

A WINNING STRATEGY FOR PROGRESSIVES: SECURING THE VOTE & CHURCH/STATE SEPARATION

Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

A democracy can only be as democratic as the minds and hearts of its people.

A fundamentalist and reactionary anti-progress takeover threatens the very fabric of American democracy, but also offers real opportunities to renew our democratic foundations and also revitalize those interested in progress, the real meaning of “progressive.” We have been on the defensive, losing ground while reacting to cleverly orchestrated assaults on countless fronts. Reminding people of the basic principles that are the pillars of a true democracy will allow us to take the moral offensive. Certainly a big mistake in progressive strategy would be to try to do what has made the reactionaries successful. Rather than lose integrity and respect by quoting the Bible, talking religious values, dropping our values for theirs, or weakening our support for controversial issues like abortion, we should expand our vision and hold firm to our values while showing them more in line with democracy than theirs.

People of all parties should join the progressives’ “Defend Democracy” movement already underway and make protecting democracy foundational. Not to do this is perilous for all of us and the nation. The opposition has proclaimed themselves the guardians of freedom, patriotism and traditional values. At least two fundamental issues reveal the spuriousness of these claims and bypass the endless splinter arguments they utilize to fragment people and obfuscate what is at stake. These two issues alone could reframe the issues and make progressives the champions of democracy, freedom, and true patriotism, while undermining much of the power of the fundamentalist right. Moreover, these issues will be difficult to oppose as they are both foundational for our democracy. If they are won, many other political battles would eventually fall into place on our side with far-reaching benefits and repercussions. This will also enable us to counter the fear- and misinformation-based methods that the opponents to progress have so successfully used.

1) THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE VOTE

Particularly because of the last two presidential elections, many people have come to think that America is not really a democracy. The real essence of democracy rests upon the incorruptibility of the vote and the rule of law. What makes a democracy a democracy is that through the vote, one power order can be bloodlessly turned out of office for another. The key is that through an honest vote available to all citizens, one power block of people can be replaced, with the instruments of governance continuing during the transfer of power. This makes the honesty of the vote essential for a true democracy, which ought to be self-evident. It is less evident but of critical importance that for a democracy to function properly, the citizenry has to *believe* they’re participating in a real democracy. If a significant number of people within a society does not believe this, the democratic process is undermined in many significant ways, which include not voting out of widespread cynicism and a vast mistrust of politicians and the political system. The point being that for a democracy to function people not only have to value democracy, but also believe they are living in one. This makes trusting the vote’s integrity a foundational piece of what makes democracy work.

There is a crisis of confidence in the reliability and fairness of the vote among far too many people—*which means in our democracy itself*. Rampant mistrust in the electoral process began in 2000 and increased in 2004. Extraordinary abuses and countless allegations of mismanagement of the 2004 election have already been reported and documented with many legal challenges underway. Consequently, for many the elections lack credibility—and since a recount is impossible, there is no way to reassure doubters or prove that Bush

won fairly. Whether people fear that there was significant fraud or even just the potential for it, or believe the election was actually stolen or just suspect it, it all undermines the motivation to vote and to trust government.

Many who voted solely to defeat Bush are so disgusted with the Democratic party for not even questioning the vote that they are withdrawing support and instead have created a Defend Democracy movement on their own. Joining them in championing a secure vote is a pre-requisite for Democrats to regain respect and counter the perception of being spineless. This will attract new people and mobilize broader alliances. So safekeeping the legitimacy of the vote is a most basic patriotic cause all progressives should take on as a mission to protect the very foundation of our democracy. Democrats and Republicans need to join the fight for the trust of the nation in the democratic process. This is necessary for the good of the country as a whole.

America needs a thorough non-partisan investigation that the entire nation can trust. This would involve examining without prejudice all reports of fraud, misuse, and logistical strategies aimed at keeping legitimate voters from voting. Any damning, unequivocal evidence of tampering should be made public and prosecuted to the fullest extent. Meanwhile, we should avoid presenting conclusions with certainty until all possible evidence is in. Until we can prove misdeeds in a court of law or sway the population at large, we should no longer make public claims that the election was stolen, that the fraud was part of a conspiracy to win at all costs and the like. Such claims are hard to prove convincingly short of not only finding the equivalent of a “smoking gun,” but of tracing culpability upward to major administrators. Instead the focus should be on what we as a nation need to do to secure the future legitimacy of elections.

Just as in principle every vote should count, so too every citizen’s trust should matter. Mistrust has reached such significant levels that it is not wholly up to the doubters to prove wrong-doing—it’s up to the government to prove the vote is secure. This reframes suspicions of vote fraud more democratically, correctly redefining those who are angry or mistrustful as “concerned citizens” and as much needed electoral watchdogs whose lost faith in our democracy needs to be regained. Instead, shamefully, those concerned for our democracy are being ridiculed, insulted, and marginalized as quacks, unpatriotic flakes, conspiracy thinkers, or “bad losers” and told to “Just get over it.” We must make such condescending *ad hominem* attacks the sign of being a “bad winner.” A good winner would honor democracy’s need for the vote to be trustworthy and trusted.

Promoting the “Protect the Vote” movement does not necessarily require proving beyond reasonable doubt that there was a determinative or even significant number of violations. It rather involves showing beyond reasonable doubt that there easily could have been and more importantly, *that there still easily could be*. The very usage of easily hackable voting machines—even with paper trails—is sufficient in itself to justify reasonable doubt. Paper trails in voting machines only show what the machine ends up with. If a machine is hacked, it shows the results of the hack.* Instead of computerized voting machines, which by their very nature are vulnerable to electronic tampering, what is needed are paper ballots counted by optical scanners, backed by random and substantial rigorous hand-counted audits of those machine-counted paper ballots. Focusing on auditing of Opti-scan systems will go a long way towards keeping the voting system in check as Opti-scan ballots do provide a lasting record of the voters’ true intent. Only then could a legitimate count and recount be ensured.

Without the possibility of a legitimate recount, there is no real democracy. It is of utmost importance to demand the bottom line necessities that will ensure a fair and honest vote and enable voters to trust the process, including trusting those who regulate it. Using hackable machines manufactured by any private corporation, let alone avowed Bush backers, is outrageous and intolerable. State by state partisan control of federal elections undermines the vote as the democratic leveler it is supposed to be (one person, one vote of equal value) and makes elections vulnerable to tampering.

Protecting our future from potential fraud will muster much more support than attempting to prove that powerful Republicans willfully and illegally rigged the election. Many more people would be responsive to the crisis of confidence issue than could ever be convinced that the elections were really stolen. Focusing on securing future elections and the repercussions of widespread mistrust is a more winning, less marginalizing strategy. We must reach the media, and gain support from influential people for paper ballots and non-partisan investigations to discover the truth about all the potential and purported voting “irregularities” so that all Americans believe their vote counts and that they are living in a true democracy. If it’s possible, it is certainly important to show convincingly there was extensive fraud. But it is of much greater importance and far easier to show that there was the possibility of it being easily done.

Though some claims may be exaggerative or largely wrong, most vote challengers are posing totally valid and crucial criticisms and questions. A long list of abuses and outrageous irregularities have been catalogued, including: corporations owned by fervent Bush supporters being intermediaries between voters and their government by manufacturing voting machines with hidden programs and also being the ones that count the machine votes—this cannot be tolerated. Civil liberties abuses include charges of vote obstruction through a deliberate lack of machines and unconscionably long waits in minority and Democratic precincts. In addition, partisan state control of elections brought unequal access to secure voting and even to voting itself—including in Ohio where the election outcome was ultimately determined. In short, there have been more than enough recent “irregularities” and legitimate causes for mistrust and suspicion to justify fighting for voting rights, security, reform, and electoral justice for all.

Much must be done to protect the vote and promote voting, including federal standards for at least federal elections, non-partisan watchers, and holding elections on a non-workday. The vote is the only power the ordinary citizen has to counter the intrinsic advantages of the wealthy and powerful. A good barometer of how much a country values voting is how easy—or hard—it makes voting. A true democracy not only ensures every citizen the right and also the means to a secure vote, but also values and fosters voting as the rock bottom basis of democracy that it is.

* The film-expose *Votergate* documents vote fraud and the 2004 vote machines’ vast potential for hacking. Free 35-minute webcast at www.votergate.tv & www.publicinterestpictures.org. *Unprecedented* on Florida vote fraud in 2000 is also at Public Interest Pictures. VOTERGATE has been changed to HACKED! It's off of our websites for now. Hacked! Will reappear on www.publicinterestpictures.org in 3-4 weeks after our new website has been reconstructed. Hacked ! Will be ready for release by Oct.1, but could be delayed.

2) SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE – A BEDROCK OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

We can turn the opposition’s fixation on religion to our advantage. The principle of religious freedom offers endless possibilities for turning the fundamentalist tide. We can best do this by focusing on *why the separation of church and state is essential for religious freedom*—a foundational principle that is difficult (we think impossible) to refute. Since this is the hardest argument for them to counter, it’s their most vulnerable point and our strongest entry to undermine their authoritarian edifice. Moreover, emphasizing the necessity of this separation for religious freedom allows us to go on the moral offensive on all issues related to religion. So the more issues we can shift to arguing under the rubric of “religious freedom” the better. This will put the religious right wing on the defensive. Can they overtly be against religious freedom? It also creates a rallying point for modern-minded religious people who are upset that religion and the large segments of the Republican party have been highjacked by the right wing and fundamentalists. If we can convince people of the necessity and crucial importance of church/state separation for religious freedom, we can reframe many problematic values issues to our advantage.

America was founded on the wall of separation between church and state as crucial for true democracy. This wall has been under constant and ever-increasing assaults—from funneling tax money to religious charities and schools to imposing religious values through legislation. The religious right wing has been eroding the boundaries between religion and government for so long on so many fronts that many Americans are confused and even ignorant of the essential import of church/state separation. It is a top priority for people to understand why this separation is a bottom line prerequisite for democracy. It and the religious freedom it guarantees, along with the governmental system of checks and balances, are what has made America unique and why our democracy has worked thus far. We can and must show why not separating them leaves the country wide open to authoritarianism. When authoritarian beliefs backed by the force of the state, the combination is deadly. To prove that democracy is jeopardized by letting government impose religion or religion set political agendas, all one needs to show is that they dismantle religious freedom, without which there can be no real freedom.

The foundation of the fundamentalists' power is their success in defining the moral rhetoric and issues. The media uses their terms and frameworks, enabling them to dominate the moral discourse. Morality is a more powerful ground than "rights," because what are considered "rights" are vulnerable to changes in the moral climate. There is an antiquated morality based on an archaic interpretation of their religion's authoritarian rules, which they proclaim "sacred" and strive to make compulsory for the nation. Since the world is in a moral vacuum and at the same time facing many new threats, the lack of adequate moral guidelines that meet the unprecedented challenges makes people fearful and vulnerable to those who claim moral certainty based upon some "higher power." So the religious right wing understandably influences many who are morally confused. However, these uniquely dangerous and chaotic times desperately need a morality whose main focus is how living people treat each other, and what's good for the present and future of society and our planet. We must wrest the moral high ground from them instead of being bludgeoned by their dysfunctional moral certainties.

This country was settled by people seeking religious freedom, which underlies all other freedoms. Given religion's enormous power over people's minds, emotions and identities, it is crucial for government, especially in difficult times, to set political boundaries against its perennial tendency to encroach on secular power and control people's lives. Religious freedom means not having others' beliefs or worldviews imposed on you, which includes the freedom to be non-religious or to feel spiritual without religion. Religious freedom also implies that legislated moral values affecting individual freedom or privacy are not the province of any religion, but are based on what's reasonably necessary for a democratic society to function. Religious freedom is a cornerstone of American democracy and is essential for political freedom. That's why the Founding Fathers were in adamant agreement about keeping government free from the rule and rules of religion. Contrary to the misinformation being put out, America was not founded as a Christian nation. The Founders were deists at best who all rejected revelation, Christ's divinity, and the supernatural. They saw keeping religion out of government as the most basic and crucial of the separation of powers. God is deliberately not mentioned in the Constitution or *The Federalist Papers*. The 1797 Treaty of Tripoli states "the Government of the United States...is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." This treaty was only the third *unanimous* Senate vote out of the 339 previous votes.

Since many fundamentalists have been moving relentlessly, issue by issue, to erode and dismantle this crucial church/state separation without ever debating the principle, the principle itself needs extensive national questioning and discussion. *Every politician, legislator and judge should be asked to reveal their stand on church/state and religious freedom*—just as they are expected to on abortion and capital punishment. We should hammer at the American people's right and need to know. Making church/state separation and religious freedom foundational issues of bedrock concern as to where our democracy is headed can be used as an endless wedge showing the authoritarian and really anti-American nature of those

who oppose it. If enough people unite to make this a central issue by relentlessly keeping the church/state issue in public awareness, the media will have to cover it. In fact, questioning major political and judicial figures where they stand on religious freedom could provide the media with an endless source of controversy. They could have a heyday with it.

Some points to push and expand in making this a critical issue for democracy and freedom:

- a) Why the separation of church and state is necessary for religious freedom.
- b) Why the Founding Fathers felt it was basic to democracy and political freedom—create a counter argument to the false position that America was founded as a Christian country.
- c) Why church/state separation is essential for a truly viable democracy to function—all the more so for us—the most multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation of all.
- d) Why church/state separation is a precondition for women’s freedom and equality, for children’s education and welfare, and hence the well-being of families.
- e) What do people really want—a Christian government or state religion, a theocracy, or a true democracy? Pose the inquiry as an investigation of where our leaders and populace stand.

Bush uses “democracy” and “freedom” as buzzwords to justify imposing his will on other nations, while collapsing the wall between church and state everywhere he can at home. His administration conveniently ignores the Founders’ insistence on keeping religion out of politics as fundamental for religious freedom. Bush also forcefully opposes other related basic freedoms, like women’s freedom to control their bodies and lives. Not coincidentally, this freedom is a prerequisite for women to compete in any domain of public power on somewhat equal footing with men. He also refuses to give children the modern education they need to survive in an ever more complex, sexual and dangerous world. Replacing real sex education with “abstinence only” propaganda is a religion-based agenda proven totally ineffective that even worse, is harmful as it is unconscionably teaching our vulnerable youth that condoms do not prevent AIDS. This is not only false but immoral, demonstrating a callous and cruel disregard for our children’s well-being that can threaten their very lives.

All moralities are embedded in a worldview. Basically there are two kinds of worldviews—those that shift with shifting knowledge and circumstances, and those that hold fixed no matter what. Fundamentalist worldviews of all stripes are of course the latter. Trying to argue or persuade against their so-called “moralistic” attacks on a multitude of separate issues keeps us on the defensive, fragmenting our energy and losing ground. So without giving ground on any specific issue, we strongly recommend not engaging in emotionally charged arguments where religious values are pitted against secular ones. Instead redefine the terms of the debate by shifting the discussion to the comparatively unassailable democratic principles of religious freedom and church/state separation. For instance, the rigidly anti-abortion faction cannot be persuaded by “rights” or other polarizing arguments. But if you say, “Before we can discuss abortion, I need to know where you stand on religious freedom and the separation of church and state,” this changes the nature of the argument to one where they don’t have pat answers and we have the historic moral high ground. We can do likewise with those who claim evolution is just another belief that should have no priority in educating our children. This shift strengthens us against any religion-based pronouncements on such issues as gay rights, sex education, women’s equal place in the world, creationism in schools, school prayer, educational vouchers, etc. ***If we win back church/state separation, we ultimately win them all.***

Never argue about the truth of religious beliefs since you can’t prove you’re right. You lose power by denigrating or ridiculing religion through getting labeled secular or atheist, marginalized, and written off. Instead, here too only argue why keeping church and state separate is necessary for religious freedom and for democracy itself—principles that many religious people will at least pay lip service to. Although archaic or apocalyptic fundamentalist beliefs can’t be proved wrong, they can be shown to be contrary to our most basic

democratic principles, including religious freedom. Moreover, those whose hidden agenda is to move us toward a more theocratic society cannot admit it and win.

The church/state issue goes far beyond issues of individual freedom. It is crucial in determining what direction our society will take and how well we will be able to compete in the modern technological world. A progressive morality has women as truly equal citizens and children as our most precious resource entitled to the best education possible. This country and the world need women to share more in public power and well educated children capable of dealing with the ever increasing complexities the future will bring. Church/state separation is essential for women's rights and for women to have a place in arenas of direct social power. It is also essential for our children's education. What happens to children's minds when taught creationism or "the Rapture" as part of their formal education? We as a society cannot afford the further dumbing-down that collapsing the wall of church and state will ensure.

Religious freedom usually implies religious tolerance, but this only works when tolerance is valued and respected by all. Otherwise it muzzles the tolerant, but not the intolerant. In tolerating the intolerant we progressives not only look uncertain and weak, but in fact are weakened. The intolerant, who have no qualms about attempting to make us look silly, naïve, immoral, and even evil, have thus gained an edge. Until we challenge their intolerant agenda as not only intolerable, but dangerous and contrary to the democratic principles that founded this country and kept it on course, we will continue to be in the weak and losing position of responding to their endless onslaughts.

WHAT'S AT STAKE:

Freedom, patriotism and moral values are endlessly repeated cliches. In Orwellian doubletalk, the Bush administration has made "freedom" the freedom to make as much money as you can without caring about the plight of your neighbor or the world. "Patriotism" has come to mean following Bush's lead right or wrong, no matter how many people needlessly die. And "morality" and "family values" have become essentially synonymous with the authoritarian dictates of reactionary fundamentalism. Bush sees himself as the chosen one to lead the world back to the black and white simplicity of the medieval mind. Until recently America was the guiding light for freedom and democracy; now we are the most feared nation on Earth. George W. Bush has succeeded in making fear his primary ally, but does not truly represent the majority of Americans' sentiments and values. If all progressives take on the mantle of protectors of the vote and of the separation of church and state, and the guardians of religious freedom, it could create a more powerful coalition for protecting democracy. Unless politicians show backbone in supporting the lynchpins of democracy, democracy will remain at risk. Modern democracy is still in its infancy and is being tested. If American democracy fails, this will undermine trust worldwide in the democratic process and threaten the cause of planetary democracy. We cannot allow this.

Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad are co-authors of an acclaimed book on cultural authoritarianism, The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power, that predicted escalating "morality wars" between the forces of the old and the new: religious fundamentalists and modern people, authoritarianism and democracy. This paper is as www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com and their "Abortion & the Morality Wars: Taking the Moral Offensive" on how to recapture the moral high ground is at www.rit.org in "Editorials."