

4 **Liberalism's Inevitability?**5 **Jeff Manza**6  
7 © Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2010

8  
9 By early 2005, the Bush Administration and its conserva-  
10 tive allies in Congress appeared poised to govern the  
11 United States for a generation. In direct contrast to the  
12 disarray of Democrats and liberals, they owned a national  
13 political machine and were regular beneficiaries of a media  
14 echo chamber centered on Fox News, *The Wall Street*  
15 *Journal* editorial page, and popular right-wing talk show  
16 hosts that virtually all commentators saw as vastly superior  
17 to their opponents. With control over all three branches of  
18 government, conservatives were pressing their offensive on  
19 all fronts and were talking about a full-fledged realignment.  
20 Journalists and sophisticated analysts were publishing  
21 books heralding the success of the conservative majority  
22 in reordering American politics. For some, Thomas Frank's  
23 *What's the Matter with Kansas?* seemed to provide the  
24 answers, linking increasingly conservative voting patterns  
25 among some segments of the working class to the  
26 mystification of rising inequality through highlighting hot-  
27 button social issues. For others, a relentless red machine  
28 and its media echo chamber had steamrolled the Demo-  
29 cratic Party, taking possession of government at all levels in  
30 most parts of the country except along the two coasts and a  
31 few pockets in the Midwest. Prominent political scientists  
32 Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson even coined the term  
33 "backlash insurance" to characterize the ways in which  
34 conservative political leaders had designed an approach to  
35 policy reform that would supposedly inure members from a  
36 public backlash.

These books postulated an inevitably "red" future 37  
America: not, that is, a sudden socialist revival, but rather 38  
an electoral map dominated by an increasingly conservative 39  
Republican Party signified by broad swaths of red on the U. 40  
S. map. But at its moment of greatest possible impact, the 41  
Bush Administration managed to squander many of the 42  
political resources conservatives had built up since the late 43  
1970s. The mistakes were many. An increasingly costly war 44  
in Iraq became deeply unpopular after the 2004 election, 45  
and revelations about shameful violations of international 46  
laws and norms long associated with U.S. foreign policy 47  
compounded the problem. The spectacular failure to 48  
respond to Hurricane Katrina, and the devastation it caused 49  
in New Orleans in the fall of 2005, suggested a President 50  
and ruling party that combined indifference to suffering 51  
with almost incomprehensible incompetence in responding 52  
to the disaster. Promised budget cuts and a reimaging of 53  
government never occurred, only the inevitable deficits that 54  
followed from the huge tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 and 55  
expensive foreign military adventures without the 56  
corresponding spending cuts. The growing visibility of an 57  
anti-science, anti-intellectual agenda issuing from a newly 58  
resurgent paleo-conservative wing of the conservative 59  
movement caused grave concerns for many thoughtful 60  
conservative intellectuals. The financial meltdown in the 61  
fall of 2008 appeared to provide the final nail in the coffin. 62

The sudden and seemingly complete exhaustion of 63  
conservative political momentum, highlighted by the Demo- 64  
cratic sweep of the 2006 midterm elections and seemingly 65  
confirmed by the election of Barack Obama, prompted liberal 66  
thinkers and writers—and their publishers—to rush in with a 67  
wave of new books encouraging or even asserting that the 68  
arrival of a new liberal hour had arrived. Some of these texts 69  
reflected a pent-up anger and had a "gotcha" mentality, 70  
but two stand out as truly serious attempts to both 71

---

J. Manza (✉)  
Department of Sociology, New York University,  
295 Lafayette St.,  
4107 New York, NY 10011, USA  
e-mail: manza@nyu.edu

72 reconstruct the history of liberalism and assert its  
 73 continuing relevance for the future of American politics:  
 74 Paul Starr's *Freedom's Power* (2007) and Alan Wolfe's  
 75 *The Future of American Liberalism* (2008). Authored by  
 76 veteran public intellectuals, both books provide a thoughtful  
 77 reimagining of liberalism by returning the discussion to its  
 78 roots and first principles. Bringing together political  
 79 philosophy and empirical social science, the two books  
 80 make about as strong a case for liberalism's vitality—and  
 81 continuing viability in the future—as one can imagine.  
 82 Although written independently, both share a strikingly  
 83 optimistic tone, suggesting the virtual inevitability of  
 84 liberalism's ultimate triumph in the next phase of American  
 85 political life.

86 It is instructive to read these books a couple of years  
 87 after their initial publication, and with the direction of the  
 88 Obama Administration now becoming increasingly clear.  
 89 The luxury of the vantage point allowed by the passage of  
 90 time is that it enables us to raise some sharp questions, and  
 91 think critically, about the trajectory sketched out by the two  
 92 books (and the larger issues they raise). The Obama  
 93 presidency has been deeply disappointing for liberals on  
 94 many levels (Robert Kuttner's recently published book *A*  
 95 *Presidency in Peril* nicely captures some of the main  
 96 concerns about domestic policy, while the anger of civil  
 97 libertarians and anti-war activists at the Administration's  
 98 continuation of Bush policies in the war on terror can be  
 99 found all over the left blogosphere). Yet rather than see  
 100 these shortcomings as the products of a weak president  
 101 overly-committed to bipartisanship and centrism, sur-  
 102 rounded by advisors too close to the Goldman Sachs  
 103 worldview, it is appropriate to ask whether the current  
 104 administration's shortcomings (like those of Bill Clinton  
 105 before him) are rooted instead in the larger political and  
 106 institutional limitations faced by contemporary liberalism.

107 In this short essay, I develop a critical engagement with  
 108 Starr and Wolfe's vision of liberalism as freedom, and their  
 109 projections about liberalism's future(s) that arise out of that  
 110 particular framing of the liberal project. I argue that while  
 111 both authors provide a sophisticated and thoughtful  
 112 reading, they also neglect or elide a number of key  
 113 problems. Contemporary liberalism in America faces  
 114 fundamental difficulties in which the past may not be a  
 115 very useful guide to the future. Indeed, liberalism's past  
 116 success—and the ability of conservatives to embrace or  
 117 even co-opt those successes as their own—severely blunt  
 118 the impact of liberal ideas. Further, some core tenants of  
 119 contemporary liberalism, in particular its approach to social  
 120 policy and the welfare state, lead to unsatisfactory out-  
 121 comes in ways that even its most able defenders seem to  
 122 have a difficult time recognizing. Freedom, I will argue,  
 123 may still be a powerful motivating idea, but it has been  
 124 thoroughly and probably permanently neutralized by

conservative opponents of liberalism who use the rhetoric 125  
 of freedom to promote non-liberal social policy goals. 126

**Rediscovering Liberalism's Foundations** 127

Before we fast forward to the present, however, it is 128  
 useful to briefly follow Starr and Wolfe in their 129  
 respective efforts to reconstruct liberalism's intellectual 130  
 and political history. Both argue that the "L-word" has 131  
 become widely derided in the heated polemic environ- 132  
 ment of the present in large measure because liberals do 133  
 not understand their own glorious history, and are thus 134  
 poorly equipped to defend their own political values and 135  
 traditions (and have allowed conservatives to caricature 136  
 liberal ideas in highly misleading ways). 137

Both authors also identify the heart of the liberal project 138  
 as a relentless search for freedom. For both Starr and Wolfe, 139  
 liberalism is centrally about freedom, not equality (although 140  
 both authors are concerned with high and rising levels of 141  
 inequality as well). As Wolfe puts it, "liberalism's key 142  
 substantive principle...is as many people as possible should 143  
 have as much say as is feasible over the direction of their 144  
 lives." Rising levels of inequality in the United States and 145  
 elsewhere, an alternative source of concern among those on 146  
 the left today, are problematic for these authors insofar as 147  
 they cause an unequal distribution of freedom. 148

The deliberate invocation of "freedom" as the unifying 149  
 concept of modern liberalism by both authors is striking. 150  
 Wolfe and Starr want to insist on a very broad notion of 151  
 freedom, one in which the "freedom" of all individuals to 152  
 meaningfully participate in key spheres of social life is 153  
 insured through an active state. Any serious reading of 154  
 contemporary American political discourse, however, 155  
 would find that freedom has largely reframed as "freedom 156  
 from" big government, not "freedom to" live a worthwhile 157  
 life. Freedom is also now, in many ways, the core 158  
 animating principle of modern American conservatism. 159  
 Attempting to wrestle it back represents no small challenge. 160

Wolfe and Starr attempt to do so via a rich reconstruction 161  
 of the often glorious (at least in this telling) history of 162  
 liberalism. Critical readers may object to certain omissions 163  
 (liberalism's history is presented in both books without 164  
 systematic interrogation of the deep and enduring problem 165  
 of race for liberals before the New Deal), but few readers 166  
 will fail to learn something new from either book. Their 167  
 accounts are, perhaps not surprisingly, parallel in many 168  
 ways, although Wolfe centers his account in European 169  
 social theory while Starr builds his on a reading of the 170  
 political history of liberalism in the Anglo American 171  
 democracies. Both emphasize that classical liberals 172  
 invented and fought hard for many of the key foundations 173  
 of modern democratic polities: constraints on the arbitrary 174

175 authority of governments, the triumph of reason over  
 176 traditional authority, and the virtues of individual freedom.  
 177 They remind us that these were deeply challenging and  
 178 politically progressive positions; the hijacking of Adam  
 179 Smith by the right has impoverished our understanding of  
 180 liberalism’s foundational importance for the rise of demo-  
 181 cratic capitalism.

182 Liberalism’s commitment to freedom and reason would,  
 183 of course, eventually require a broadening out of the more  
 184 narrow liberalism represented in 18th Century models. Two  
 185 problems were critical: political self-determination would  
 186 require forms of democracy that civil liberalism did not  
 187 envision; and the changes wrought by industrialization and  
 188 the expansion of market capitalism in the 19th Century  
 189 required the development and justification of a positive role  
 190 for government in social and economic regulation that  
 191 would go far beyond the concepts bequeathed by classical  
 192 liberals. Starr and Wolfe note that liberals were not always  
 193 at the forefront of the initial impetus for democracy and  
 194 positive government. For example, early liberals were often  
 195 not enthusiastic about universal suffrage, favoring property  
 196 requirements and stakeholder models of participation.  
 197 Demands for social provision similarly emerged first in  
 198 the struggles of social movements from below (or the  
 199 socialist movements in Europe). And economic elites  
 200 would also set limits on democracy and craft the appeal  
 201 for positive government around their own needs for market  
 202 regulation and corporate power.

203 But the core principles of liberalism were vitally  
 204 important in translating the demands of working class  
 205 movements into the concrete institutions of modern  
 206 democracy (at least in the Anglo-American world). Liber-  
 207 alism provided the intellectual foundations for democratic  
 208 capitalism and, eventually, a significant welfare state. Both  
 209 Starr and Wolfe are right to highlight the ways in which  
 210 mid-20th Century liberalism perhaps became the closest  
 211 thing America has had to a governing philosophy. While  
 212 the labor and civil rights movements of the 1930s and  
 213 1960s were critical to creating reform environments, liberal  
 214 political leaders and thinkers were the key actors who  
 215 designed and implemented the programs that brought  
 216 positive government to America (and justified it in terms  
 217 that would resonate for many decades).

218 Starr’s defense of liberalism as freedom highlights not  
 219 only these key moments of domestic political transition, but  
 220 also the centrality of a strong public sector with liberal  
 221 democratic principles for fighting wars and maintaining a  
 222 “muscular” foreign policy. Authoritarian regimes may  
 223 emphasize war-fighting capacity and foreign military  
 224 adventures, but, Starr notes, they invariably lose the  
 225 resulting wars to liberal democracies where citizens are  
 226 motivated to fight for a society where they have a right to  
 227 participate in its governance. This emphasis comes as

something of a surprise, given conservative hijacking of  
 aggressive foreign policy (and the resulting insinuation that  
 liberals are “weak”). The powerfully negative reaction to  
 the image of Michael Dukakis in that tank in the 1988  
 presidential campaign remains a vivid reminder of how  
 successful that connotation has been. This image, Starr  
 posits, is fundamentally wrong. Liberals too know how to  
 fight wars (and, perhaps he might have added, also seem  
 just as capable as conservatives in falling into quagmires).

Looking to the present and immediate future, both Starr  
 and Wolfe envision a turn in American political life away  
 from conservative dominance of the past 30 years towards a  
 new liberal moment. At one level this opportunity arises  
 from the seeming exhaustion of conservative political  
 moment. But both Starr and Wolfe go much further in their  
 claims about liberalism’s inevitable triumph in the future.  
 The seeds of this argument lie in two core claims: (1)  
 liberalism remains the only viable broad-based ideological  
 and political challenge to market fundamentalism, the only  
 hope for stitching together a diverse and eclectic set of  
 progressive forces under a single umbrella; (2) liberalism  
 still has plenty of room to be “reimagined,” as Starr puts it,  
 for the 21st Century. That reimagining would involve the  
 shift towards a fourth kind of liberalism, one that embraces  
 a global, and multicultural world with social policies that  
 reinvigorate equal opportunity for all.

**The Permanent Crisis of Liberalism** 254

So what are we to make of these claims, midway through  
 the first Obama term? In spite of its notable historic  
 achievements, liberalism has essentially become—and  
 remains—a dirty word for the majority of the American  
 mass public. The evidence is everywhere. While around  
 35–40% of Americans will describe themselves as “con-  
 servatives” in polls and surveys, only around 15–20% will  
 typically call themselves liberals. Survey respondents’  
 feelings of “warmth” towards liberalism have declined in  
 the National Election Study since the 1970s. Further, while  
 the percentage of conservative identifiers has been growing  
 (albeit slowly, and only slightly) over the past 30 years, the  
 percentage of liberals has remained essentially unchanged  
 since the early 1970s.

Liberals sometimes take comfort in the “operational”  
 progressivism of American public, that while most  
 Americans may not identify with liberalism, they  
 nonetheless tend to embrace many of the social policies  
 we associate with contemporary liberalism. For example,  
 when asked if they favor increasing, decreasing, or  
 maintaining the current level of government spending  
 on a wide range of social programs, majorities (often  
 significant majorities) favor increased spending. But this

278 kind of “operational” liberalism has long been accompa- 311  
 279 nished by “principled” conservatism; Americans consistent- 312  
 280 ly oppose big government, higher taxes, and when forced 313  
 281 to choose between market and government solutions to 314  
 282 social problems far more will choose the market. 315  
 283 Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs note this paradox 316  
 284 in their recent study of Americans’ attitudes towards 317  
 285 rising inequality; while Americans have strong negative 318  
 286 feelings about high levels of inequality, they will not 319  
 287 support the kinds of redistributive policies that might 320  
 288 reduce inequality (especially if those programs involve 321  
 289 increasing the size and scope of government or raising 322  
 290 taxes).

291 If the mass public does not embrace liberalism as an 323  
 292 ideological label, the problem is in some ways even worse 324  
 293 among elected politicians and Democratic political elites. 325  
 294 For a full generation now, left-of-center American politi- 326  
 295 cians have been running away from the “liberal” label. 327  
 296 Leading Democrats, including both Bill Clinton and Barack 328  
 297 Obama, have generally refused to openly and consistently 329  
 298 embrace the label, preferring something vaguer like 330  
 299 “progressive” or even more commonly to insist that labels 331  
 300 are “old fashioned.” It is striking that, in the contemporary 332  
 301 frame game, conservatives have no problem whatsoever 333  
 302 calling themselves conservatives, even today after the 334  
 303 universally recognized failures of the Bush presidency.

304 The virtual disappearance of “liberal” Republicanism has 335  
 305 been another key source of liberalism’s contemporary 336  
 306 political difficulties. A now little-remembered component 337  
 307 of liberal strength from the 1930s through the 1970s was 338  
 308 the bipartisan nature of liberal identification in Congress. 339  
 309 There were a handful of influential Republicans prepared to 340  
 310 talk about civil rights and, in some cases, moderately liberal 341  
 311 social policy reforms. This potential for bipartisanship in 342  
 312 the name of liberalism created the possibilities for a true 343  
 313 vital center, and an alternative route to policymaking when 344  
 314 conservative Southern Democrats resisted liberal ideas that 345  
 315 challenged the racial order.

316 The present could not be more different. There are now 346  
 317 literally no national Republicans who would dare openly 347  
 318 declare themselves liberals (and very few who would even 348  
 319 embrace the label “moderate” or “maverick,” even among 349  
 320 those whose beliefs warrant it). Professional ambition on 350  
 321 the right now seems to require the open embrace of 351  
 322 aggressive conservatism, sometimes in forms (e.g. the 352  
 323 contemporary “Tea Party” movement) that represent dra- 353  
 324 matic departures from the traditional center-right.

325 In the face of such evidence, Wolfe and Starr would 354  
 326 argue that liberalism can still triumph. In particular, the 355  
 327 emphasis of both authors is on the past as a guide to the 356  
 328 future. But their very emphasis on recovering the past is 357  
 329 ironic. It suggests the way to important limitations in the 358  
 330 present and future. So much of what we celebrate about

liberalism has been absorbed into mainstream political 331  
 discourse that it has largely lost its power to motivate. 332  
 Modern conservatives can wax eloquent about the virtues 333  
 of freedom and democracy as well as any modern liberal. 334  
 Consider, again, Wolfe’s definition of liberalism: “as many 335  
 people as possible should have much say as is feasible in 336  
 the direction their lives will take.” Would these words not 337  
 feel quite at home coming out of the mouths of modern 338  
 conservative thinkers and politicians? 339

340 Many of the most attractive ideas of liberalism concerning 341  
 freedom have, in short, been thoroughly co-opted by modern 342  
 conservatives. Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman 343  
 showed how powerful this reclaiming of liberalism against 344  
 the welfare state could be earlier in the 20th Century, but it 345  
 would take some time for modern conservatives to be 346  
 completely comfortable using the language of freedom to 347  
 advance anti-liberal goals. But today, that lesson has been 348  
 thoroughly learned. Irrespective of what one thinks about 349  
 how conservatives propose to *implement* their visions of 350  
 democracy and freedom, the use of similar rhetorical frames 351  
 embodying core ideas first invented and developed by 352  
 liberals is now so common that liberals rarely gain traction 353  
 reasserting their own core principles.

354 It is not difficult to think of many examples from recent 355  
 American policy and political debates. School “choice” 356  
 rhetoric to defend voucher programs is deeply threatening 357  
 to the critical liberal goal of providing a strong public 358  
 education for all, including those students with special 359  
 needs. Freedom to allow individuals the choice of where to 360  
 invest their “retirement savings” rather than a government- 361  
 run social security system is a way of challenging the 362  
 universal nature of the one truly successful and popular 363  
 welfare state program in America. Conservative challenges 364  
 to affirmative action have frequently and explicitly used the 365  
 language of Martin Luther King and civil rights movement. 366  
 Defending the “rights” of the unborn fetus has become the 367  
 mantra of anti-abortion activists seeking to take freedom 368  
 away from a pregnant woman. Illiberal foreign military 369  
 interventions such as the war in Iraq defended as a way of 370  
 giving freedom to the “Iraqi people” or to “bring democracy 371  
 to the Middle East.” (Indeed, the Bush Administration 372  
 frequently made heroes out of progressives and liberals in 373  
 the Middle East in their challenges to their authoritarian 374  
 governments and/or religious leaders.)

375 Nowhere is the reframing of freedom more blunt than in 376  
 the sudden embrace of gender equality by evangelical 377  
 conservatives. Sarah Palin, in spite of her embodiment of an 378  
 old-fashioned conservative reaction to the forces of change, 379  
 represents a remarkably transformed conservative usage of 380  
 core liberal themes. Palin, an evangelical mother of five 381  
 children, can run for the Vice-Presidency not *only* without 382  
 any explicit need to address the contradiction with 383  
 traditional values her candidacy represents, but actually 384

embracing the opportunity for women it represents. It is, in short, all too easy for non-liberals to use the language of liberalism to defend non-liberal public policies for liberalism per se to have a clearly progressive impact.

So when does liberalism find its distinctive voice in American politics? Looking over the course of the past Century, its moments of greatest triumph in have come in those periods when it could, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once put it, be the “vital center” of American politics, the embodiment of freedom and reason against the extremes of the left and the right. In the moments of grand reform, such as the 1930s/40s and again in the 1960s, liberalism could plausibly stand between the forces of conservative traditionalism and the demands of social movements from below (or resurgent left-wing thought from the intelligentsia). In the New Deal era from the 1930s to the late 1940s, the presence of strong unions, a visible Communist and other left organizational presence, and open public debate over the relative virtues of left-wing ideas in the face of a sea of trouble, gave liberalism a powerful source of centrist purpose. Similarly, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement brought pressure from below that emboldened liberals positioned in the center. To be sure, the growing tensions between older liberals and an increasingly militant student left in the late 1960s would eventually tear the Democratic Party apart, but not before some of the most sweeping and important expansions of the public sector took place, spearheaded by liberals.

In dramatic moments like this, liberals can indeed plausibly assert the middle ground in American politics. The existence of both a viable left and an intractable conservative opposition to social change is what makes the vital center vital. There has, throughout American history, been no shortage of conservative presence. But what about the left? What happens when social movements, on a scale large enough to impact national political debates, are largely absent? And what if, as appears increasingly likely, the era of large-scale left-wing social movements has ended (with the decline of organized labor, the successes of the civil rights/gay liberation/women’s movements, the “normalization” of activism in which even large one-off protest events are treated as routine events by an increasingly fragmented media, and so forth)? One need not go all the way to an “end of history” position to be doubtful that the large-scale national social movements of the sort capable of moving liberalism to the vital center may not reappear any time soon.

The problem goes even deeper. Many liberal intellectuals, in the rush to claim the vital center, have often attacked the very groups seeking to build a left presence in American political life. Some of these groups represent causes or issues that may present the least appealing face of liberalism to the American public (such

as “multiculturalists,” anti-globalization activists, “post-modernists,” race-centered political claims-making, etc.), but they also represent the primary source of left politics at the present. Wolfe makes a related point about some liberals’ disdain for progressive religious activism. A really important, but little discussed, recent example is that powerful liberals did virtually nothing to stand up and support the most important organization representing poor people in America (Acorn) when it came under attack from the right because of an incident involving one of its local offices captured on video. The crushing of Acorn—after four decades of coordinating social and political mobilization of poor people at the neighborhood level—passed with barely a whisper of protest from the liberal intelligentsia.

For that matter, organized labor, long thought to be the organizational backbone of the liberal movement, has largely been left to wither without dedicated or significant support from liberal, non-labor groups. The teacher’s unions, in particular, have come under withering critique in the name of “liberal” education reform. The long campaign for labor law reform aimed at making unionization easier through so-called “card check unionism,” (a policy proposal that would move U.S. labor law much closer to the models in other rich democracies where union density is far higher) has never been a high priority for most liberals. While some (including Obama) have paid lip service to labor law reform, the notion that having a more powerful labor movement against which the vital center could be positioned has not been viewed as a key strategic development for the future.

In distancing themselves from activist organizations and unions, liberals ultimately put themselves in a self-defeating position. The current situation is not akin to liberalism’s failures during the McCarthy period (when strong principled defenses of civil liberties were far from universal, and many liberals stood on the sidelines as the Communist Party and the left-wing of organized labor was crushed). The stakes are simply not as high. But the attacks one finds on left groups that do pop-up nevertheless calls to mind some of the limits of the pragmatist impulse that continual reaching towards the vital center suggests.

In this limited social movement environment, the failure of the Obama Administration to promote truly progressive social policies comes to be seen not as a failure of a weak president, but as entirely predictable response. Facing little pressure from his left flank, Obama (like Clinton before him) cannot easily position an expansionist agenda from the rational (vital) center. Ideas and policy positions cannot be cast as grand compromises; rather, whatever the Administration does (as the early Clinton Administration before it) is aggressively counter-framed as “socialist” or “big government” by their conservative opponents.

490 A related, and seemingly perpetual problem for liberal-  
491 ism in America, arises from the fact that as the only game  
492 in town, it has to, by default, absorb far too much  
493 ideological space to present a coherent set of ideas, policies,  
494 and principles in modern political debate. At one level,  
495 liberalism's role as umbrella could provide energy and  
496 momentum, but it also tends to dilute liberalism's core in  
497 ways that make it difficult to provide a defining set of  
498 beliefs shared across the center-left and left of American  
499 politics. In his recent survey of American liberalism, Todd  
500 Gitlin plausibly suggests that no fewer than *eight* distinct  
501 social forces (such as organized labor, women's organiza-  
502 tions, civil rights groups, anti-globalization/anarchist acti-  
503 vists, the so-called "netroots" of progressive bloggers and  
504 readers, the secular academic/intellectual left, the Christian  
505 left, and Jews) are a part of liberalism's "broad tent." Rather  
506 than representing a set of core principles, liberalism often  
507 becomes a mish-mash of groups with competing interests  
508 and demands on the state. "Message control" is a perpetual  
509 impossibility. Conservatism, by contrast, appears remark-  
510 ably streamlined and coherent (even while at times bitterly  
511 divided between the Christian Right and business elites).

512 The contrast between contemporary liberalism in  
513 America versus Europe in this regard is especially stark.  
514 There, strong unions and social democratic parties mark a  
515 "left" space beyond liberalism. European liberals can be  
516 the vital center, although—paradoxically—in most Euro-  
517 pean polities, liberalism is largely a spent force politically  
518 (and has been for a long time). It is no doubt true, as Starr  
519 suggests, that European social democratic parties in recent  
520 years have become "more liberal," but there is still a  
521 mammoth gulf between the policy legacies of past social  
522 democratic successes represented by these parties and the  
523 moderate and defensive posture of liberalism in America.  
524 Consider health care. European governments considering  
525 cost containment measures involving introduction of  
526 modest market mechanisms for their universal health  
527 systems have relatively little in common with American  
528 liberals pushing for a "public option"—a government-run  
529 health insurance to compete with private insurers—as a  
530 pragmatic compromise.

531 The contrast with European political systems reminds of  
532 a crippling institutional shortcoming of liberalism, one that  
533 neither Starr nor Wolfe deals with at all effectively. Where  
534 liberalism has been strongest, primarily in the Anglo-  
535 American countries, it has built welfare states that vastly  
536 underperform relative to their social democratic or even  
537 Christian democratic peers in Europe. The "liberal"  
538 democratic welfare states, as they have come to be known  
539 in the wake of Gosta Esping-Andersen's pioneering work,  
540 do much less to reduce poverty or promote equality than  
541 European welfare states. They rely much more on market  
542 mechanisms, means-testing rather than universal provision,

and leave important categories of individuals uncovered. 543  
Nowhere has this been more clear than in the current 544  
recession, where growing numbers of the long-term 545  
unemployed get no benefits and no health insurance at a 546  
time when there are as many as six people looking for 547  
every available job opening and near double-digit unem- 548  
ployment is now projected to last for some time. 549

550 The problems of the liberal welfare state aren't simply a  
551 matter of insufficient spending effort; as Irwin Garfinkel  
552 and his colleagues have recently pointed out, the American  
553 welfare state spends only a bit below the European average  
554 once we take into account all of the private subsidies for  
555 benefits that other governments typically pay for directly.  
556 This means that liberal welfare states, with the United  
557 States being the most extreme, are neither efficient nor  
558 effective. This problem continues to plague the liberal  
559 agenda. The Obama health plan, once implemented, will  
560 suffer from many of the same problems as other parts of the  
561 liberal welfare state produced in the United States since the  
562 New Deal. It promises to be very expensive while still not  
563 covering everyone. The attempt in this case to find the  
564 "vital center" between free market approaches and full  
565 government program of the sort built by social democratic  
566 forces in other rich democracies is neither efficient nor truly  
567 universal.

568 In their celebrations of liberalism's virtues, Wolfe and  
569 Starr never fully pause to acknowledge the ways in which  
570 in practice it has fallen short of the achievements of social  
571 democracy elsewhere. There is, of course, the always  
572 available excuse, one that "responsible" liberal observers  
573 frequently make: the "votes simply aren't/weren't there" to  
574 move more aggressively in the direction of broader and  
575 more sweeping policy activism. True enough. But rather  
576 than seriously *challenge* that consensus, pragmatic liberals  
577 in power have tended to operate with a perpetual urge to  
578 compromise, to seek the vital center. Major reform initiative  
579 draw upon the liberal impulse to synthesize the best  
580 practices, combine the best ideas of the left and the right  
581 and come up with complicated policy plans that make no  
582 one happy.

583 To be sure, the hostile environment of anti-government  
584 sentiment that has been cynically stoked by corporate and  
585 conservative groups makes it difficult to articulate clear  
586 alternatives that require a large public presence. But liberals  
587 should not escape blame for this situation either. Many  
588 liberal intellectuals and politicians have indulged in rhetoric  
589 that has *contributed* to the widespread public perception  
590 that government is the problem. When a Bill Clinton or  
591 Barack Obama, for example, talk about "reinventing  
592 government" or making government more efficient, and  
593 embrace the need to "cut waste," they are feeding the very  
594 sentiments that have undermined confidence in government  
595 in the first place.

596 A good example of how toxic this approach can be can  
 597 be seen in the case of public education. When it comes to  
 598 criticizing existing government institutions, nowhere is the  
 599 Obama Administration more blatant and aggressive than  
 600 when it comes to the public schools. The Administration is  
 601 in the midst of a full-on assault on public education that  
 602 rarely pauses to acknowledge the important successes and  
 603 achievements of public schools in educating an increasingly  
 604 diverse population of students and *raising* test scores. In an  
 605 environment like this, big government has far too princi-  
 606 pled defenders to effectively combat its legions of critics.

607 Perhaps the most substantial political problem for  
 608 liberals, and indeed progressives of all stripes, is that they  
 609 have decisively lost a critical framing battle over the virtues  
 610 of a substantial government role in social and economic  
 611 regulation. The heart of liberalism-as-public-philosophy  
 612 was the idea that the public sector was capable of doing  
 613 good for people (and public service was a higher calling,  
 614 not the employer of last resort). Declining confidence in  
 615 government makes it relatively easy for conservatives to  
 616 counter-frame against liberal policy proposals by invoking  
 617 fears of increased taxes or an intrusive and inefficient  
 618 government. In this, there are few easy or simple answers.  
 619 My colleague Clem Brooks and I have been working for  
 620 the last half-decade on a series of national telephone  
 621 surveys with embedded “framing” experiments. We find,  
 622 as others have before us, enormous difficulty in talking  
 623 Americans into liberal positions. Our initial plan was to  
 624 write a book called *When Liberals Win*, now shelved in the  
 625 face of evidence that we (and others) cannot deny.

626 Liberalism may well continue to be the umbrella under  
 627 which Americans with egalitarian or left-of-center political  
 628 views will have to embed themselves in the future. For  
 629 now, it is the only unifying political ideology with a ghost  
 630 of a chance of holding otherwise fragmented progressives  
 631 together. But careful scrutiny also suggests intractable  
 632 political and institutional shortcomings. The current  
 633 moment, like that of the 1990s, is likely to produce few  
 634 lasting and important policy legacies, unless social move-  
 675

ment pressures from the left grow in ways that hardly seem 635  
 possible at this writing. Liberalism’s future *existence* may 636  
 be secure, but its *successful* reimagining in ways that would 637  
 make the “L”-word popular again and provide the founda- 638  
 tions for a long-term governing philosophy remain difficult 639  
 to envision. 640

**Further Reading** 641

Edsall, T. 2006. *Building Red America: The new conservative* 642  
*coalition and the drive for permanent power*. New York: Basic 643  
 Books. 644  
 Frank, T. 2004. *What’s the matter with Kansas?* New York: 645  
 Metropolitan Books. 646  
 Garfinkel, I., Rainwater, L., & Smeeding, T. 2010. *Wealth and welfare* 647  
*states: Is America a laggard or a leader?* New York: Russell 648  
 Sage Foundation. 649  
 Gitlin, T. 2007. *The bulldozer and the big tent: Blind republicans,* 650  
*lame democrats, and the recovery of American ideals*. New York: 651  
 Wiley. 652  
 Hacker, J., & Pierson, P. 2005. *Off-center: The republican revolution* 653  
*and the erosion of American democracy*. New Haven: Yale 654  
 University Press. 655  
 Hetherington, M. 2004. *Why trust matters: Declining political trust* 656  
*and the demise of American liberalism*. Princeton: Princeton 657  
 University Press. 658  
 Jurmonville, N., & Mattson, K. (Eds.). 2007. *Liberalism for a new* 659  
*century*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 660  
 Lakoff, G. 2006. *Whose freedom? The battle over America’s most* 661  
*important idea* (p. 2006). New York: FSG. 662  
 McGowan, J. 2010. *American liberalism: An interpretation for our* 663  
*time*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 664  
 Schlesinger, A. 1997 [1949]. *The vital center: The politics of freedom*. 665  
 New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. 666  
 Starr, P. 2007. *Freedom’s power: The true force of liberalism*. New 667  
 York: Basic Books. 668  
 Waldman, T. 2008. *Not much left: The fate of liberalism in America*. 669  
 Berkeley: University of California Press. 670  
 Wolfe, A. 2008. *The future of liberalism*. New York: Vintage. 671

**Jeff Manza** is Professor of Sociology and Department Chair at New 672  
 York University. His research is in the area of social stratification, 673  
 political sociology and public policy. 674

AUTHOR QUERY

**AUTHOR PLEASE ANSWER QUERY.**

No Query.

UNCORRECTED PROOF