

## Communitarian Observations

*I often write about rather different matters, but in my mind they all deal with one core question: the guidance our shared values, especially the common good, provides to our public policies.*

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### Debate

On November 19, 2014, ACLU President Susan Herman and Amitai Etzioni held a public debate on the topic of the balance between national security and individual rights. You can view video of the debate [here](#).

Of the newly-released book *The New Normal*, Jonathan B. Imber of Wellesley College writes: “*The New Normal* is a brilliant summation of Etzioni’s long and productive efforts to offer a way to understand our common life and the imperatives of civil society. Amitai Etzioni asks two questions that appear evermore to complement one another: ‘What can we live without?’ and ‘What should we not have to live with?’ Economic change, he argues, has offered opportunities to reconsider the American habits and limits of consumption, and technological change poses profound challenges to establishing the limits to our protection from endless surveillance.” This book is especially relevant in light of recent revelations that “only 64 percent of respondents [to a [New York Times poll](#)] said they still believed in the American dream.” Copies are available for purchase at [Amazon](#).

### Shorter Pieces

#### *“China: Young Voices”*

I used the occasion of my invitation to deliver the keynote address at the closing ceremonies of the 2014 Beijing Forum to meet with a group of Chinese students. I found them to be more interactive than they were during my previous trips. They were more willing not only to ask questions, but also to comment on my presentations, although they delivered all their comments in a congenial manner. (Read more of “China: Young Voices” at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS website](#).)

#### *“US Grand Strategy: More Restraint”*

In his important new book [Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy](#), Barry R. Posen raises one more call for restraint, although he reaches this conclusion in a distinct way uniquely his own. Posen finds that the United States has fallen prey to the illusion that it can – indeed, is being called upon to – bring to the nations of the world a democratic, stable form of government and a prosperous way of life to boot. He calls this thesis “liberal hegemony” and points out that its experiences in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan should have made the United States realize that it cannot make this vision come true. The United States should therefore stop all its efforts at coercive state- and nation-building and limit its overseas interventions to those situations in which its major national interests are involved. (Read more of “US Grand Strategy: More Restraint” at [The Diplomat](#) or at the [ICPS website](#).)

#### *“Defining Up Corruption”*

The existing campaign financing system is a major source of corruption in the U.S., but limiting private contributions is viewed by the U.S. Supreme Court as limiting free speech — money is speech. And there

is little hope that the court will change its mind or that a constitutional amendment can be passed to address the problem. So what if, instead of focusing on contributions, we penalize those who gain substantive, material favors for their contributions and those who grant such favors for receiving contributions? Limitations would not be imposed on what one can give, but rather on what one can get. (Read more of “Defining Up Corruption,” which was first published at *The Daily Journal*, at the [ICPS website](#).)

#### *“The U.S Should Not Fear Competing With China”*

On October 24, 21 Asian nations signed a memorandum to form a new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, to be drawn on considerable Chinese funds. Behind the scenes, Washington had been trying to discourage South Korea and Australia from accepting a Chinese invitation to be among the founders. The effort was successful. U.S. opposition to the new bank illuminates a much greater issue: Will the U.S. seek to contain every international initiative by China, or will it only counter aggression but welcome China’s non-coercive engagement in regional and world affairs? (Read more of “The U.S. Should Not Fear Competing With China” at [The Diplomat](#) or at the [ICPS website](#).)

#### *“It’s Economic Insecurity, Stupid”*

The post-mortem of the midterm elections is widely held to show that people are more concerned about economic stagnation than about any of the specific policies Democrats promote, such as climate control, immigration reform, and Internet neutrality. My interviews with middle-class Americans reveal that many are even more concerned with losing what they have than with gaining more of the same. True, they are bitter that their real income has not increased for years on end, and they sense that they will be unable to provide a better life for their children than they had. However, they are even more concerned about the fact that they are no longer sure that the job they have will be there tomorrow; that Social Security will be there when they retire; and that their pension fund will not be retroactively diluted and is properly funded. They are even more alarmed about the future of Medicare, which they are told will go broke in the near future, and they are not at all sure that they can afford the “affordable” Obamacare, which does not cap the costs of the health insurance access that it provides. They read about millions who have been kicked out of their homes in recent years. In short, they feel insecure, and for good reason. (Read more of “It’s Economic Insecurity, Stupid” at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS website](#).)

#### *“Debating the ACLU: Advocacy vs. Policy Analysis”*

The president of the ACLU, Susan Herman, recently debated the proposition that “Our government is doing the terrorists' work for them by undermining our way of life and our liberties.” She presented highly troubling cases of what she called government “dragnets” leading to the arrest and long detention of innocent people. She railed against the lack of transparency and the chilling effects of investigating leaks to the press. I was supposed to take the other side. I could have done so by claiming that hordes of brutal ISIS terrorists could sneak across our porous borders any day; that terrorists could take out any one of our cities with a nuclear bomb; and that our water reservoirs—for instance, that of Washington DC—are not protected by more than three seagulls. Instead, I tried to make the case for policy analysis instead of one-sided advocacy. (Read more of “Debating the ACLU: Advocacy vs. Policy Analysis” at [The Huffington Post](#) or at the [ICPS website](#).)

### **Longer Pieces**

"Politics and Culture in an Age of Austerity." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27(4). December 2014. *Abstract: The Great Recession forced many people to cut back on consumption and is one factor that has driven the rise of right-wing forces. One response to the downturn has been a call for a return to high-level growth and consumption of goods. By contrast, this paper argues in favor of an alternative conception of the good life. To defend this thesis, it first surveys the social science literature regarding the relationship between income and happiness, noting that the growth of the former does not necessarily translate to improvements in the latter. Next, it provides a number of explanations why greater income and consumption often do not yield greater happiness. The paper then goes on to discuss historical and theoretical alternatives to consumerism-driven life and society. Finally, it discusses how happiness can best be found in socializing with others, participating in the community, and engaging in spiritual and intellectual pursuits. The paper thus concludes that human contentment and flourishing is perhaps best found outside of the high-growth, high-consumption paradigm. Moreover, it finds that such a new normal is not only protective of the environment, but also enhances social justice.*

"The United States' Retreat from the Middle East and Pivot to the Far East is Likely to Intensify." *Defense and Security Analysis* 30(4). December 2014. *Abstract: This article outlines the reasons one should expect that the United States will shift more military forces to and focus more diplomatic efforts on the Far East. The term "forecasting" is employed rather than prediction, to remind the reader that that statement only holds if no "black swans" appear—that is, if no major unexpected forces come into play.*

### ***The New Normal at the Brookings Institution***

Isabel V. Sawhill wrote a [blog entry](#) about *The New Normal*.

In politics, the "new normal" may well be something close to the gridlock we are witnessing today, according to Etzioni. One reason for this is that the electorate is more conservative than liberal. (Conservatives, he notes, include not just Republicans but many independents and some Democrats.) So it should be no surprise that during the 2008-12 period, conservatives in Congress succeeded in blocking attempts to move policy in a more liberal direction.

[...]

Yet the electorate remains highly dissatisfied. There is a big disconnect between what the political system produced (presumably what the majority wanted) and how that majority feels about their government. The proportion of citizens who believe that the country is headed in the wrong direction has risen. Approval ratings of the both the President and especially the Congress have plummeted.

Major issues with bipartisan support, from immigration to crumbling infrastructure, have not been addressed.

Why this disconnect? And why the conservative strength? Five explanations present themselves:

1. Voters are misinformed and not entirely rational;
2. Voters are "philosophically conservative" (in other words, dislike government in the abstract) but "operationally liberal" (in other words, like their Medicare);

3. Voters are not representative of the broader public. About 60 percent of those eligible actually vote in Presidential elections, and just 40 percent in midterms;
4. Conservatives have done a better job of honing and repeating their messages in recent years; and have been helped by some provocative and well-known radio and TV hosts. The fact that more people watch Fox than MSNBC suggests that the public likes what Fox has to offer.
5. There is too much money in politics, dictating results. But there isn't in fact much evidence that money plays a major role in electoral outcomes.

Etzioni can find no single smoking gun to explain our political dysfunction. But it seems that we have met the enemy, and it is us. Perhaps we are getting the government we deserve.

Thomas E. Mann also gave a [response](#).

Sawhill's [summary](#) of Amitai Etzioni's provocative discussion of "Is There a Gridlock" in his new book, *The New Normal*, ends with the Pogo Principle: "we have met the enemy, and it is us." There is much to be said for that argument. The electorate produces the governments that it subsequently distrusts, denounces, and finds unresponsive. Etzioni's version of this chestnut is built around the ideological congruence between voters and policies. The American citizenry has long been and continues to be more conservative than liberal. The American government, including the 2008-2012 period under review, produces conservative policies. Ergo: the American political system successfully produces democratic responsiveness. Yet the public shows every sign of being unhappy getting what they want. Is the problem the public, our political system, or our theory of democracy?

Interesting questions, thoughtfully addressed. But the disconnect between policy congruence and public dissatisfaction with government may not be as mysterious as it first appears. Etzioni himself provides some of the most important clues. First, many have noted that Americans are both ideological conservatives and operational liberals. They are skeptical of government in general but supportive, even demanding, of concrete government programs. Popular majorities favoring minimum wage increases, higher taxes on the wealthy, infrastructure spending, comprehensive immigration reform, and protection of the environment are not being well served by conservative opposition to these policies.

Second, public assessments of government are based less on policies enacted or defeated than on outcomes that materially affect their well-being, such as good jobs with livable wages. The latter are often shaped by powerful forces beyond the reach of policies. The economy shapes presidential success more than the president shapes the economy.

Third, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, Obama's first, was disputatious and produced no liberal utopia, but by contemporary American standards it was unusually productive – one that enacted policies long on the moderate and liberal wish list. The divided party government that followed was dramatically different, one featuring levels of brinkmanship, hostage-taking and nullification not seen in many decades. The public had much to be unhappy with.

Following the global financial crisis and Great Recession, America is doing better than most other countries. Since late 2009, the economy has been growing, unemployment declining, deficits dropping, stock markets climbing, and corporate profits out of sight. Stagnant wages,

growing inequality and limited social mobility have limited the gains from this economic renaissance to the upper crust. That is the big disconnect in our politics, one that is substantively real and a major source of public discontent.

I responded to these blog posts with the [following](#).

I am indebted to Isabel Sawhill for [a fine overview of my arguments](#) about the political state of the nation in my new book *The New Normal: Finding a Balance between Individual Rights and the Common Good* and to Tom Mann for [very thoughtful comments](#). The severest test for a social scientist is predictions. My book went to bed well before the midterm elections. The election clearly confirmed my thesis about the large following that conservatives (in the economic and not in the social sense) command in the United States. This was evident not only in the major wins of the GOP (in Congress, governorships, etc.), but also in that most of the Democrats who lost also campaigned in support of conservative ideas (against ACA, for the Keystone pipeline, against carbon tax, immigration reform, and gun control, etc. ). Moreover, on the foreign policy front, the President recently re-involved the US in the war in Iraq, extended US military involvement in Afghanistan, and started a new front in Syria—all acts favored by the likes of John McCain and Lindsey Graham.

As to the past, Tom Mann states: “Since late 2009, the economy has been growing, unemployment declining, deficits dropping, stock markets climbing, and corporate profits out of sight. Stagnant wages, growing inequality and limited social mobility have limited the gains from this economic renaissance to the upper crust.” Well put. Conservatives could not have done much better by themselves, for themselves. Much more was done for conservative economic and political causes by the Supreme Court, which ultimately also reflects the majority.

I would add that since 2009, the Obama Administration bailed out AIG and the banks but allowed many millions of regular folks to be thrown out of their homes, lose their jobs and benefits, take jobs that pay less, and lose their life savings.

As to Mann’s point that Americans are “operationally liberal”, this is mainly true only if no costs are cited. Typically when asked if they want more goodies from the government, those polled are not told that they will have to pay for these goodies with tax increases, cuts in other goodies, or increases in the deficit. When those are mentioned, as they should be, the support for liberal policies shrinks. Above all, most Americans do not favor reallocation of wealth, a core part of the liberal agenda.

I agree with Tom Mann and Norman Ornstein that the media contributes to the conservative tilt. However, given that this tilt was evident long before Fox and the recent segmentation of the media, I wonder how much weight to assign to this factor.

If the American majority is conservative and the government tends to acts conservative, why are Americans so unhappy? I offer several possible explanations in my new book *The New Normal*. Most likely this is the case because special interests have captured so many parts of the government that they no longer serve any major segments of the public but heads of hedge funds, oil companies, Medicare mills, et cetera. The Democrats have not succeeded in pointing this out, in part because they are on take from the same interests.

Here comes the next test: I predict that after the 2016 elections, the conservative GOP will still have a majority in the House *and* Senate, and whoever is elected president will follow policies that are even less liberal than those of Carter and Clinton and maybe those of Obama.

### From My Diary

"The White House pledged \$150 million for Myanmar during Mr. Obama's recent visit for an Asian summit. On the same meeting, China pledged \$7.8 billion to refurbish decrepit roads and increase energy production." This followed China's [announcement](#) that it would invest \$30 billion in Kazakhstan, \$15 billion in Uzbekistan, and \$3 billion in Kyrgyzstan to help build its vision of a new "Silk Road Economic Belt" across Central Asia. (Jane Perlez. "[Asia's 'Big Guy' Spreads Cash and Seeks Influence in Pacific Region.](#)" *The New York Times*. November 22, 2014.)

"62% of those polled in China worry that its border disputes could lead to armed conflict [and some] 67% of Americans say the same thing." ("[Still on a hill.](#)" *The Economist*. July 19, 2014.)

### I Read

Mark Edmundson. "[One Nation Under Fear.](#)" *The Hedgehog Review* 16(3). Fall 2014.

Chris Mooney. "[What's behind the spread of solar? Peer pressure.](#)" *The Washington Post*. October 24, 2014.

Lew Daly. "[Our Mismeasured Economy.](#)" *The New York Times*. July 7, 2014.

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