Massachusetts Politics in the 21st Century: Recognizing the Impact of Clashing Political Cultures

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An enormous amount of scholarly energy has gone into the analysis of political party decline in America. A look a Massachusetts politics in 2002 does not provide supporters of vigorous political parties with much hope. Indeed, the party may be over in the Bay State. Most Americans would identify Massachusetts as a liberal Democratic state. The state is often called a one-party state or a modified one-party state due to our habit of electing Republican governors. In my view, Massachusetts is presently a no party state.

The cleavages in Massachusetts politics, at both the mass and elite levels, are not closely related to party ideologies. Forty-nine percent of the state's registered voters are "unenrolled."[1] The state's electorate has for more than a decade put Republicans in the governor's office and kept Democrats in control of the state legislature. Are the state's voters torn between liberal and conservative approaches to state government? Are the voters even presented with such a choice? The answer to both questions is no.

In order to understand the cleavages in Massachusetts politics I believe that we should reconsider the work of Daniel Elazar, whose political culture framework has become standard fare for introductory textbooks in state and

[1] In Massachusetts "un-enrolled" is how registered voters not affiliated with a political party are designated.

local government.[2] Elazar posited three types of political cultures in the United States; traditionalistic, individualistic, and moralistic, assigning these labels to each state. According to Elazar, traditionalistic political cultures, in which social order is emphasized and political participation is not, are found primarily in the Southern and border states. Elazar classified Massachusetts as a hybrid political culture. He saw the Bay State as an individualistic political culture with a strong moralistic streak. It is my contention that, though not perfect, the tension between individualists and moralists provides a better lens through which to examine Massachusetts politics than the increasingly obsolete liberal *versus* conservative, or Democrat versus Republican, debate. I also believe that the presently popular view that the state and nation are exhibiting conservative political tendencies may be a product of a cultural, rather than political, shift. The dominant political culture in Massachusetts and American politics is individualistic. While this may have always been true to a large degree, presently self-conscious politics is rare among voters whose ballot box calculations and every day opinions seem to turn on cultural (or at least non-ideological) judgments more than ever before. Voters in the state and nation are certainly not activated by partisan loyalties as much as they used to be.

In 2002 the State's Democratic party staged a fight for the soul of the party and the party lost, while the Massachusetts Republicans, long the walking dead, took no steps to revitalize their party. The gubernatorial general election provided a vivid example of candidate-centered elections in which ideological and policy debates were muted while both campaigns focused on "values" and pro-business / anti-government rhetoric. The first gubernatorial election year in the new century also produced high drama in the clash between individualistic politicians and moralistic reformers over the issue of "clean elections."

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[2] In a paper presented at the 2003 New England Political Science Association meeting Karl Trautman skillfully used Elazar's construct to look at the differences and similarities between the politics of New England states (Trautman 2003).

Elazar's Political Culture Framework

Individualistic political cultures "emphasize the private sector and the marketplace as the central theme of democracy" (Trautman 2003, 1). Individualistic political actors see politics as a competitive arena in which a vigorous pursuit of self-interest is both acceptable and appropriate. From this perspective our political system, like our economy, is designed to function best when interests and individuals compete for power and profit. Participation in politics is in one's interest. It is a "means by which individuals may improve themselves socially and economically" (Trautman 2003, 1; quoting Elazar 1984, 115-116). Also, like business people, politicians strive to accumulate as much capital as possible. The amassing of political capital, like wealth, is understood to be a necessary and important part of maintaining a flourishing democracy and economy.

A moralistic political culture does not share the classical liberal outlook of the individualistic culture. More communitarian in nature, moralistic-political culture "stresses the view of democracy as commonwealth" (Trautman 2003, 1). Politics is an arena for citizen action. Good citizenship requires public service, which is a duty rather than an opportunity. Focus on competition is replaced by cooperation and community involvement. Resort to governmental involvement in social and economic problems is more acceptable in a moralistic culture than in an individualistic one, where public resources are the spoils of political victory. While those operating with individualistic assumptions see politics driving policy, moralistic voters and activists believe that policy should drive politics. Much of the conflict and confrontation in Massachusetts politics these days results from a failure of moralists and individualists to acknowledge the difference between each group's primary assumptions about government and politics, and the failure of both camps to negotiate with these differences in mind. Maybe we should push for political cultural diversity training for activists and elected officials?

Despite having massively over simplified these constructs, I think Massachusetts politics in 2002 can be profitably viewed and explained with the aid of Elazar's framework. I will apply the political culture framework to a brief analysis of the state's political parties, elections, and public policy debates. I will look at the state parties' nomination fights (primarily the Democrats), the 2002 general election for governor, and the fierce debate among the state's political elites about campaign finance reform in 2002. In each section the analysis will be guided and anchored by the individualistic/ moralistic tension in the state's politics.

The Massachusetts Democratic and Republican Parties

The 2002 election cycle in Massachusetts represents a low point for both of the state's political parties. The state's Republican Party continued its modern history of complete failure in building a relevant state party, while the Mass Democrats managed to pull defeat from the jaws of victory in another gubernatorial contest. Both parties in Massachusetts have stopped doing what parties are designed to do – mobilize voters behind a coherent agenda. The state's elections are completely candidate-centered. Candidates for statewide offices, in 2002, rarely mentioned their party affiliation in a state where half of the registered voters are not affiliated with a political party.

The Republican Party in the state seems to have given up party building entirely. In 2002, the Massachusetts Republican Party failed to field viable candidates for State Treasurer and State Auditor and did not even have candidates for Attorney General, Secretary of State, or for more than two thirds of the seats in the legislature. Spurning its hard-edged conservative aspirants and its sitting governor, The Republican party turned to a "white knight" outsider in its effort to retain the governor's office.

In early 2002, the state's Democratic establishment was giddy. The "acting" governor had seen her popularity plummet amid various missteps and the state seemed poised to end its twelve-year fascination with Republican

governors. The fight for the party's gubernatorial nomination was a fight for the soul of the Democratic Party that most pundits and analysts depicted as a battle between the liberal left wing of the party and its more moderate, DLC, "third way" center. Some rightly saw it as a fight between the policy advocates and the political establishment. Actually, it could have more usefully been characterized as a fight between the individualistic and moralistic wings of the party. In 2002, the individualists won and the party lost, again. The gubernatorial nominee was defeated and the conservative, though nominally Democratic, Speaker of the state House of Representatives is more powerful than ever.

By the time of the Democratic nominating convention in the spring of 2002 there were five Democrats vying for the top job. The convention, held in Worcester, would turn out to be one of the worst in recent memory. Instead of narrowing the field to produce a coherent debate between viable candidates, the party convention ended with all five candidates making the primary ballot. Through a Byzantine web of deals struck at the convention by the campaigns of millionaire businessman Steve Grossman, Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich, and Clean Elections candidate Warren Tolman, all three would join frontrunners State Treasurer Shannon O'Brien and State Senate President Tom Birmingham on the primary ballot. The large field would doom the party's most experienced candidate (Birmingham) in the primary election, and ultimately doom its nominee (O'Brien) in the general election.

Although Grossman bowed out early, the Tolman and Reich campaigns made considerable progress in the summer months garnering support from the liberal / progressive, or moralistic, wing of the party. These members of the party have a programmatic focus and were attracted to Reich's outspoken and charismatic liberalism and to Tolman's support for clean elections. While Tolman and Reich appealed to Democratic voters' moralistic streak, O'Brien and Birmingham fought for the more individualistic party voters. Birmingham had the endorsements of nearly all the party's core constituencies – labor unions,

public employees, teachers, police officers, fire fighters, nurses, etc. O'Brien had the endorsements of most of the State's congressional delegation and the major newspapers across the state.

She never came in second in any published public opinion poll. Her dominance in the opinion polls bolstered her frequent claims of electability, which carried an unstated promise that she was not just another "tax and spend" liberal. O'Brien won the nomination because Tolman and Reich captured a significant chunk of the party voters whom Elazar would characterize as moralistic. These voters, who participate in primary elections at a much higher rate than others, split their votes between the candidates vying for their attention. Despite Birmingham's extensive record of championing liberal programmatic causes and successes in enacting many pieces of progressive legislation, many of the state's progressive activist Democrats (read moralists) punished Birmingham for being a successful politician, for having competed and won in a game they associate with corruption and selfishness. Given the opportunity many of these folks chose to cast their ballots for bone fide progressives they perceived as being above the selfishness (individualism) of politics.

Had Reich and Tolman (who combined garnered more that 200,000 primary votes) not been an option for these folks, many would have opted for Birmingham because of his leadership of progressive causes on Beacon Hill. O'Brien's victory on primary day can be attributed to the division of the party's moralistic wing and the power of her individualistic campaign theme, which, ironically, even appealed to many programmatic liberals who didn't want to make the same mistake that progressives did in the 2000 presidential election by voting for a candidate that might not appeal to the mushy middle. O'Brien's campaign was based primarily on her often repeated contention that she should be the nominee of the party because she was the only one who could win the general election. This electability claim produced enough support for O'Brien to

narrowly win the nomination. If she had appeared on the ballot with only one strong progressive competitor, particularly if it were the heavily endorsed Birmingham, it is highly unlikely that O'Brien would have won the nomination. O'Brien's nomination did considerable damage to the state's Democratic Party because it was not the result of a truly unified party with a coherent message. Instead, she cobbled together a loose coalition of voters motivated by vague universalistic values and antigovernment sentiment. Throughout the primary season O'Brien promised repeatedly that she could win and could "clean up the mess on Beacon Hill." Her candidacy alienated the party's most committed activists and ideologues. Having only assembled an electoral coalition to beat her primary opponents rather than a coherent alternative to the Republicans, the O'Brien candidacy, even if it were successful in November, would have failed to provide a governing coalition. Had O'Brien united the party around a coherent mission, the party could have moved forward even in defeat. A united minority coalition could exert considerable influence on the governor and the legislature. In the end, the strategy that won O'Brien the nomination lost her the general election and failed to unite the Democrats behind a coherent message or agenda.

The nomination of outsider Mitt Romney also represented a blow to the state's Republican Party. His nomination represents continued surrender on the part of the state G.O.P. He was not selected for his conservative credentials. Only his Olympic image and electoral viability mattered. He had no coattails and everybody knew it. The Republicans have effectively given up trying to build a party in Massachusetts. They have become a talent agency devoted to recruiting electable gubernatorial candidates. The Republicans had a nomination fight for Lieutenant Governor in which the conservative businessman Jim Rappaport was defeated by Kerry Healy because he was too Republican. He would drag down the ticket because he wanted to talk about issues from a conservative perspective. All that the party saw was a rich white guy who would make it easier for the Democrats to attack the ticket as the rich white guy ticket.

Both of the state's parties nominated candidates who alienate the moralistic, programmatic wings of their parties. For the Democrats it was a missed opportunity to strengthen the party's message and approach to governance. For the Republicans, it was another example of their outright surrender. They have no presence in the legislature and a governor whose inexperience is allowing the legislature to eat him for lunch. The G.O.P. loyalists have to settle for the fact that the governor is a Republican who may at least be able to provide a speed bump between the Democrats and the state budget.

O'Brien *versus* Romney

The O'Brien nomination was doomed from the start because although she had won the primary by assembling a coalition of Democrats hungry to regain the corner office, she had alienated a large segment of the Democratic electorate in the process. Her choice not to appeal to the moralistic wing of her party was made with the assumption that such appeals tend to doom Democrats in the general election. Romney's rejection of Rappaport and his campaign rhetoric reveal similar assumptions on the part of the Republican nominee.

These assumptions, however, only make sense if the electorate is dominated by voters who are moderate in their ideological preferences. I believe that the 49% of voters who are not affiliated with a party, and who were hotly pursued by both the major party gubernatorial candidates, in 2002, are not ideological at all. I think they are cultural voters who, at present, bring predominantly individualistic cultural assumptions into the voting booth. At this point in time and, in the context of the current terms of debate, such assumptions favor Republican gubernatorial candidates and incumbent legislators in the state. Candidates too closely identified with the moralistic wing of their party (i.e. those with a coherent ideology and programmatic agenda) are considered ideologues and therefore extremists. To win, candidates in competitive statewide elections must avoid ideology and champion mainstream American "values."

A systematic look at the rhetoric of the 2002 campaign in Massachusetts (and elsewhere) would likely turn up frequent references to values / virtues such as independence, integrity, pragmatism, and competitiveness. In the Massachusetts governor's race these individualistic virtues were contrasted to the sloth, inefficiency, and corruption of state government insiders, most of whom are Democrats. Instead of couching their respective ideologies in clearly individualistic cultural terms, each candidate abandoned their ideology in the campaign and sought to exploit the voters' moralistic streak with morally charged rhetoric based on individualistic cultural assumptions. The result was a campaign where the "issues" were integrity, independence and managerial competence.

In the absence of a coherent Democratic alternative based on these vague but powerful values, O'Brien (or any other Democrat) doesn't stand a chance of winning the corner office over an outsider with a reputation for honesty and a record of managerial / business success. By the same token, the state Republican Party's unwillingness to abandon their "campaign not to lose the corner office" approach prevents them from producing a coherent conservative message that might help them make gains in the legislature. In the absence of united parties with coherent messages and governing philosophies, politics in Massachusetts will continue to produce Republican governors, elected without coattails on culturally individualistic rhetoric, and entrenched Democratic legislatures.

If the Republicans want to build a majority party in the state they will have to formulate a strong coherent legislative message, rather than simply relying on the tendency of voters to elect governors who seem like competent managers. In a largely individualistic political environment Republican identification with successful business management provides the party with a natural advantage in the race for the state's chief executive. Unfortunately for Bay State Republicans, their tiny share of registered voters and the deep

entrenchment of Democratic legislative incumbents make their hope of building a viable majority party all but impossible.

If the Democrats want to win back the corner office they would have to nominate someone who appeals to the state's increasingly important information workers who exhibit strong preferences for fiscally conservative and socially liberal governors, while at the same time not alienating the party's traditional blue-collar and over-educated base.[3] While such a strategy makes electoral sense in pursuit of the corner office, it falls short if the goal is to revitalize the Democratic Party (not to mention democratic politics) in the state. While it is clear that winning the governor's office requires a nominee to project managerial competency, the Democrats cannot win and govern simply be producing a candidate who can compete on the management question. The party has to formulate a managerial philosophy that is distinct from the Republicans.' They cannot simply neutralize the management issue. It is too important to the state's voters. Long-term electoral and governing success will require the Democratic Party to build an intra-party consensus on a progressive management philosophy that does not under-value efficiency in government administration or abandon the party's programmatic principles.

In other words, the Democratic Party has to unite its individualistic wing, which is focused on winning and efficient administration, and its moralistic wing, which is focused on programmatic solutions to the state's problems, around an electorally viable public management philosophy. Unlike their G.O.P. competitors, however, the Democrats could achieve total dominance in a state where they have a virtual lock on the state legislature and every statewide office except the Governor's office. To do so they would have to begin the long hard work of reconciling their present culture clash. Presently the party is home to

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[3] This view is expressed in an excellent analysis of how the Democrats could win the corner office written by Elaine Kamarck. Her essay "Glass Ceiling" was published in the Summer 2003 issue of *Commonwealth Magazine*.

flag wavers and flag burners who coexist in an uneasy, fractious, and often-turbulent organization.

Developing a managerial philosophy that values efficiency and progressive programmatic effectiveness is a tall order. Yet is possible if the party's moralistic activists and individualistic establishment are willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's perspective, and to approach the electorate with a united front. Both cultural wings of the Party have to accept the realization that an effective and efficient public management agenda is and will continue to be crucial in gubernatorial elections, and that the development of a Democratic managerial message that is much more than the "me too" approach attempted by Shannon O'Brien is essential to the realization of the goals of both wings of the party.

The Clean Elections Night

The battle over the Massachusetts Clean Elections Law provides the most vivid example of the state's political culture clash. Good government reformers (moralists) and professional politicians (individualists) in both major parties have been engaged in a bitter and mean spirited war of words and court orders over the comprehensive public financing system enacted by the voters in a 1998 ballot initiative (for a more comprehensive analysis of this issue (see Duquette 2002).

The forces of reform in the Bay State have long exerted influence over public policy by working hard to cultivate grass roots support and by leveraging that support to produce incremental reforms in the state legislature. On the issue of campaign finance reform the early 1990s were a productive time period. In 1994 a coalition of reformers spearheaded by the nationally prominent reform group Common Cause was able to move the legislature to enact legislation that gave the state one of the most stringent campaign finance laws in the nation. The Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MassPIRG) declared the law among the most progressive in the nation. The leverage used to push the 1994

bill through the Massachusetts General Assembly was a successful petition drive coordinated by Common Cause that would have put campaign finance reform on the ballot. With full knowledge of the unpredictability of ballot initiatives, both sides chose to negotiate a deal. The law, titled "An Act Further Regulating Public Financing of Political Campaigns" reduced the legal limit on individual and PAC contributions to candidates, tightened up the regulation of lobbyists in the state, and expanded disclosure requirements, among other things. It was, in my view, an example of productive politics.

It was not long, however, before the futility of campaign finance regulation in changing long established patterns in election financing was recognized and the push for reform was resumed. Fresh off a sweeping victory for comprehensive public financing of state elections in Maine a small, but dedicated, band of reformers migrated south to Massachusetts. In the fall of 1997, these "clean elections" activists collected more than 100,000 signatures to put "clean elections" on the ballot in 1998. The group of professional reform activists quickly set up an organization called "Mass Voters for Clean Elections," which was almost entirely made up of radical progressive activists in a periodic unholy alliance with conservatives who hoped the reform would improve Republican fortunes in legislative elections.

The clean elections reformers are extremely moralistic in their approach to politics. They are very anti-establishment and anti-politician. They frequently express disgust and dismay over what they see as the debasement and corruption of electoral politics in the Bay State. While this attitude was not foreign to the state's reform activists prior to the clean elections fight, it is a bit different. These clean elections reformers were much more professionalized in their approach and they were riding on a wave of success in other parts of the country. When they arrived in the Massachusetts their forces had vanquished the forces of special interest politics in Arizona and Maine, and while they were fighting the good fight in Massachusetts their allies scored victories in North

Carolina and New Mexico, among other places. Publicly financed election reform was on the rise and the Massachusetts missionaries were bold and confident. And, like all faith-based operations, their view of right and wrong was nonnegotiable.

Unfortunately, the newly emboldened reform activists were up against a highly professionalized political establishment that knows its audience well. The state's elected officials, especially those with long experience, never even tried to match the intensity of the clean elections reformers because at the end of the day they recognized the limits of the movement's appeal, as well as the depth of their own electoral coalitions. This was a recipe for culture clash that the political establishment knew would break its way because while the state's voters have a moralistic streak, they are highly individualistic on issues that lack direct moral content.

Campaign finance reform is a process issue. No matter how passionately reformers spell out the implications of the current system, campaign finance reform will never evoke the same moral outrage as teen-age abortions. Normally individualistic voters were not and are not moved to activate their moral streak on the issue of public financing of elections. Nothing more dramatically illustrated the limits of a moralistic appeal to the state's voters on a process issue like election reform than the very quiet death of the Clean Elections Law earlier this year. There was no public outcry despite the fact that the state legislature killed the voter passed law without even a recorded vote. Does this mean that sensible reform is impossible in Massachusetts? I don't think so. I think the road to sensible reform (which includes publicly financed elections) can be traveled only if parties, activists, candidates, and officeholders come to grips with the increasing bifurcation of political elites, which is producing increasing alienation among the larger electorate. Half the electorate is "un-enrolled" because they are repelled from the moralistic imperatives of the activists as well as the impersonal, businesslike approach of professional politicians. To revitalize

politics and parties in Massachusetts does not require elites to pander to alienated voters, it requires them to educate voters and to come to grips with the larger implications of their cultural assumptions about voters. In the case of clean elections, reformers have to appreciate the legitimacy of an individualistic approach to politics. They will have to re-engineer their message so the predominantly individualistic electorate will better understand their goal and be more comfortable with their proposed means. For my money, I think "clean elections" advocates should start by becoming "voter-owned elections" advocates.

Conclusion

For the state to get out of this political rut at least one party will have to attempt to unite their base with a compelling and coherent approach to state governance. The Republicans see their hold on the governor's office as the proverbial finger in the dike and are unlikely to seriously attempt to build their party any time soon. The Democrats, on the other hand, could change course and build a governing party. They face little or no opposition in the legislature. They have a huge voter registration advantage over Republicans and their electoral strategy of simply avoiding the "L" word has produced four gubernatorial defeats in a row, leaving the party fractured and with a serious identity crisis.

In 2002, because they assumed that the key to capturing the state's non partisan voters was simply to downplay the nominee's liberalism and present her as an experienced, independent leader who would put a leash on the Beacon Hill crowd, the Democrats played right intro the hands of the Republicans. They accepted the Republican terms of debate. They moved to where they thought the voters were, rather than trying to move the voters.

The Democrats, or any party for that matter, have to move voters. When I make this point to Democratic Party insiders they invariably assume I am calling for a sharp leftward movement for the party and remind me that such a strategy

didn't work for McGovern or anybody else since. When I urge the members of the party's activist wing to take seriously calls for more efficient use of tax dollars they tend to treat me with quiet scorn. Although I do believe losing with a coherent philosophy beats just losing, I am not actually calling for the party to try to turn voters into ideologues. Instead, the Democrats in Massachusetts and the nation must reshape the terms of the values debate. They must not accept conservative definitions of America's creedal values, or their definitions of contemporary managerial values, which have become so important in the election of public chief executives. Freedom doesn't have to mean freedom from government meddling. Equality doesn't have to require the government to treat everybody the same.

Limited government doesn't have to mean little government. And, of particular importance to Massachusetts Democrats, effective management doesn't have to mean "business management." Freedom and equality can have compelling progressive meanings and the business of government has never been, nor will it ever be, business. Redefining the values debate will require the Massachusetts Democrats to engineer a truce between the wings of their party—in another venue, I would have recommended that the party seek marriage counseling. The progressive activists (moralists) and the party establishment (individualists) have to accept that policy and politics are inseparable and that neither one can be permanently subordinated to the other. This cannot happen if the progressives continue to see the establishment folks simply as sellouts and unprincipled power brokers, and the party's centrists continue to see progressives as pie in the sky idealists who couldn't win an election to save their lives or their party. These caricatures were nurtured by an unwillingness to recognize and compromise cultural values. The fact is that the policy activists can move their programmatic agenda forward and the centrists can enjoy electoral victory only when both sides accept that elections are about values and then seek to fashion mainstream American values in an image they can use.

In a recent column, E.J. Dionne made a similar argument about the national Democratic Party. He wrote that Democrats need not be liberal, but they must have convictions, a clear vision of governance, to separate themselves from Republicans and offer voters "a choice, not an echo"(Dionne 2003). Ironically, the Dionne column was about Massachusetts Senator John Kerry's bid for the White House. Kerry, according to Dionne, is attempting to link patriotism with a sense of civic responsibility. The implication is that Democrats can take ownership of values, like patriotism, and imbue them with a more communitarian flavor that will facilitate the programmatic agenda of Moralistic Democrats without alienating the anti-ideological sentiments of most Americans.[4]

For Massachusetts Democrats to recapture the corner office and move their progressive agenda through a state legislature dominated by a conservative House Speaker, the party has to invest in a long-term party building strategy. At a very practical level, they should reform the nomination process for statewide candidates. The nominating convention should reduce the number of candidates and provide primary voters with electorally viable contenders who present clear interpretations of the party's mission. Furthermore, the nominee should be chosen in the spring, rather than the fall when the nominee has just a couple of months to conduct a general election campaign.

The party should articulate a clear set of values for its candidates to champion. The party's platform and its candidates at all levels must articulate and explain to voters what basic American values mean to Democrats. Instead of claiming greater virtue on a couple of universally accepted values, like integrity and independence, which produce issue and policy avoidance campaigns,

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[4] In an argument about America in the world community British journalist Will Hutton (*A Declaration of Interdependence: Why America Should Join the World*) argues that Americans must fashion a brand of liberal democracy that does not alienate Europe. The brand he has in mind is New Deal liberalism and the message in his argument for the Democrats is that the American way is not defined solely in classical liberal terms. This should hearten Democrats from Beacon Hill to Capitol Hill because it implies that an increasingly global political and economic world favors their approach to governance.

Democrats have to be willing to run on values with clear programmatic implications. In the short run, this may not produce victory in the gubernatorial elections but, gradually, it will produce greater parity in the state and nation on "values" questions. Such parity is essential for the creation of a vibrant democratic debate. Until politicians of both parties are willing to connect their "values" rhetoric to programmatic choices, elections and effective governance will continue to seem unrelated to each other and voters will continue to tune out.

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