less than 36% of Bush's total electorate in the 2004 presidential election (PEW, 2004). This particular group is known to vote according to faith and 'moral values' (Ashbee, 2007: 29). Until recently, they have never had the environment as one of their core values, but under the label 'creation care', evangelicals are now beginning to take

progressive steps toward environmental protection based on the Biblical notion that humans have responsibility for Earth. The name 'creation care' was chosen because it is rooted in the Bible rather than in politics and ideology, but also because many conservatives are likely to associate the word 'environmentalism' with liberals, secularists, and Democrats (Harden, 2005).

Religious leaders may have an important part to play for environmentalism in the Republican Party and maybe also for a possible green social movement since the impact of religion can and does extend beyond political conviction (Tucker and Grim, 2007). As a result, they are helping Republicans and members of their congregations to move in a progressive direction.

Richard Cizik, Vice President for Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), is one of the most prominent evangelical lobbyists in the U.S. and a keen spokesperson for creation care. With more than 20 years of political experience, a top position at NAE, which represents 40% of the Republican Party (Griscom, 2005), and a reputation for being a diplomat and peacemaker (Nicholas Institute Board of Advisors, 2008), Richard Cizik has the power to influence Republican attitudes toward environmental protection. And a green movement within the religious right is not without importance because this group has proven to be very politically active.

Furthermore, environment issues also seem to alter the way conservatives think about the relationship between government regulation and business. In fact, the environment has the potential to make Republicans, Evangelicals, and conservatives take positions that align with the progressive view; that is, a combination of government regulation and the market is the best solution to implement clean-tech industries. For example, Michael Gerson, former policy adviser and chief speechwriter to President George W. Bush, argues that a solution to global warming will come from the new industry of green technological solutions, but this industry is not likely to be well-established unless environmental policies guide the way. Some level of federal and state environmental regulations is needed, says Gerson, but only combined with free-market measures and a financial incentive will industries approach the issue with seriousness (2007).

A combination of free-market measures and state regulation is the exact recipe for the strong environmental movement in California. Gerson argues that the smog over Los Angeles was reduced mainly by innovative technological developments, which, on the other hand, were

initiated due to the state's strict restrictions on carbon emissions. Similarly, the Republican Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, argues that the environment is good politics and good business, and like Gerson, he believes that the clean-tech industries should be market-based in a combination with state regulations. Neither one would be able to kick-start a genuine, green progress alone. Political leaders should set up the rules for the industries to follow, and in turn, the industries develop and supply new clean-tech solutions which the market increasingly calls for (Easton, 2007).

Environmental protection has also proven to be an issue which makes unlikely parties stand together and fight for a green cause. In 2006, when Congress was to insert an amendment to a budget bill which would open up millions of acres of public-owned wilderness areas to be purchased by commercial interest, hunting and fishing organizations teamed up with environmental protection organizations and demanded the amendment withdrawn from the bill (Larson, 2006). It was an unlikely team – hunters are mostly associated with conservatives and environmentalists are mostly connected with liberals.

Such examples of conservatives and liberals finding common ground in environmental issues are many. The concern for the environment reaches a broad spectrum of organizations; it cuts across political affiliations, and holds a lot of potential for policies that are truly progressive in nature. Christina Larson, editor of the magazine *Washington Monthly*, observes that, *"each time environmental concerns [unite] a broad array of the public behind the need for government action, it has forged new alliances and remade American politics with a progressive tilt"* (Larson, 2006). In short, environmentalism – or creation care – has remarkable possibilities of being the platform where conservatives and liberals meet on common ground with a progressive purpose.

The environment seems to have become an issue that appeals to progressive values in people who otherwise do not associate themselves with progressivism. If we look at environment and partisanship, the move toward greater concern for the environment does not only relate to progressives and Democrats, but the opinion poll on the environment presented in Chapter 3.4 clearly shows that Republicans and conservatives are also becoming more concerned about the environment.

When the responses are broken down into self-identified conservatives, the figures show that in

1994, 47% believed the U.S. was spending too little money on improving and protecting the environment. In 2008, it had risen to 54%.⁴⁴ A similar development is true for people who identify with the Republican Party where the development goes from 48% to 55% during the same period of time.⁴⁵

This finding could also indicate a rejection of the conservative notion that government should not get involved in business sector. If an increasing number of Americans want to see government get involved in environmental issues, it is most likely that government will introduce further business regulation of negative externalities in order to minimize pollution. At least in regard to the environment, it could be a rejection of the conservative free-market principle which states that government should stay out of the market.

A growing number of Americans want government to increase spending on improving and protecting the environment. It is an acknowledgement of the progressive 'Common Good Principle' which is the belief that the environment is common property and that people have a common responsibility to take care of it.

⁴⁴ The responses '*slightly conservative*', '*conservative*', and '*extremely conservative*' are combined in one response.

⁴⁵ The responses '*Independent, near Republican*', '*Not strong Republican*', and '*Strong Republican*' are combined in one response.

5 Conclusion

Progressivism is a political approach which seems to be gaining ground in the U.S.. At the same time, public attitudes toward a broad array of issues have seen noteworthy shifts during the past two decades. Some argue that the U.S. is inherently conservative; others argue that a new progressive era is underway. We sought out to research these developments and find out if Americans are becoming more progressive.

In doing so, we first established a comprehensible outline of progressivism and the underlying theoretical framework and dynamics. In order to assess progressivism in the U.S., we wanted to base our findings on public opinion polls that relate specifically to progressive policies. However, since the progressive approach to any issue and policy is based on empathy and responsibility, progressivism can practically be applied to any thinkable issue. Therefore we focused the public opinion chapter on five particular areas which are some of the key-issues of progressivism, namely, trust in government, size of government, health care, homosexuality, and the environment. With the mid-1990s as our year of departure, we were able to establish the trends in the figures and compare and contrast them to the core progressive features which we outlined in Chapter 2, *What Is Progressivism?*. On the basis of our findings, we are able to conclude that the Americans have, in fact, become more progressive. A common denominator which can be found throughout our assessment is that there is increasing support for more government intervention in the American society – an inherent progressive feature. With the exception of trust in government, all of our findings point in a progressive direction.

More specifically, this is what we found out.

We began our research on public opinion by looking at the role of government. First, we wanted to measure people's trust in government because trust is fundamental for policies that require extensive government intervention. If the public does not have trust and confidence in their elected officials, it is difficult to gather a majority in Congress for major policy reforms. Since several key-progressive policies require substantial government intervention, trust in government is an important measure in our research. We found that the trust figures do not show a consistent tendency toward increased trust in government. Rather, the trust figures have been subject to substantial fluctuation. At a glance, this development does not display progressive tendencies;

however, there is reason to believe that the trust figures turn out not to be an optimal measurement for evaluating people's trust in government. We found several short-comings in the wording of the polling question that makes us conclude that the poll actually does not say anything specific about 'government' after all. Furthermore, the trust figures seem highly correlative to governmental approval ratings. Comparing trust levels with congressional, presidential, and judicial approval ratings, respectively, lead us to suggest that the trust figures are not entirely about people's overall assessment of 'government in Washington'. We had suspicions that the trust figures would be sensitive to presidential evaluations since acknowledged trust-researchers have made that case, so we were surprised to find that trust in government appears to be a proxy for congressional approval ratings. Although recent trust levels are low, trust proves to be dynamic and is not irreversible. But it has to be earned so the current elected officials will have to work hard to regain public trust. We would argue that the new president and Congress should begin building up trust first and foremost by effectively leading the U.S. out of the current economic crisis in a sustainable manner. If they succeed, it could pave the way for new progressive policies such as health care reform and new energy policies.

When it comes to progressive tendencies in regard to size of government, we found that since the mid-1990s, the public has showed increased support for a bigger government that provides more services. A suggestion to the low figures in 1996 could be that the mid-1990s were the peak of conservatism and anti-government rhetoric. Support for bigger government starts to grow by the late 1990s, and it is possible to argue that the Americans have grown more supportive of bigger government and more services because of changes in government-rhetoric since the mid-1990s. The degree of harsh and very government-critical rhetoric used by the conservative political elite begins to decrease significantly. Political rhetoric on a particular matter is not without importance to public opinion. As the extremely critical voices on, for example, health care reform got lower, the support for government services began to rise. The support, however, dropped by a few percentage points around 2001-2002 but we have reason to believe that the early 2000s' recession made people reluctant to support a bigger government and more services since such a constellation often entails increased government spending. As the economic outlook began to look brighter, the support for bigger government rose again and the support for bigger government and more services now makes up a slight plurality. This is an interesting finding since

studies have found Americans to be quite skeptical of government when it is presented as an abstract concept as is the polling question we have studied. Supplying this finding with another poll which is more specific about government only supports the progressive tendency. We found that a significant plurality supports more government services in areas such as health care and education in spite of increased spending. Furthermore, Americans associate 'government spending' with programs aimed at helping the underprivileged in society which seems to add yet another progressive aspect to the already progressive trend in the findings on size of government.

Speaking of government services and spending should also include public attitudes on taxation. We found that this is also an area in which Americans hold progressive views. In fact, statistics show that a majority of Americans support redistribution of wealth, progressive taxation, and believe their tax level to be fair. This finding on taxation has not seen much development since 1994; it has remained rather high for decades. Thus it challenges the alleged perception of Americans being hostile of taxation.

At the heart of progressivism is economic inequality. One of the main concerns is the claim that despite increased growth, only those at the top of the income scale have reaped the benefits. The high U.S. Gini coefficient supports this claim and places the U.S. among the most unequal of the OECD countries. Americans are likely to have grown more unequal due to the economic policies of the George W. Bush administration. Especially the tax cuts for the wealthiest have been criticized for concentrating the wealth at the very top of society and failing to benefit those at the bottom who need an economic injection the most. It is also possible to argue that the somewhat weak position of labor unions in the U.S. has an influence on the inequality levels. Statistics show that societies with the lowest levels of economic inequality have powerful labor unions. We found that public attitudes toward this issue are difficult to operationalize due to the complex nature of economic inequality. However, there is increasing public support for government intervention in helping the poorest Americans improve their living standards. This implies a tendency toward greater acknowledgement of the situation of the lowest income groups in society which have been left behind in times of economic growth.

We also found that, contrary to conservatives, progressives argue that economic inequality is not an incentive for the poorest in society to work harder. As economic inequality rises, the 'social

ladder' grows longer and, as a consequence, the American dream has become less of a reality for many Americans. Under the current conditions, the entrenched economic inequality makes it almost impossible for the poorest Americans to move up in society – no matter how hard they work. Upward mobility seems to be confined to the middle- and upper-income groups. Furthermore, while intragenerational mobility is much more common, probably because people tend to earn more as they age, intergenerational mobility is much more limited. Consequently, the upward mobility does not extend to the poorest groups in society who probably need mobility the most.

From a progressive perspective, giving all Americans access to health care is only possible with government involvement. We found that Americans are becoming increasingly supportive of more government spending in terms of help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. It is possible to make the case that the Americans have become more progressive in regard to health care because the number of uninsured Americans has grown for years. The development seems to be that this trend not only applies to the poorest Americans but people from the middle-class are also beginning to worry about health care insurance. This is a pressing situation for many Americans because as the number of uninsured people continues to grow the cost of health care premiums has sky-rocketed. A highly unequal development in earnings and health insurance costs has created great concern for health care among Americans. Today, many Americans find that their financial situations are deteriorating and this is very likely to boost the demand for more government aid on the health care issue. Health care reform is a key-progressive goal and a majority of the Americans now support increased government intervention in the health care system.

We have also found that attitudes toward homosexuality have seen significant change in a progressive direction since the mid-1990s. One of the correlative developments is increased exposure of homosexuals in popular culture. This is likely to have brought with it demystification and a deeper understanding for people's differences and lifestyles. Also, it is possible to argue that there is a correlation between high levels of education and tolerance of homosexuality. As the number of people with a bachelor's degree or higher is increasing steadily every year, the positive attitudes toward homosexuality rise correspondingly. Furthermore, there have been

several landmark court rulings that have favored gay-rights and the number of states which legalize civil unions is growing.

Last but not least, we are able to conclude that the Americans are becoming more progressive in their attitudes toward the environment. It is very likely that a major event like Hurricane Katrina may have raised support for more government intervention. At the same time, groups in society which are usually not associated with environmentalism are going green. Religious groups known to be Republican base voters that normally let moral values guide them when they vote, are beginning to embrace environmental protection under the guise of 'creation care'. Subsequently, environmental protection seems to be an issue which has potential to unite people from a broad political spectrum, and such developments could have long-lasting effects on the progressive trends in the U.S..

With the exception of trust in government, our research strongly suggests that there are growing progressive tendencies in the American society. Several polls show pluralities and in some cases majorities favoring progressivism and progressive policies. Events, people, and processes have changed the attitudes of the American people to an extent which has made them move in a progressive direction.

The next and final section of our thesis will discuss the wider implications of our findings.

6 Implications

The 'American dream' is widely cited as being an essential characteristic of the U.S. society. There are many interpretations of the dream but fundamental is the notion that people who are willing to work hard and be self-reliant will be able to climb the social ladder. But even these basic elements of the American dream are open to discussion. Conservatives would argue that due to capitalism and a free-market not tied down by much government regulation, people have the liberty and opportunity to prosper. On the other hand, in this notion lies also the implication that it is people's own fault if they are poor and remain poor. It is their own responsibility to prosper when they live in a society such as the U.S.. In this manner, the American dream can be very much tied to individualism. But John Podesta would argue that this is the wrong interpretation of the American dream. He believes that the dream is not so much about money and becoming richer as it is about the 'dream' itself – the dream of a better life for you and your family. It does not necessarily have to be that everyone in the bottom income-group has to move to the top. It is more about believing that there is actual mobility, and that mobility is not restricted to middle- and upper-income groups. It is about making it possible for all groups in society to experience mobility to various extents. Especially for poor people, it is about being able to move into the middle class and staying there (2008: 9).

The fact the Americans are becoming more progressive could have the implication that an increasing proportion of the people adhere to the progressive version of the American dream. We found increasing support for bigger government, more services, and help in paying for health care. These are distinct progressive traits. The growing tendency that Americans want government to play a larger role in people's well-being challenges the conservative version of the American dream. Furthermore, the fact that a growing proportion of Americans believes that the government should step in and do everything possible to help the poorest in society challenges the individualistic notion that is expressed implicitly in the American dream. Our findings suggest that this is the direction in which public opinion is going and we will argue that these tendencies could develop into a rejection of the conservative, individualistic version of the American dream. The dream will always be a part of the American character because it is such a distinct part of their common beliefs. However, the dream which is argued to be an inherent part of the American consciousness proves to be open to interpretation. So far, we have encountered the

conservative version and the progressive version. If Americans are becoming increasingly progressive, the distinct conservative features of the dream may be toned down, and thus the dream will be molded into a more progressive version that fits the American people of the times. Focus would probably still have connotations to self-reliance and hard work but it will also be the promise that you will never fall too far behind in case you do not succeed on your own merits.

The implications of our findings also touch upon other established views of American national character. Some of our key-findings suggest that since 1994, Americans have gradually approached European characteristics – especially when it comes to the role of government and taking care of the poorest people in society.

Theories behind ‘American exceptionalism’⁴⁶ – the belief that the U.S. is fundamentally different from other countries – stress that the U.S. is set apart by the dominance of an American creed. The American creed includes, among others, individualism and laissez-faire (Lipset, 1996). The individualistic approach to life and the belief that the market is able to regulate itself, in other words, minimal government intervention, has shaped Americans’ view of the role of government. Allegedly, Americans are hostile toward government. Their skepticism toward government is one of the defining features of American society, and, among others, this is what makes the U.S. exceptional – at least in contrast to Europe. However, our findings seem to challenge these established views of the American character. Americans today may no longer be as individualistic and skeptical about government as the theories of American exceptionalism would have us believe. One of our key findings is that Americans are changing their views on government. They support more government intervention, they increasingly support government-funded services, and are not as hostile toward taxes as they are sometimes depicted to be. Furthermore, our findings also suggest that when a growing number of people lose a fundamental necessity such as health care, they look to government for help. The market has not been able to provide citizens

⁴⁶ The notion of ‘American exceptionalism’ was first implied by the French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831. He observed the U.S. to be uniquely different from other developed nations because of its origins, national creed, historic evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions (Koh, 2003: 1481).

with access to medical care as the number of uninsured people has increased in times of economic growth. Correspondingly, the support for government intervention in the health care system has risen to a majority. As attitudes toward government grow increasingly positive, it challenges the notion of American exceptionalism in regard to the view of government, and implies that Americans now have more in common with their European counterparts than previously.

As explained at the beginning, the theory behind the inherent conservative features is that they were shaped by the frontier, the Wild West, that thus the U.S. never saw a need for a socialist movement like Europe. They could always move further west and begin a fresh on their own merits. Frederick Jackson Turner, American historian from the early 20th century, believed that the greatness and success of Americans was tied directly to the country's westward expansion in the pursuit of happiness and a better way of life. Moreover, he argued that the frontier life was the epitome of individualism and that America was too egalitarian to need major structural changes. The relative young age of the country had created a classless consciousness among Americans, mainly due to the lack of a feudal tradition that was prevalent in most of Europe (Lipset, 2000: 24, 33). The 'frontier myth' and classless consciousness still prevails in the American national character; however, our findings suggest that the U.S. may be developing class systems as economic inequality continues to grow. Economic mobility seems confined to the middle- and upper-income groups since a large proportion of the poorest Americans never experience upward mobility. While economic inequality has increased, the notion that government should help the poor improve their living conditions has gained further support in the American society. These findings do not suggest a social movement of European scale, and the U.S. is still quite far from having a European 'cradle-to-grave'-welfare state but these tendencies are pointing toward a greater concern for those who need help in the American society. It is a move away from the individualistic approach, shaped by the frontier, toward a society that has concerns for the greater good and well-being of all citizens – not unlike European societies.

We also want to include the implications of the recent election in the U.S. for with the election of President Barack Obama, there is a new line of policy in the White House. He ran on a progressive platform, campaigning among others for universal health care, a new green economy, and massive investments in the education system. These are all major extensions of the role of

government in society, an inherent progressive trait, and he won 53% of the popular vote against John McCain's 46%. This is the largest share of the popular vote which any president has received in twenty years (Teixeira, 2009).⁴⁷ In his report, *New Progressive America*, Ruy Teixeira declares that this election confirms that a progressive America is on the rise, and that Americans' view of what government can do and should do is changing – the election of Obama seals these changes (Teixeira, 2009).

Since Obama's inauguration, he has been busy implementing new policies and reforming old ones – and government is the main tool of these policies. His most radical response to the current economic situation has been to get the nearly \$800 billion economic stimulus package passed in Congress. Furthermore, he has achieved a broad expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program which extends health care coverage to millions of children. Also, the program to stop foreclosures, Making Home Affordable, is likely to also be passed soon (Fernholz, 2009).

These are all policies which bear the progressive mark; however, the implications of the election of a progressive president in relations to our findings are multifaceted. It could be argued that because Americans are becoming increasingly progressive, they elected Barack Obama last November. Not only was he the Democratic candidate but he also has a highly progressive agenda on key-issues. He wants to expand health care provision so that all Americans have access to medical care. He plans to reform the school system so that all Americans have access to quality education and good teachers. He believes that the energy and environment issues need to be taken seriously and that the U.S. needs to invest in renewable and alternative energy sources in order to minimize the country's dependency on foreign oil. In that, he argues that such measures would both create jobs and spur growth. Obama wants to fight poverty and economic inequality so that the American dream is alive for all who want to pursue it. Furthermore, he supports full civil unions which give same-sex couples the same legal rights as those of married couples ("The Agenda", 2009). His policies on the key-issues which we have researched in this thesis correspond

⁴⁷ Or since the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988. Teixeira highlights the 1988-election because it was an election that proved that a conservative America was on the rise. Now the tables have turned, and a progressive majority is emerging.

very well with our findings. The trends in the public attitudes are pointing in the same direction as Obama's policy proposals. Therefore it is possible to argue that the Americans elected Obama because he is progressive.⁴⁸ Indeed, his campaign slogan, "*Change we can believe in*", promises a new approach and so he embodies the changes which people are increasingly longing for.

However, there is also reason to suggest that the democratic victory was a natural result of events and of processes that have been underway for years – events and processes that have little to do with progressivism or Barack Obama. There are two factors we want to point out in this connection. First, it is possible to argue that Obama won the election because he is not Bush. Former President George W. Bush left the White House with very low approval ratings, reaching just 25% by the end of 2008. His approval ratings rank him among the lowest of presidents together with Nixon, Truman, and Carter (Jones, 2009). In a joking but still quite remarkable comment, talk show host, David Letterman, recently said that, "*Bush and Cheney handed Obama this country on a silver platter*" ("*Late-night Political*", 2009). Americans were so dissatisfied with President Bush at the end of his second term that it could be a factor in the election. During the campaign, the Republican candidate, John McCain, made an effort to distance himself from Bush, but it was Obama who in many ways was Bush's opposite. It is possible to argue that Bush's unpopularity together with Americans' desperate desire for change contributed to the election of Barack Obama. It was rather a rejection of George W. Bush than a vote for progressivism.

Secondly, the U.S. is finding itself in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. In the latest poll from 2008, 88% of the Americans said that they are dissatisfied with the way things are going in America ("*Satisfaction*", 2009). The sub-prime mortgage industry has collapsed. The unemployment rate is rapidly growing by the day. Consumer spending is drastically slowing down which puts further pressure on the economy. Large American corporations are finding themselves

⁴⁸ Obama is essentially progressive in his policies but he still receives critique for not being progressive across the board. For example, he has left progressives disappointed for not supporting the Employee Free Choice Act, a piece of key-legislation that would strengthen unions. Obama has taken other steps that will help workers, but progressives say that the EFCA would encourage a much needed labor movement (Fernholz, 2009).

on the brink of bankruptcy; for example, the three major automobile companies, Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler have pleaded with Congress for financial assistance. The list of financial emergencies which Americans are currently facing goes on and on. Everyone would probably agree that something has to be done – something has to change. Studies have shown that in times of economic recession the public primarily blames the president and not Congress (Richardson, Houston, and Hadjiharalambous, 2001: 93). Thus, it could be argued that people blame the former president for not handling the economy well and letting the crisis reach such levels. The economic crisis could very well have spurred a strong desire for change in the White House. If this is the case, the election implies that people held the president responsible for their economic despair. In this case, it was a Republican president, and thus the election of the Democratic presidential candidate is an obvious choice in a two-party system.

The declaration that the election of Barack Obama is a clear sign of a new progressive America rising can be argued. There is also evidence which suggests that the election was more of a rejection of Bush or that it was an inevitable outcome of a substantial economic crisis than it was a choice of progressivism. Whether the election of Barack Obama was a consequence of public dissatisfaction with the conservative administration or if the election sealed the progressive tendencies in the American public, remains a discussion.

Nonetheless, our findings show that progressive tendencies have been underway since 1994 – long before George W. Bush and Barack Obama were in the White House. The reasons why Obama was elected do not change the fact that there is a new president in Washington and a new line of policies. The most recent poll shows that his approval rating is 65% (Saad, 2009). Within his first 100 days, he has already pursued several progressive policies, and with a Democratic majority in Congress, the U.S. is very likely to see American policies move even further in a progressive direction.

In regard to the issues which we have brought specific attention to in regard to public opinion, Americans are becoming more progressive. On the issues of social security, government financial aid in paying for doctors and hospital bills, and the environment, a majority of the respondents

align with progressive policies. Yet, it is important to note that on the issues of size of government and attitudes toward homosexuality, the figures which speak for growing progressive trends do not amount to majorities, that is, exceed 50% of the respondents. The figures are, however, moving in a progressive direction. Therefore we will not proclaim that a 'new progressive America' is just around the corner but there are distinct tendencies to be found in public attitudes which strongly suggest that Americans are becoming more progressive. We will argue that the conservative traits which were shaped at the frontier and live on in the American dream will probably always be part of the American national character. But at the same time, our findings suggest that Americans have become increasingly concerned with the collective needs in society and, on certain areas, they have thus become more willing to give government a longer leash.

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Appendix: Presidential Approval Statistics – Yearly Averages: 1994 – 2009

President	Year		% Yearly Averages
Clinton	1	Jan 20, 1993-Jan 19, 1994	49,3036
	2	Jan 20, 1994-Jan 19, 1995	45,9286
	3	Jan 20, 1995-Jan 19, 1996	47,5229
	4	Jan 20, 1996-Jan 19, 1997	55,7604
	5	Jan 20, 1997-Jan 19, 1998	57,9167
	6	Jan 20, 1998-Jan 19, 1999	63,8271
	7	Jan 20, 1999-Jan 19, 2000	60,5078
	8	Jan 20, 2000-Jan 19, 2001	60,2440
Bush	1	Jan 20, 2001-Jan 19, 2002	67,8619
	2	Jan 20, 2002-Jan 19, 2003	71,2917
	3	Jan 20, 2003-Jan 19, 2004	59,6119
	4	Jan 20, 2004-Jan 19, 2005	50,1532
	5	Jan 20, 2005-Jan 19, 2006	45,7023
	6	Jan 20, 2006-Jan 19, 2007	37,3438
	7	Jan 20, 2007-Jan 19, 2008	33,2857
	8	Jan 20, 2008-Jan 19, 2009	29,8348

Source: Gallup (2009b). Retrieved from Gallup via email upon request.