

Politics and Values

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As the political campaign heats up, we're likely to hear more talk about values. Politicians love to raise the issue to show that they connect with people. So, we hear talk about American values, Montana values, family values, and so on.

I found it telling, however, that in a recent debate among the Democratic candidates, Senator Joe Lieberman chided his fellow democrats for not talking enough about values. What sorts of examples did he give? He spoke of religious faith, family issues, and personal responsibilities. Gay marriage is likely to be raised increasingly as an issue of values. The implication here is that values are the sorts of things we consider to be private and even highly personal.

What is often missing from political values discussions is the recognition that the public policies that candidates advocate for are ultimately values issues as well. For example, whether or not the government should provide universal access to health care is an issue of whether you believe that health care is a matter of charity or social justice. As a matter of charity, we would look to each other to find ways voluntarily to see to it that people are cared for in their illnesses. As a matter of justice, we would argue that health is central to well-being and therefore to our ability to have fair opportunities in society. A just society is therefore one that provides health care for all its members.

Likewise, whether we have higher tax rates for the wealthy than for lower income citizens is a matter of whether we believe that those who earn more have a greater obligation to contribute to the welfare of a society from which they have reaped great benefits. Others may argue that fairness dictates that all persons pay an *equal* percentage of their income in taxes.

The point is that a campaign is ultimately all about values—whether the candidates say so or not. It is about the values that we hold as Americans regarding the type of society in which we want to live. In fact, the personal concerns that are often raised as issues of values are those on which the government is traditionally supposed to stay neutral anyway.

Unfortunately, the broader values implied in the politicians' policies remain hidden in the rhetoric with which they try to win our votes. Increasingly the appeal is not about sacrifice on behalf of values. Rather, the political appeal goes to how public policy will serve your individual interests.

Thus, our taxes become understood as our burdens, rather than as our contribution to the common good through provision of services like education, fire and police protection, health care, and national defense. Our economy becomes a system for maximizing personal wealth, rather than as a means for providing a good life. Our foreign policy becomes an issue of keeping us safe, rather than promoting world peace.

Our education becomes a means to secure employment, rather than a means to promote good judgment and human well-being.

I recognize that political focus groups and campaign strategists have probably found it more effective to have candidates use buzzwords like “family values” and “Montana values,” without ever having candidates specify what that means exactly. Such phrases are designed to manipulate you into identifying with the candidate, rather than think about that for which the candidate stands. Thus, the picture on a Max Baucus re-election brochure touting his identification with Montana values was of him holding a rifle, rather than visiting people without health care.

But I believe there is room to believe that appeals to the values that unite us as Americans—as Montanans—will actually contribute to unifying us as citizens in service of the common good, rather than dividing us, as current political rhetoric tends to do. If we recognize that even our individual pursuits are dependent on the quality of society in which we live and work, we have an ethical responsibility to look beyond self-interest to consider the values within the public policies that affect each other. What kind of society, and world, we are to have in coming years, will depend on which values we support among those represented by the politicians now competing for our attention.

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