

Bipartisan pursuit of happiness

Maximize freedoms, guarantee services using free-market methods.



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Until the Asian Buddhist nation of Bhutan made maximizing "gross national happiness" government policy, the pursuit of happiness was unique to American exceptionalism.

Our Declaration of Independence established it as the core value of American government.

However, other countries have overtaken us in what was so quintessentially American. The United States is not the happiest country in the world, not by a long shot. We rank 31st, according to a new Gallup Poll survey of over 55,000 people in 54 nations.

American conservatives are unhappy about what may be a permanent shift in the electorate toward liberal social policies and regulated capitalism in the age of Obama. But liberals are unhappy, too, more so than conservatives. Studies tell us that the angst liberals feel over inequality in American society prevents them from being happy in their own lives.

And, no longer do we have the healthiest or most-prosperous society, according to a study of 142 nations released this year by the Legatum Institute, a London think tank. Using 89 indicators of well-being, in eight categories, the United States ranked 12th, behind countries like Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. These countries also outrank us in the Gallup happiness survey.

Perhaps these lands provide some lessons for America. What most of these countries have in common is a broad social welfare system alongside substantial individual freedoms (most allow, for example, same-sex marriage and school choice) and opportunities to advance

and relatively low levels of social pathology and income inequality.

Is it any wonder they are happy? They have managed to combine the best aspect of American exceptionalism – our individual freedoms and entrepreneurial spirit, with the best aspect of effective democratic socialism – a robust public welfare, educational and health system. Studies tell us that when controlling for socioeconomic factors, the happiest societies are those with high levels of personal, political and economic freedom.

The lesson for conservatives is that "socialism," to the extent that means our citizens are guaranteed certain services and benefits, may actually make us happy. Indeed, Social Security and Medicare enjoy broad support and are here to stay. And, with last year's U.S. Supreme Court ruling, so is Obamacare, at least in some form.

But what is the most effective way to deliver guaranteed government benefits and services? That is the question for the new American century.

The happy democratic socialist countries are not anything like the nightmare of Britain in the 1970s, with its wholly ineffectual public and private sectors strangled by labor unions and oppressive regulation. Nor are they Greece today.

Rather, these governments provide quality public educational, health and welfare services, while keeping their debt levels low. They do this through public-private partnerships that capitalize on the flexibility, dynamism, creativity and competitive drive to quality of the free market while also providing more choices for their citizens. That is the lesson for liberals.

Conservatives should abandon fights to end abortion, deny marriage rights to gays and other morals-policing restrictions on freedom. They cannot win these battles, which will only cost them greater electoral de-

free market, rather than government, that drives the delivery of government-guaranteed services. Yes, the government should provide a free K-12 education for all citizens, but this can be best obtained through programs that maximize freedom by providing choice while using free-market competition to drive quality.

Yes, all citizens should have the guaranteed right to basic health care, but the optimal approach may be through a system that ensures choice and quality by keeping benefits under private insurance plans and that pays for those who cannot afford insurance from general revenue, without driving down job growth by penalizing employers.

Yes, a Social Security system should guarantee income for the elderly, but we can enhance investment returns, and, thereby, increase economic freedom, by permitting workers the option of designating a portion of the trust fund go into private investment such as an IRA. Although detractors point to stock market losses in the economic crash of 2008 as a reason not to do this, it is true that, over any 10-year period, the market has always outperformed the Social Security trust fund.

The American exceptionalism of the new century may be a government that maximizes individual social freedoms (the libertarian model) while providing guaranteed quality-of-life benefits and services to all (the Democratic model) delivered through the free market (the Republican model). America should be better at implementing this bipartisan vision than any country in the world. We still have the strongest and most-vibrant democracy, we still have a Constitution that is providential in ensuring freedom, and we still are the leader in economic innovation.