

spotlight on
POVERTY and
OPPORTUNITY

Could Conservatives Lead the Fight Against Poverty?

By Tamar Jacoby, December 7, 2016



Finally, the white noise of the campaign is subsiding, and policy is reasserting its rightful place alongside politics in Washington and beyond.

Some Democrats and others whose primary policy issue is poverty are worried. After all, for the past 50 years, Democrats have taken the lead in addressing poverty—so much so that it's often seen as a left or center-left issue, with Republicans largely AWOL, if not obstructionist.

But now Republicans are in control: in the White House, the Senate, the House, 34 governors' mansions, and 25 states where the GOP runs both the governor's office and the state legislature. What will this mean for the poverty agenda? Many advocates are bracing for the worst.

Their fears are misplaced. There's no need to panic or circle the wagons. On the contrary. The last few years have been a time of exciting intellectual ferment on the center right: researchers, policy thinkers, lawmakers and on-the-ground practitioners developing new ideas about poverty and economic mobility.

And now, like him or not, Donald Trump's surprising success among working class voters has created a new political imperative for both parties. Working-class poverty is different, but it's taking on a new urgency in many communities hit hard by globalization – and the center right is intent on developing better answers for these families too.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress won't see eye to eye on all these issues. The GOP is bringing new ideas – that's the point – and a range of novel means to the shared ends of reducing poverty and enhancing economic mobility. There are also sure to be tough fights about how to pay for a poverty agenda. But Republicans lawmakers at all levels of government are coming into office with a fresh playbook, and many will be hoping to work with Democrats to enact their ideas into law.

Just what are these new ideas?

My organization, Opportunity America, is partnering with ten other groups, including the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, to sponsor a summit in Washington on December 14-15. The goal: to showcase new center-right thinking on poverty and economic mobility.

Participants will include House Speaker Paul Ryan, bestselling author J.D. Vance, former governor and welfare-reform pioneer John Engler, public intellectuals Charles Murray and Arthur Brooks, plus several dozen other policy experts and on-the-ground practitioners—people working in church basements, state welfare offices and forward-thinking C-suites, among other places, to help people escape poverty and move up the economic ladder.

The summit will feature sessions on a broad range of issues that matter to poor and working families: from single-parent families and criminal justice reform to school choice, college affordability and how to help people learn the skills they need to make a decent living in the postindustrial economy.

A handful of common themes are sure to echo through the sessions. First and foremost, the need to look beyond government and harness the power of communities. Also, the dignity of work – a hand up is better than a handout. And unlike those on the center left focused primarily on the economic underpinnings of poverty, many on the center right are more concerned about people's choices, particularly bad choices, about marriage, school, work, drugs, violence and a range of other issues.

But don't expect participants in the summit to agree on every issue. Conservatives differ among themselves about whether and to what extent we should use the tax code to fight poverty. There's no consensus yet – both right and left are just starting to explore the issue – about what exactly ails the working class or how to help. And while most center-right thinkers agree that we ought to be reaching beyond government to unleash the power of

civil society, there is still some role for government – and robust debate on the right about what exactly that role should be.

Bottom line: the ferment on the center right is just that—ferment. And like most fresh thinking, it's rich and dynamic—a work in progress.

How will it play out in the new Republican Washington? How will these ideas translate into policy? It's too soon to tell. But we can start to speculate about the debates where the new thinking might bubble up.

A new national infrastructure program could be accompanied by a push to promote skills training and workforce education. Child care and family leave were much discussed on the campaign trail and are likely to come up early in a Trump administration. Congress is poised to reauthorize the Higher Education Act and perhaps TANF. And in this Congress as the last, there's sure to be widespread agreement on the Earned Income Tax Credit—perhaps next year Democrats and Republicans can finally find common ground on how to pay for it.

My advice: fasten your seat belts. The debate about poverty isn't winding down—it's just getting going. And whether or not you agree with everything on the center right's poverty agenda, these thinkers are going to bring new energy and new commitment to the fight.

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