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## ***Progressivism's Seeds are Here for the Planting***

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In the past couple of columns in this space I've emphasized some of the background reasons --vanishing voters, weakened unions, money-corrupted elections -- why American public policy is so distinctly anti-worker and pro-business. In Washington in recent weeks, this background has come fore, with every day bringing fresh news of some new anti-worker change in policy or payback to Governor Bush's business campaign contributors. Now, as former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich recently summarized the scene: "There's no longer any countervailing power in Washington. Business is in complete control of the machinery of government."

But if voters are demobilized, workers disorganized, and only business in charge in Washington, why are we at Sustaining Wisconsin optimistic about the birth of a new progressivism?

Simply because the public wants it. Our politicians may be neck deep and still slurping trench liquor (or single-malt Scotch) in a trough-period for progressive values, but among the general population those values -- basic fairness, respect for work, equal opportunity, democracy, social responsibility -- remain alive and well. And the public is getting restive. An old saying has it that "the people lose every battle but the last." Especially if the Bush administration continues to grossly overreach, the next battle in the U.S. could be a big one, and it will go to those who can convert that restiveness to a policy program better reflecting those values. Such program needs to be attentive to current needs, practical, and skeptical of "big government" solutions to everything, but it can also be quite radical in its departures from present policy.

How radical? Judge yourself. From polling data we know that super-majorities of the public favor equal educational opportunity for kids, lifelong educational opportunity for adults, health insurance and retirement security for all, clean elections, much stricter protection of our environment, more freedom for unions, much higher minimum wages, greater worker and environmental protections in international trade, an end to public subsidies for "low road" production, universal quality daycare, sharp constraints on sprawl, and reinvestment in the neglected infrastructure and housing stock of our nation's cities. What is striking about this list, of course, is that on most if not all these dimensions, public policy is moving in exactly the opposite direction, and has been for years.

You can even see voter discontent in the last election, where Nader/Gore got the biggest left-center share the Presidential vote since 1964, just become the boom of the Great Society. Even the white working class voters who finally gave Bush the election told exit pollsters they much preferred Gore's message, if not the messenger.

And where is Wisconsin in all this? Well, we voted for Nader/Gore at well above national levels, again suggest some mass base alternative to Bushism. And now stateside, as in Washington, we've got a very narrowly divided legislature, and an unelected chief executive who may also be overreaching his mandate. Like so many places, we've also got an accumulation of problems without much constructive debate about how to solve them -- and, I suspect, a citizenry getting more than a little tired of the bickering without debate.

But we've got some other things as well. Among them, however tattered of late, are our historic traditions of high voter turnout and other citizen organization (in everything from softball teams to labor unions), squeaky-clean government, and bold policy experiment. We're also still a small enough state to get around and talk to each other, which helps in organizing. And now that we've got the internet -- to which a majority of WI voters are now connected -- we can talk to each other online when we're not face to face. Finally, we're soon heading into the 16th year of a single party in the governor's office, which suggests to many that it's simply "time for a change."

And so we return to where we started a few weeks ago. What better place, just as a century ago, to ignite a new majority behind discussion of a genuinely progressive public policy program -- led by a new crop of civic leaders (from either party) willing to stand up for working families, the environment, kids, and a clean government? Offhand, I can't think of one.

Which brings us back at last to the hard question: "So, just what might that progressive program be?"

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see [www.cows.org](http://www.cows.org) and [www.sustainingwisconsin.org](http://www.sustainingwisconsin.org).

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.