

The American Way of Equality

by DAVID BROOKS

Income inequality is on the rise. The rich are getting better at passing their advantages on to their kids. Lifestyle and values gaps are widening between the educated and uneducated. So the big issue is: Will Americans demand new policies to reverse these trends — to redistribute wealth, to provide greater economic security? Are we about to see a mass populist movement in this country?

Nobody was smarter on this subject than Seymour Martin Lipset, the eminent sociologist who died at 84 on New Year's Eve. Lipset had been a socialist in the hothouse atmosphere of City College during the 1940s, and though he later became a moderate Democrat, he continued to wonder, with some regret, why America never had a serious socialist movement, why America never adopted a European-style welfare state.

Lipset was aware of the structural and demographic answers to such questions. For example, racially diverse nations tend to have lower levels of social support than homogeneous ones. People don't feel as bound together when they are divided on ethnic lines and are less likely to embrace mutual support programs. You can have diversity or a big welfare state. It's hard to have both.

But as he studied these matters, Lipset moved away from structural or demographic explanations (too many counterexamples). He drifted, as Tocqueville and Werner Sombart had before him, to values.

America never had a feudal past, so nobody has a sense of social place or class-consciousness, Lipset observed. Meanwhile, Americans have inherited from their Puritan forebears a sense that they have a spiritual obligation to rise and succeed.

Two great themes run through American history, Lipset wrote in his 1963 book "The First New Nation": achievement and equality. These are often in tension because when you leave unequally endowed people free to achieve, you get unequal results.

Though Lipset never quite put it this way, the clear message from his writings is that when achievement and equality clash in America, achievement wins. Or to be more precise, the achievement ethos reshapes the definition of equality. When Americans use the word "equality," they really mean "fair opportunity." When Americans use the word "freedom," they really mean "opportunity."

Lipset was relentlessly empirical, and rested his conclusions on data as well as history and philosophy. He found that Americans have for centuries embraced individualistic, meritocratic, antistatist values, even at times when income inequality was greater than it is today.

Large majorities of Americans have always believed that individuals are responsible for their own success, Lipset reported, while people in other countries are much more likely to point to forces beyond individual control. Sixty-five percent of Americans believe hard work is the key to success; only 12 percent think luck plays a major role.

In his “American Exceptionalism” (1996), Lipset pointed out that 78 percent of Americans endorse the view that “the strength of this country today is mostly based on the success of American business.” Fewer than a third of all Americans believe the state has a responsibility to reduce income disparities, compared with 82 percent of Italians. Over 70 percent of Americans believe “individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves” whereas most Japanese believe “the state should take more responsibility to ensure everyone is provided for.”

America, he concluded, is an outlier, an exceptional nation. And though his patriotism pervaded his writing, he emphasized that American exceptionalism is “a double-edged sword.”

Political movements that run afoul of these individualistic, achievement-oriented values rarely prosper. The Democratic Party is now divided between moderates — who emphasize individual responsibility and education to ameliorate inequality — and progressive populists, who advocate an activist state that will protect people from forces beyond their control. Given the deep forces in American history, the centrists will almost certainly win out.

Indeed, the most amazing thing about the past week is how modest the Democratic agenda has been. Democrats have been out of power in Congress for 12 years. They finally get a chance to legislate and they push through a series of small proposals that are little pebbles compared to the vast economic problems they described during the campaign.

They grasp the realities Marty Lipset described. They understand that in the face of inequality, Americans have usually opted for policies that offer more opportunity, not those emphasizing security or redistribution. American domestic policy is drifting leftward, but there are sharp limits on how far it will go.