

The Failure of Conservative Politics to Foster Wellbeing

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For the 15 years I have published in *Explore* I have tried to make the point that social values determine social outcomes, based on objective quantifiable social outcome data. And that on the basis of that data, it is clear that when forming social policy the best option is always the one that is the most compassionate, life-affirming and fostering of wellbeing. That option proves always easier to implement than the alternatives: more productive, more efficient, nicer to live under, longer enduring, and much much cheaper.¹

I know this is going to be controversial, but I want to talk about a second point this data teaches, a trend that is shaping the United States in many ways. It's components are frequently discussed, but the over-arching trend is rarely mentioned. I am speaking here of the objectively verified failure of conservative social policies to foster wellbeing. Where conservative social policies prevail, Americans, men, women, children, regardless of race or gender, are less healthy and have shorter more miserable lives than people in other developed nations. So it may be controversial but I think this is a topic with which those involved with healthcare and social wellbeing need to be conversant. Let us start with the meta-view.

We live in such a parlous time for America that the media, consumed by the saga of Donald Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic, barely even discusses climate change, let along the touchy issues covered in this essay. But, acknowledged or not these major trends are shaping our future. One is the state of wellbeing in the United States. The 2020 Social Progress Index of Social Progress Imperative could not make it any clearer. In a study of 163 countries assessed, the index found that worldwide only three countries had a population that was worse off then when the Index began its research in 2011. The three countries? The United States, Brazil and Hungary. And the declines in Brazil and Hungary were smaller than America's.²

This 30,000 foot profile, however, does not really reveal the important truth: the failure of conservative politics to foster wellbeing. So let's look at that from several perspectives. I am going to use pre-2020 data, because the 2020 in most instances is too distorted to be representative.

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LIFESPAN:

Not only are Americans more miserable, we are living shorter lives. As Rochelle Sharpe wrote in *Truthout*, “One of the most disturbing trends in American public health is that women's life expectancy is shrinking in many parts of the U.S. Women's longevity took an unprecedented nosedive during the past decade, researchers recently discovered, with their life expectancy tumbling or stagnating in one of every five counties in the country.” And these counties are not random. That is a very important part of the story, because there is a commonality across the data. People who live in Red Value states governed by Republicans stand out, for negative reasons.

A multi-university research team headed by Jennifer Karas Montez found:

1. Changes in US state policies since the 1970s, particularly after 2010, have played an important role in the stagnation and recent decline in US life expectancy.
2. Some US state policies appear to be key levers for improving life expectancy, such as policies on tobacco, labor, immigration, civil rights, and the environment.
3. US life expectancy, it is estimated, would be 2.8 years longer among women and 2.1 years longer among men if all US states enjoyed the health advantages of states with more liberal policies, which would put US life expectancy on par with other high-income countries.³

Peter Montague of *Truthout*, reported: “In 2017, life expectancy (at birth) in West Virginia was 74.6 years, but in Hawaii, it was 81.6 years — a full 7-year difference. If West Virginia were a nation, it would rank #93 in the world for life expectancy, below Morocco, Tunisia and Honduras — all nations with many fewer resources than the United States. If Hawaii were a nation, it would rank #23 in the world, with life expectancy within 0.7 years of countries with the highest longevity such as Canada, Iceland and Sweden.”⁴

MATERNAL MORTALITY

Having started with the end of life, let us go back to the beginning of life starting with the mother. The United States, as with most of its health outcomes, does very poorly. There are 195 nations recognized in the world. Of that number 193 belong to the United Nations, (The Holy See and the State of Palestine are the two exceptions as non-members observer states.)⁵ According to the World Health Organization, of those 193 countries the US ranks 55th, just behind Russia and just ahead of Ukraine. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Vital Statistics System the 2018 maternal mortality rate was 17.4 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

That's 658 women who died in pregnancy, giving birth, or within 42 days of giving birth. You would be safer delivering in Russia (17 per 100,000).⁶

Once again, as bad as the overall national standing is, that is only part of the story.

Here is a list of the top 10 states with the highest maternal mortality rates (although some of these states may break from their historic political orientation in the highly unusual election that just took place in November). It is very revealing list.

WORST MATERNAL DEATHS PER 100,000 LIVE BIRTHS (2011-2015) BY STATE

STATE		HISTORICAL POLITICAL ORIENTATION
Georgia	46.2	Red State
Louisiana	44.8	Red State
Indiana	41.4	Red State
New Jersey	38.1	Blue State
Arkansas	34.8	Red State
Texas	34.2	Red State
Missouri	32.6	Red State
South Dakota	28.0	Red State
South Carolina	26.5	Red State
New Mexico	25.6	Blue State

INFANT MORTALITY

And if that is what happens to mothers, what happens to their new born infants? Once again it is very revealing.

WORST INFANT DEATHS PER 100,000 LIVE BIRTHS (2011-2015) BY STATE

STATE		HISTORICAL POLITICAL ORIENTATION
Mississippi	8.7	Red State
Arkansas	8.1	Red State
Oklahoma	7.8	Red State
South Dakota	7.8	Red State
Alabama	7.4	Red State
Tennessee	7.3	Red State
Indiana	7.2	Red State

Georgia	7.2	Red State
Ohio	7.2	Red State
Louisiana	7.1	Red State
North Carolina	7	Red State
West Virginia	7	Red State
Michigan	6.8	Blue State
Kentucky	6.6	Blue State

HEALTHCARE:

Americans spend more on healthcare than any developed nation in the world. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the average American spends more than \$11,000 per year on personal healthcare.⁷ According to the Commonwealth Fund, “In 2018, the U.S. spent 16.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on health care, nearly twice as much as the average Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Nation. The second-highest ranking country, Switzerland, spent 12.2 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, New Zealand and Australia devote only 9.3 percent, approximately half as much as the U.S. does.”⁸

It is such a large sum that a 2018 study found, “that 66.5 percent of all bankruptcies were tied to medical issues — either because of high costs for care or time out of work. An estimated 530,000 families turn to bankruptcy each year because of medical issues and bills, the research found.”⁹ It is an appalling reality. And what do we get for that? According to the World Health Organization in 2020, the U.S. has the 30th best healthcare.¹⁰ And yet as bad as that story is, when you go a little deeper, something very revealing comes out. Considering the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia here are the 10 best systems:¹¹

STATE	STATE RANKING	
Massachusetts	1	Blue State
Minnesota	2	Blue State
Rhode Island	3	Blue State
District of Columbia	4	Blue District
North Dakota	5	Red State
Vermont	6	Blue State
Colorado	7	Blue State
Iowa	8	Swing State
Hawaii	9	Blue State
South Dakota	10	Red State

And here are the worst:¹²

Oklahoma	40	Red State
Arizona	41	Red State
Alaska	42	Red State
Texas	43	Red State
South Carolina	44	Red State
Tennessee	45	Red State
Arkansas	46	Red State
Mississippi	47	Red State
North Carolina	48	Red State
Alabama	49	Red State
Louisiana	50	Red State
Georgia	51	Red State

EDUCATION, INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT:

Assuming child and mother survive birth, what kind of educational opportunities is that child likely to get, and what kind of financial future can they look forward to? Here are the 10 best educated states.¹³

STATE

Massachusetts

Blue States

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 45.0% (2019); 44.5% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$65,373 (2nd highest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$52,470

Unemployment: 2.9% (2019); 3.4% (2018)

Colorado

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 42.7% (2019); 41.7% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$58,229 (12th highest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$46,887

Unemployment: 2.8% (2019); 3.2% (2018)

New Jersey

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 41.2% (2019); 40.8% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$67,038 (the highest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$51,786

Unemployment: 3.6% (2019); 4.1% (2018)

Maryland

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 40.9% (2019); 40.8% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$65,193 (3rd highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$52,011
Unemployment: 3.6% (2019); 3.9% (2018)

Connecticut

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 39.8% (2019); 39.6% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$64,143 (5th highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$50,788
Unemployment: 3.7% (2019); 4.1% (2018)

Virginia

Swing State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 39.6% (2019); 39.3% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$61,529 (8th highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$46,873
Unemployment: 2.8% (2019); 3.0% (2018)

Vermont

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 38.7% (2019); 38.7% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$47,170 (7th lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$41,496
Unemployment: 2.4% (2019); 2.5% (2018)

New York

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 37.8% (2019); 37.2% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$62,699 (6th highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$47,645
Unemployment: 4.0% (2019); 4.1% (2018)

New Hampshire

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 37.6% (2019); 36.8% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$60,544 (9th highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$47,392
Unemployment: 2.5% (2019); 2.6% (2018)

Minnesota

Blue State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 37.3% (2019); 36.7% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$60,316 (11th highest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$47,050
Unemployment: 3.2% (2019); 2.9% (2018)

Now the 10 least educated states¹⁴

West Virginia

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 21.1% (2019); 21.3% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$45,304 (4th lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$35,440

Unemployment: 4.9% (2019); 5.2% (2018)

Mississippi

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 22.3% (2019); 23.2% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$44,148 (2nd lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$32,574

Unemployment: 5.4% (2019); 4.8% (2018)

Arkansas

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 23.3% (2019); 23.3% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$46,964 (6th lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$35,215

Unemployment: 3.5% (2019); 3.6% (2018)

Louisiana

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 25.0% (2019); 24.3% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$50,699 (17th lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$37,599

Unemployment: 4.8% (2019); 4.9% (2018)

Kentucky

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 25.1% (2019); 24.8% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$50,711 (18th lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$37,674

Unemployment: 4.3% (2019); 4.3% (2018)

Nevada

Swing State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 25.7% (2019); 24.9% (2018)

Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: /strong> \$50,293 (13th lowest)

Median earnings for all workers: \$39,505

Unemployment: 3.9% (2019); 4.4% (2018)

Oklahoma

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 26.2% (2019); 25.6% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: \$47,828 (11th lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$38,088
Unemployment: 3.3% (2019); 3.4% (2018)

Alabama

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 26.3% (2019); 25.5% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: \$50,643 (16th lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$37,217
Unemployment: 3.0% (2019); 3.9% (2018)

Indiana

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 26.9% (2019); 27.1% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: \$50,630 (14th lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$39,833
Unemployment: 3.3% (2019); 3.5% (2018)

New Mexico

Swing State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 27.7% (2019); 27.7% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: \$45,109 (3rd lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$35,284
Unemployment: 4.9% (2019); 4.9% (2018)

Idaho

Red State

Adults with at least a bachelor's degree: 28.7% (2019); 27.7% (2018)
Median earnings for bachelor's degree holders: \$46,364 (5th lowest)
Median earnings for all workers: \$36,445
Unemployment: 2.9% (2019); 2.9% (2018)

Now let's consider a selection of life realities. I could pick from dozens of social outcomes but let these stand for the entirety, because they are all similar. So: obesity, unmarried births, and divorce.

OBESITY:

Obesity is a growing problem throughout the world and, once again, the United States is a world leader of developed nations. In 2016 the U.S. ranked 12th, with 36.2% of the population being obese.¹⁵ But, as with all the other social outcome measures, as bad as the national rate is it is the state level of obesity that reveals the real problem.

Here are the 10 states with the highest rates of obesity in 2020:¹⁶

STATE	PERCENT OF POPULATION OBESE	
West Virginia	38.10%	Red State
Mississippi	37.30%	Red State
Oklahoma	36.50%	Red State
Iowa	36.40%	Red State
Alabama	36.30%	Red State
Louisiana	36.20%	Red State
Arkansas	35.00%	Red State
Kentucky	34.30%	Red State
Alaska	34.20%	Red State
South Carolina	34.10%	Red State

And here are the states with the lowest obesity rates:

The ten states with the lowest obesity rates are:¹⁷

STATE	PERCENT OF POPULATION OBESE	
Colorado	23%	Blue State
District of Columbia	24.7%	Blue State
Hawaii	24.9%	Blue State
New Jersey	25.7%	Blue State
Massachusetts	25.7%	Blue State
California	25.8%	Blue State
Montana	26.9%	Blue State
Connecticut	27.4%	Blue State
Vermont	27.5%	Blue State
New York	27.6%	Blue State

UNMARRIED BIRTHS:

Conservative politics, both voters and the politicians they elect, are obsessed with sex: premarital sex, same sex sex, gender transition sex, out of wedlock births, and on and on. So it should follow that those societies controlled by conservative values would engage in only heterosexual married sex, and there should be no out of wedlock births. Here are the 10 states with the highest out-of-wedlock birth rates:¹⁸

STATE	% BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED MOTHERS
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Arkansas	45.4	Red State
West Virginia	45.7	Red State
South Carolina	46.2	Red State
Florida	46.4	Swing State
Alabama	46.8	Red State
Delaware	47	Blue State
Nevada	48.3	Swing State
New Mexico	51.2	Swing State
Louisiana	53.3	Red State
Mississippi	54.1	Red State

And here are the states with the lowest percentage of births to unwed mothers:¹⁹

STATE	% BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED MOTHERS	
Utah	19.2	Red State
Colorado	23.2	Blue State
Idaho	27	Red State
Washington	31.1	Blue State
Minnesota	31.9	Blue State
North Dakota	31.9	Red State
Massachusetts	32.5	Blue State
Nebraska	32.5	Red State
New Hampshire	32.9	Blue State
Wyoming	33.3	Red State

And how well do marriages last in Red Value and Blue Value states? Here are the 10 states with the highest divorce rate in 2018:²⁰

STATE	% OF DIVORCED WOMEN PER 1,000 MARRIED INDIVIDUALS RATE BY STATE	
Arkansas	13	Red State
South Dakota	12.1	Red State
Oklahoma	10.8	Red State
Kentucky	10.5	Red State
Oregon	10.1	Blue State
Indiana	9.9	Swing State
Alabama	9.8	Red State

West Virginia	9.8	Red State
Nevada	9.6	Swing State
Washington	9.6	Blue State

Here are the 10 states with the lowest divorce rate in 2018:²¹

STATE % OF DIVORCED WOMEN PER 1,000 MARRIED INDIVIDUALS
RATE BY STATE

North Dakota	4.7	Red State
Rhode Island	4.9	Blue State
New York	5.7	Blue State
New Jersey	5.7	Blue State
Wisconsin	6.2	Swing State
Vermont	6.3	Blue State
Pennsylvania	6.5	Swing State
New Mexico	6.6	Swing State
Illinois	6.6	Blue State
Hawaii	6.7	Blue State
California	6.7	Blue State

I could go on and on listing things like literacy, or child care, or elder care, but it becomes repetitious, because all of these social outcome measures say the same thing. Now you may think that I am arguing a politically partisan position. I am not. I am looking at a series of facts. As I said at the beginning, what I care about is the fostering of wellbeing at every level from the individual, to the family, community, state, nation, and the planet itself. And what these facts tell me is not just that conservative politicians create poor social policies that do not foster wellbeing, although that is certainly true. It also speaks to the cultures of these states because politics are an expression of culture, and citizens elect those conservative politicians.

And it suggests that we should be focusing much more attention on why certain people consistently choose politicians who create and impose social policies that degrade their lives and wellbeing.

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