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Americans Show They Have a 'Wise Heart'

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I do want to get back to our state's anti-environmental subsidies, and what might be done with that money instead. As Gunther Toody used to say on "Car 54 Where Are You?" (here showing my TV age), "I do I do I do!"

But first some breaking news that's too good to pass up.

You know how we've often argued in these pages that the American public, while endlessly misled by its leaders and subjected to a diet of "news" that's almost Orwellian in its corporate bias, is not nearly as stupid and reactionary as most political observers -- including, sadly, many progressives -- think? That there is indeed a "wise heart" in the American people, whose core values include fairness, responsibility and caring for others, not just liberty to do whatever the hell one wants? This is in fact a premise of the Sustaining Wisconsin effort. Given sensible democratic alternatives to the irresponsible and unfair "business as usual" rule by business and the rich, people almost always prefer them.

Now consider two just-released national polls, one by the New York Times/CBS News, the other by Democracy Corps, a group that uses former Clinton adviser Stan Greenberg as its pollster. Both polls were conducted just recently, and thus in the wake of the signing of President Bush's regressive tax bill and the further elaboration of his energy policy. Despite different question wordings, they make nearly identical findings about that wise heart.

For starters, Bush's approval ratings are plummeting. He's now back to where Bill Clinton was after the famously rocky first few months of his first term -- after the gays in the military dispute, Zoe Baird not paying taxes for her maid, health care reform already in a meltdown of confusion, and Clinton gone south already in his campaign promise to "invest in people," etc. -- even though Bush has faced no such controversy and is zooming right along enacting his campaign agenda. And this for the simple reason that most of the public don't like where he is zooming.

Voters were unimpressed, or worse, with the tax bill, which awarded about half its \$1.3 trillion in breaks to the 1 percent of Americans making more than \$375,000 a year -- apparently, Bush's notion of the "average American family" -- while delivering much less than claimed or nothing at all to 51 million current middle-class taxpayers. Most thought it would do little to nothing to achieve its alleged purpose of stimulating the economy. And overwhelming majorities questioned the wisdom of spending down the project surplus, much less spending it down at the expense of other priorities.

So, better than 60 percent would favor canceling the rate cut for the rich and spending the money instead on education, and 70 percent would have preferred spending it on a better prescription drug benefit for seniors; indeed, better than 70 percent favor Medicare paying for prescription drugs "even if it means an increase in premiums and program costs," and favor a patients bill of rights with similar costs by the same margin.

On the environment, again directly counter to Bush, nearly 60 percent thought we should "protect the environment even if it means paying higher taxes for electricity and gasoline"; nearly 70 percent favored "conservation" as an energy priority over increasing production of fossil fuels (28 percent); and better than 70 percent thought it "necessary to take immediate steps to counter the effects of global warming."

Nor has the class bias of Bush's policies been lost on the general public. A staggering 57 percent of them now flatly state that Bush's policies "favor the rich," as against only 10 percent who believe they favor the middle class (8 percent) or poor (2 percent). This has to be at or near some record in perceived class division. Certainly this observer's never seen anything close to it. Meanwhile, people are worried about retirement and upset about lousy jobs. The Times, surveying 20 years of its polling on the subject, reports that concern about the safety of Social Security is at its highest level ever. And some 80 percent feel its time for a substantial hike in the minimum wage (only 10 percent favor keeping it where it is). More generally, more Americans now think that under Bush things in the country "have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track" (48 percent) than think things are basically "going in the right direction" (41 percent), and already 40 percent think Bush can't be trusted to keep his word.

* Not good news for the Republicans, to be sure, but I'm less concerned with the political spin here than the values story. You just can't read these numbers and continue to claim that Americans aren't disturbed by the present course of government, or don't care about equity or the environment, or a host of social problems that affect the middle class and poor -- i.e., the vast majority of us -- much more than the rich. And you can't read them and dourly conclude the public is "reactionary" any more than you can that it doesn't care.

As the Times summarized: "a majority of Americans seem disenchanted by what they view as Mr. Bush's inattention to matters they care most about. And there is a substantial gap between his stand and theirs on many of those issues."

So, further proof if such were needed that "the people" aren't dead yet!

But enough good news. Next week, I promise, it's back to those subsidies you're now paying to kill the planet.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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