Uniting the Divided States of America

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I never thought before the last Presidential elections that I would be doing many things I'm doing now, including this Forum. The elections revealed the inconvenient truth about us, namely that we live in divided, rather than United, States of America. So, after several discussions, including some initiated by our "Positive Agenda" group, I've come to realization that we have to start a serious conversation about bridging the divide in our society. And the first question is, where are the main dividing lines? Are they between Democrats and Republicans? Between liberals and conservatives? Between the rich and the poor? Between people of different classes, levels of education, religions, or races?

Many such lines can be drawn, but the deepest differences between people are defined by their needs and values. Therefore, we have to ask who and what they care about.

Of course, all people care about themselves. There is nothing wrong with this, this is what we all have to do just in order to survive. However, if people care mostly or exclusively about themselves, they are more likely to use others for their own ends. These people are known as "libertarians." Their mantra is success, usually understood in terms of material gains. They can be nice people, and with some luck they can accomplish something of high value to society. The problem is that they always try to accumulate as much wealth and power as possible. They don't stop until they find the ways to rig the system in their favor. It's noteworthy that many of Republican ideologists and big donors, including Koch brothers, are libertarians.

They need some luck, however, to achieve success they desire, and luck is the rare commodity. Therefore, most would-be libertarians turn to their families and communities (and religion, if they live in religious communities) for security and support. They become a part of much larger, perhaps the largest, group of people, who care about security, their communities, families, and the future of their children. These are good people who have a strong sense of fairness. If you work hard and help your neighbors and can have a decent life - this is fair, anything else is not. We can call them "conservatives," because they want to conserve their communities and lifestyle. Their mantra is fairness, security, and family values. Their main weakness is that if they feel that their communities are threatened, they become an easy target for xenophobic ideas. Also, they are susceptible to libertarian propaganda, so they frequently vote against their own economic interests.

Some people feel comfortable in much larger or diverse communities, either due to certain genetic traits, or because they were exposed to such communities in their formative years. These people, who we usually call "liberals," learn to appreciate the values of freedom and diversity. They care about the same things as conservatives do, but their "community" can be "scaled up" to the whole human race, and their "security" becomes a global security. This explains why they are so active in antiwar and environmental movements. Their mantra is freedom and human rights.

Liberals sincerely try to help people who seem most needy. The problem is that, with so much suffering in the world, any choice of group of people that need most help is somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, with so many tensions and conflicts it's nearly impossible to help one group without alienating others. For instance, some liberals support international aid and free-trade agreements because they hope that such policies will help people in the poorest countries. This school of thought is known as "neoliberalism". In fact, the main beneficiaries of neoliberalist policies are the libertarian wealthy elites, but even if these policies helped reduce extreme poverty in some countries, this would not make happy many Americans, losing their jobs or income as a result of outsourcing. Likewise, it may be hard to find a common ground between liberals concerned about anti-Semitism and those who support Palestinians at "occupied" territories.

This is not because the common ground doesn't exist and compromise can't be found (although sometimes this can be the case). The problem is that if you care deeply about a particular group of people, you almost inevitably develop strong opinions and emotional bonds with them. This is not the best starting point for finding balanced solutions. All these divisions fracture the "liberal camp" and make it inherently weaker than "conservative America" despite the fact that many liberal policies are widely popular.

The problem is further exacerbated by the sense of urgency in helping people who are really suffering. This creates a strong incentive for quick fixes to do something "right now" that may be not very helpful and can be even counterproductive in the long term. Refugee camps that become a fertile ground for terrorists come to mind, but examples are too many to list here. Liberals are very effective in raising awareness and bringing attention to issues that need to be addressed, but not so effective in finding and implementing long-term solutions.

To address these weaknesses of liberal mindset, we have to care about one more thing - the future. We have to focus on finding long-term solutions that would ensure the better future for most, if not all, people in our communities, our country, and everywhere on our planet. These solutions have to be implementable, and for that they have to be fair, popular, and effective.

We don't have a good term for people sharing with liberals their pain and concerns, but with this special focus on the future. Pragmatists? Technocrats? These terms imply a degree of moral relativism, but this is not the case here. "Futurocrats" would be the closest, but it sounds too awkward. So, for the lack of better term, let's reuse the word "progressives" that is usually considered as almost synonymous to liberals.

Note that in our confusing (to say the least) political jargon progressives usually take place at the far-left fringe of political spectrum (think of Bernie Sanders). However, it would be more fair to see them as the most reasonable sort of liberal-minded people, who are more than willing to work patiently with all stakeholders to find solutions that would work for all. The whole political spectrum as described here is not "linear" from right to left, but rather a sort of "hierarchical," with each group inheriting most traits of the other. Conservatives are libertarians who care about their communities and focus on security and fairness. Liberals are conservatives who appreciate larger and more diverse communities, care about global security, and focus on human rights. Progressives are liberals who care about the future and

focus on finding long-term solutions that would make life of most people better and safer. Their mantra is democracy, balance, and sustainable development.

Future; *democracy, balance, and sustainability* — Progressives
Large and diverse communities, world; *human rights* — Liberals
Community, family; *safety, security, and fairness* — Conservatives
Individual; *success, wealth, and power* — Libertarians

Such hierarchical representation, as any generalization, entails a great deal of simplification, but it captures what is common for all these groups. It also hints that the main dividing lines in our society are not between conservatives and liberals as the common wisdom suggests, but rather between libertarians, who exploit other people for their benefits, and the rest of us, who care about other people.

However, bridging this divide isn't likely, since libertarians have no interest in this while they have their way. The more realistic goal would be to neutralize their influence by restoring democracy, based on "one person - one vote" principle. This requires reducing the role of big money in politics by refusing to accept any funds from corporate donors or by reducing the cost of election campaigns all the way down to Zero-Cost Elections. Bernie Sanders and other progressives already demonstrated how this can be done.

In short, the libertarians are those who corrupt our political system. The conservatives and the liberals blame each other for being corrupted, but have no problem with corruption that works in their favor. Only the progressives stand against corruption for principled reasons, rejecting it as a main threat to our democracy.

The divide between conservatives and liberals is no wider than, say, between neoliberals and pro-labor democrats within the liberal camp. It is amplified, however, by the fact that conservatives and liberals tend to live in different "bubbles" and to have strong and self-reinforcing opinions. So, they don't have strong incentives to leave their comfortable bubbles for questionable benefits of finding common ground with each other.

The progressives do have such incentives, because the only way to implement the long-term solutions they want is by bringing all stakeholders together. Moreover, progressives are well-positioned for doing this, they are problem solvers and coalition builders par excellence. Now more than ever the country needs progressives to initiate and lead discussions about the future of our communities and our country, through media, online platforms, community meetings and town halls, political and non-political activist organizations. These discussions need to lead to tangible outcomes, such as community development plans, legislative proposals, political platforms for candidates running for offices, and progressive vision of the future of our country (that we called a "positive agenda").

Now we can better understand why conservative America remains so strong despite all the obvious weaknesses of conservative ideology. We all, except the libertarian wealthy elite, are conservatives. We all care about our communities, safety, and security of our country. These are not "conservative values," they are universal values. Therefore, a progressive vision shouldn't discard or dismiss these values, it should be built upon them and expand

them further. This is not the issue of "framing" (in G. Lakoff's terms) or cynical political calculations, but the recognition of importance of these values to all people.

At the very high level, the progressive vision of better and stronger America can be as simple as this:
- safe, supportive, and thriving communities
- secure, democratic, strong, and generous country
- decent standard of living, basic human rights and freedoms for all Americans.

How to achieve these goals is subject to debates, and we should have these debates and not to dismiss any issues only because Trump or the GOP claim to "own" them. Sure, the border security is important, but is it more important than cyber-security? Is a physical wall along the Mexican border the best way to ensure the border security? Wouldn't using the drones for electronic surveillance and improving cooperation with Mexican authorities across the border provide more cost-effective solutions? The questions like these should be asked, and they should be answered using all available data and expert knowledge.

There is no need to start everything from scratch. Many good policy ideas have already been proposed and vetted by experts. You can see a partial list of these ideas in our Draft of Positive Agenda and references in this doc. The Democratic Party seems increasingly open to some of these ideas, but the Party establishment still worries too much about upsetting its big donors and its traditional liberal base. At the same time, common ground is not the same as middle ground, and a positive agenda as defined here is not the same as a bipartisan or "between-partisan" agenda in the spirit of No Labels movement since this would make it too limited. Rather this is the people's agenda, similar to what is already embraced by Brand New Congress, Justice Democrats, Our Revolution, and other new progressive groups. By refusing to accept corporate money and appealing directly to the people, progressives can advance bold ideas that otherwise would be rejected by Democratic and Republican establishment.

This doesn't mean that progressives are "better" people than, say, liberals or conservatives. All people are different. All people and all groups of people have their strengths and weaknesses, and progressives are no exception. They tend to be well-educated people, using careful analysis and data crunching to evaluate policy options. This is good, but it has a flip side, a sort of technological arrogance. Progressives tend to rely too much on technology, sometimes they fail to connect to people who are not as tech savvy as they are. They tend to assume somehow that everyone tweets or wants to use Slack or other specific tools. They don't always appreciate the value of direct human interactions. However, they may be able to overcome these weaknesses, since they are willing to leave their tech bubble for good cause and to work together with diverse people.

Anyway, someone has to do this: to bridge the political divide, to bring us together, to unite the nation around common goals, to restore democracy and use it to reverse the libertarian power grab and its disastrous results - political corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation. Progressives can do this better than others. Perhaps, only they can do this. This is their historic chance.

Draft of Positive Agenda

1. **Healthcare as a right.** Medicare for all. Control medication costs. Restore mental care that was dismantled in the end of last century, and ensure that human rights of patients are protected.

2. **Basic income and housing for all.** This is needed to ensure that no matter how many jobs are lost to automation, no one will be left on the street without food.

3. **Democracy for all.** Repeal Citizens United. Close "revolving door" between the government and industry lobbyists. Redistricting reform.

4. **Justice for all.** "Ban the box" in job applications, abolish death penalty, ban prisons for-profit. And this is just the beginning...

5. **Carbon tax for polluters, clean transport for commuters.** Carbon tax is the best policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It will also create more economic incentives for investments in green manufacturing and clean transport, including futuristic solutions like Elon Musk's hyperloop and on-demand mobility systems.

6. **Learn and earn.** Free public transportation for schoolchildren. Increase teachers' wages, eliminate tenure and excessive bureaucracy in public schools, and stop abuse of Individual Instruction Plan (IIP) and Special Education programs. Free vocational education in high school and post-high school, including free college courses leading to employment. Encourage on-the-job training and direct placement programs.

7. **Share prosperity, not austerity.** Massive investments in infrastructure and cutting edge R&D (ARRA on steroids). Big tax incentives (all the way down to zero tax) for those who create jobs on American soil. Renegotiate trade agreements to the benefit of the people rather than TNC and wealthy elites. Establish federal and state programs for helping people in economically depressed regions. Protect the right of worker organization.

8. **Financial stability and responsibility.** Restore Glass-Steagall act. Force the Pentagon (the biggest waster of taxpayers' money) to become more transparent and efficient. Tax stock trade transactions (as suggested by Pikketti). Increase marginal tax to 70% (as it was before Reagan). Increase taxes on capital gain to 35%.

9. **Balance immigration with assimilation.** Ensure that we have adequate resources and policies to assimilate economically and culturally all refugees coming to our country. Ensure that all immigrants, including refugees, recognize the sovereignty of our civil law over religious laws and customs of their countries of origin. Provide a path to legalization and naturalization for law-abiding immigrants, while also strengthening our borders.

10. **Boon for the Moon.** Establish, in collaboration between NASA and private space companies, a permanent human-robotic presence on the Moon as a stepping stone for human missions to Mars. Begin moving the dirty and energy-intensive manufacturing processes to cis-lunar space. This will generate a lot of good jobs in old and new aerospace industry and relieve the burden on Earth environment.

11. **Simple tax return.** Simplify tax code so that most of us wouldn't need to spend any time and money for filing our tax returns.

Progressive Groups in Bay Area

Bayshore Progressive Democrats (BPD): www.bayshoreprogressive.org

Our Revolution in North CA: https://ourrevolution.com/groups/norcal4ourrevolution/

Positive Agenda Discussion Group: positive-agenda@googlegroups.com

South Bay chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA): https://southbaydsa.org/

South Bay Progressive Alliance (SBPA): https://southbaypa.org/

Sunnyvale Democratic Club: http://sunnyvaledems.org/

References

Justice Democrats: https://www.justicedemocrats.com/platform

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The Real Agenda for Working People: https://petitions.signforgood.com/RealWorkersAgenda?code=PA

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