

Out of progressivism's ashes

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ALTOONA, WI - We live in crazy and unpredictable times politically. The Republican Party descends into madness in so many respects and grows more [self-destructive](#) by the day, yet for now remains the majority party in America both [nationally](#) and at the [state level](#). That says a lot about the Democratic Party's weakness and lack of appeal.

In most statehouses across the country and most of the time in Congress, liberal or progressive ideas do not have the upper hand in policy debates and haven't for quite some time. Progressive advocacy groups are regularly losing in the political arena, watching helplessly as right-wing forces successfully chip away at old progressive policies and programs or dismantle them altogether.

In searching for explanations, many rightly point to the corrupting influence of money in politics. Indeed, the exponential growth in money's role in election campaigns and lobbying – and, just as importantly, the fact that so much of that money is supplied by so few – does cripple efforts to advance policies that promote the common good or serve the broad public interest. A privileged few pay for politics, and a privileged few benefit from politics.

But here is modern-day progressivism's great dilemma....

Ideas favoring the commoners among us instead of the royals don't stand much of a chance of becoming the law of the land as long as the vast wealth of a few holds policymakers in such an iron grip. For there to be a chance of progressive values being reflected in government actions, something clearly needs to be done about money in politics. But campaign finance reformers aren't faring any better than any other progressive policy advocates. They too are watching helplessly as old safeguards against government corruption are stripped away and the

floodgates are opened ever wider, allowing more and more money to flood into elections and lobbying. They are powerless to stop political inequality from breeding still more political inequality. Growing political inequality then produces greater economic and social inequality. And the more government is seen working for just a few at everyone else's expense, the more the masses despise government. The more government is despised, the easier it is for a wealthy and well-connected few to control.

This vicious cycle is the progressive quandary.

The recipe for breaking the cycle is undoubtedly a complicated mixture, but three ingredients are required for sure.

Repair the broken bonds between rural and urban people and their communities. When elected officials put policies and programs in place in the past that promoted greater equality and broadly shared prosperity, they did so with the support of both city and country folks. Rediscovering common ground that now-estranged rural and urban populations once stood on together starts with examining the reasons rural-urban political unions have fractured and rural and suburban interests have coalesced around a right-wing agenda. Then new counteractive measures for the 21st Century that both [rural and urban voters can get behind](#) have to be cooked up.

Weaken and eventually break the grip of the political industrial complex that strangles our democracy. Our political system has been commandeered by professionals. Now more than ever, the involvement of people with a life outside politics is needed. It's quite possibly never been harder in our nation's history for people who don't practice politics for a living to gain a foothold in the public arena. But given how Americans are feeling about politics and politicians and government these days, there probably hasn't ever been a time when such a rich reward awaits those willing to swim against the powerful currents of political professionalization.

And to do that....

Put non-monetary political currencies that have been largely forgotten back into circulation. One such currency is organized people. Another is provocative ideas. Those who

call themselves progressives have been playing defense for more than a generation. They have become [America's true conservatives](#) . They need to start [playing offense](#) . They need to start thinking big again.

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