

# When Liberals Become Progressives, Much Is Lost

By Greg Weiner April 13, 2018

Op-Ed Contributor



Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Capitol in 1995. He forthrightly described himself as a liberal, while today the label “progressive” is becoming more common. David Scull/The New York Times

WORCESTER, Mass. — On the night of his election to the Senate in 1976, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, declared: “I ran as a liberal. I was elected as a liberal.” This month, discussing her campaign for the Democratic nomination for governor of New York, Cynthia Nixon called for “[progressive change](#).” The distinction matters.

In recent decades, the label “progressive” has been resurrected to replace

“liberal,” a once vaunted term so successfully maligned by Republicans that it fell out of use. Both etymologically and ideologically, the switch to “progressive” carries historical freight that augurs poorly for Democrats and for the nation’s polarized politics.

Historical progressivism is an ideology whose American avatars, like Woodrow Wilson, saw progress as the inevitable outcome of human affairs. Of course, liberals and conservatives believe that their policies will result in positive outcomes, too. But it is another thing to say, as American Progressives did, that the contemporary political task was to identify a destination, grip the wheel and depress the accelerator.

The basic premise of liberal politics, by contrast, is the capacity of government to do good, especially in ameliorating economic ills. Nothing structurally impedes compromise between conservatives, who hold that the accumulated wisdom of tradition is a better guide than the hypercharged rationality of the present, and liberals, because both philosophies exist on a spectrum.

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A liberal can believe that government can do more good or less, and one can debate how much to conserve. But progressivism is inherently hostile to moderation because progress is an unmitigated good. There cannot be too much of it. Like conservative fundamentalism, progressivism contributes to the polarization and paralysis of government because it makes compromise, which entails accepting less progress, not merely inadvisable but irrational. Even when progressives choose their targets strategically — Hillary Clinton, for example, called herself “a progressive who likes to get things done” — the implication is that progress is the fundamental goal and that its opponents

are atavists.

Unlike liberalism, progressivism is intrinsically opposed to conservation. It renders adhering to tradition unreasonable rather than seeing it, as the liberal can, as a source of wisdom. The British philosopher Roger Scruton [calls this](#) a “culture of repudiation” of home and history alike. The critic of progress is not merely wrong but a fool. Progressivism’s critics have long experienced this as a passive-aggressive form of re-education.

Because progress is an unadulterated good, it supersedes the rights of its opponents. This is evident in progressive indifference to the rights of those who oppose progressive policies in areas like sexual liberation.

This is one reason progressives have alienated moderate voters who turned to Donald Trump in 2016. The ideology of progress tends to regard the traditions that have customarily bound communities and which mattered to Trump voters alarmed by the rapid transformation of society, as a fatuous rejection of progress. Trump supporters’ denunciation of “political correctness” is just as often a reaction to progressive condescension as it is to identity politics.

Where liberalism seeks to ameliorate economic ills, progressivism’s goal is to eradicate them. Moynihan recognized this difference between Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which he always supported — as exemplified by his opposition to Clinton-era welfare reform — and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, which he sympathetically criticized. The New Deal alleviated poverty by cutting checks, something government does competently even if liberals and conservatives argued over the size of the checks. The Great Society partook more of a progressive effort to remake society by eradicating poverty’s causes. The result, Moynihan [wrote](#), was the diversion of resources from welfare and jobs to “community action” programs that financed political activism.

This ideology of progress naturally aggrandizes the fastest route to the future,

which is one reason progressivism has historically elevated the presidency to the center of the American regime. This insistence on progress based solely on reason also explains the doomed progressive aspiration, dating to the early 20th century, for “scientific legislation,” which seeks to transform the political into the rational. Yet policymaking in a republic is not, and [should not be](#), purely rational. Constitutional institutions like the separation of powers instead require that policies develop gradually and command wide consensus — at least under normal circumstances.

But neither liberalism nor conservatism opposes rationality. Conservatism holds that accumulated tradition is a likelier source of wisdom than the cleverest individual at any one moment. It fears the tyranny of theory that cannot tolerate dissent. Liberalism defends constitutionalism. One of the finest traditions of 20th-century liberalism was the Cold War liberal who stood for social amelioration and against Soviet Communism. This genus — including Moynihan, Senator Henry Jackson and the longtime labor leader [Lane Kirkland](#) — was often maligned by progressives.

One cannot, of course, make too much of labels. But democracy is conducted with words, and progressivism, by its very definition, makes progress into an ideology. The appropriate label for those who do not believe in the ideology of progress but who do believe in government’s capacity to do good is “liberal.” They would do well, politically as well as philosophically, to revive it.

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