

FIRST THINGS

The Missing Piece in Conservative Economics

By Greg Forster

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Pete, I appreciate your [response](#) to my [post](#), and I think you're right that the key problem is that conservatives are perceived as pro-rich rather than pro-middle-class. I don't think, however, that we will have solved the problem when we cobble together a set of policy initiatives that can be plausibly sold as pro-middle-class, such as carving out larger special tax breaks for parents. That's just another way of buying votes, and the other side will always beat us at that game, because they believe in big spending. This problem, like so many others, can't be solved by just throwing enough money at the right constituencies. There is a deeper issue that needs to be solved.

We don't lack policy ideas, we lack words to describe them. Specifically, we lack a person who can describe these policies in a way that is exciting and inspiring both to a large enough portion of the conservative movement base and a large enough portion of the general public. We're never going to get the Cato Institute and the suburban moms at your local parent-teacher organization singing off the same song sheet, of course. But we don't need to simultaneously please those who are most seriously committed to libertarianism and those who are most seriously committed to being squishy moderates with no serious commitments other than squishy moderation. We do, however, need to get at least *most* of the movement base and *most* of the mushy middle to hold hands.

That requires rhetoric, in the Aristotelian sense. You don't assemble the policy ideas first and then find a salesman who can pitch them. You need the big ideas first, and the policies should conform to the big ideas. "Big ideas" is a matter of rhetoric. Who are we as a people? What is praiseworthy? What is unjust? The policy wonk is the rhetor's handmaiden, not the other way around.

This is why I would not be so quick to dismiss the value of bashing cronyism. Yes, you're right that bashing cronyism cannot be the center of the solution to this problem. It's not constructive. Tearing down the bad stuff is great, but the future belongs to people who build. Nonetheless, it is a big idea that brings together the base and the squishes.

Moreover, the basic problem here—as you have so eloquently put it—is that the public thinks we're pro-rich. If people suspect you of harboring wrong values and corrupt practices, trust must be reestablished. An act of almost ritual cleansing is called for. A successful conservative push to tear down some major crony-capitalism program—especially if it's *not* a Solyndra-like green

boondoggle, awful as those are, but a “plain vanilla” business racket—would go far to silencing the public’s doubts.

That said, the constructive element must also appear. We need a rhetor who can talk about work, savings, entrepreneurship, compassion and subsidiarity in a way that makes enough people in the movement and in the public at large *feel good* about voting for him. Until we find him (or her) the rest is tinkering.

As a postscript, a quibble about your post. You point to Republican politicians who use libertarian rhetoric to explain why people would think “conservatives” are libertarian. But that misses the point of my question—I wanted to know why these libertarian figures are able to get their message into the cultural narrative while conservatives who *don’t* use libertarian rhetoric seem to be unable to do so. By citing these examples you’re basically just repeating the premise of my question.