Since the 1970s American national politics have moved decisively to the right. Yet polls indicate that there has been no corresponding shift in the values of most Americans. What explains this disparity? In this book I argue that part of the problem is that people working for social justice have largely—but unnecessarily—ceded the moral high ground to the right. Too often progressive activists present their proposals in a cool and technical tone, avoid articulating broad social visions, and fail to make links between politics and the cultural traditions to which Americans are attached. In short, the compassionate and even egalitarian values found at the grass roots, and the public-spirited energy seen every day in local communities around the country, have not been adequately connected to our national political debates. To address these failings, we need to pay greater attention to the cultural dimension of political activity and to “styles” of political discourse.

While the style of progressive politics is often anemic, there are efforts currently underway to construct a more culturally robust politics, and these offer hope for the future. In this book, I examine the differing styles of engagement adopted by grassroots activists, looking closely at two major movements—faith-based community organizing and human rights—and more briefly at others. On the basis of the evidence from such groups and an analysis of the arguments made by contemporary social critics, I argue that the potential gains from adopting a more “expansive” mode of politics are greater, and the risks less, than one might imagine.

The work of social movements is the focus of this book. These movements represent an ideal of active citizenship that is an enduring strength of American politics. Furthermore, while political developments
in Washington and the state capitals are important, activist movements are equally essential—particularly at times when only a narrow range of options is being articulated in central political venues.

This book is intended not only for people with a personal concern for the direction of American politics but also for a partly overlapping group: students and scholars who wish to understand better the cultural dimension of American politics. I argue that modes of public discourse and styles of political engagement are a factor in public life independent of the content of the political agendas people pursue. Through case studies of the cultural work of grassroots social change organizations, I examine in empirical detail the range of choices progressive activists are currently making about modes of discourse and styles of engagement, the reasons for those choices, and the consequences of making them. This is an especially important task because the cultural dimension of progressive political work (except for identity politics) has been almost ignored. These case studies show both the difficulties progressives sometimes have in adopting more expansive political styles and also the ways in which justice and rights activists do construct more expansive modes of politics. The empirical data, and the way of conceptualizing politics developed in this book, shed light on contemporary debates in social criticism concerning individualism, civil society, and the role of cultural forces such as religion in American politics. And finally, these data and concepts contribute to the social-scientific study of political culture, social movements, and religion.

I am persuaded that the political tendencies recently dominant in Washington do not represent the best or only possibilities for our nation. America has always possessed an energetic voluntary sector and a rich and varied set of cultural traditions, religious and secular, many of them with progressive political potentials. We can draw in the future as in the past on these resources, articulating values and ideas that can serve to guide and motivate the work of citizen activists striving for social justice and human rights in the new millennium.