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Time for Progressive to Stand Up Proudly for Government

What's Your Reaction?

From the beginning of the "Reagan Revolution" in 1980 until the election of Barack Obama, progressives were in a defensive crouch. The ideas and values of the right wing were predominant. During the Clinton years, at least there were two ideological teams on the field, but even then progressives fought on the defense - especially when it came to the role of government. Remember it was Bill Clinton who felt compelled to open a State of the Union with the words: "The era of Big Government is over."

Today's health care debate epitomizes the sharp difference between the progressive understanding of the role of government, and the right wing views underlying of the failed policies that culminated in the Bush years

This year progressives, lead by President Obama, have stopped apologizing for our view the proper role of government, and begun to assert that Reagan was fundamentally wrong when he said government was the problem. **Instead, as Congressman Barney Frank says, government is the name we give to the things we choose to do together.**

The right wing argues that government can never do things as well as the "private sector."

Government is not always the solution, any more than it is always the problem. But in many cases, progressives know that it is more efficient, more effective and more consistent with the values of a democratic society for all of us to do something together - through our government.

Progressive leaders need to finish getting out of that defensive crouch, stand up straight, and assert our view of government forcefully and without apology.

After all, we have the high political ground. For example, today's *Washington Post*-ABC poll shows continued strong public support for a public health insurance option (57% support, 40% oppose). The public option has consistently shown to be the most popular element of health reform.

The same poll shows that 55% of voters feel that the health care plan would create either the right amount (34%) or not enough (21%) "government involvement in the nation's health-care system". The charge that health care reform will result in a "government take-over" of health care has failed to resonate.

In fact one of the major concerns voters raise about health care reform is the fear - especially among seniors - that it would weaken the very popular government-run Medicare system. It's actually pretty remarkable that one of the most potent criticisms Republicans have raised about health care reform is this completely incorrect charge that it would weaken the government run Medicare program that the Right opposed as socialized medicine for years.

Progressives know that Government action is necessary to assure the public health, provide public education, and maintain the public infrastructure for our common life - from streets, parks, and airports, to mass transportation. Government is the expression of our common life - our life as a community; and in democratic societies, it is much more accountable to average citizens than any other major decision-making structure, including large corporations.

Most Americans agree with us that government - not the "private sector," is best equipped to provide public security, fire protection, public education, highways, public transportation and a common defense against enemies. Most also agree that we are much better off providing everyone with Social Security and health insurance for retirement through Medicare. And most agree that government has the obligation to make sure that all Americans have health insurance.

After 9/11, when it was obvious that America needed to massively strengthen its airport security, there was uniform agreement that security screeners should become officers of the government rather than the private security contractors who had done the screening before the 9/11 attacks. The choice seemed obvious. Where you want serious attention to security and public accountability everyone agreed that the screening personnel should be officers of our government.

In fact, the demonization of government -- and the Right's success over the last three decades at diverting resources from the public sector into the hands of Wall Street and multi-national corporations -- have lead directly to our most intractable problems. It has shortchanged our investment in the education of our next generation, created a health care system that costs twice as much per person as any other on earth but leaves us 37th in health care outcomes. It has starved our investment in infrastructure and energy efficiency.

The anti-government forces prevented serious regulation of Wall Street that lead directly to the frenzy of reckless risk-taking that precipitated the current economic collapse, and cost millions their jobs.

By starving the public sector they contributed directly to the concentration of income in the top 1 percent of the population, and outsized growth of Wall Street and the rest of the financial sector.

Right wing activist Grover Norquist, the leader of the Republican efforts to slash taxes for the wealthy, expressed their view in its purest form when he said he believes that government needs to be "shrunk to the size that it can be drowned in the bathtub." In his view, government is the enemy of moral purpose, which resides solely in the ability of individuals to pursue their own individual self-interest. In a utopian right wing world, there are very few things that we should choose to do together.

From the progressive point of view, government is critically necessary because it uses the common wealth for the common good - to make individual freedom possible - and to allow each individual to realize his or her own individual goals and aspirations. In the progressive view, as George Lakoff says, "the common wealth builds the infrastructure for freedom."

The progressive view of the role of government is not a radical new departure. It dominated American domestic politics from 1932 until the mid 1970's. That dominant view translated directly into policies that created a huge leap in economic growth. Real income grew among every sector of the American population and the level of income inequality shrank precipitously.

The right wing counter-revolution against government never spread to most other developed countries in the world. The progressive view of the role of government is widely shared throughout Europe and Asia not just by the center-left - but by many who would describe themselves as center-right.

Today the right wing view that "government is the problem" is shared by a shrinking minority of the American population, and it is embodied in the ideology of a rapidly declining Republican Party that is out of touch with the needs and beliefs of ordinary Americans - not to speak of the views of people in the rest of the world. Only 20% of Americans now self identify as Republicans according to today's *Washington Post*-ABC Poll - the lowest in a quarter century.

But the most important thing for us to remember is that the anti-government ideology is not simply a set of ideas that emerged whole cloth from scholars at the CATO Institute or the mind of Rush Limbaugh. It is not simply an alternative view of what's good for the "public interest." **It is the creation of those who use it to justify their own private gain.**

It is used to justify the empirically unsupportable notion that private insurance companies are better at providing health insurance than publicly organized insurance programs like Medicare, or the public health insurance programs that provide better health care outcomes in other industrial countries at much lower prices. Would anyone seriously argue that we should leave fire protection to the private sector We all agree that it is

both more efficient and more humane to make fire protection the responsibility of government. The same goes for health insurance - a fact that has been recognized throughout the rest of the world.

Of course, health insurance companies don't embrace anti-government rhetoric because of some deep-seated ideological commitment. They do it so they can continue to make huge profits and pay multi-million dollar executive salaries.

Wall Street bankers don't battle "governmental intrusion" for ideological reasons, they do it so they can continue to be free to make billions in bonuses - even if they periodically bring the economy down in the process.

The Republicans don't promote huge tax cuts for the rich out of a high-minded belief that the private sector is more effective at investing hundreds of millions of dollars than the government. They do it because their wealthy backers want the money.

Opposition to policies that would create millions of new clean energy jobs does not flow from the oil companies' principled opposition against an "intruding government." They want to be free to make as much money as they can, no matter what the consequences for our children or our planet.

The movement for more "outsourcing" of governmental functions from public employees to private companies like Haliburton and Blackwater has nothing to do with genuine concern for "effective" government. It has everything to do with siphoning off taxpayer dollars into the hands of big corporations.

The anti-government forces have always wanted to prevent us from doing things together through a democratically accountable government, so they can do things privately to enhance their own wealth and power - often at the expense of everyone else.

This year progressives - led by the President - have the opportunity to reassert the importance of the public sector by winning health insurance reform, financial regulatory reform, and a new energy policy. Together, let's get it done.

Robert Creamer is a long-time political organizer and strategist, and author of the book: "Stand Up Straight: How Progressives Can Win," available on amazon.com.