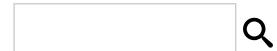


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## POLITICS

### Can progressives define what to be a 'progressive' actually means?



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For House Democrats, 2011 is likely to be the year of the progressives.

The midterm elections [largely purged the party of moderate Blue Dogs](#) ([./2010/11/03/conservative-democrat-blue-dog-caucus-cut-in-half/](#)), meaning that [for the first time](#) ([./2010/11/04/election-results-confirm-house-democratic-caucus-in-2011-will-be-smaller-but-more-liberal/](#)) the Congressional Progressive Caucus will represent more than forty percent of Democrats in the House. There's no question Democrats are now a progressive party. The only problem: nobody can agree on what the word "progressive" actually means.

And not for lack of trying. While many have tried to define the term — John Podesta of the Center for American Progress [wrote an entire book on the subject](#) (<http://www.amazon.com/Power-Progress-Americas-Progressives-Economy/dp/0307382559>) — no consensus has emerged. Call a dozen different self-described progressives, and you're likely to get as many different explanations of what a "progressive" is.

"I'm not sure what the definition is," conceded James Rucker, executive director of [Color of Change](http://colorofchange.org/about.html) (<http://colorofchange.org/about.html>). "I don't love the term." Rucker co-founded his organization with former White House "green jobs czar" Van Jones, so there isn't much question about where he stands politically. But the term still strikes him as opaque. "I think it's kind of the new 'liberal,'" he said.

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Ambiguous? That may be the point. "People use the word 'progressive' these days in part because the word liberal has been discredited by the right," said Roger Hickey, co-director of [Campaign for America's Future](http://www.ourfuture.org/) (<http://www.ourfuture.org/>), a Washington-based non-profit that touts itself as "the strategy center for the progressive movement."

Hickey, whose group hosts [one of the most prominent annual gatherings](http://www.ourfuture.org/now/archive/2010) (<http://www.ourfuture.org/now/archive/2010>) of liberal activists in the country, added that there is more to the term than just a rebranding effort. "'Progressive' connotes that element of economic populism and the little guy up against big corporate forces that liberalism does not," he explained.

"Progressive" may connote standing up for the little guy, but an awful lot of big guys have suddenly appropriated the term. When asked in [a debate during the 2008 presidential primaries](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2oOoCdFbIc) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2oOoCdFbIc>) if she considers herself a liberal, Hillary Clinton said she prefers "the word progressive" because liberalism "has been turned up on its head and made to seem as though it is a word that describes big government." In October, the President of the United States himself told a group of bloggers that he considers himself a progressive. The Center for American Progress, the progressive movement's brain trust in Washington, now has a budget of around \$25 million.

So what does it mean? Some progressives contend that progressivism is a distinct subset of modern liberalism. Others say that it's a set of beliefs separate and apart from liberalism – indeed, beyond the traditional "liberal versus conservative" divide.

If you're confused, you're not alone. Even within left-wing circles, the debate rages. MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell and Glenn Greenwald of [Salon got into a heated discussion last Friday](http://2010/11/05/is-msnbc Lawrence-o'donnell-a-socialist/) (<http://2010/11/05/is-msnbc Lawrence-o'donnell-a-socialist/>) after O'Donnell accused liberals of hiding behind the term. He went on to suggest that the re-emergence of the word "progressive" was nothing but a mere marketing ploy.

"Glenn, unlike you, I am not a progressive," O'Donnell said on the "Morning Joe" program. "I am not a liberal who is so afraid of the word that I had to change my name to progressive. Liberals amuse me. I am a socialist. I live to the extreme left, the extreme left of you mere liberals, okay?"



Former Clinton Chief of Staff John Podesta spent almost 250 pages working to explain the difference between liberals and progressives. In his 2004 book, *The Power of Progress*, Podesta argued that progressivism values pragmatism over ideology. "Progressivism...is less theoretically developed and more hands-on in its approach," Podesta wrote.

President Obama seemed to espouse this view in his 2009 inauguration speech when he said, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works." John Halpin, who directs research at the Center for American Progress, echoed Podesta's definition. "[P]rogressives believe the typical liberal-conservative fight over big government versus small government misses the point," Halpin wrote, also in 2004

(<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2004/01/b18188.html>). "We want to focus instead on finding the best solution – public or private – to a given problem, a proven approach that marries American pragmatism and our history of taking all challenges head on."

But despite the certainty of these claims, the fine points still seem lost on leaders within the movement.

"I consider myself a progressive, but I don't know what would distinguish a progressive from a liberal," James Rucker said.

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