Bipartisan pursuit of happiness
Maximize freedoms, guarantee services using free-market methods.

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 by the 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.

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 abjecto
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