



**A Senate-Focused Progressive Advocacy Organization**

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## **PROSPECTUS**

Honorary Co-Chairs:

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***Third Way:***  
***Building a New Progressive Agenda for America***

With the nation divided down the middle, not only in electoral politics, but also in the ideological struggles that define the cultural, economic and security issues of our day, whichever side can capture the center and build an “idea majority” will dominate the debate. Working as an “idea broker” and as a strategic advocacy group focusing on the Senate, *Third Way* will help progressives retake the initiative and win the war of ideas.

The need for such a group is urgent. The right wing’s concerted attacks have distorted the debate, and progressives are now regarded by a significant percentage of Americans as wedded to old dogmas and out of touch with mainstream values. *Third Way* will help restore the progressive “brand” and move the debate forward, by finding innovative solutions to complex problems and promoting them with sensible messaging, all pegged to a return to the “progressive centrism” that defined the Clinton presidency. And progressive centrism is not about splitting the difference between right and left. Rather, it is a philosophy that favors government regulation to ensure fairness but opposes interference in private lives; it is a “third choice” that replaces the left’s defense of big government and the right’s frenzy to dismantle government.

*Third Way’s* approach will be unique: a multi-issue advocacy group focused exclusively on the Senate, the place where progressives can most reliably and efficiently have a real impact. Our mission will be to achieve this through three primary means:

- a) Creating a national “ideas network” that will seek out and develop the best new progressive centrist ideas – on subjects like the economy, education, retirement, national and homeland security, home ownership, health care, and poverty – and bringing them in usable form to the Senate;
- b) Working to shape public debate over hot-button social “wedge” issues like abortion and gay marriage in ways that protect progressive centrist values; and
- c) Combating the most corrosive right-wing ideas, legislation and nominees.

*Third Way* will be organized as a 501(c)(4) non-partisan, non-profit advocacy organization. This structure will give it the flexibility to work on legislation, communicate with key players in the national debate, and educate the public on its issues. Moreover, Senators can be directly involved with *Third Way*, both in helping with substantive direction and in raising the funds needed to complete its mission.

The founders of *Third Way* together founded and directed Americans for Gun Safety, which, soon after its launch in 2000, the *Washington Post* labeled the “dominant force” for gun safety. AGS has been featured on *60 Minutes* (twice), *Good Morning America*, *World News Tonight*, and in every major newspaper and news magazine. And in just four years, AGS has racked up a tremendous series of substantive successes – helping develop and pass gun legislation in both the House and Senate, helping pass ballot initiatives in Colorado and Oregon, and helping to entirely re-shape approach to the gun issue taken by many progressives both in the Senate and those who running for president in 2004.

The founders of *Third Way* will use the same model they used for AGS: seeking out progressive centrist solutions that every one can embrace, and using new ideas, fresh messaging, aggressive advocacy and extensive public education to make progress.

## *Third Way*

# **A Senate-Focused Progressive Advocacy Organization**

### **I. The Problem: Losing the War of Ideas in a Divided Nation**

#### **A. Why a Progressive “Idea Majority” Can Come Only from the Center**

America is a nation evenly divided. The presidential election of 2000 was closer than any in modern memory, the winner determined by fewer votes than normally decide a race for city alderman. The partisan divide in the House of Representatives is narrow, and the Senate hangs in a one-vote balance and has witnessed two changes of majority in the last three years.

These electoral results, along with polling that shows neck and neck races for president and the Senate in 2004, reflect two important concepts: First, that the deep ideological divide that separates a nearly even number of Americans is a long-term phenomenon, not a fluke of the 2000 presidential election. Those that place themselves on the left and the right of the ideological spectrum are as polarized as ever in American politics. Second, it is now clear that the remainder of citizens – those who place themselves in the political center – represent a plurality of the electorate. Recent national polling by the firm of Penn, Schoen & Berland shows that in nearly every region of the country, more people call themselves politically moderate than any other ideological category.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the dismaying trend of self-disenfranchisement continues, with millions of eligible voters kept from the polls either by disinterest or by alienation from the political process caused by the perceived political gridlock and ideological rigidity of the major parties.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly every political and social indicator reflects these divisions. For example, on several of the most divisive political issues, Americans are evenly split:

- *Abortion*: 48% are pro-choice, while 46% are pro-life.<sup>3</sup>
- *Gay Unions/Marriage*: Americans are evenly split on laws permitting civil unions for same-sex couples (49% favor; 48% oppose), though a majority oppose same-sex marriage (42-55%).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nationwide, 37% of voters describe their political views as moderate, compared to 20% who describe their views as liberal, and 34% who describe them as conservative.

- In the South, the ideological split is 36% moderate, 18% liberal, and 40% conservative.
- In the Midwest, the ideological split is 37% moderate, 24% liberal, and 29% conservative.
- In the Farm States, the ideological split is 42% moderate, 20% liberal, and 33% conservative.

(Source: Penn, Schoen & Berland, October 1-6, 2003, 802 interviews)

<sup>2</sup> The Federal Election Commission reports that only slightly over half of the electorate bothered to vote for president last time – 51.3% of eligible voters participated in the 2000 general election, down from 55.1% in 1992 (the last presidential election without an incumbent running). Mid-term congressional elections fare much worse – the 1998 mid-terms saw just 36.4% participation, down from 38.8% in 1994. See <http://www.fec.gov/elections.html>.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Penn, Schoen poll, only in the Northeast and Midwest are there pro-choice majorities. Voters are more pro-life in the South (48-48%), the Farm States (34-59%) and the West (43-52%).

- *Affirmative Action*: 47% think affirmative action programs designed to increase minority access to college are fair; 42% think they are unfair.<sup>5</sup>

The public also is evenly divided when it comes to some social indicators that can serve as proxies in political discourse:

- *Gun Ownership*: About half (47%) of the electorate lives with a firearm in their home.<sup>6</sup>
- *Religious Observance*: 49% say they attend religious services at least once a week.<sup>7</sup>

So the situation is clear – with an equal number of Americans in separate ideological camps, those in the middle will determine the nation’s course. Therefore, if progressives want to build a long-term “idea majority” – one that promotes progressive values and defeats destructive right-wing ideology – we must do so by seizing the center. And we can and must do so without compromising core progressive principles.

## **B. Why the Progressive “Brand” Must be Rescued**

In marketing a product or a service, any CEO or business school professor would agree that creating a durable and attractive brand is paramount. There is little difference in politics. It is difficult or impossible to market a political ideology with a brand that has become devalued or mistrusted. For example, contemporary politicians will contort themselves to avoid the “liberal” label, while 30 years ago, politicians were eager to be called liberals. The conservative label maintains a positive brand – witness the number of politicians of all stripes who call themselves fiscal “conservatives.” The progressive brand must be clearly and positively defined as seeking traditional ends and promoting common values by using innovative and centrist means.

The reasons for concern about the progressive label are legion, but the most important reason is this: over the last 30 years, the right-wing has created a breathtakingly effective set of mechanisms – think-tanks, advocacy groups, and, in particular, television, talk radio, newspaper, magazine and book publishing media empires – to spread lies and misinformation about progressive positions, progressive initiatives, progressive leaders and progressive values.

In addition, the right has been enormously skillful at – quite literally – defining the terms of the debate. They have managed to inject into political discourse the language that benefits their side and demonizes the progressive position. There are many examples: rather than the more accurate “estate tax” to describe the tax on the estates of wealthy decedents, conservatives coined the “death tax.” This underscores their distorted claim that the tax impacts anyone who dies, rather than almost exclusively the rich.

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<sup>4</sup> Gallup Poll, May 2004 (<http://www.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=11689>).

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003 News Interest Index Survey.

<sup>6</sup> Nationwide, 47% of voting households contain a firearm. (Penn, Schoen poll)

<sup>7</sup> Penn, Schoen & Berland poll.

Similar political points are scored by terms like “partial birth” abortion, rather than “late term.” Progressives have not effectively fought this labeling or countered with their own frames.

The result of this relentless, ruthless assault by the right has been devastating: on some of the most important political, social and cultural issues, progressives are no longer associated with new ideas or fresh thinking. Rather, progressives are seen as promoting old and misguided approaches to enduring problems, and, even worse, as being out of touch with mainstream values.

Some of the damage to the progressive brand is self-inflicted. On important social issues, some progressive groups have hewed to old thinking and have been defined by their opponents as out of touch with the values of a majority of the public. For example, consider the gun issue. A vast majority of Americans – nearly 90% in most public opinion polls – regard the Second Amendment to the Constitution as providing an individual right to own a gun.<sup>8</sup> The public has energetically exercised that right: 65 million Americans own guns. And yet, some progressive organizations still discuss the problem of gun violence in ways that suggest that lawful gun owners are to blame, denying the existence of gun rights.

The impact for progressive politicians and parties is not surprising: by a margin of 58-20%, Americans say Democrats are the party that wants to ban guns. And by a margin of 48-21% (59-20% among gun owners), they say Democrats don't respect gun owners and the values they hold.<sup>9</sup>

Progressives desperately need to revive their brand. At the core of this revival must be two initiatives: fighting back against the right-wing attack machine with fresh ideas that take a new look at old problems, and better messaging and marketing. We need to show the public that we are open to new approaches. What's more, we need to communicate those new approaches in ways designed to galvanize broad, mainstream support, not alienate all of those outside of our base. (To complete the gun example, progressives must communicate their strong support for Second Amendment rights coupled with effective approaches to keeping guns out of the hands of criminals.)

In short, progressives must come to terms with where the nation is ideologically. We must begin to take the initiative; we must seek to end the environment in which progressives are viewed with mistrust by substantial portions of the public. For right now, even at a time in which conservative ideology is more extreme, mean-spirited and misguided than ever, we find ourselves losing the war of ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Penn, Schoen and Berland, finding that 88% of respondents believe in a constitutional right to own a gun.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

## II. The Solution: Moving Forward in the Senate with “Progressive Centrism”

### A. “Progressive Centrism” and the Clinton Philosophy of Government

Running and governing from the center does not and should not mean abandoning progressive principles. To be sure, some so-called “centrists” are actually engaged in splitting the difference between traditional liberal and conservative ideas. For example, they might support a conservative goal like cutting taxes for the rich, only by an amount lower than that which the right-wing conservatives are seeking. But difference splitting is not the way that progressives can or should seek to retake ground in the war of ideas. Rather, they should run and govern as “progressive centrists.”

As authors John Judis and Ruy Teixeira<sup>10</sup> have explained, “progressive centrism” describes those who generally favor government regulation of business and oppose government interference in people’s private lives.<sup>11</sup> Those are classic progressive values. But these people also see themselves as centrists. “They favor government intervention, but not, except in very special circumstances, the government’s supplanting and replacing the operation of the market. They want government, in David Osborne’s phrase, ‘to steer, not to row.’”<sup>12</sup>

Progressive centrism is not simply an academic hobbyhorse. In July 1996, the Democratic Leadership Council/Progressive Policy Institute (DLC/PPI) issued *The New Progressive Declaration*. This Declaration set forth a governing philosophy that rests on three cornerstones – equality of opportunity, mutual responsibility, and self-government. The Declaration states:

Most [Americans] have ceased believing that the solutions to today’s problems are to be found in a larger, stronger central government – a course still supported by traditional liberals. Nor do they buy the conservative argument that the federal government is the source of our problems and that dismantling it will solve them. America needs a third choice that replaces the left’s reflexive defense of the bureaucratic status quo and counters the right’s destructive bid to simply dismantle the government.<sup>13</sup>

If this sounds familiar, it is. Issued at the end of his first term, this Declaration served as a restatement of President Bill Clinton’s governing philosophy. Later, as his Administration came to a close, President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton co-hosted a roundtable discussion at the White House with five world leaders to discuss how to develop “progressive governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” That conference

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<sup>10</sup> John B. Judis is a senior editor of *The New Republic*, and Ruy Teixeira is a senior fellow at the Century Foundation. Both have authored several books on politics.

<sup>11</sup> John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Id. at p. 5 (quoting David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government* (New York: Plume, 1993)).

<sup>13</sup> *The New Progressive Declaration* (July 10, 1996)

([http://www.ndol.org/ndol\\_ci.cfm?contentid=839&kaid=128&subid=174](http://www.ndol.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=839&kaid=128&subid=174)).

discussed in detail this approach, which, as the DLC describes it, “seeks to adapt enduring progressive values to the new challenges of the information age.”<sup>14</sup>

President Clinton’s progressive centrism sought traditional progressive ends with new means. For example, rather than proposing a large-scale new entitlement program to help the poor, Clinton offered the Earned Income Tax Credit – this was the means (a tax cut) that appealed to conservatives, with ends (fighting poverty) that satisfied progressive values.

## **B. The Means of Moving Our Agenda – The US Senate**

Now, with the Clinton Administration receding into history, it is simply imperative that progressives find a way to exercise some power to control the course of federal legislation and policymaking, as well as the ideas and messages that are debated before the public during campaigns. The leaders atop the Bush Administration and both houses of Congress are not merely conservative, they are true right-wing radicals, bent on leaving a permanent mark on the manner that America is governed. Their ultimate vision is to forever shrink the role that government can play, and they seek to do so by budgetary starvation (with huge tax cuts to the rich offset by deep cuts in domestic programs), regulatory rollback (relaxing almost every aspect of government oversight of American business), and judicial fiat (by seeding the federal bench with reactionary judges so extreme in their views as to be near parodies).

Of course, the immediate outlook for stemming the tide of reactionary federal policy is somewhat limited, as conservatives hold most of the levers of federal power. Progressives have no voice in the Bush Administration, and the House of Representative rules allow the majority party to utterly ignore the views, legislation and procedural requests of progressive members in that chamber. But the Senate, with its close partisan split and elaborate rules protecting the prerogatives of every member, provides progressives with the opportunity to play a meaningful role in setting the course of American governance.

To be sure, this situation will brighten if the nation rejects the conservative “idea majority” in future elections. But in a “50-50” country, control of the White House is likely to shift back and forth. Thus, the long-term outlook remains the same: the Senate, with its procedural protections, ideological balance, and role in the selection of judges and senior administration officials, will be the one of the only reliable grounds for progressive ideas to take root and will serve as a bulwark against the tide of conservatism.

If progressive Senators craft their legislation in a manner that seems sensible to Americans on both sides of the ideological divide, they can, even in an era of conservative dominance, enact legislation and make a positive mark on government. And by hewing to centrism and moderation, progressives can more effectively fight and defeat right-wing extremism.

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<sup>14</sup> See [http://www.ndol.org/ndol\\_ci.cfm?contentid=895&kaid=85&subid=109](http://www.ndol.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=895&kaid=85&subid=109).

This will not be easy. Despite the opportunities available there, the Senate remains a body currently controlled by the right and with too many of the old solutions the only ones available to progressive members. To succeed, there must be an aggressive force outside Congress that is focused on the Senate, coming up with new ideas, educating the public and generating support for these initiatives. That need is the impetus for a new organization – *Third Way*.

### **III. The Work: An “Idea Broker” for Progressive Centrism**

#### **A. The Mission of *Third Way***

There currently is a serious gap between the creation of new ideas and their actual use as legislation or as vehicles to educate and move the public to action. Many worthy ideas are published in elite magazines, academic journals and books. On the right, these ideas become the foundation of the conservative agenda, but on the left they gather dust, going nowhere legislatively or politically.

We aim to change that. *Third Way* will be an “idea broker,” seeking to put the philosophy of progressive centrism into action. We will find the best new ideas, shape them into usable form, and work to educate the public about these new initiatives.

Our mission will be to achieve an ideas majority through three primary means:

- a) Creating a national “ideas network” that will seek out and develop the best new progressive centrist ideas – on subjects like the economy, education, retirement, national and homeland security, home ownership, health care, and poverty – and bringing them in usable form to the Senate;
- b) Working to shape public debate over hot-button social “wedge” issues like abortion and gay marriage in ways that protect progressive centrist values; and
- c) Combating the most corrosive right-wing ideas, legislation and nominees.

*Third Way’s* approach will be unique: a multi-issue advocacy group focused exclusively on the Senate.

#### **B. The Activities of *Third Way***

*Third Way’s* activities will include:

1. *Finding and Promoting New and Better Ideas:* *Third Way* will develop an “ideas network” --- a virtual think tank of the best and most creative experts in academia, policy institutes and elsewhere, that will help provide concepts for a new progressive centrist legislative agenda for the Senate. This agenda will be

focused on answering the challenge on the most critical issues confronting America and American families:

- growing the economy,
- improving education,
- reforming the tax code,
- securing retirement,
- repairing our national and homeland security structures,
- making college affordable,
- increasing home ownership opportunities,
- reducing health care costs,
- relieving poverty,
- and fixing Social Security (among other key issues).

2. *Lobbying for Enactment of New Ideas: Third Way* will not be simply an idea factory or another think-tank. Indeed, we also will spend time on the nuts and bolts of enacting these initiatives, helping move our policy ideas through the Senate. We will engage in some traditional lobbying, seeking out co-sponsors and support for the legislation in other offices. In addition, we will do grassroots lobbying, through public education projects. This work will help explain to the public the importance of our legislation (or the dire need to stop right-wing initiatives or nominees that we might be fighting). Finally, we will help move (or stop) legislation with “grasstops” work, finding crucial supporters and community leaders who can weigh in with key Senators in support for (or opposition to) legislation that we are working to pass (or defeat).
3. *Handling Cultural Hot Buttons*: The first and one of the most important tasks for *Third Way* will be to help progressive centrists regain the upper hand on the social “wedge” issues like abortion, guns, religion, affirmative action, gay marriage, etc. As detailed in Section VI below, the founders of *Third Way* did this with considerable success on the gun issue as the leaders of the progressive centrist group Americans for Gun Safety. We will seek to bring the same thinking - seeking out pragmatic new approaches to difficult issues (approaches that preserve progressive values while attracting public support) - to the array of social issues that currently divide large segments of the public.

Public opinion polling shows that these are enormously important, often decisive, issues in American political discourse. One recent poll showed that issues like religion, guns, civil rights and gay marriage are having a huge impact on the voting preferences in a number of crucial states.<sup>15</sup>

As noted above, the public is evenly divided on many of these issues. Still, there is no question that messaging and position can make an enormous difference. For

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<sup>15</sup> Ayers, McHenry and Associates, National Public Opinion poll, May 3-6, 2004 (see <http://www.ayresmchenry.com/default.asp?pt=newsdescr&RI=480>).

example, even many pro-choice Americans favor (or do not oppose) a ban on late-term abortions, yet many in the pro-choice advocacy world have made that a litmus test for their supporters. And while some who favor legal fairness for gay and lesbian couples do not support gay marriage, the marriage issue has recently swamped efforts to secure civil unions and other legal protections.

*Third Way* will work with progressive centrists to reframe and reposition wedge/cultural issues to show Americans that progressives stand behind the values of liberty and freedom contained in the Constitution. This work will include drafting and regularly updating a “playbook” on these issues, with new ideas, messaging tips, talking points, and other tools on handling these issues.

4. *Arming Ourselves and Others with Research:* *Third Way* will be conducting two types of research: substantive studies into the problems we are seeking to solve, and public opinion research to help frame the problem and the solution most effectively. First, our Idea Network will provide extensive research assistance to help flesh out the proposals, frame the arguments, and respond to questions and concerns.

Second, we will conduct both qualitative and quantitative research (focus groups and opinion surveys) with Penn, Schoen & Berland, the premier progressive centrist polling firm. This research will help us develop strategies to advance our ideas and our brand, and allow us to most effectively combat and debunk right-wing ideas, messages and attacks.

5. *Framing/Writing Assistance:* Often the most crucial part of moving an agenda is the rhetoric. Indeed, on many issues progressives have lost or are losing the war of ideas because they use rhetoric that is alienating to significant segments of the public. *Third Way* therefore will produce model policy pronouncements and speeches, to ensure that both the substance and the messaging accurately and persuasively reflect our principles.
6. *Drafting Regular Talking Points:* In an age of the 24-hour news cycle and constant cable news, talk radio and other buzzing about political issues, it is important to ensure that progressive centrists are armed with accurate and fresh talking points. So in addition to helping with major framing speeches and policy papers, *Third Way* will providing regular talking points with the progressive centrist perspective on key issues, promoting our proposals and attacking the right-wing agenda.
7. *Taking the Message to the Free Airwaves:* *Third Way* will do more than just provide materials for others to use – we will ourselves go on cable and talk radio to defend, promote and advance our ideas, our legislation and our point of view.

## V. The Track Record: *Third Way's* Strategic Model in Action

### A. Americans For Gun Safety and the Gun Debate

The strategic model for *Third Way* has been proven to be effective in one of the toughest testing grounds in American politics: the gun debate. As the founders of *Third Way* showed with their success at Americans for Gun Safety (AGS) (another 501(c)(4)), an aggressive and strategic approach to progressive centrism advocacy can work, even in the most highly charged area of American politics.

The gun issue not only is vitally important politically – many commentators, including Judis and Teixeira, attribute Gore's loss to guns<sup>16</sup> – it is a serious national concern: there are more than 533,000 annual gun crimes, 29,000 gun-related deaths, and 75,000 injuries in the United States.<sup>17</sup> What's more, our federal gun laws are filled with gaping loopholes and are poorly enforced.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the urgency, the issue had, at the time of the AGS founding in 2000, become stuck in a seemingly un-navigable morass, dominated by groups on both sides that take hard-line, uncompromising positions. The gun control groups<sup>19</sup> insist that there is no right to own a gun, a position that 86% of Americans do not share; the NRA and its allies<sup>20</sup> have fought any attempt to impose reasonable restrictions on gun sales or ownership, a position that nearly 80% of Americans reject, including most gun owners. The result was gridlock – no gun measure had passed either the House or Senate since in mid-1990s (and then only the Senate by one vote) and the issue had become deeply partisan: progressives were pointing to Gore's loss and urging their colleagues to steer clear of the issue, and conservatives were heeding the NRA's call for no new gun laws. Leaders on both sides were predicting that the gun issue was “dead”.<sup>21</sup>

Into that breach came AGS. The AGS approach is to seek out progressive centrist solutions that everyone, including gun owners, can embrace. In particular, AGS is the

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<sup>16</sup> *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (see <http://webapp.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate10.html>). Numbers are rounded and reflect the 1999 statistics, the latest available. The annual average of 1981-1998 statistics was much higher: 35,700 gun deaths (15,300 murders; 18,900 suicides; 1,500 accidents), and there is evidence from 2002 that the gun homicide rate is rising for the first time in 10 years.

<sup>18</sup> To wit: It is legal in most states for private individuals to sell firearms without background checks at gun shows and through other outlets; the names of 35 million prohibited buyers are missing from the background check system; federal investigators are permitted only one unannounced visit to a gun store each year; only about 2% of federal gun crimes are ever prosecuted, and 20 of the 22 federal gun laws are enforced so rarely that they might as well not exist.

<sup>19</sup> The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence United with the Million Mom March, The Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence, The Violence Policy Center, and 29 state-based gun violence prevention organizations.

<sup>20</sup> Gun Owners of America, the Citizens' Committee to Keep and Bear Arms, and an array of smaller groups.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Susan Page, “Democrats back off on firearms: The party is quest as the new administration shifts from Clinton policies. Some believe the issue gave the GOP the ammo it needed to propel Bush into the White House,” *USA Today* (Aug. 13, 2001, p.A1).

first progressive advocacy group to unambiguously support Second Amendment gun rights. AGS couples that position with a call for closing loopholes and toughening enforcement to keep guns out of the hands of criminals, noting that all rights come with serious responsibilities.

This approach has worked, for two reasons: First, it resonates with Americans – the AGS “rights and responsibilities” view is shared by the vast majority of respondents in every major survey. Second, AGS has provided innovative, workable new proposals, based on real data and designed to appeal both to gun rights supporters and traditional gun control advocates.

## **B. What AGS Achieved**

Using new ideas, fresh messaging, aggressive advocacy and extensive public education, AGS has, in just four years, fundamentally changed the gun debate in America. Here is the proof:

### **1. AGS Became a Leader on the Gun Issue**

By staking out the previously vacant center of the gun debate and bringing new approaches and serious research to their work, AGS quickly became the go-to group on guns for both the media and elected officials. Indeed, after just 18 months in existence, the *Washington Post* had labeled AGS the “dominant force” for gun safety.<sup>22</sup> This analysis seems correct – consider the objective evidence from a variety of sources:

#### **The Media**

- AGS’s work has twice been the basis of stories on *60 Minutes*.
- In addition to the *Washington Post*, the group has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *USA News*, *Fortune*, and on *Good Morning America*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *CNN*, *Fox Newschannel*, *MSNBC* and *NPR*, along with countless regional and local television, radio and newspaper reports.
- Virtually no national gun policy stories are reported without input from AGS.

#### **Political Leaders**

- AGS wrote or directly inspired the gun policy positions for every major candidate for president in 2004 (except President Bush).
- AGS has provided the gun policy position for nearly every progressive and centrist Senator.
- In October 2003, AGS co-hosted with the DLC a well-attended and influential conference for progressive centrist elected officials entitled “God, Guns and Guts,” at which AGS laid out in detail how political leaders should handle the gun issue.

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<sup>22</sup> Juliet Eilperin, “Billionaire’s Gun Control Role Is Debated,” *The Washington Post* (Apr. 29, 2001).

### **Gun Debate Adversaries**

- In perhaps the greatest sign of its influence, the NRA labeled AGS “potentially the most lethal of all gun control groups.”<sup>23</sup>

## **2. AGS Has Achieved Substantive Results**

In addition to its role as a debate leader, the AGS “rights and responsibilities” approach brought real, substantial victories. Among other things, AGS:

- Handed a stunning defeat to the NRA in March 2004, when the Senate passed AGS-backed legislation that would close the gun show loophole and renew the ban on assault weapons. Passage of these amendments killed an NRA bill to shield the gun industry from lawsuits. This was the biggest legislative setback for the NRA in 30 years. (See Section C below.)
- Helped pass state ballot initiatives in Colorado and Oregon that closed the gun show loophole in those states.
- Found high-profile bipartisan sponsors (Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman, among others) for new approaches to legislation dealing with the problems of the gun show loophole, the faulty background check system, and weak federal enforcement of gun laws.
- Generated national coverage, including two *New York Times* stories, attacking the Bush Administration/John Ashcroft for their failure to enforce the existing gun laws.
- With Senator Clinton as chair, launched a 45 state program to teach abused women how to work with the courts to take away the guns of their abusers (a program profiled in *People* magazine, with a PSA featuring the female stars of ABC's “The Practice” running on *Lifetime* television).
- Passed through the House, with unanimous bipartisan support, a bill to fix the background check system.
- Built a coalition of over 300 sheriffs and police chiefs to defend Senators who support sensible gun laws in key states.
- Trained candidates on how to properly handle the gun issue.

### **C. How AGS Did It – A Look at Gun Shows**

To assess the political model that *Third Way* will use, it is worth examining how AGS managed one of its most remarkable achievements – winning a March 2004 vote in the Senate to close the gun show loophole.

When Congress passed the Brady Act in 1993, it left open a significant loophole – individuals without federal firearms licenses could sell guns at gun shows without performing a background check on the buyer. The NRA has estimated there are

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<sup>23</sup>*Shooting Straight: Telling the Truth About Guns in America*, Wayne LaPierre (CEO of the NRA) and James Jay Baker (Former Exec Dir of the NRA Institute for Legislative Action), Regnery Publishing (2002), p. 126.

“hundreds of thousands” of such sales each year,<sup>24</sup> and the loophole has become a serious problem – federal law enforcement has reported that gun shows are the second leading source of guns recovered in firearms trafficking investigations.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of the Columbine massacre in 1999, the Senate passed a bill to close the loophole, but, after enormous pressure from the NRA to kill it, the bill failed in the House. In 2000, AGS led the successful fight for passage of ballot initiatives in Colorado and Oregon to close the loophole in those states, but the group soon realized that a state-by-state approach was too slow – federal action was crucial.

With NRA allies dominant in Congress, AGS recognized that the old approach – the 1999 bill – was certain to fail, and that any measure would be doomed without bipartisan support. AGS then worked with Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Joe Lieberman (D-CT) to craft a new bill, one that met the objections of thoughtful gun owners, protected gun show sellers and buyers from unwarranted intrusion, but still firmly closed the dangerous loophole.<sup>26</sup>

But AGS did more than just offer up a new idea – it did what it took to keep momentum alive for an idea that few in Congress wanted to address. After 9/11, AGS unearthed four incredible examples of foreign terrorists (with links to al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and the IRA) buying guns at gun shows by exploiting the loophole. And when the bill still failed to move in the last Congress, AGS shifted gears again, this time focusing on attaching the measure to a “must pass” piece of gun legislation being promoted by the conservative leaders in Congress – the gun industry immunity bill. Legislating in a nearly evenly split Senate requires compromise, and that would be it – the gun industry would get immunity, and the loophole would be closed (along with an additional AGS-backed measure, to extend the assault weapons ban).

AGS then put together a substantial coalition of partners – the NAACP, the National Education Association, a number of police groups, religious organizations, and others – to mobilize their members to lobby their Senators on the gun show bill. AGS also contacted individual police chiefs and sheriffs in key states and asked them to sign a letter to their Senators urging passage of the measure, and AGS traveled to meet with newspaper editorial boards, urging them to weigh-in (many did). Finally, AGS engaged in traditional lobbying, visiting Senate office, and providing the proof they needed that the loophole is a serious problem and the AGS-backed bill is a solution that also protects gun rights.

Despite ferocious attacks from the NRA (both publicly and in private lobbying of members), the AGS strategy worked. When the Senate voted on March 2 on an amendment to the NRA’s immunity bill to close the loophole, it passed by a seven-vote

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<sup>24</sup> James Jay Baker, Executive Director, National Rifle Association ILA, Letter to Congress (Apr. 23, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, *Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws Against Firearms Traffickers* (June 2000).

<sup>26</sup> For more on this see [http://americansforgunsafety.com/the\\_issues\\_bill.asp](http://americansforgunsafety.com/the_issues_bill.asp)

margin, astounding virtually all political commentators. Many Senators, including the bill's sponsors, credit the strategic vision, broad array of tools employed, and dogged determination of AGS in the passage of a progressive measure so bitterly opposed by the dominant group on the right. Indeed, there is simply no question that the AGS work did two things – it galvanized progressive centrist support for the amendment, and it helped move a number of Senators to defy the NRA, some for the first time.

The ability of AGS to move the gun debate to the center provides evidence that the approach envisioned for *Third Way* can and does work. If AGS could achieve such success in one of the most highly charged debates in American political life, then it is clear that *Third Way* can succeed with this model on a host of other issue.

#### **D. *Third Way* Founders**

- **Jonathan Cowan:** In 2000, Mr. Cowan founded Americans for Gun Safety, and serves as President of AGS. AGS has become, in the words of the *Washington Post*, the "dominant" group on the gun safety side of the gun debate - carving out a centrist, bipartisan approach on a highly polarized issue. Before founding AGS, Mr. Cowan was a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics, teaching a course on youth and political advocacy. In the late 1990s, Mr. Cowan served as Chief of Staff of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, managing a federal agency of 9,000 employees with a \$27 billion annual budget. Previously, he was Senior Advisor to the HUD Secretary and Acting Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs. In 1992, he co-founded Lead...or Leave, which became the nation's leading Generation X advocacy group. He was featured on the cover of *U.S. News & World Report*, in *Time*, on *Nightline*, *60 Minutes*, the *Today Show* and in many other media outlet as a generational spokesperson. He also co-authored Revolution X, and has published op-eds in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.
- **Jim Kessler:** Mr. Kessler served as the Director of Policy and Research at AGS for nearly four years. He joined AGS after a 12-year career on Capitol Hill, where, after serving as Legislative Director for Representative Chet Atkins and Rep./Senator Charles Schumer, he became the leading congressional expert on gun policy. As the top policy aide to Rep./Sen. Schumer, Mr. Kessler drafted dozens of newsworthy reports, including those on the GOP Contract on America, Medicare cuts to local hospitals, college tuition increases, energy shortages, and mortgage discrimination in New York. Mr. Kessler also has extensive campaign experience, including service as policy director for Charles Schumer's successful Senate bid in 1998.
- **Matt Bennett:** Mr. Bennett served for three years as Director of Communications and Public Affairs at AGS. He took a leave from AGS in 2004 to serve as Director of Communications for the Clark for President Campaign. Mr. Bennett came to AGS after four years in the White House, where he served as Deputy Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs, where he was the leading

White House liaison to governors. Before that, Mr. Bennett served as Trip Director and Assistant Counsel to the Vice President, where he managed Vice President Gore's traveling staff. Mr. Bennett has served as a staff member in the Dukakis, Clinton '92 and Clinton '96 campaigns. He is an attorney and was a litigation associate for the Washington office of King & Spalding from 1993-1997.

- **Nancy Hale:** Ms. Hale served with the other founders of *Third Way* as the Managing Director of the Tides/Tsunami Fund, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit legislative advocacy organization that handles all of the legal, financial, human resources and other administrative support services for AGS. Ms. Hale, who left Tsunami in 2003 but continued her work with AGS as a Principal in Groundwork Strategies, has twenty years of experience in the non-profit sector, advising progressive social welfare and advocacy organizations. Ms. Hale was instrumental in formulating the mission and strategy of AGS and scores of other groups and in helping to develop their business plans, infrastructure and fundraising operations. Prior to joining Tides/Tsunami, Ms. Hale has served as a director and development consultant to a number of independent nonprofit organizations.