

Another View

Winning war on poverty demands radical centrism

The main casualty of Washington's endless partisan squabbling is a pragmatic approach to policy — meaning one that prefers results to noise. Ideological warriors of left and right say centrism of this kind is mere cover for cynical deal-making, splitting the difference and substituting platitudes for principles. They're wrong, and proof is at hand.

A working group convened by the (conservative) American Enterprise Institute and the (liberal) Brookings Institution has just produced an excellent report on poverty. Its recommendations don't take a weak-willed average. They combine the strongest parts of what Democrats and Republicans in Congress think on this issue.

Crucially, the group began by accepting three general truths that often derail debate before it begins: Able-bodied adults should work, two committed parents are better than one, and schools must do more to prepare students for careers. In each of those areas, the group managed to reach consensus on policy.

To encourage work, the group endorses some traditionally liberal ideas: modestly raising the minimum wage, increasing state payroll taxes to fund paid medical and family leave, offering child-support debt forgiveness for fathers who work, "banning the box" that is used to screen out job applicants with criminal records, and subsidizing wages for low-income workers and the hard-to-employ. Traditional conservative ideas also won support: creating stronger incentives for workers not to claim disability benefits, tying housing benefits and food stamps to work, and expanding "workfare" programs for those unable to find jobs.

Incidentally, one of these recommendations — increasing the value of the earned income tax credit for single adults — has been backed by both President Barack Obama and House Speaker Paul Ryan. That's great. The question is why the entire program hasn't been backed by both.

On education, the group's approach was no less catholic: It called for increasing and improving pre-K and early learning opportunities, as liberals want, and expanding school choice and teacher evaluations, as conservatives want. The group wants more focus on "social-emotional learning" — standards of behavior that are essential to workplace success. It calls for expanding career and technical-education opportunities by encouraging community colleges to offer more employment-oriented classes and businesses to offer more apprenticeships.

Even on policy toward the family, where disputes over values can get heated, the group was able to agree. It called for expanding programs that offer counseling and birth control to young men and women, child-rearing guidance to low-income parents, and employment opportunities and parenting support to fathers.

The group also backs a monumental endeavor: changing cultural norms around single parenthood, recognizing that children raised in single-parent families are far more likely to end up in poverty and prison than those raised in a home with married parents. Up to now, government efforts to promote marriage haven't amounted to much, but the group notes correctly that campaigns to change public opinion on smoking and other health issues have worked. Given the stakes for children, it's worth a try.

Taken in isolation, each of these policies is likely to arouse opposition from one party or the other. Bundled together, they form a package that both sides can support. This new report, excellent in its own right, makes an even larger point. The most effective way to make policy is not from the left or the right, but from the radical center.