Democrats say they represent values of the working class and “underclass.” Republicans suggest that they safeguard “American values.” In both cases we ask, “What are those values?” What values do we as Democrats or Republicans believe our respective parties ought to portray as their own? What values ought to inspire the rhetoric, policy proposals and platforms of the parties?

Our *Discourse* allows us opportunity to put our heads together to *begin to determine* two sets of values we conclude represent the ideals of the two major parties in American politics whose rhetoric, policy orientations and political philosophies dominate the American political sphere.

The logic underscoring our focus on values is based upon two ideas.

**1. Values are central to authenticity – to “authentic leadership,” and the electorate is crying out for authentic leadership.**

Polling data suggest that much of the appeal of candidate Trump was indeed his apparent authenticity. Those who voted for him frequently referred to his being “real,” or “genuine,” or “authentic,” – the opposite of being “politically correct.” And now, in the immediate aftermath of his election, the same voters – including even those who observe a litany of errors of the Administration’s own making – continue to assert their support for President Trump, most often, by suggesting that he is, at least “trying to do the right thing,” or that he is “doing what he said he would do.” In other words, supporters cite his authenticity as the reason for their adherence.

In leadership classes I provide to MBA candidates and executive program participants an opportunity for (i.e. require) each aspiring leader to attempt to understand and articulate her or his values – for three reasons especially germane to leaders operating within complex environments.

* Knowing one’s own values allows a leader to act with integrity in the face of changing and unpredictable events. The consistency itself tends to cultivate loyalty and confidence – confidence in the organization and in its leaders and confidence within the organization about the leader.
* Knowing one’s own values, and acting in accord of them, allows the leader to live with herself or himself when making a controversial decision, even if a decision made ultimately proves unsuccessful. Internal, cognitive conflict is minimized, freeing the leader to focus on emerging opportunities and challenges.
* Knowing one’s own values and then comparing them to an organization’s values, helps a prospective leader recognize whether she or he is compatible with that organization.

The third reason listed requires that the prospective leader know not only her or his values, but the values of the entity she or he is contemplating joining. The *Discourse* is, in essence, taking a crack at doing exactly that. *The Discourse is attempting to discern the normative values (i.e. what the values ought to be) of the two major entities of the American political system – the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.*

**2. The electorate votes for those it trusts; the wise trust the trustworthy; trustworthiness pre-requires explicit, aligned values (i.e. “benevolence”).**

Our January *Discourse for Democracy*, we investigated the idea of “trust.” We noted that many candidates urge voters to trust them. And in American society generally, citizens accept the need to build trust as an article of faith. The more trust we have, the thinking goes, the better off we are.

We examined trust by discussing a trust model that I proposed (below). The model suggests that trust is not inherently desirable. I drove home the point, by borrowing the story of Bernie Madoff, who made-off with the money of those who gave him their trust (and savings). We mentioned other examples, and concluded that blind trust, whether in a business partner or a political leader, is not desirable. Bluntly stated, building trust for the sake of having more trust is a stupid goal.

We recognized also that trust is something that people or organizations bestow upon others; it is not something a person or organization can rightfully demand. The trust model implies a relationship between a (prospective) trustee and a (prospective) “trustor,” whereby the prospective trustee must present reason for the prospective trustor to bestow her or his trust. The reason for a (prospective) trustor to trust is, in summary, found in the (prospective) trustee’s trustworthiness.

And finally, we recognized – although we didn’t require much discussion – that having the trust of constituents would be helpful to a candidate or to an organization to get things done. Having the trust of others is empowering. Having the trust of many bestowed upon a political entity would likely aid that entity in achieving political success.

The discussion helped us to acknowledge (and probably reach consensus on) three ideas.

* We ought not desire to trust more per se.
* We ought to direct our trust intelligently, to those whom are trustworthy.
* Political entities, cannot demand trust, but they can and ought to act to build and maintain trustworthiness and ensure that their trustworthiness is known to all possible constituents or, in other words, prospective trustors.

The *Discourse* spent a significant amount of time of the January 2017 discussing ways political entities can make evident two of the three pre-requirements of trust: ability and integrity. In this March 2017 *Discourse*, we concentrate on a third pre-requirement, “benevolence.”[[1]](#footnote-1) *What ought be the values of the major political parties?*

**Bounding the activity of this *Discourse* discussion session.**

In the second paragraph of this short introductory paper, I suggested that we will put our heads together to *“begin to determine”*… Given the constraints of our time together, we might not reach complete agreement or even general consensus as to what either party’s values are.

To explore values thoroughly, we would need to enlist armies of people to canvas the public since the political parties are supposed to reflect the wishes of the people. But even large scale polls might not ensure accuracy, however, if only because, we the people rarely think in abstract terms, and the very notion of “values” is an abstraction. The answers we the people would provide might be subject to hypothetical bias or otherwise simply not altogether well thought through.

Maybe we might want to enlist the help of historians who can remind us of the founders’ intent. Doing so might jog our minds. Or if we really are a nation under God, then we might want to think about God’s intent. Then again, we might have to ask, which god? And yet still again, we might need to recollect that there are people who do not believe in God or a god and so we might have to think about how we could ensure their values are reflected in the list(s) we construct.

The point is that we should not presume to know the normative values of either political party. We can merely build a list – to include perhaps a half-dozen value or so – that we think might serve as a good starting point. If we are confident in the lists of values we build for a given political party, all before the end of the *Discourse’*s discussion session, we might attempt to prioritize the values.

Prioritization necessarily means that we would have to discern the relationships of a multitude of values that might apply to either or both political parties. We would want to consider which values are the “core” values. We would subsequently determine the values that are supporting values, or values that essentially “define” the higher order, core values. This method mimics ideas of decision analysis, where we would build a values hierarchy such as that which is depicted below.

Notes re: The Values Tree:

* The highest level of the tree is the most abstract, the most vague. In the political context, that highest value could be, for example, “Democratic Representation” or “The People’s Concerns” or some other value that reflects the very purpose for a political entity’s existence.
* The second level, represents slightly less abstract values, but ones that might need more definition – before they could reasonably be thought to be operationalized by policies or programs. These values might be thought of as the “core values” – the highest level of values that start to provide meaning to the absolute highest level singular value.
* The level below the core values are the values that provide definition to the core values. If, for example, one of the core values for a political party were “health,” there would likely be a need to define what “health” means by articulating the defining values. Several types of health might identify “health” – all of which could reasonably be thought of as values: “physical health,” “mental health,” “financial health,” “political health,” etc.
* “Operationalizing Actions” are activities executable in the workplace through practiced processes, policies, regulations, statutes, procedures, etc. Operationalizing Actions might include tax reform or healthcare reform proposals that a party or an administration believes will enhance financial health and physical health. Each “lowest level value” in a values string is achievable by one or more “operationalizing actions.” Each “operationalizing action” contributes to realizing at least one intermediate level value and thus, the ultimate value at the very top of the hierarchy.

1. Here, the term benevolence means “aligned values,” i.e. when the values of one entity are similar or the same as the values of another. Benevolence in this context does not denote a proclivity towards acts of kindness. The author does recognize that acts of kindness, implied by the typical interpretation of the word “benevolence,” however, are generally reflective of aligned values. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)