



The **Opportunity** Agenda

*Building the National Will  
to Expand Opportunity in America*

# *Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse*

An Analysis of Media Content  
and Public Opinion

# Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Eleni Delimpaltadaki, Public Opinion and Media Research Coordinator, and edited by Juhu Thukral, Director of Law and Advocacy, at The Opportunity Agenda. Special thanks to those who contributed to the analysis, editing, and design of the report, including Alan Jenkins, Julie Rowe, Janet Dewart Bell, and Christopher Moore, with Paulette J. Robinson. Additional thanks go to Andrea Goezinne and Jill Mizell for contributing to the collection and analysis of data.

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## About The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2004 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda synthesizes and translates research on barriers to opportunity and corresponding solutions; uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion; and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people's lives. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to our website at [www.opportunityagenda.org](http://www.opportunityagenda.org).

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# Executive Summary

This report analyzes mainstream media coverage and a large body of public opinion research regarding America's economic recovery and the ways in which it is affecting different communities and groups within our society. The report is intended to identify trends in reporting and beliefs, with the aim of contributing to a more robust, more accurate, and more sophisticated public discourse on this subject.

The report consists of two parts: an analysis of media content, in the mainstream press and, to a lesser extent, television news; and a meta-analysis of existing public opinion research on the economy, recovery, equality, disparities, and the role of government. Both parts concentrate on the period between October 2008 and May 2010.

## Media research

We analyzed the content of 17 mainstream newspapers, including the largest national newspapers in the country and five regional ones; *Newsweek* magazine; and a limited number of transcripts of news shows on the ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC networks.

The media content analysis explored key elements of coverage of the recovery and equity issues, including:

1. Framing of stories
2. Most prevalent storylines
3. Individuals and types of people most frequently quoted
4. Dominant narratives

## Major findings:

- ▶ Overall, the coverage of the recovery is heavily focused on the actions of the Obama administration, Congress, and local and state governments.
- ▶ Mainstream print media and television network news focus on a relatively small number of topics: stimulus spending, jobs, and the partisan debate over these topics.
- ▶ In terms of individuals quoted or featured, Democratic elected officials, President Obama, and his administration predominate the general discussion about the recovery, immediately followed by Republican elected officials. Regarding issues of equity in the print world, Democrats and social justice advocates head the parade of spokespeople. Overall, coverage reflects the voices and ideas of institutional actions more so than those of everyday Americans, who are the primary victims of the downturn.
- ▶ Middle-class and low-income people, often portrayed by the media as victims of the economic recovery, receive more media attention than any other segment of the public in coverage about the recovery. African Americans are next. In equity-related coverage, low-income people and communities of color, as a whole, garner the most media coverage. We encountered very little coverage of women as a group.
- ▶ Stories of individuals are more frequent, but not of significant volume, in news dealing directly with equity issues in the press. Individuals are most frequently featured in network TV news stories where they are offered a platform to speak about their experiences during the crisis.
- ▶ Disparities, communities in need, and the idea of a recovery that offers equal levels of opportunity to all are low on the media agenda, making up only a small share of the total news content.

- ▶ Stories about the economic recovery as well as equity issues are predominantly framed thematically: they focus on the big picture—providing statistics, expert analysis, or other information—to help the public view the event in a broader context. These frames encourage the idea that the issue at hand is a systemic one that demands the government’s attention, a move that benefits those advocating for public solutions.
- ▶ The same is true of framing the problems of vulnerable, that is, overlooked, communities, which has shifted—at least for now—from single episodic to thematic; from single, event-driven coverage with little or no context about underlying causes or solutions to a conversation about systemic challenges.
- ▶ The dominant media narrative largely accepts and assumes the government’s role and responsibility in the economic recovery. Most articles have a pro-government intervention angle, at least with respect to the fact that the *Recovery Act* is necessary; no such consensus exists, however, on how or where to invest the funds it calls for in getting the economy back on track.
- ▶ Explicit coverage about the role of government in the economy, in the lives of ordinary Americans, and in the overall structure of the country’s economic system is limited to a few opinion articles.
- ▶ There is little coverage of abuse and fraud allegations regarding the *Recovery Act* in the articles we examined. Similarly, transparency does not drive coverage in any significant way.
- ▶ The quality of existing or new jobs—living wages, benefits, and fair labor protections—receives very little coverage.
- ▶ Similarly, the issue of underemployment—where a worker is only part-time or working far below his or her qualifications and desire—does not receive significant coverage.

## Public opinion research

The public opinion review is based on a synthesis and meta-analysis of attitudinal tracking surveys. Also considered were recent public opinion studies by nationally known and respected research organizations, media outlets, and issue groups on the following topics:

- ▶ The public’s priorities and opinions about the economy, personal finances, economic recovery policies, jobs, and the American Dream
- ▶ The role of government, corporations, and individuals in the economy
- ▶ Equity issues—attitudes about economic disparities, discrimination, and economic mobility—as well as attitudes of specific demographic groups—women, Latinos, African Americans, other racial and ethnic groups (where available), and low-income people
- ▶ Americans’ aspirations, values, and goals for the economy

### Major findings:

- ▶ Americans are deeply concerned about the economy. Despite recent trends indicating that the U.S. economy is improving, the public’s attitude has yet to catch up. Most Americans think that our economy is not in good shape, believing that it will take a long time before it significantly improves (43 percent say the economy is in poor shape and 48 percent that it is in fair shape; “Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press/*National Journal*, June 3–6, 2010). Nonetheless, according to public polls, “most individuals believe they personally got themselves through the recession rather than lawmakers”<sup>1</sup> and are skeptical that the stimulus plan passed last year has really made much difference in putting us on the road to recovery; 38 percent think the stimulus is already helping the economy improve or it will help

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1 “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” 2009.

it improve in the future while 42 percent say that it will not help improve the economy at all (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll, May 2010).

- ▶ Nearly seven out of 10 Americans believe the economy can be influenced by government action (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010); moreover, a considerable majority thinks that the government has a role in confronting today’s economic problems (62 percent; “Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll,” January 2010). Support for government intervention fluctuates, however. Generally there is greater support for the government’s regulating major financial institutions (59 percent; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009) than for greater control of the overall economy.
- ▶ The idea that the “government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people” is more popular with blacks and Hispanics (65 percent and 63 percent, respectively; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009). One out of two whites disagrees saying that “government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.”
- ▶ Americans question the government’s efficiency rather than its intentions. Most Americans (72 percent) feel that government has the nation’s best interests in mind all the time (13 percent) or some of the time (59 percent), while a considerable 27 percent think it never has their interests in mind. Similarly, more people think that the government runs its programs inefficiently (50 percent) rather than having the wrong priorities (38 percent; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2010).
- ▶ Coupled with this mind-set is Americans’ elevation of personal responsibility. A majority thinks that economic mobility is mostly dependent on personal attributes such as hard work (71 percent) rather than external conditions (20 percent). On the other hand, when thinking about downward economic mobility or poverty, Americans are split on whether outside circumstances or lack of effort is responsible (48 to 48 percent; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009).
- ▶ While antigovernment sentiment can have its own ideological or partisan basis,<sup>2</sup> the public is discontented with many of the country’s other major institutions, including large corporations (64 percent) and banks and other financial institutions (69 percent; “Pew Research Center for the People & the Press,” March 2010; “Polling and Message Research Landscape Scan,” by Jenifer Fernandez Ancona for the New Majority Campaign Coalition, February 2010).
- ▶ Americans are more likely to think of the government as a “last resort” when someone or something fails—the poor, the unemployed, or our financial system—rather than to think that it can play an important role in their pursuit of happiness. They question whether the government can have a positive impact on their lives (43 percent see a negative impact; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009” March 2010). Most people also assume that new businesses and industries of the kind that drive economic growth are the products of creative and energetic individuals or companies, with little contribution from the government or policy (“Promoting Broad Prosperity,” October 2009).
- ▶ Americans also view the government as a “watchdog.” For example, the one role for government that garners support from most Americans—83 percent—is that of monitoring issues such as financial fraud, environmental pollution, and workplace safety all the time (32 percent) or some of the time (51 percent; “Allstate/*National Journal*,” January 2010).
- ▶ Eight out of 10 Americans strongly believe that equal opportunities regardless of race and freedom from discrimination are human rights that all are entitled to by virtue of their humanity (“Human Rights in the United States,” The Opportunity Agenda/Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2007).

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2 “The People and Their Government,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, March 2010.

- ▶ A majority of Americans sees or experiences incidents of bias in their immediate communities and recognizes that economic, gender-, and race-based inequalities exist. They want the government to tackle them, although government spending toward this goal is not popular. Seventy-four percent agree on the existence of gender inequalities and 64 percent on the existence of racial disparities (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010), and 62 percent agree that income differences are too large (“General Social Survey,” 2008). African Americans, Hispanics, and women are much more likely than other groups to perceive inequalities in society or in their economic well-being.<sup>3</sup> However, they are ambivalent as to whether these inequalities are embedded in our current laws and policies or are caused by “bad” individuals.
- ▶ Thinking of the road ahead, Americans have high aspirations for the economy and for their lives. The themes of financial security, stability, accountability, opportunity, and individual responsibility prevail in the public agenda for the economy and as priorities for themselves individually as well. The concept of the common good is key to most Americans who give it a higher priority than greed or self-interest (86 percent place common good above greed and 87 percent prefer common good over a “culture where everyone is in it for themselves”; “Community Voices on the Economy,” 2010).

## Recommendations

While the public mood is understandably gloomy, our research suggests a number of ways in which journalists, advocates, policymakers, and others can promote a better informed public discourse that builds support for greater and more equal opportunity in our economy.

### *Media Strategies*

Changes in media outreach and the strategic use of repetition can create a more informed and accurate public debate that moves toward positive solutions:

- ▶ Encourage a less contentious and partisan discourse about the stimulus, which combats efforts to increase Americans’ trust in government and embrace of a larger role of government in the economy.
- ▶ Within the context of the recovery process and economic inequalities, tell more stories about the direct impact of the recession on the lives of ordinary Americans. Without threatening the dominant thematic frame that benefits the discussion of social issues, drive home the issue of the economic recovery and the need for equality for people in terms that resonate better than figures and economic jargon.
- ▶ Minimize historical appeals and colorblind arguments; avoid reducing all opposition to racism.

### Narrative, Messaging, and Storytelling:

- ▶ Lead with values—opportunity, security, community. A large body of research shows that starting conversations with shared values instead of dry facts or argumentative rhetoric is more effective in building support for social justice. In this context, the most resonant values are **opportunity** (everyone deserves a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential), **security** (everyone should have the tools and resources to provide for themselves and their families), and **community** (that we are all in this together and share responsibility for each other and for the common good). Notions of equity, experience shows, are best expressed in terms of opportunity for all.

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3 Multiple Sources; see “Equity Issues” beginning on page 39.

- ▶ Restore the American Dream, which most Americans want and feel they may be able to reach in their lifetimes. This important overarching theme can connect a range of issues, facts, and objectives. Americans are concerned that the American Dream, as they understand it, is in danger of slipping away.
- ▶ Promote an economy that works for all. Jobs and the economy are the top priority for Americans and news outlets. Showing how our issues and proposals are tied to this question and will assist the economy as a whole can increase interest, newsworthiness, and support.
- ▶ Highlight solutions. Americans are in a problem-solving mood, despite their pessimism about the role of government. Highlighting solutions that work instead of critiques and abstractions and that have strong levels of support is likely to be more effective:
  - ✓ Equal pay and benefits for men and women.
  - ✓ More jobs with decent wages and benefits for low-income families.
  - ✓ More affordable education and training opportunities.
- ▶ Acknowledge progress while highlighting challenges and solutions. Acknowledging the nation's progress in securing equal opportunity is important in getting persuadable audiences to listen to our subsequent points. That acknowledgment should be linked to specific evidence of barriers to equal opportunity and ways of overcoming them. Where possible, emphasize the causes of unequal opportunity instead of just disparate outcomes.
- ▶ Talk about the greater, more essential "role" that government can play in the economy; however, avoid talking about the government taking more "control" over it, which scores low with Americans.
- ▶ Refrain from emphasizing the role of government as a "safety net." That narrative perpetuates Americans' dominant perception of the government as a "last resort" rather than one that can contribute to one's pursuit of happiness.
- ▶ Avoid talking about "welfare" as one of the positive roles that government plays in our society. Support for welfare programs is low. If advocates have to talk about it, use alternative language, such as "assistance to the poor." Years of polling by the General Social Survey show higher support for assistance to the poor than support for spending on welfare.
- ▶ Talk about the quality of jobs saved or created by the stimulus, which is rarely discussed in mainstream media. Rather, the focus is on the numerical success of job creation programs and the levels of job supply. Leverage the focus on jobs to talk about quality beyond quantity. Good jobs that offer a living wage and provide occupational safety and health are necessary for a healthy, productive, and competitive society.
- ▶ Make government's positive role visible. The structural role that government plays in the economy—in terms of rules, such as consumer protection; initiatives like FDIC insurance or Social Security; enforcement, such as fraud prosecutions; and innovations such as the Internet—is largely invisible in today's reporting and in the public's mind. Stories that illustrate that role in concrete terms can create a more balanced understanding of the public role.
- ▶ Document extensively the unequal barriers to economic opportunity. While there is some reporting on racial, ethnic, and gender disparities, there is a need for more, particularly stories that document and explain the unequal barriers facing different groups and communities. For instance, mapping geographical access to jobs, transportation, or other opportunities experienced by different communities can illustrate systemic and unequal obstacles that have systemic solutions.
- ▶ Highlight success stories. Many audiences are concerned about overall joblessness and even unequal opportunity, but see no actionable solutions. Pitching or covering stories about



initiatives that are working on the ground can both inform and inspire problem-solving in other areas.

- ▶ Show the connections. Americans increasingly understand intuitively that we are all in this economic crisis together. But there is a need to highlight the considerable evidence and examples that document it. Research linking inequality to a weaker overall economy, for example, or inner-city initiatives that have revitalized an entire metropolitan area help to communicate this important reality.
- ▶ Convey the reality of the mixed-message stimulus media coverage, which has tended to depict either significant success or abject failure of the *Recovery Act*. At the same time, more stories are needed that illustrate the more complex reality: that the stimulus has been critical to averting wholesale economic disaster, but has failed to reach many groups of Americans fully or equally.
- ▶ Connect human stories to systemic causes and solutions. While the thematic framing of the economy has been helpful in directing attention to systemic causes and solutions, print coverage has often lacked a human face and, therefore, may have failed to convey the urgency that Americans are feeling. Include people who are affected by the economy in ways that inform the systemic story; for example, participants in job training programs or those passed over for them, workers sidelined by public transportation cuts, or teachers whose jobs were saved by recovery efforts.

# Introduction

As our nation struggles to recover from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, media coverage, public perception, and the relationship between them strongly influence public policy and its impact on Americans' daily lives. The perceived effectiveness of the federal stimulus package—the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*, for example—can have a far greater impact on the subsequent policy debate than does the consensus of economists or the tracking of actual job creation. And the level and framing of reporting on issues of economic inequality, for instance, helps to determine the extent to which that issue becomes a political and policy priority, especially in an election year.

In order to understand those trends, and their implications for ongoing policy debates, The Opportunity Agenda undertook this study, *Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse*. By analyzing the content of media reporting and recurrent themes across a large body of existing public opinion research, we seek to highlight the ways in which key news media are interpreting the current economic moment and the ways in which different segments of the American public understand it.

We chose to examine public discourse on both the economic recovery as a whole and its disparate barriers facing different groups of Americans because they are complementary dimensions of a single notion: the American Dream of greater and more equal opportunity for all. Because that national value is broadly shared and has been an explicit goal of many federal economic recovery efforts, we analyze the extent and ways in which it is reflected in the national conversation.

This report is intended to inform journalists about reporting trends and areas in which greater or more accurate reporting is needed. It strives to inform advocates of job creation and equal opportunity about challenges, openings, and strategies for mobilizing public will. And it aims to inform policymakers about public priorities as well as places where greater information, transparency, or political leadership are needed. Moreover, scholars, researchers, and activists are likely to take a keen interest in our findings and recommendations.

# Methodology

## Media Content Analysis

The news content analysis of the *Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Media and the Public Mind* report is based on an analysis of content in 17 mainstream newspapers, including the largest national newspapers in the country, and five regional ones; Newsweek magazine; and a limited number of transcripts of news and programs on the ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC television networks. The timeframe of coverage was from October 2008 through May 2010.

Our analysis was conducted in two parts. We analyzed coverage of the economic recovery in general and coverage specific to recovery efforts in relation to inequality and economically vulnerable populations of Americans.

The first part was made up of a sample of 100 articles, of which 65 were appropriate for analysis, about the economic recovery generally and the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*. This sample is referred to in the report as the **overall sample**. To generate a pool of relevant articles, we searched for news on the Nexis database using words and phrases such as “economic stimulus,” “stimulus bill,” “stimulus package,” “*Recovery Act*,” and the “*American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*.”

The second part of the study was based on a sample of 150 stories, of which 60 were appropriate for analysis, about the impact of recovery policies on economic groups. This sample is referred to as the **equity sample**. To identify these stories, we performed a separate search on the Nexis database using a broad set of search terms: “stimulus package,” “women,” “gender,” “low income,” “middle class,” “African American,” “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “American Indian,” “Native American,” “Asian American,” “discrimination,” “disparity,” “opportunity,” “(un)employment,” “poverty,” “jobs creation,” and similar phrases.

Finally, the samples were drawn applying a random sequence generator on the entirety of both groups of articles and transcripts generated on Nexis to ensure a representative sample.

A list of the press and network TV outlets included in the analysis follows.

National Newspapers	Circulation
<i>Atlanta Journal and Constitution</i>	196,200
<i>Boston Globe</i>	232,432
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	268,803
<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	174,876
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	616,606
<i>New York Times</i>	951,063
<i>Newsweek</i>	1,972,219
<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	356,189
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	241,330
<i>USA Today</i>	1,826,622
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	2,092,523
<i>Washington Post</i>	578,482

Regional Newspapers	Circulation
<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	185,222
<i>Clarion Ledger</i> (Jackson, MS)	65,300
<i>Columbus Dispatch</i> (Columbus, OH)	170,179
<i>Denver Post</i> (Denver, CO)	333,675
<i>Times-Picayune</i> (New Orleans, LA)	157,068

Network Television	
<b>ABC News</b>	Good Morning America, This Week
<b>CBS News</b>	60 Minutes, The Early Show
<b>CNN</b>	American Morning, CNN Newsroom, The Situation Room, Anderson Cooper 360
<b>NBC News</b>	Today Show, Meet the Press
<b>Fox News</b>	Fox 9 News, Fox News Sunday, America's Newsroom, Your World with Neil Cavuto, Special Report with Bret Baier, Fox Special Report with Brit Hume, O'Reilly Factor, Hannity, On the Record with Greta Van Susteren, Red Eye w/ Greg Gutfeld

## Public opinion research

This public opinion section is based on a synthesis and meta-analysis of attitudinal tracking surveys and recent public opinion studies by nationally known and reputable research organizations, media outlets, and issue groups. Most of the data examined are publicly available; some come from proprietary research, which was made available to The Opportunity Agenda for the purposes of this report.

We reviewed original data from more than 50 public opinion studies, the vast majority of which were surveys, which address topics relevant to the economy, the economic recovery, government, and equity issues. At least 30 of these studies informed the final analysis and our understanding of Americans' views on relevant issues, as well as those segments of the public who would be most receptive to communications about an equitable recovery and opportunity for all in America. We looked at attitudinal surveys that have tracked opinion changes and trends in the United States over two years and, in a few cases, over the past few decades. The greatest majority of information, however, was provided by surveys conducted within the past two years, up to June 2010.

The studies referenced in this report meet The Opportunity Agenda's standards and best practices for quality and objective public opinion research, including appropriate sample size, a methodologically sound design and research instrument, and inclusion of a balanced questionnaire for surveys and discussion guides for focus groups. The studies are listed at the back of this report under the heading "Public Opinion Research Sources."

Finally, because opinion research has largely adopted racial categories utilized by the federal government, this section uses these categories as appropriate. The categories are defined as follows:

- White: any person who self-identifies as white only and non-Hispanic
- Black: any person who self-identifies as black only
- Asian: any person who self-identifies as Asian only
- American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN): any person who self-identifies as AIAN only
- Hispanic: any person of any race who self-identifies as Hispanic

# Media Content Analysis

## Overview

This report provides insights regarding the public discourse about the nation's economic recovery in general, as well as regarding issues of equity, equal opportunity, and inclusion in particular.

The findings of our analysis are grouped into the following categories:

1. Framing of stories
2. Most prevalent storylines
3. Individuals and types of people most frequently quoted
4. Dominant narratives

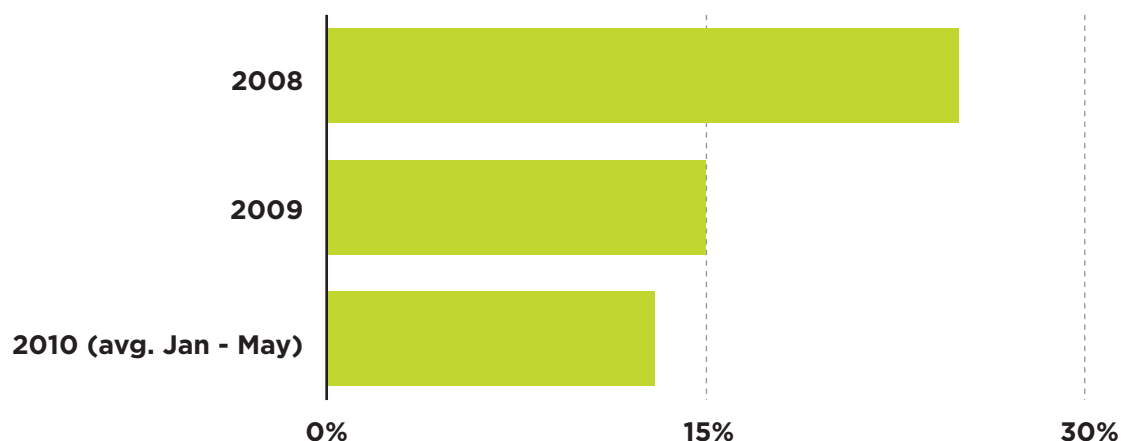
## Outlook of overall coverage of the economy across all types of media

Drawing from the weekly “News Coverage Index” by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2008), we see that as the economic crisis deepened in late 2008, the economy became one of the dominant topics across all forms of news media. Approximately 25 percent of all media coverage during the last three months of 2008 was devoted to the economy—more than was devoted to any other topic except the presidential election. In 2009, with the election over, the economy took over as the top story.

Throughout the year, stories related to the economy comprised 20 percent of all news coverage, although that amount fluctuated dramatically over time: Economic coverage topped out at 43 percent during the first quarter of 2009, when Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner unveiled a plan to clean up “toxic assets” in banks; this was the most covered story on the economy in the time frame that we examined. The coverage of the U.S. economy dropped to less than half that amount over the summer of 2009 as “the story moved away from Washington, DC—and the news about the economy seemed to improve.”

Until May 2010, the U.S. economy topped the news coverage intermittently for seven weeks, fueled by actions by the administration and the Congress. For example, the political battle over how to regulate Wall Street and the fate of the financial reform bill in the last two weeks of April drove the most economic coverage. Other events propelling such coverage to the top of the media agenda: the somewhat contentious reappointment of Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke in January; President Obama’s officially releasing his budget to the Congress and the one-year anniversary of the Recovery Act in February; and Goldman Sachs executives’ congressional testimony in April.

Although the economy was the most covered topic on network television, the amount of coverage that the medium devoted to it was less than the amount of coverage in newspapers. In 2009, economic stories represented 25 percent of all newspaper coverage that began on the front page, compared to 19 percent of all network evening news stories and just 14 percent of all network morning news stories.

**FIGURE 1. COVERAGE OF THE ECONOMY AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL NEWS CONTENT ACROSS ALL MEDIA**

Source: Data for 2008 and 2009 are estimates of coverage provided by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism in the 2009 and 2010 "State of the News Media" reports. Data for 2010 are an estimate of average monthly coverage of the economy through May, monitored also by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

## Framing of Economic Recovery and Equity Stories

The framing of news stories is important because different frames have different effects on how people attribute responsibility for both the cause of and solution to social problems. For example, episodic frames highlight the individual experiencing a situation and tend to promote the idea that the individual is solely responsible for what happens to him or her. Thematic frames highlight the conditions that lead to the situation and encourage an understanding that broader social or systemic reasons are responsible for a situation.

The overall coverage of the recovery, including coverage of equity issues, is overwhelmingly framed thematically: These issues are treated as broad social and institutional ones that society and the government are responsible for solving, rather than isolated incidents or ones that stem from individual choices or actions. By a ratio of 8 to 1, thematic stories outnumber episodic stories in the print media. In other words, "an episodic frame presents a portrait, while a thematic frame pulls the camera back to present a landscape."<sup>4</sup> Some of the characteristics of thematic stories about the recovery include large amounts of data, economic analysis, broad discussions about the system, and competing, partisan policy claims. Only stories about "struggling" Americans on network TV newscasts are framed episodically or are driven by a distinct event. These represented only a very small portion of TV news stories on the economy.

Although the economy and unemployment have generally tended to be covered thematically, at least for the past 15 years,<sup>5</sup> our study shows a shift in the coverage of the experiences and problems of different communities in our society, such as African Americans: from event- or individual-driven stories ("episodic" frame) to systemic stories (thematically framed), especially in the print media, where policy and political decision making at the federal or state government level drives stories. This shift might be specific to the coverage of the economic downturn and perhaps be momentary. At present, however, it is likely to shine more light on systemic and institutional problems and solutions facing these different groups.

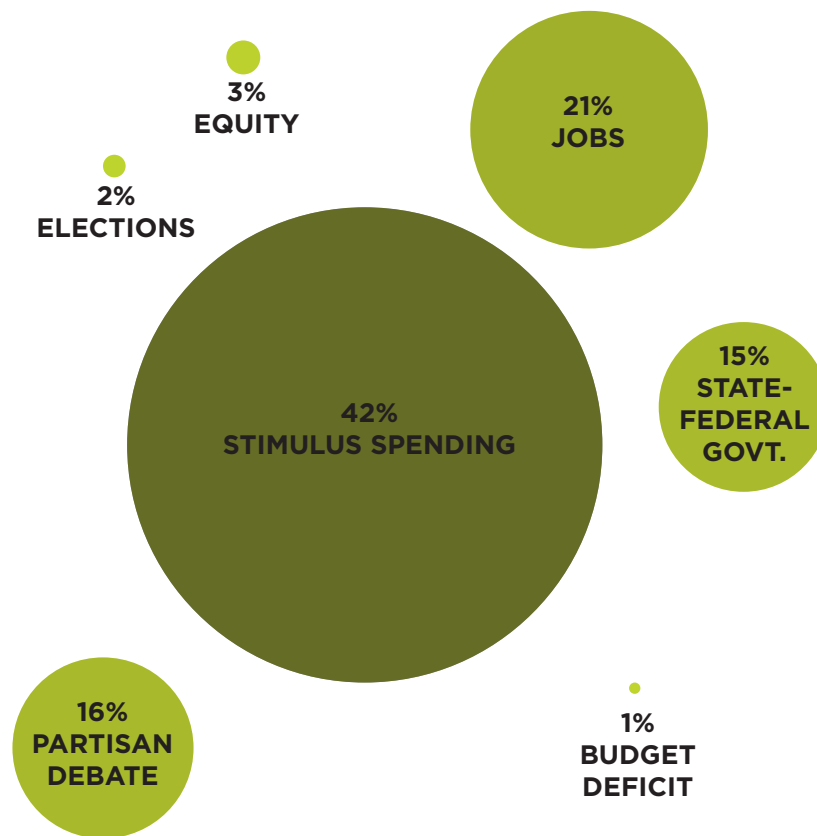
<sup>4</sup> "Framing Budgets and Taxes," Susan Nall Bales for the FrameWorks Institute, June 2009.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most groundbreaking studies of news framing effects on public opinion was conducted by Shanto Iyengar, published in *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1991.

## Storylines

Overall, the coverage of the recovery is heavily focused on the actions of the administration, Congress, and local and state governments. Mainstream print media and network news focus on a relatively small number of stories: Stimulus spending, jobs, and the partisan debate lead the news, followed closely by stories about the actions of state and local governments, which are especially prevalent in regional press. Figure 2 illustrates the most prevalent storylines.

FIGURE 2. RECOVERY COVERAGE INCLUDING NATIONAL AND, TO A LESS EXTENT, REGIONAL PRESS, OCTOBER 2009–MAY 2010



Source: “Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse”, The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010.

The five regional newspapers we examined—in Little Rock, AR; Jackson, MS; Columbus, OH; Denver, CO; and New Orleans, LA—appear to have slightly different priorities of coverage, whether recovery or equity related, than the national press, and include the following:

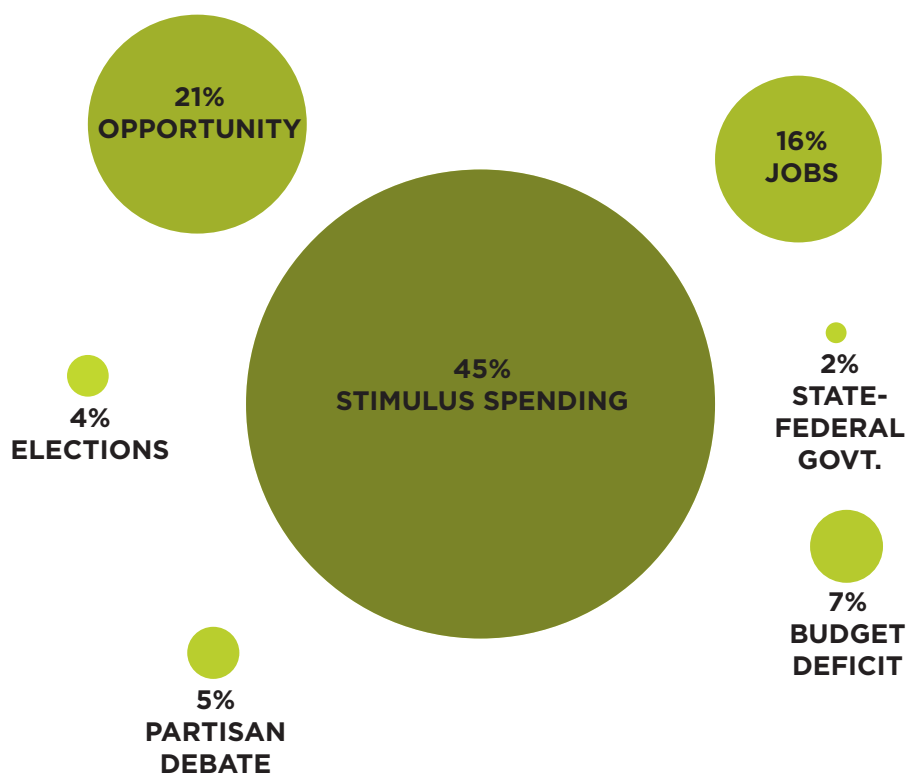
- ▶ The dispute between advocates and local or state government about the allocation of stimulus resources.
- ▶ Complaints that the stimulus funds allocated to a given state are not enough to cover the needs of that state and call on Congress and the administration to help.
- ▶ The positive impact of the stimulus on the region.

Coverage of the recovery with respect to equal opportunity or equity, disparities, and communities in need is low on the media agenda and makes up only a small share of the total news content about the recovery (shown in figure 2 as *equity*). Only 3 percent of the sample of stories we analyzed overall

were focused on equity-related issues. Within that coverage (*equity-specific*), the leading topics in order of volume include (1) stimulus funds spending, (2) the experiences of communities of color or low-income people and the need for stimulus investment in these communities (shown in figure 3 as *opportunity*), and (3) jobs. Stimulus spending and jobs are examined predominantly through the lens of the experience of these communities and of the middle class.

Figure 3 compares the leading topics in order of volume of coverage in the print media and network TV news.

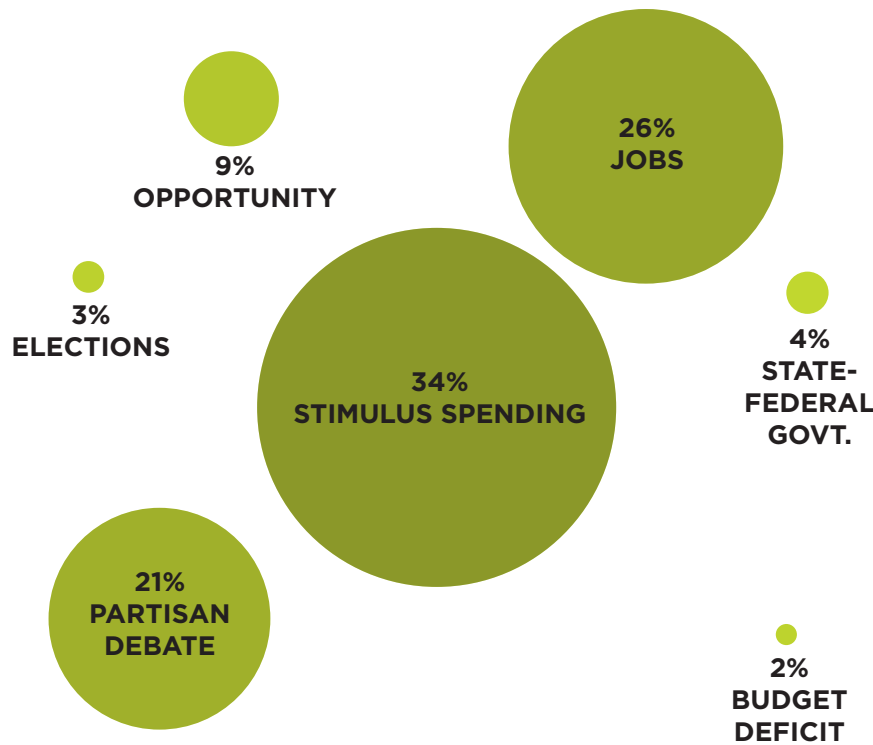
**FIGURE 3A. EQUITY-SPECIFIC COVERAGE IN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PRESS, OCTOBER 2009–MAY 2010**



Source: "Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse," The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010



FIGURE 3B. EQUITY-SPECIFIC COVERAGE IN NETWORK TV, OCTOBER 2009–MAY 2010



Source: “Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse,” The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010

Detailed analysis of the content of the dominant storylines in overall recovery and equity-specific coverage follows.

## Stimulus spending<sup>6</sup>

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

Stimulus spending is the most discussed topic and occupies 42 percent of overall recovery coverage. Articles about stimulus spending address the legislative process in Washington, DC; investments and projects, especially infrastructure, targeted by the *Recovery Act*; and regions around the country that have received or are expected to receive *Recovery Act* funds. A considerable portion of these articles includes criticism of the allocation decisions, which, in a few cases, are phrased as actual or possible “abuse” of stimulus money.

Public investments in infrastructure drive the coverage of stimulus spending in the general recovery sample—not surprising, given that a major share of the stimulus funds is channeled to infrastructure projects across the nation. Within this category, investments in transportation systems are most frequently covered, followed distantly by school facilities, energy grid (green jobs), and public housing. Investment in infrastructure is often criticized because, in the view of those opposing it, it would not immediately stimulate the economy or have a positive effect within the 18-month time frame.

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

In coverage specifically about equity, spending stories focus on job training and creation, education,

6 42 percent of overall recovery coverage, 45 percent of equity print coverage, 34 percent of equity television coverage.

and social programs such as food stamps and shelters for communities in need. Although the scope of most of these stories is limited to the immediate outcomes of the stimulus, there are some opinion articles and a few news stories that discuss what the long-term impact of the stimulus should be, according to the opinion author or source. Some stories criticize current public investments for being designed to stimulate the economy immediately (“jump-start” the economy) and not to create long-lasting prosperity for the country.

The following excerpt from an op-ed column in *The Washington Post* is indicative of this type of discourse.

*“President-elect Barack Obama has promised billions in infrastructure spending as part of a public works program bigger than any since the interstate highway system was built in the 1950s. Though it was greeted with hosannas, his proposal is only tapping into a clamor for such spending that’s been rising ever since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 and a major bridge collapsed in Minneapolis last year. . . . More important, we should think beyond temporary stimulus and make-work jobs and about investments that will propel the economy well into this century. . . . Convention centers and other tourist attractions create reasonably high-paying construction jobs in the short term, but over time, they create an economy dominated by lower-wage service jobs. . . . The call for more spending on infrastructure represents a unique opportunity to rebuild our productive economy and create long-term middle-class jobs”*

(“Make Sure All That Spending Is Well Supported,” Joel Kotkin, *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2008).

## **Equal opportunity and communities in need<sup>7</sup>**

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

Stories about equal opportunity and communities were missing from the ones that we analyzed about the recovery in general.

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

Stories about equal opportunity and communities in need comprised one-fifth of the coverage about equity.

Equal opportunity stories are usually driven by the positive impact of stimulus funds on vulnerable communities through programs, such as shelter houses and job training programs, or through criticism of the *Recovery Act* for not equally reaching all groups. Although the stimulus was portrayed as beneficial to the U.S. economy overall, stimulus investments were questioned as to whether they would produce equal and inclusive outcomes. Also questioned was whether they would reach all communities to the extent that they would end existing disparities. News stories focusing on this kind of criticism over stimulus funds allocation and impact are usually driven by conflicts between state officials and advocates or between officials and advocates fighting for more and better-targeted federal funds. Advocates quoted in articles and opinion pieces condemn the inequality in the recovery process and call for equal opportunity for all. For example:

*“No stimulus package is going to change America for the children who live in the shadows until we get serious about community. A task force should be formed that includes representatives from small business, housing, transportation, and labor to envision a plan that revitalizes the urban landscape and with it young lives. . . . The education challenge [for our*

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<sup>7</sup> 21 percent of equity print coverage, 9 percent of equity television coverage.

*children] is one of economic class, where race is disproportionately represented. . . . How can we let them down and not demand their government and the private sector develop a strategy where they can be the energy that moves their local communities forward? . . . Let's really change our country by allowing everyone the opportunity to succeed"*

("A winning battle plan on learning," Evan S. Dobelle, Opinion, *The Boston Globe*, March 28, 2009).

*"Advocates for the poor and minority groups are urging the Patrick administration to reserve a portion of the jobs created by the economic stimulus package for low-wage earners, the long-term unemployed, and young adults. . . . Although this policy will apply to jobs with the \$11 billion the state is getting from the stimulus package, it does not do as much for low-income residents as advocates are seeking"*

("Groups seek stimulus jobs for minorities, poor; urge governor to allocate work," David Abel, *The Boston Globe*, March 20, 2009).

Within that context, President Obama is criticized for his perceived lack of commitment to a recovery process that considers the special needs of each community and produces equal outcomes. Much of that criticism comes primarily from social justice leaders and the Congressional Black Caucus. The president defends himself in some of these stories, which are often characterized by rhetoric and content.

*"Stung by accusations from some African-Americans that he has not done enough for urban communities, President Obama has embarked on an effort to soothe a constituency once counted as his fiercest source of support . . . [citing] 'the health care effort as one example,' [Obama] says, [that] 'will be hugely important for blacks. I cannot pass laws that say "I'm just helping black folks." I'm the president of the entire United States. What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need. That in turn is going to help lift up the African-American community'"*

("Obama denies he is not doing enough for blacks," Farah Stockman, *The Boston Globe*, December 22, 2009).

*"Yet most of his [Obama's] references to ideology are disdainful and dismissive. In discussing his economic stimulus package, he speaks of judging his proposals by how many jobs they produce and how quickly they will move the economy. Other criteria are inadmissible...But Obama's anti-ideological turn is also a functional one for a progressive, at least for now. "*

("Audacity Without Ideology," E. J. Dionne, Jr., *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2009).

The discussion about disparities in the workplace is limited to issues that are immediately relevant to the economic downturn and the economy—the unemployment gap between blacks and whites; the need to expand and extend unemployment benefits and the safety net for communities of color and low-income communities; and an urgency to target stimulus-sponsored investment on the progress of these priorities. Other important disparity issues—the income gap, wage gap, or education attainment across different racial and ethnic groups—are hardly mentioned in this context.

*"Latinos and African-Americans in Massachusetts and across the country are facing high unemployment rates that could spiral to levels not seen in decades as the jobless economic recovery drags on, analysts and urban community advocates say. At the same time, some big-city mayors and community activists complain that the \$787 billion federal stimulus package that the Obama administration promised would preserve or create jobs has not put a significant dent in urban unemployment, threatening to leave blacks and Latinos behind when the economy finally turns around"*

("Latinos, blacks take harder hit amid recession; jobless rate could climb to highest in

decades,” Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2009).

*“Overlooked by Romer and Pelosi is this troubling (at least for me) detail: While the seasonal adjusted unemployment rate declined in January for whites and Hispanics, it went up three-tenths of a percentage point for blacks”*

(“No good news for blacks in latest jobless numbers,” DeWayne Wickham, *USA Today*, February 9, 2010).

There is no elevated discourse about the causes of economic inequality among different racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic groups. Causes of disparities mentioned in this context are hardly explored in a meaningful way, although it is generally admitted that their existence far precedes the economic downturn.

## **Jobs<sup>8</sup>**

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

In recovery-related coverage, jobs are the second-most covered topic. Close watch of the unemployment rate; Washington, DC’s focus on jobs; and job creation as the foremost measure of success of the *Recovery Act* dominate the discourse on jobs.

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

In equity coverage, jobs are the third-most covered issue. Relevant stories discuss disparities and stimulus spending and are dominated by the following narratives: (1) the stimulus works, as demonstrated by stories of its positive impact on hard-hit and minority communities across the country; (2) the stimulus works, but it is not adequate to address our shattering economy; primary indicators of this challenge, as depicted in the news, are a middle class suffering from persistent high unemployment, or most vulnerable communities, which are not being reached by the stimulus and left behind in the recovery process; and (3) the need to ensure that any economic recovery efforts must invest equally in all communities in our society (inclusiveness), especially the hardest hit and most vulnerable ones.

*“‘The duration of long-term unemployment, which is over six months, is unlike anything we’ve seen since the Depression, and even though we are extending the safety net, it is not enough for some folks,’ said Stephen Levy with the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy in Palo Alto. ‘The situation is awful, way beyond the 12.5 percent figure’ of unemployment”*

(“More middle-class jobless need government aid,” Tom Abate, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 23, 2010).

*“[U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary] Locke had no estimate of how many jobs the funding would create in Southern Nevada, but he said the buildout of computer centers will employ a lot of workers from the construction trades, as well as technicians to wire and install the computer systems. . . . Spanish-speaking instructors will be hired to help the Hispanic population. . . . Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., said community centers and senior centers play an important role for Southern Nevadans looking to upgrade their skills and find a job. ‘There will be a coordinated outreach with minority-owned businesses,’ he said”*

(“\$4.7 million will make local centers better click,” Hubble Smith, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 3, 2010).

8 21 percent of overall recovery coverage, 16 percent of equity print coverage, 26 percent of equity television coverage.

## Contention between federal and state governments<sup>9</sup>

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

In general, recovery-related articles about state government issues are focused on the type of projects and programs that received stimulus funding; the impact of the funding on the projects and, in effect, on the community; and, finally, on different topics of contention around the issue. Specifically, arguments among advocates, institution leaders, and state elected officials about the appropriate place and the amount of allocation of stimulus funds are frequently voiced in the media. Also highlighted: the demands for federal funding from congressional representatives on behalf of their state.

States are shown, especially in local newspapers, to confront Washington for more funds toward job growth programs and social benefits at the local level. The unemployed and the middle class are at the core of the debate.

*“Suzanne M. Bump, the Massachusetts labor secretary, agreed that cities need help. Hardest hit, she added, are urban areas and immigrant ‘gateway cities’ such as New Bedford, where the unemployment rate was nearly 13 percent in September. ‘Clearly, we need some economic development that creates jobs in those areas,’ she said, suggesting more government-funded projects to upgrade roads and rail lines—work that, in turn, can attract business investment and quality, long-term jobs.*

*[Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter agreed.] “People do need to get to work. It’s about restoring a sense of hope on the ground. . . . Without it . . . it’s a downward spiral to where I’ve got five guys on a street corner wondering, ‘If the federal government is spending all this money, but the city is cutting services, what am I supposed to do?’”*

*(“Latinos, blacks take harder hit amid recession: Jobless rate could climb to highest in decades,” Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2009).*

Both national and local print media cover these issues. Local print media often report on the more factual announcement of projects in the area, while national media cover the political debate and contention around the stimulus within a specific region.

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

There are very few stories that address the contention between the state and federal governments in coverage specifically about equity.

## Partisanship and legislative debate<sup>10</sup>

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

The political, partisan debate between Democrats and Republicans is concentrated on the legislative process, the content of the stimulus bill, the allocation of its funds, and the outcomes of the overall package.

Generally, Democrats talk “on air” about the passing of the stimulus bill and the extending of unemployment benefits and health coverage for the unemployed through Medicaid. Democrats in Congress do not voice loud support for funding of social programs for low-income people or other social benefits such as education. Most demand for such programs, at least in the media, comes from advocates or local, and sometimes state, elected officials.

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9 15 percent of overall recovery coverage, 2 percent of equity print coverage, 4 percent of equity television coverage.

10 21 percent of recovery coverage, 5 percent of equity print coverage, 16 percent of equity television coverage.

Republicans, advocating for tax cuts and against government spending, argue that the stimulus or any government intervention is the wrong answer to the economic crisis. Slow recovery, the persistently high unemployment rate, and, more recently, the budget deficit make up the basis of criticism. The coverage of Republicans shows a party that is focused on obstacles, not solutions. However, there is little criticism of Republicans' failure to offer solutions, at least not in the coverage we examined.

*“‘Our job losses would have been substantially more, but for the economic stimulus,’” [said Jeremy] Aguero [a principal at the economics research firm Applied Analysis in Las Vegas] . . . ‘Today’s report further demonstrates just how incredibly wrong Senator Reid was about the so-called “stimulus” bill, which he claimed would “protect and create three and a half million jobs across our country[”] when he rammed it through the Senate in February,’ wrote National Republican Senatorial Committee spokesman Brian Walsh”*  
 (“Alternative Energy: \$90 Million Steaming To Nevada,” Benjamin Spillman, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 30, 2009).

*“In a speech this afternoon on the floor of the Ohio Senate, Republican Sen. Jon Husted of Kettering complained that Georgia wants to use federal stimulus money ‘at Ohio taxpayer expense’ to move NCR. ‘Other states are competing with us aggressively and they’re using Ohio taxpayer money to do it,’ said Husted....Jessica Towhey, a spokesman for House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-West Chester, said, ‘Ohio lawmakers who voted for the so-called stimulus package before anyone even had a chance to read it, need to explain why they voted for legislation that let another state woo away Dayton’s only Fortune 500 company, resulting in a devastating economic and emotional blow to that community.’”*  
 (Columbus, Ga., seeks federal stimulus money to help NCR move from Dayton,” Jack Torry, *Columbus Dispatch*, June 4, 2009).

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

When the partisan and legislative debates are the focus of a story that also addressed equity issues, the nature of the discussion of the topic is similar to the one that takes place within stories about the recovery in general, as previously described.

## **Focus on communities**

### *Overall Recovery Coverage and Equity-Specific Coverage*

Among all communities, the problems facing the middle class, low-income people, and, to a lesser extent, African Americans are at the center of general coverage of the recovery. Within equity stories, low-income people, followed by African Americans and then the middle class, garner the most media attention.

Whether addressing the recovery in general or equity issues, stories that focus on African Americans deal with the soaring unemployment; demands from social justice leaders and elected officials for targeted, stimulus-sponsored investment in hard-hit communities that creates jobs; and the positive impact of stimulus-funded programs, such as job search centers, food programs, and shelters, on African Americans.

However, discussion about the direct impact of the recession on the lives of ordinary Americans and stories of individuals are sporadic in mainstream media coverage about the economy. Stories of individuals are more frequent, but not of significant volume, in news dealing directly with equity issues



in print media. Most frequently individuals are featured in TV network news stories—second only to the administration and elected officials—where they are offered a platform to speak about their experiences during the crisis.

Following are excerpts of conversations about different communities.

*[Former Clinton administration Labor secretary Robert] “Reich, speaking on CNN’s ‘Late Edition,’ said the middle class is being squeezed by mountains of personal debt, plummeting home values, and a vast tightening in available credit”*  
(“Democrats’ Stimulus Plan May Reach \$700 Billion; Spending Package Would Rival Financial System Bailout,” *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2008).

Several other communities of our society are hardly mentioned. Women’s issues in the economic recovery are barely covered. A few relevant articles raise awareness that the heavy investment on infrastructure will create jobs that are traditionally dominated and create an employment gap between men and women. There are also a couple of stories about local social programs targeted to women that received stimulus funds. Latino, Asian American, and American Indian communities are not addressed at all in the coverage we analyzed.

## **Other relevant topics receiving marginal coverage**

### **Elections<sup>11</sup>**

#### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

Election coverage within the context of the recovery is very limited, addressing primarily the impact of the economy—real and perceived—on the midterm elections in 2010 and the “horseraces” in different states between rivals who voted for or against the stimulus bill. There are only a few stories about the 2008 presidential election because of the design of the sample covering primarily the period after that election.

### **Role of government<sup>12</sup>**

#### *Overall Recovery Coverage and Equity-Specific Coverage*

Substantive discourse about the role of government in the economy and the structure of the country’s economic system is limited to a few opinion articles.

The role of government is discussed predominantly within the context of stimulus fund spending—how much is enough and where it should be invested—and tax policy (mostly tax cuts). Most articles have a pro-government intervention angle, at least with respect to the fact that the *Recovery Act* was necessary; no such consensus exists, however, on how or where to invest the stimulus funds.

Articles that discuss minorities, the poor, and equity issues also tackle the issue of the adequacy of the role of government as a “safety net” for poor people and the unemployed (affordable health-care coverage, unemployment benefits, job creation, and training). There is no question that the government should rally in support of “the most vulnerable”; the only discussion is whether it is doing enough.

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11 2 percent of recovery coverage, 4 percent of equity print coverage, 3 percent of equity television coverage.

12 percentage of overall coverage less than 1 percent.

## Transparency and open government<sup>13</sup>

### *Overall Recovery Coverage*

Transparency in government in general and in the recovery process in particular does not attract coverage in any significant way. There are only “on-the-fly” references to the administration’s emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability in the political and legislative processes. The following excerpts are representative of these references.

There are sporadic, brief references to the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board with respect to its role of overseeing the stimulus money and to the challenges it faces in measuring the impact of the stimulus, especially job creation.

Also sporadic and brief are instances of criticizing President Obama for not delivering on his pledge for an open, transparent government.

*“Information on the Web site recovery.gov says 130,362 such reports have been filed. To date, \$158.7 billion in stimulus funds has been awarded”* (“Thousands of stimulus fund reports missing, officials weigh penalties,” Jeremy Redmon, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 11, 2009).

*“One of the best ways to discover what money is available and how to put in a bid for it is through the state’s Web site recovery.arkansas.gov,” Masingill said* (“Officials share plans for stimulus spending,” Dave Hughes and Evie Blad, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, June 26, 2009).

*“The sad thing about the Obama presidency is his habit of saying things that turn out not to be true—the promise of transparency in developing health care legislation, for example”* (“Bill for health care is coming due,” Jim Wooten, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 2, 2010).

### *Equity-Specific Coverage*

There is no reference to transparency in stories about equity that we analyzed.

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<sup>13</sup> percentage of overall coverage less than 1 percent.



## Spokespeople

TABLE 1. PEOPLE MOST FREQUENTLY QUOTED IN THE RECOVERY AND EQUITY STORIES

Spokespeople	Recovery sample	Equity print sample	Equity television sample
President or Administration Officials	23%	16%	35%
Democrat (except President)	31%	26%	19%
Republican	20%	4%	23%
Business leader	12%	13%	4%
Academic, economist, or expert	5%	9%	6%
Individual	6%	11%	10%
Advocate	3%	22%	3%

Source: “Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse”, The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010.

The voices elevated in the news media, also called spokespeople, and the sources quoted play a significant role in framing and positioning a story. They also provide insight into the angles that journalists choose to highlight. What spokespeople say and whom or what they represent add a certain perspective to a story, which can impact public perception and public opinion about an event or issue.

To that end, we scanned coverage about the recovery to identify the types of spokespeople that are most frequently called upon to “tell their story” about the economy (see table 1).

In our sample coverage, Democratic elected officials, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), President Obama, and his administration prevail in the general discussion about the recovery, immediately followed by Republican elected officials. Democrats and President Obama may have been uniquely positioned to drive the narrative by proposing federal initiatives and implementing policy.

In issues of equity in print media, Democrats, social justice advocates, and business leaders and experts lead the parade of spokespeople. The picture is a little different in network news. Barack Obama and his administration appear far more often than anyone else. Republicans and Democrats appear to be right behind the president, with Republicans having a small advantage.

Democrats and Republicans are quoted more frequently in the partisan debate over financial legislation, such as the *Recovery Act* itself, financial regulation, the jobs bill, government spending, the budget, and the deficit. In general, Democrats advocate in favor of extension of unemployment benefits, school reform, and Medicaid, while Republicans oppose solutions offered by the Democrats and advocate for tax cuts.

Overall, the story of the economic crisis and recovery has been largely told from the top down and reflects the voices and ideas of people in institutions more than those of everyday Americans. “Citizens may be the primary victims of the downturn, but they have not been the primary actors in the media depiction of it” (“News Coverage Index,” Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

## Voices of elected officials:

*“This is an enormous bill. It could be close to a \$1 trillion spending bill. Do we want to do it with essentially no hearings, no input, for example, in the Senate from Republican senators who represent half of the American population? I don’t think that’s a good idea,” [Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky] said on ABC’s ‘This Week’”*

*(“Top Democrats Give Longer Timetable for Stimulus Bill,” Shailagh Murray, *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2009).*

*“Our bill produces more jobs,” [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.)] said. ‘We will go to conference to fight for those jobs’”*

*(“Deal on stimulus bills mired in details,” James Oliphant, *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2009).*

*“[Charles Harvey, Nevada stimulus director] added he wants to make sure the stimulus money ‘creates jobs, keeps jobs, and helps the people of Nevada who need it the most’”*

*(“Clark County official named stimulus czar,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 19, 2009).*

## Social justice leaders:

*“Make no mistake: this is the civil rights issue of the moment,” said Wade Henderson, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, who suggested a multiracial Poor People’s Campaign like the one Martin Luther King, Jr., helped organize just before his assassination. ‘There is no greater priority for the civil rights community’”*

*(“Latinos, blacks take harder hit amid recession; Jobless rate could climb to highest in decades,” Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2009).*

*“Janet Murguia, president of National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights group, said the White House and economists were alarmed when the national unemployment rate edged past 10 percent in October, but ‘the truth is, for the African-American communities and Latinos, unemployment passed 10 percent eight months ago.’ . . . ‘The help may be out there, but it’s not reaching our families,’ Murguia said. ‘A rising tide doesn’t necessarily lift all boats. We need specific strategies to reach the hardest-hit communities’”*

*(“Latinos, blacks take harder hit amid recession; Jobless rate could climb to highest in decades,” Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2009).*

*“Benjamin Jealous, chairman of the NAACP, said nearly four years ago his organization noticed a spike in foreclosures among African-American homeowners. ‘Folks said, ‘Oh, that’s really sad it’s happening in the black community’” and ignored early signs of a growing housing crisis that ‘just about brought down the world economy’ as it spread last year, he said.”*

*(“Latinos, blacks take harder hit amid recession; Jobless rate could climb to highest in decades,” Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 2009).*

*“Bill Allan, executive director of the Disability Policy Consortium, called on the administration to target some of the stimulus money at human service workers, which he said would ensure that more women receive jobs. ‘There’s a human service infrastructure that needs to be maintained as well as the highway infrastructure,’ he said. ‘I think that’s a perfect way to keep up the safety net’”*

*(“Groups seek stimulus jobs for minorities, poor; urge governor to allocate work,” David Abel, *The Boston Globe*, March 20, 2009).*

Television coverage:

*Robert Rector, Heritage Foundation: “This is clearly a type of welfare. It’s a welfare expansion.”*

*Christine Romans (CNN Reporter): “Robert Rector, a senior fellow at the conservative think tank, the Heritage Foundation, approves of using federal money for food banks. But he argues the entire stimulus bill merely expands welfare.”*

*Rector: “It does help support people who’ve lost their jobs and that’s a good thing, but it’s not going to put more jobs back into the economy.”*  
(“Plan for the Poor; Stimulus Project,” CNN Newsroom, January 26, 2010)

*Don Lemon (CNN Reporter): “OK. Getting Bill Schneider, I want to talk to you about getting some resistance on bills, spending bill, or what have you. Let’s listen to John McCain this morning on one of the talk shows, and I’ll talk to you about it, Bill.”*

*Sen. John McCain (R-Arizona): “[Obama] clearly said in debates with me that line by line he would go through these bills and he would eliminate the wasteful and pork barrel spending. Obviously, he’s not doing that. They’re saying that this is last year’s business. This is money we’re going to spend this year. And he should, he should veto the bill”*  
(“Plan for the Poor; Stimulus Project,” CNN Newsroom, March 8, 2009).

## Narratives

A set of narratives dominates the coverage of the recovery in general and of equity issues in particular. They are delivered either by the voice of a spokesperson, the writer of an opinion piece, or the perspective of a reporter. A discussion of these narratives follows.

Narratives common to the general recovery and to the equity-specific coverage:

- The recovery is a systemic, not an individual, problem. The government is responsible for the treatment of this problem.

Washington is held responsible for getting the country out of the economic crisis and onto a path of a sound economy. This responsibility is attributed to the government either directly, through the voices elevated in the media, or indirectly, through the framing of news stories about the recovery. As discussed earlier in this report, the discourse about the recovery and equity is framed thematically: these issues are treated as broad social and institutional ones for which the system and government are responsible to resolve. Thematic frames highlight the conditions that lead to the situation and encourage thinking that broader social or systemic reasons are responsible for a situation.

- The *Recovery Act* was necessary.

That the stimulus was necessary is an idea that permeates the vast majority of news stories, although it is hardly debated directly. Most of the contention around the ARRA is focused on its content rather than whether some type of stimulus package is needed.

- The *Recovery Act* is effective.

In the general coverage about the recovery that we examined, the theme that the stimulus package works dominates the narrative that it is working or will not fail. A third narrative in between the two prevails within the equity coverage: the idea that the stimulus works but is not sufficient (see the following narrative).

Narratives that prevailed only in equity coverage:

- The *Recovery Act* is helpful but not sufficient.

The theme that the stimulus has been productive for certain areas of the economy but has not reached enough other areas, including communities of color and the poor as well as certain regions and states around the country, prevails in equity-related stories. As discussed previously, this narrative is voiced primarily through calls for more support of communities in need or criticism of the president for his so-called monolithic definition of economic recovery and his “rising tide lifts all boats” approach to issues of inequity.

- Economic Recovery for all: Historically overlooked and vulnerable groups must be included in any economic recovery policy through strategically targeted investments.

The need for an inclusive and equitable economic recovery for all is echoed in most of the articles that discuss disparities and opportunity through the recovery. This concept is usually presented as a criticism of the lack of stimulus investment in communities of color and low-income people or, to a lesser degree, to reward such stimulus investments happening already. It is voiced predominantly by social justice leaders (see the previous section, “Spokespeople”), leaders of regional social programs, and state government officials. There are only a few stories discussing whether the stimulus has equally reached women and men.

## Values in the narratives

In the narratives that dominated equity-related stories, we find a more substantive conversation about values in the economy and the recovery, such as community, opportunity, equity, justice, fairness, and a safety net for the most vulnerable.

FIGURE 4. DOMINANT WORDS AND PHRASES IN EQUITY-RELATED COVERAGE



Source: “Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse,” The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010.

The following excerpts demonstrate the use of values.

*“Too many communities in Clark County and across the country are stuck with 20th-century infrastructure in a 21st-century global economy,” [U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary] Locke said. “Today’s grant is a small, but important step to finding work and creating job opportunity”* (“\$4.7 million will make local centers better click,” Hubble Smith, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 3, 2010).

*“Advocates for the poor and minority groups are urging the Patrick administration to reserve a portion of the jobs created by the economic stimulus package for low-wage earners, the long-term unemployed, and young adults. Some of them plan to hold a rally in Roslindale today to demand ‘fairness and equity in the distribution of jobs and contracts’”* (“Groups seek stimulus jobs for minorities, poor; urge governor to allocate work,” David Abel, *The Boston Globe*, March 20, 2009).

*“Without efforts to increase workforce diversity, this could lead to a massive shift of hundreds of billions of dollars of wealth from women to men. . . . Not only should funding for the Perkins Act increase, but the program should be more narrowly geared toward **gender diversification** in infrastructure-related jobs through gender equity set-asides and the reestablishment of equity coordinators”* (“Remember the ladies,” Jared Polis, *The Denver Post*, January 27, 2009).

*“President Obama aims to reinvent the Education Department as a venture capitalist for school reform, investing more in schools with innovative ideas. . . . Many worry about promoting innovation at the expense of equity”* (“Misgivings about a race for school aid,” Nick Anderson, *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2010).

Finally, a few narratives that are important to promoting an equitable economy are missing from coverage of the recovery. News stories lack ideas about the interconnectedness of communities, that we are all in this together in this economy and that allowing barriers to opportunity to exist for any community hurts us all. That is why it is important to address inequalities. These positions are hardly discussed in the news even though they may be critical to those who want to promote opportunity and equal economic recovery.

## **Opposition narratives**

We identify a series of narrowly defined narratives that are consistently echoed by different Republican elected officials or conservative voices in the media. These narratives, although important to understand, occupy less space in the debate than the prevalent narratives we previously discussed; they appear primarily in coverage about the recovery in general and rarely in stories about equity.

- ▶ Any initiative by the president and his administration to stimulate the economy is painted as “wasteful” or “pork-barrel spending” that is determined to fail.
- ▶ “The welfare state”: Republicans, playing on Americans’ aversion to welfare, frame any government spending as “welfare spending” and “social welfare priorities.” Such spending is a “give-away,” “money being sent out to people.”
- ▶ “Numbers war”: Questioning or challenging that the stimulus has saved or created any jobs; this narrative is driven by unemployment rates and other related economic data.
- ▶ The stimulus was a bad idea: Prior to passing the stimulus bill, most Republicans argued that its composition would fail its primary goal to stimulate the economy, spending on welfare instead

of “jump-starting” the economy. After the passage of the bill, the narrative changed to “the stimulus is determined to fail.”

- ▶ Lack of fairness in the legislative process: Democrats use unfair tricks to implement their agenda.
- ▶ “Government take-over:” An attempt to portray President Obama and Democrats’ legislative initiatives as a “take-over” of the government and the economy. That narrative might speak to Americans’ fear of ever-expanding government control.

FIGURE 5. DOMINANT WORDS AND PHRASES IN OPPOSITION NARRATIVES



Source: “Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity in the Public Discourse,” The Opportunity Agenda, October 2010.

# Public Opinion on the Economy, Government, and Equity

## Introduction

The public opinion section of this report is based on a synthesis and meta-analysis of attitudinal tracking surveys and recent public opinion studies by nationally known and reputable research organizations, media outlets, and issue groups. Most of the data examined are publicly available; some come from proprietary research, which was made available to The Opportunity Agenda for the purposes of this report.

We reviewed original data from more than 50 public opinion studies, the vast majority of which are surveys that address topics relevant to the economy, the economic recovery, government, and equity issues. At least 30 of these studies informed the final analysis and our understanding of Americans' views on relevant issues, as well as those segments of the public who would be most receptive to communications about an equitable recovery and opportunity for all in America. We looked at attitudinal surveys that have tracked opinion changes and trends in the United States over two years and, in a few cases, the past few decades. The greatest majority of information, though, was provided by surveys conducted within the past two years, up to June 2010.

Across the board, all studies show that Americans are deeply concerned about the economy. Despite recent trends indicating that the U.S. economy is improving, the public's attitude has yet to catch up. According to public polls, "most individuals believe they personally got themselves through the recession rather than lawmakers"<sup>14</sup> and are skeptical that the stimulus plan passed last year has really made much difference in putting the country on the road to recovery. A majority of Americans think that government response to the crisis benefited banks, investment companies, and major corporations, while only a few think that the middle class or low-income people were the biggest beneficiaries. Most also think that our economy is not in good shape and that it will be a long time before it gets better. They also have a more negative view of their own financial situation than they did in January 2008.

Most think that the government has a role in confronting today's economic problems and that it has the nation's best interests in mind most or some of the time, but they question its efficiency. Support for government intervention fluctuates, based on its definition. Generally there is greater support for government regulation of major financial institutions than for overall greater control of the economy by the government. Moreover, we find that some people think that the government should regulate corporations and financial institutions, but it should not limit business initiative and creativity.

While antigovernment sentiment can have its own ideological and partisan basis,<sup>15</sup> the public also expresses discontent with many of the country's other major institutions, including large corporations (64 percent) and banks and other financial institutions (69 percent), which are thought to have a

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14 "Economic Mobility and the American Dream Survey," Stanley B. Greenberg, CEO, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research & Public Opinion Strategies, 2009.

15 "The People and Their Government," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, March 2010.



negative impact on the country.

Americans are more likely to think of the government as a “last resort” when someone or something fails, such as the poor, the unemployed, or our financial system, than to think that it can play an important role in one’s pursuit of happiness. Along with that goes Americans’ elevation of personal responsibility. A majority thinks that achieving success in life and economic mobility are mostly dependent on personal attributes like hard work. Indicative of this attitude is that “most people assume that new businesses and industries of the kind that drive economic growth are the products of creative and energetic individuals or companies—with little contribution from the government or policy” (“Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief,” by the Topos Partnership for Public Works: the Demos Center for the Public Sector, Alex Aubrun, Meg Bostrom, and Joe Grady, October 2009).

Another role for government familiar to most Americans is that of a “watchdog.” For example, the one role for government that garners support from most Americans—83 percent—is that of monitoring issues such as financial fraud, environmental pollution, and workplace safety all the time (32 percent) or some of the time (51 percent; “Allstate/*National Journal*,” January 2010).

Most Americans recognize that there is racial bias and other forms of unequal opportunity as they experience or see them in their communities. However, they are ambivalent as to whether these inequalities are embedded in our current laws and policies. African Americans, Hispanics, and women are much more likely than other groups to perceive inequalities in society or the economy. They think that economic inequalities might not be systemic but caused by “bad” individuals. They want the government to tackle these problems, even though government spending—one of the most familiar remedies for curbing disparities—is not always popular.

Thinking of the road ahead, Americans have high aspirations for the economy and their participation in it. The themes of financial security stability, accountability, opportunity, and individual responsibility prevail in the public’s economic agenda and priorities for themselves. The idea of the common good is also important to Americans, who prioritize it above greed or self-interest.

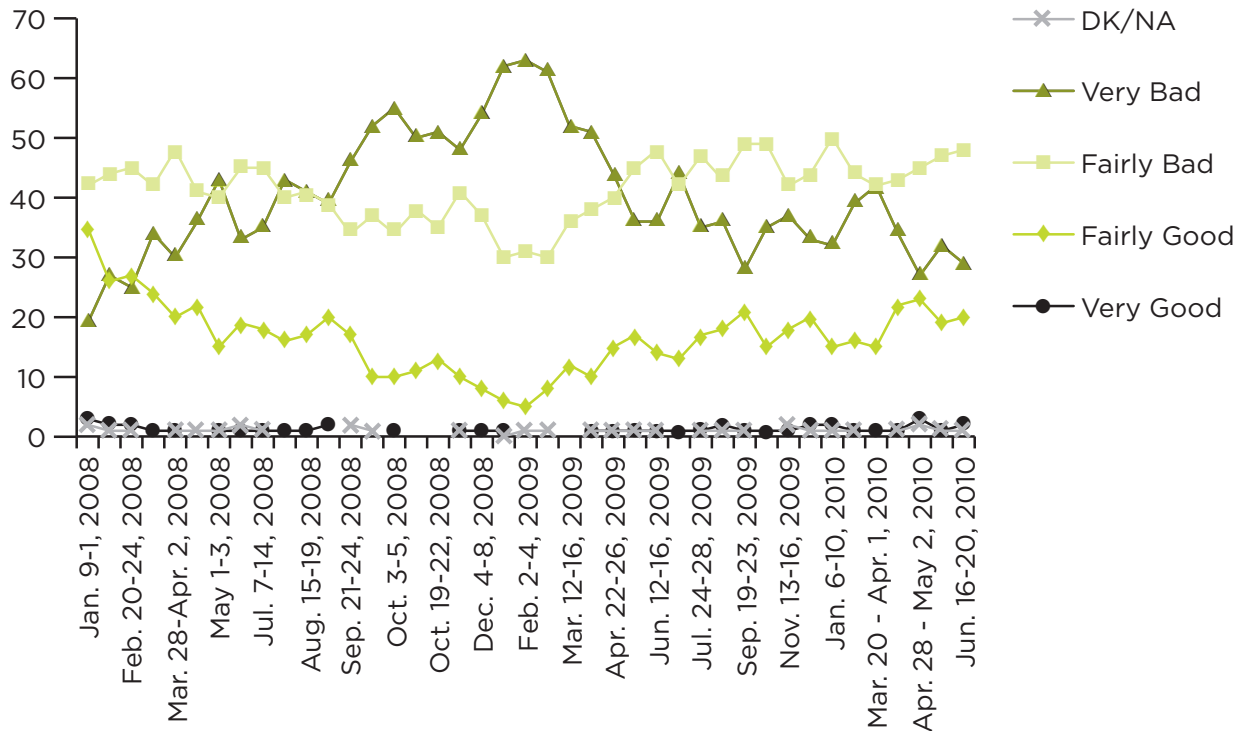
## The Landscape

### **The status of the economy and personal finances, progress of the economic recovery, and jobs**

Americans are deeply concerned about the economy. Nearly all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or income, report that the state of the economy is just fair (48 percent) or poor (43 percent) (“Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal* (June 3–6, 2010). The public sentiment about the economy has slightly improved since December 2008–February 2009, when it hit bottom (57 percent thought that the economy was poor; “Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010). However, Americans do not think that the economy is as good as at the very beginning of the downturn, when opinions were already gloomy (*New York Times*/CBS News Polls, 2008 - 2010; see figure 6).



FIGURE 6. HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE CONDITION OF THE ECONOMY TODAY?

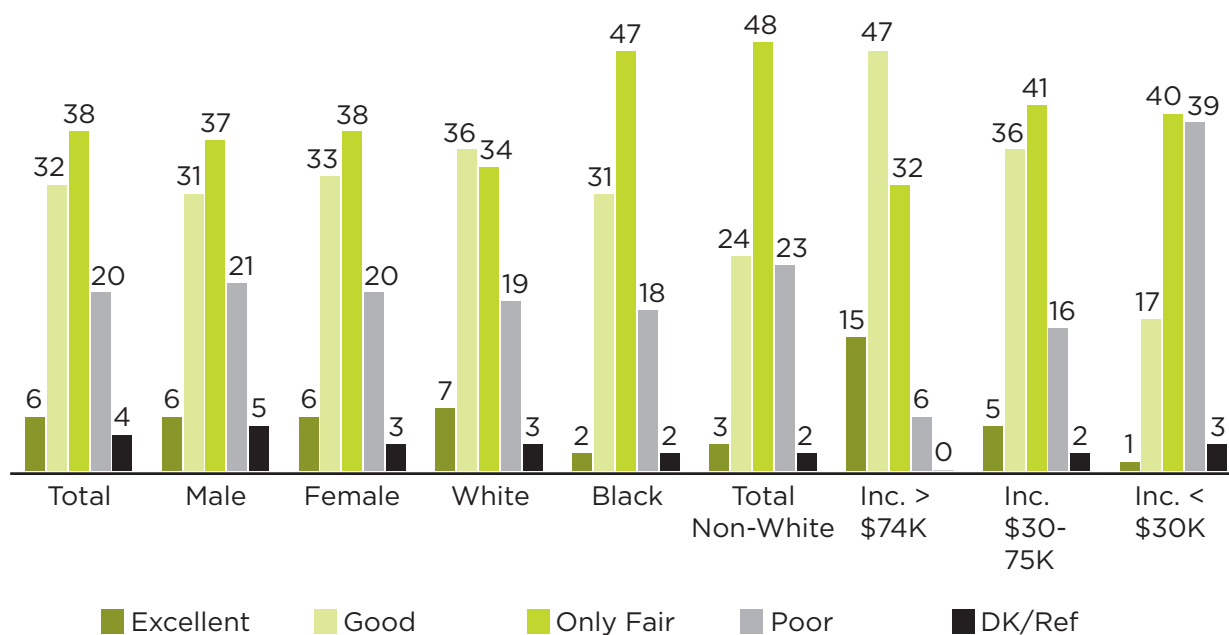


Source: *New York Times*/CBS News Polls, 2008 - 2010.

Most Americans continue to feel the economic downturn. In particular, 68 percent say that the economic downturn has an impact on their families; 83 percent say that it has affected their communities (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010). A small majority also reports that their own finances are in only fair shape (38 percent) or poor shape (20 percent across race and gender), while about one-third consider them good (32 percent) or excellent (6 percent). There are a few considerable gaps among demographic groups regarding this question: slightly more whites than blacks and more in the \$75,000-and-over income bracket than any other group report that their finances are excellent or good. African Americans and people earning less than \$30,000 annually report their financial situation as poor more than any other group (“Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 2010; see figure 7).

Most groups are worried mainly about rising health-care costs (31 percent), lack of jobs with a suitable wage (24 percent), everyday expenses (23 percent), and losing their jobs (18 percent; “Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010).

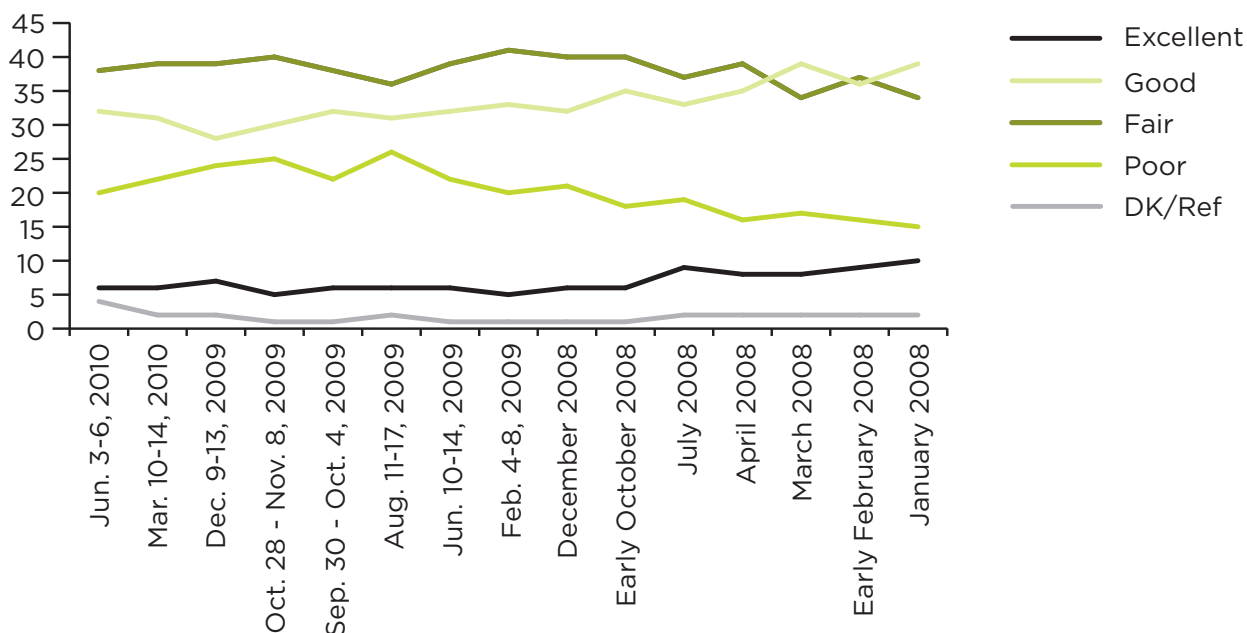
FIGURE 7. HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION?



Source: "Congressional Connection Poll," Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3-6, 2010.

Overall, people today have a more negative view of their own financial situation than in January 2008, as indicated in figure 8.

FIGURE 8. HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION?



Source: "Congressional Connection Poll," Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3-6, 2010.

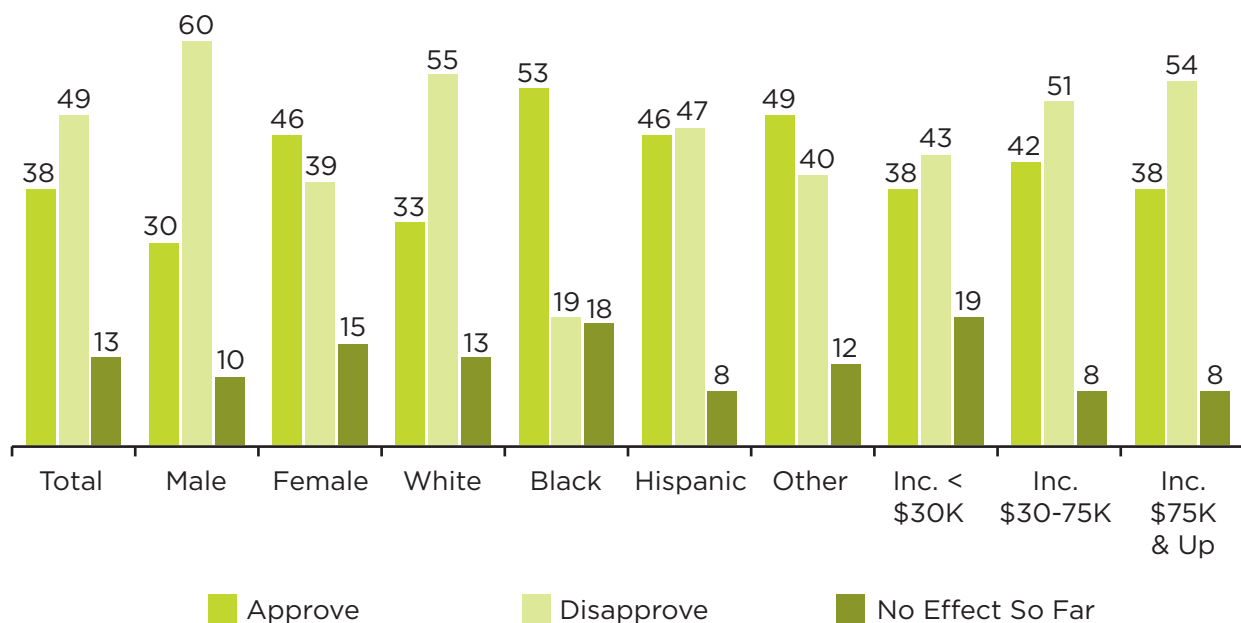
## The economic stimulus and recovery

Most Americans think that our economy is not in good shape, as shown in figure 6, and that it will take a while to recover. One out of two Americans says that it will be a long time before the economy improves, while only a minority of respondents across all groups believes the economy is now recovering. Whites are the most pessimistic, with about one out of two saying that it will be a long time before the economy recovers. Forty-three percent of those whites say that the economy will recover soon or is now recovering. Blacks, on the other hand, are the most optimistic of all groups (62 percent; “Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3–6, 2010).

Reflecting the gray views of the economy, many Americans think that the stimulus had no impact on the economy. Forty two percent say the stimulus will not help improve the economy at all while 38 percent think the it is already helping the economy improve (18 percent) or will help it improve in the future (20 percent), while (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Survey, May 2010).

Men first and foremost, and whites second-most, disapprove of “President Obama’s stimulus package” more than any other demographic group by about 10 and 5 percentage points, respectively (“Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3–6, 2010; see figure 9).

**FIGURE 9. DO YOU APPROVE OR DISAPPROVE OF BARACK OBAMA’S \$800 BILLION ECONOMIC STIMULUS PLAN PASSED BY CONGRESS LAST FEBRUARY?**



Source: “Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3–6, 2010.

Slightly more Americans think that the bailout, defined as “federal government loans to troubled banks and financial institutions,” did not help prevent a more severe economic crisis (49 percent) than those who say it did (42 percent; “Congressional Connection Poll,” Pew Research Center/*National Journal*, June 3–6, 2010).

Americans are even more critical of the impact of the stimulus on jobs, which is also a primary issue of discussion in mainstream media. Americans’ expectations for the job-targeted government investments have not been met. Although most people support publicly funded job creation programs (71 percent; “Survey on Financial Reform,” Benenson Strategy Group, 2009), by a ratio of 2 to 1, Americans think

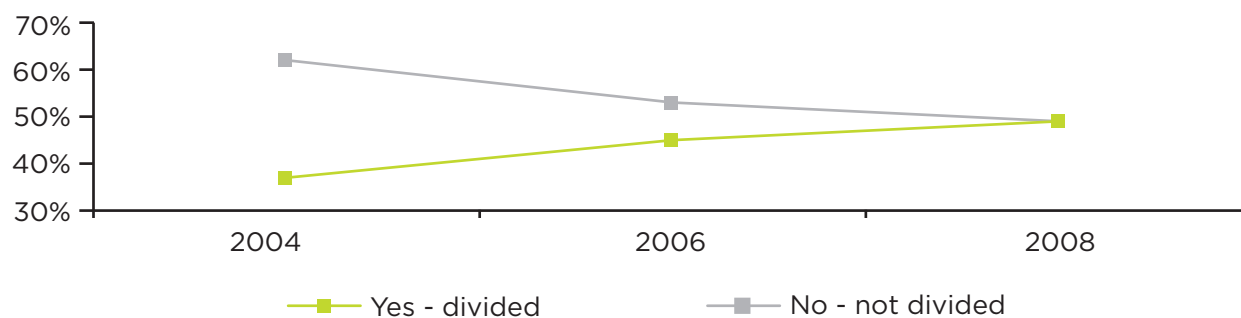
that the economic stimulus has not helped the “job situation.”

Recent polling indicates the public is still of two minds about whether the administration’s actions would help or hurt them: 37 percent think that “actions being taken by the Obama administration will increase opportunity for people like me to get ahead” while 34 percent think it will decrease their opportunities; the remaining one-fourth says these actions will have no impact on their opportunities (“Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll,” January 2010).

Perhaps this dichotomy exists because Americans (60 percent overall) think that the actions the federal government took in 2009 to respond to the financial crisis primarily benefited banks and investment companies (40 percent) and major corporations (20 percent). Only 17 percent think that middle-income (9 percent) or low-income people (8 percent) were the biggest beneficiaries.

Finally, there is evidence that the economic downturn has, to some extent, undermined Americans’ faith in the country’s economic system. According to Gallup, more people believe that America is a country of “haves” and “have-nots,” resulting in an equally divided electorate on this question for the first time in many years: 49 to 49 percent (“More Americans Say U.S. a Nation of Haves and Have-Nots,” June 5–July 6, 2008; see figure 10).<sup>16</sup>

**FIGURE 10. IS THE U.S. DIVIDED BETWEEN “HAVES” AND “HAVE-NOTS”?**



Source: “More Americans Say U.S. a Nation of Haves and Have-Nots,” Gallup Poll, June 5–July 6, 2008.

Most Americans (59 percent) place themselves in the “haves” column, and that percentage has not changed over the past several years in spite of the hike in unemployment. But significant differences in self-categorization emerge based on income, race, and ethnicity. Non-Hispanic whites are more than twice as likely to label themselves as “haves” than “have-nots” (64 percent vs. 26 percent). This contrasts with blacks and Hispanics, who are about evenly divided in their self-identification. None of these findings by race/ethnicity has changed much in recent years. As for income level, those with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 per year are much more likely to describe themselves as “have-nots” than any other group (“More Americans Say U.S. a Nation of Haves and Have-Nots,” Gallup Poll, June 5–July 6, 2008).<sup>17</sup>

## Government, Corporations, and the Individual in the Economy

Americans are skeptical about whether the government has a positive impact on their lives; they expect more. They generally believe the economy can be influenced by government actions (69 percent; “Community Voices on the Economy,” 2010) and a considerable majority thinks that the government has a role in confronting today’s economic problems.

<sup>16</sup> This part of the analysis was originally conducted for The Opportunity Agenda’s “Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on Reproductive Justice,” May 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## The role of government in today's economy

Americans generally believe the economy can be influenced by government actions (69 percent; “Community Voices on the Economy,” 2010); a considerable majority thinks that the government has a **role in confronting today's economic problems**. However, support for government intervention fluctuates based on its definition. Generally there is greater support for regulation of major financial institutions than for greater government control of the economy.

Overall, 62 percent of Americans agree that the government must play an active role **to ensure the economy benefits people like them, although 29 percent are not sure that they “can trust government to do this effectively”** (“Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll,” January 2010). Fifty-nine percent find it a good idea for “the government to more strictly regulate the way major financial companies do business” (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009). Finally, the one role for government that garners support from a vast majority of Americans is that it is needed to monitor issues (83 percent) such as financial fraud, environmental pollution, and workplace safety all the time (32 percent) or some of the time (51 percent; “Allstate/*National Journal*,” January 2010). The considerable support for government regulation and monitoring of the financial sector speaks to the role for government that is popular with most Americans—that of a “watchdog.”

Americans are also likely to think of the government as a “last resort” when someone or something fails, such as the poor, the unemployed or our financial system, than to think that it can play an important role in one's pursuit of happiness. Along with that sentiment goes Americans' elevation of personal responsibility. A majority thinks that achieving success in life and economic mobility are mostly dependent on personal attributes like hard work. Also indicative of this attitude is that “most people assume that new businesses and industries of the kind that drive economic growth are the product of creative and energetic individuals or companies—with little contribution from the government or policy” (“Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief,” 2009).

With regard to more government intervention, support drops to about 50 percent when it is defined as follows: “it's time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American” (50 percent) or “it is a good idea for the government to exert more control over the economy than it has in recent years” (49 percent; “Community Voices on the Economy,” 2010).

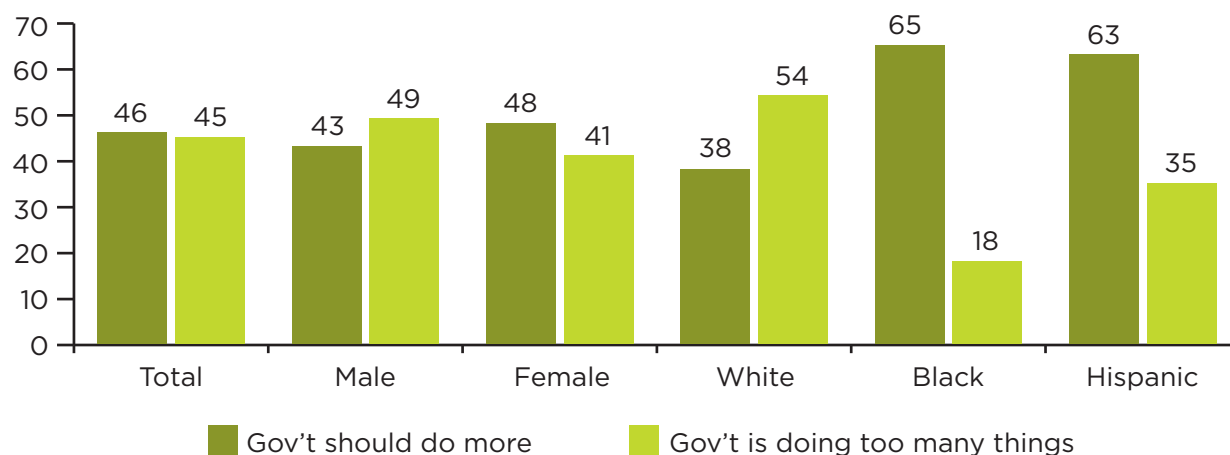
Opposition to government intervention remains steady in the low 30s percentile, with opposition driven by self-identified Republicans:

- ▶ Thirty-five percent of Americans say that the **“government is the problem, not the solution, to our economic problems,”** according to an “Allstate/*National Journal*” poll (January 2010).
- ▶ The statement that “turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good” is supported by an average 36 percent of Americans, according to the “Community Voices on the Economy Survey” (2010) and a 2009 Gerstein/Agne one, respectively.
- ▶ Forty-two percent think that it is a bad idea for the government to exert more control over the economy than it has in recent years (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” 2009).

People's ambivalence about the role of government in the economy extends to all aspects of life. Americans are divided on whether “the government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people,” with 46 percent thinking it should do more and 45 percent saying it is doing too many things better left to business and individuals (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” 2009). Blacks and Hispanics support more government action than any other group by at least 15 points. Additionally, blacks show the least opposition to government involvement by about half the level of any other group (see figure 11).

A consistent majority of Americans (63 percent) also believes that it is the responsibility of government to take care of “people who can’t take care of themselves.”

**FIGURE 11. SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT INTERVENE MORE TO TURN AROUND THE ECONOMY?**



Source: “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009.

### **Skepticism about the government and Washington to get the job done**

As previously discussed, a majority of Americans think that the government and the country’s leaders should intervene in the economy. However, they question whether government can be effective in that role.

Most Americans (72 percent) think that government has the best interests of the American people in mind either all the time (13 percent) or some of the time (59 percent), while a considerable 27 percent believe otherwise. Similarly, more people think the problem with government is that it runs its programs inefficiently (50 percent) more than that it has the wrong priorities (38 percent; Pew Research Survey, March 2010). However, the percentage saying government has the wrong priorities has increased sharply since 1997, from 29 percent to 38 percent, according to the tracking opinion polls by the Pew Research Center.

The ambivalence about whether the government can be effective is also reflected in the slight majority of Americans (54 percent) who think that the government is managed well only some of the time, while 30 percent think that it is never managed well (“Allstate/ *National Journal*,” January 2010).

At the same time, most Americans do not trust the government. A little more than one out of five can trust the government in Washington almost always or most of the time—among the lowest measures in a half-century (22 percent; March 2010, Pew Research survey). About the same percentage (19 percent) is “basically content” with the federal government, which is largely unchanged from 2006 and 2007 but lower than a decade ago. Given that people question the efficiency of the government more than its intentions, it might be the slow economic recovery that is to be blamed for this lack of trust. According to a longitudinal study by the Pew Research Center (March 2010), “there is considerable evidence that distrust of government is strongly connected to how people feel about the overall state of the nation. Distrust soars when the public is unhappy with the way things are going in the country.”

Related to this trend is a growing number of people saying that the federal government has a negative effect on their day-to-day lives: 38 percent view the federal government’s personal impact as positive while slightly more (43 percent) see it as negative. In October 1997, 50 percent said the federal

government had a positive effect on their daily lives, compared with 31 percent who said its impact was negative.

Opinions about elected officials are equally poor. Over the past year, favorable opinions of Congress have declined by half, from 50 to 25 percent (Pew Research Center, April 2010). This is the lowest favorable rating for Congress in a quarter-century of Pew Research Center surveys. President Obama's approval rating in June 2010 was at a better but still vulnerable standing (45 percent approval, 51 percent disapproval; average approval ratings; Pollster.com, June 2010.).

Regarding the two major parties, Americans are split on whether Democrats (41 percent) or Republicans (38 percent) are better at handling the economy. Responses to this question follow predictable lines, with more males, whites, and mid- and high-income respondents asserting that the Republican Party is better at handling the economy than the Democratic Party ("Political Survey", Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, February 2010).

## **Financial institutions**

While antigovernment sentiment has its own ideological and partisan correlation,<sup>18</sup> the public also expresses discontent with many of the country's other major institutions, including large corporations (64 percent) and banks and other financial institutions (69 percent), which are thought to have a negative impact on the country.

Voters tend to believe big banks and financial companies are reckless and greedy, that they helped cause the recession in order to profit at the expense of ordinary Americans:

- ▶ An average 73 percent of respondents agree with statements such as: "the banks are engaging in greedy and risky decisions" and "stopping at nothing to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of us" ("Survey on Financial Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, October 2009).
- ▶ Sixty percent think the banks have used the bailout money they received from the government to pay executive bonuses. (CBS/*New York Times*, February 2009).

## **Economic mobility and the American Dream**

Americans tend to think that reaching the dream or achieving success generally in life is mostly dependent on personal attributes like hard work.

The current condition of the American Dream scores a mediocre 4.5 on a 10-point scale. "Nearly half of Americans rate the Dream lower than a 5, with nearly a quarter assigning the lowest possible rating." The legacy of the dream is also scoring low: 60 percent believe that "it has become harder to reach the American Dream than it was for their parents' generation." Even more (68 percent) believe that "it will be harder still for their children to reach the Dream," with 45 percent thinking it will be much harder" (State of the American Dream Survey™, March 2010). African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, and younger Americans are more positive about the condition of the American Dream. Nonetheless, Americans overall are confident that they can reach the dream in their lifetimes (67 percent). When asked about the income ladder, Americans are split on whether it is easier or harder for them than their parents to move up (43 percent say it is easier; 46 percent, harder).

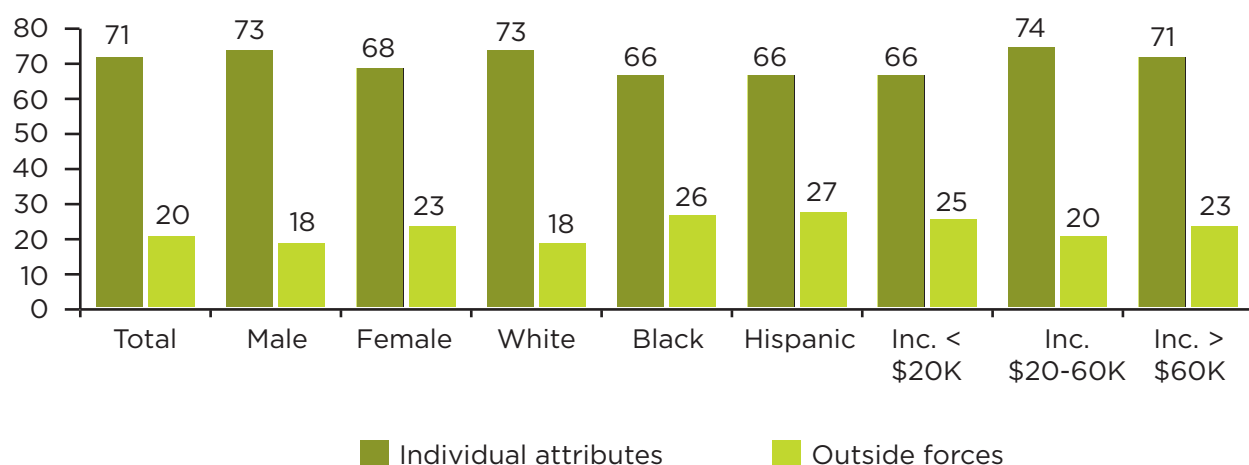
Three out of four Americans believe achieving the American Dream depends mostly upon hard work as opposed to luck or circumstances. That leaves little room for government to play a role or pave the way to one's reach of the American Dream. Similarly, by an overwhelming 71- to 21-percent margin,

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<sup>18</sup> "The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor" National Survey, by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, March 2010.

Americans think that personal attributes—hard work and drive—are more important to attaining economic mobility than external conditions—the economy and economic circumstances—when growing up (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009; see figure 12). When asked to rate the importance of different factors to economic mobility, hard work (92 percent), ambition (89 percent), staying healthy (83 percent), quality K–12 education (83 percent), and getting a good education (81 percent) top a list of 16 items. The state of the economy was ranked higher than other factors, but it was considered very important by 62 percent. Attitudes are similar across demographic groups except Hispanics (49 percent), who are more likely than African Americans (42 percent) or any other group to think that race is important.

**FIGURE 12. WHEN IT COMES TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS MORE IMPORTANT: THE INDIVIDUAL PERSON AND THINGS LIKE HARD WORK AND DRIVE, OR OUTSIDE FACTORS AND THINGS LIKE THE ECONOMY AND THEIR ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES GROWING UP?**



Source: “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009.

Personal attributes such as “poor life choices” and “too much debt” were the top explanations given for downward mobility (see table 2). However, when people were asked about which factors they personally worry about the most in terms of potentially moving down the economic ladder, the rising cost of living (23 percent) and losing one’s job were by far the most frequently selected answers.



TABLE 2. EXPLANATIONS GIVEN FOR DOWNWARD MOBILITY

Factors for Downward Mobility	Total %	Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp.	<20K	20K-60K	>60K
Poor life choices	25	25	25	29	14	18	17	32	31
Taking on too much debt	20	21	19	17	24	28	22	17	17
Lack of education	20	20	20	23	16	11	15	22	19
The overall economy	14	13	16	14	15	17	11	16	21
Not working hard enough	14	16	11	16	7	14	17	16	17
Reliance on gov't assistance	11	10	12	12	5	6	9	14	20
The cost of living	10	10	9	8	12	15	12	11	5

Source: "Pew Economic Mobility Survey," March 2009.

In a 2008 survey, most Americans considered failure to take advantage of available opportunities (62 percent) a greater problem for African Americans than discrimination by whites (21 percent; CNN/*Essence Magazine*/Opinion Research Corp., July 2008).

Evidently, Americans' elevation of individual responsibility is broad and even shared by those who face chronic systemic challenges to opportunity, including women, low-income people, blacks, and Hispanics.

However, people put more weight on the role that circumstances play in their life when they are asked to consider the economic reality of others (the question is framed in non-personal terms). To this end, only 43 percent think that Americans in general exercise at least some control over their economic situation compared to 74 percent who report they have control of their own situation—even in the midst of the recession. Similarly, Americans are split on whether circumstances beyond one's control (48 percent) or lack of effort are to blame for one's "failure" (48 percent); who is to blame if a person is poor? Americans have been evenly split on this question since 1998, but public opinion on this topic significantly fluctuated before that, as indicated in figure 13.

**FIGURE 13. WHO IS TO BLAME FOR BEING POOR?**

Sources: Gallup—1965–67, 1984, 1988–90; National Opinion Research Center—1969; CBS/*New York Times*—1982, 1994–95, 2000; *Los Angeles Times*—1992; Princeton Survey Research—1997; NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School—2001; The Opportunity Agenda/BRS Survey—2007.

## Equity Issues

Most Americans recognize that there are inequalities, as many experience or see them in their communities and want the government to tackle them—although government spending, one of the most familiar remedies for disparities, is not always popular. However, they are ambivalent about the existence of unequal opportunity in our current laws and systems.

### Economic disparities

Most Americans recognize that there are economic inequalities, whether they are gender- or race-based, and want the government to lead the way in eliminating or, at the least, reducing them.

According to the “Community Voices on the Economy Survey” (2010), most people strongly or somewhat agree that there are gender inequalities and, to a lesser extent, racial disparities in the economy right now. Seventy-four percent agree on the existence of gender inequalities and 64 percent of racial disparities.

Income differences in America are also considered too large (62 percent). An even greater majority feel strongly (50 percent) or somewhat strongly (19 percent) that the “government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor.” One-third disagrees and thinks that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income gap between the rich and the poor. When offered the option, most Americans say the existence of income inequality persists because it benefits the rich and powerful (54 percent to 24 percent who disagree; “General Social Survey,” 2008).

More Americans no longer see barriers to how far women can advance in the workplace (55 percent) than those who do (43 percent; “A Woman’s Nation Poll,” September 2009). This may inform why most people think it is only a minor problem that women are less likely than men to move up the income ladder over a generation (54 percent to 38 percent, who think it is a major problem; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009). It is worth noting that even among women, more find it a minor problem (52 percent to 44 percent).

On the other hand, a solid majority (64 percent) find it a major problem that “almost 50 percent of children of middle-income African Americans fall to the bottom of the income ladder as adults” to 34 percent who see it as a minor issue. Although the level of those saying it is a major problem is at least 60 percent across the demographic spectrum, African Americans support this statement and unify around it more than any other group (77 percent to 18 percent; “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009).

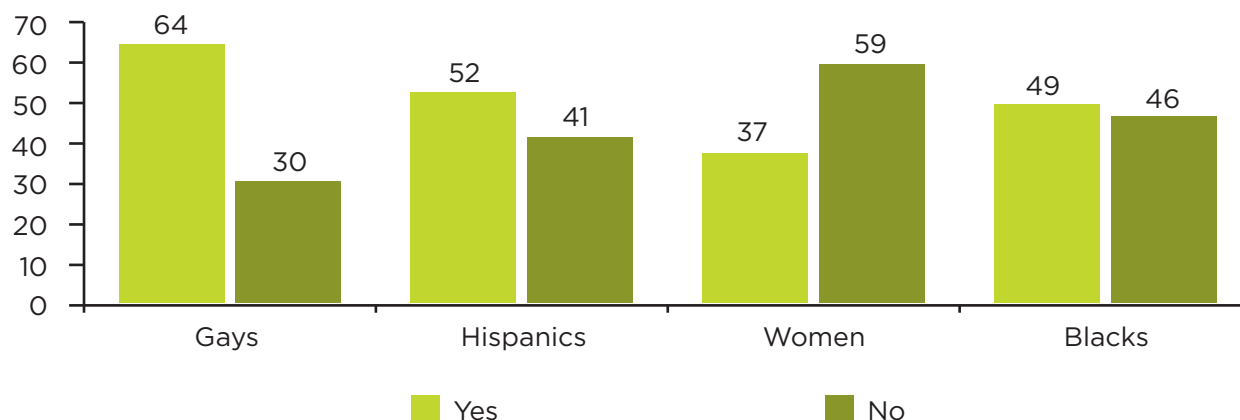
**Discrimination:** The existence of prejudice based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation in the United States today is by no means a universal truth for Americans. People are of two minds about the existence of systemic discrimination, which can lead to disparities, such as lack of economic mobility or poverty, which are generally renounced, as shown earlier in this report.

As shown in table 3 and figure 14, discrimination against gays and lesbians is the most universally perceived form of discrimination (64 percent). Discrimination against Hispanics follows, with 52 percent saying that it exists to 41 percent who disagree. Americans are split on the existence of prejudice against blacks: 49 percent think it exists, 46 percent do not. With respect to women, Americans across the board agree that women are not discriminated against (59 percent), although African Americans are divided on this (50 percent disagree it to 47 percent agree) (“Religion & Public Life Survey,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, August 2009).

**TABLE 3. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DIFFERENT GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES**

RACE		Total %	Male	Fem.	White	Black	Hisp.	<\$30K	\$30K-\$75K	>\$75K
In the U.S. today, is there a lot of discrimination against gays and lesbians?	Yes	64	60	68	60	83	66	65	65	65
	No	30	35	25	32	12	34	27	32	31
... discrimination against Hispanics?	Yes	52	52	52	46	57	76	55	51	47
	No	41	44	38	46	33	21	35	44	47
... discrimination against women?	Yes	37	30	44	33	47	41	44	36	32
	No	59	66	52	63	50	56	52	61	65
... discrimination against blacks?	Yes	49	44	54	43	78	54	50	51	49
	No	46	49	43	51	19	42	44	46	45

Source: “Religion & Public Life Survey,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, August 2009.

**FIGURE 14. IN THE U.S. TODAY, IS THERE A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST...?**

Source: ("Religion & Public Life Survey," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, August 2009).

Race relations are improving and perceptions of racial equality have increased in recent decades. Even though racism was an important predictor of the 2008 election outcome according to political scientists, the election of Barack Obama is a clear example of an attitude shift: An overwhelming majority of white Americans will consider voting for a black candidate. "Since the 1990's less than one out of ten white voters say that they are not willing to vote for a black candidate compared to one out of five saying so in the 1980's and three out of five in 1958." ("A Change Has Come," Bobo and Dawson, 2009).

Today, most Americans think that racism is a problem, whether a big or a somewhat big one: 85 percent of blacks and 72 percent of whites (*Washington Post/ABC News Polls*, January 2009). However, far fewer Americans (26 percent) think that racism is a big problem (one out of two blacks, one out of five whites).

The following opinion research data draw a relatively optimistic picture about the status of racial equality and relations in the United States today:

- ▶ Conflicts between blacks and whites are considered strong by far fewer whites (38 percent) than African Americans (53 percent) or Latinos (47 percent) ("2009 Values Survey," Pew Research Center, April 2009).
- ▶ Blacks and whites equally think that race relations will always be a problem in the United States (about 43 percent) ("2009 Values Survey," April 2009).
- ▶ Most think (73 percent) that African Americans have reached or will soon achieve racial equality (CBS News/ *New York Times* Poll, April 2009).

Sixty percent of Americans think that whites and blacks have "an equal chance of getting ahead." More blacks than ever before think they have an equal chance, but still not a majority of blacks believe this (44 percent; "Human Rights in the United States," The Opportunity Agenda/BRS Survey, 2007). The racial divide over the existence of discrimination against blacks is clearly demonstrated in the following attitudes:

"Blacks who live in your community . . ."

- ▶ have as good a chance as whites to get housing they can afford?" 81 percent of whites and 47 percent of blacks responded "yes."

- ▶ have as good a chance as whites to get a job for which they're qualified?" 83 percent of whites and 38 percent of blacks answered "yes."
- ▶ receive equal treatment as whites from the police?" 60 percent of whites and 22 percent of blacks said "yes."
- ▶ receive equal treatment as whites when they visit local businesses, such as stores, restaurants, or banks?" 83 percent of whites and 44 percent of blacks said "yes."

The data are drawn from a *Washington Post*/ABC News Poll taken on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration. More light on the recent opinions of blacks is shed by a Harris Poll (December 2008) conducted after Obama was elected president but before he took office. The survey demonstrates near unanimity among African Americans on the persistence of discrimination:

- ▶ Most African Americans believe that blacks are discriminated against in getting full equality (86 percent), which is virtually unchanged since 1969, when it was 84 percent.
- ▶ Most African Americans believe they are discriminated against by the way they are treated as human beings (77 percent compared to 82 percent in 1969).
- ▶ Most believe they are discriminated against in getting white-collar jobs (76 percent) and getting skilled labor jobs (74 percent).
- ▶ Most believe they are discriminated against in getting decent housing (76 percent) and in the wages they are paid (76 percent).

Lastly, there is a disconnect between what people think should be the standard practice and what they perceive as such in the United States. Eight out of 10 Americans (83 percent) strongly believe that equal opportunities regardless of race and freedom from discrimination are human rights that all are entitled to by virtue of their humanity.

## Disparities and Attitudes by Demographic Group<sup>19</sup>

**Women:** Are more sensitive to discrimination against their own sex, African Americans, and gays and lesbians. More women than men attribute poverty to circumstances beyond an individual's control.

With respect to the economy, women are particularly worried about health-care costs (37 percent), everyday expenses such as food and gas (25 percent), and "lack of jobs that pay a wage that allows you to support your family" (23 percent). Low-income women and single moms are especially worried about rising health-care costs (30 percent), jobs, and everyday expenses. The cost of everyday expenses is even more a concern for them (34 percent) than for the public overall (23 percent). Furthermore, several principles and goals for the economy that are more likely to be extremely important to women than to men include stability, family-friendly policies, and balance ("Community Voices on the Economy Survey," 2010).

**African Americans:** Are highly aware of the existence of discrimination against themselves and others and are the least likely to attribute poverty to "lack of effort." African Americans are safety-net champions—their support for government programs to help the needy exceeds that of all other groups. African American women are worried about rising health-care costs, everyday expenses, and the lack of jobs that pay a decent wage, "like much of the rest of America" ("Community Voices on the Economy Survey," 2010). More jobs with decent wages and benefits for low-income families are the number-one priority for African American women.

<sup>19</sup> Part of the analysis that follows was originally conducted for The Opportunity Agenda's "Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on Reproductive Justice," May 2010.

**Latinos:** Latino attitudes tend to fall somewhere between those of the general population and those of African Americans. They are more likely than the general public, but less likely than African Americans, to perceive “a lot of discrimination” against blacks and gays and lesbians. They are also more likely to perceive discrimination against their own ethnicity. Latinos seem more likely to attribute poverty to lack of effort than either African Americans or the public at large, but they are strong supporters of the government safety net.

“Latina women seem to be particularly hard hit, with two-thirds saying that their personal situation has been affected by the country’s economic situation, and more than half reporting that they or someone they know in their household has lost a job in the past year.” One in four Latinas says her first economic concern is losing her job. They are much more likely than African American women (13 percent) to cite this as their primary worry. Lower taxes is Latinas’ top priority for the economy (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010).

**Low-Income People:** Americans whose family income is less than \$30,000 perceive more discrimination against women than other groups, and they are more supportive of affirmative action programs. They are also more likely to attribute poverty to circumstances beyond an individual’s control, and they are strong supporters of the safety net.

## Moving Forward: Aspirations, Values, and Policy Goals for the Economy

Thinking of the road ahead, Americans have high aspirations for the economy and their own experience within the system. The themes of financial security, stability, accountability, opportunity, and individual responsibility prevail in the public’s agenda for the economy and in priorities for themselves in general. The concept of the common good is also important to Americans and prioritized over greed or self-interest by nearly all.

### Goals for the economy and the government

Previously in this report, we discussed the American Dream, which is believed to embody to a large extent the aspirations of people who live in this country. Most Americans today define the American Dream as opportunity, freedom, family, and financial security, followed by wealth, a good job, and home ownership, with variations on opinions by race or immigrant story (first- and second-generation immigrants compared to all adults in the United States).

Overall, Americans most commonly define the dream in terms of opportunity. White adults associate it primarily with freedom and financial security. Financial security also tops the list of middle-class, middle-aged whites and women. Family is mentioned most often by homemakers and working-class whites, particularly white women over 50.

Blacks, Latinos, other nonwhites, and recent immigrants define the dream mostly in terms of “tangible markers of financial well-being or a means of attaining the same: opportunity, home ownership, a good job, or wealth itself” (“State of the American Dream Survey<sup>TM</sup>”).

When asked generally about important qualities in one’s life, Americans across the board put financial security (98 percent) at the top, followed by “being self-sufficient and not having to depend on others (97 percent)” in a list of seven items, including having children, having a fulfilling job, being healthy, being married, or having religious faith (“A Woman’s Nation Poll,” September 2009).

With respect to the economy, accountability followed by security is the most important value to people. Other top-rated values include individual responsibility, opportunity, and playing by the rules, most of which, Americans say, do not describe the current economy well (“Community Voices on the Economy

Survey,” 2010; see table 4). Several principles and goals for the economy that are more likely to be extremely important for women than men include stability, family-friendly policies, and balance.

**TABLE 4. TOP-PRIORITY VALUES FOR THE ECONOMY AND FOR ONESELF**

Value	Mean (% 10/Extremely Important)		
	Total	Men	Women
Accountability	8.5 (54%)	8.4 (53%)	8.7 (56%)
Security	8.6 (53%)	8.6 (54%)	8.6 (53%)
Individual responsibility	8.5 (53%)	8.5 (54%)	8.5 (52%)
Opportunity	8.5 (50%)	8.4 (49%)	8.6 (51%)
Play by the rules	8.4 (50%)	8.3 (52%)	8.4 (48%)
Stability	8.3 (44%)	8.2 (41%)	8.5 (48%)
Everyone for themselves	3.6 (8%)	3.6 (9%)	3.5 (6%)
Mutual responsibility	8.0 (40%)	7.8 (36%)	8.2 (43%)

Source: “Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” February 2010.

As table 4 shows, individual responsibility is more important to people than mutual responsibility. In turn, collective or mutual responsibility is critical to supporting a strong role for government and for corporate as well as individual accountability in the current economic system.

The common good is prioritized by nearly all Americans, when framed by the idea that the government and corporations should “join with individuals to place it above greed” (87 percent) or emphasize the common good rather than a culture where everyone is in it for themselves (86 percent). Intensity of support for the latter position is slightly lower than in the former (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010).

In sum, people believe that “everyone for themselves” is the most descriptive but the least important trait of the economy. In a list of words and phrases, such as individual responsibility or accountability, that do not describe the economy well, “everyone for themselves” came last (28 percent thought it describes the economy well; “Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010).

## Government policies

*Improving economic mobility in the United States:* When asked to choose among a list of remedies that would improve mobility in this country (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” 2009), Americans unified around three: (1) keep U.S. jobs (81 percent), (2) make college more affordable (69 percent), and (3) reduce health-care costs (67 percent). It is worth noting that cutting taxes ranked twelfth in a list of 16 items (supported by 51 percent).

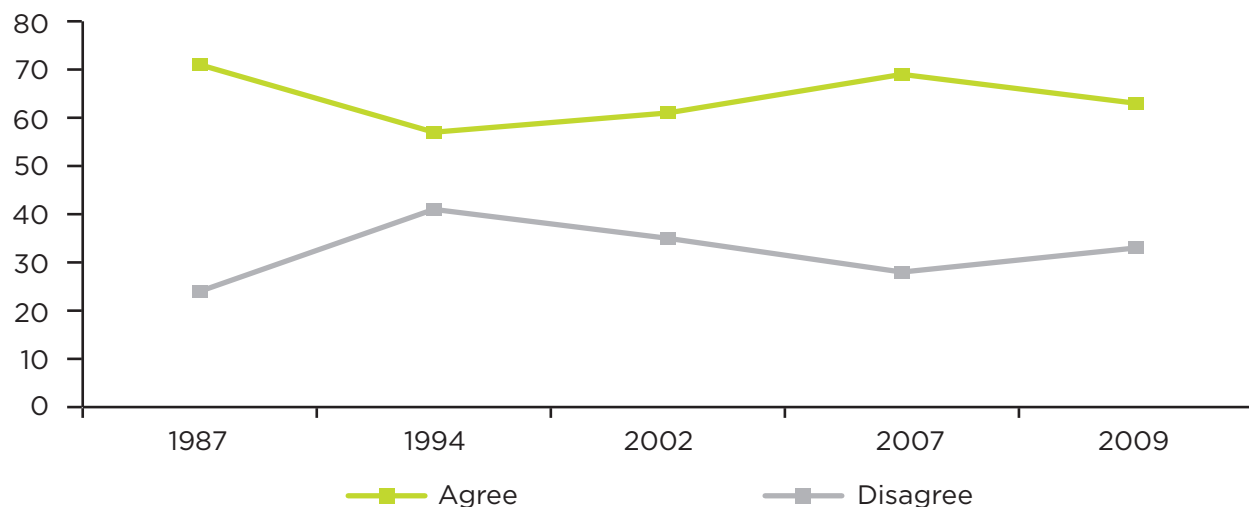
*Support for government safety net:* Public sentiment about a government safety net today is relatively positive. A consistent majority of Americans (63 percent) believes that it is the responsibility of government to take care of “people who can’t take care of themselves.” As figure 15 illustrates, there have been shifts in support for the social safety net. The all-time low was in 1994, at the time of the conservative ascendancy and the “Contract with America” (“Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2009,” Pew Research Center).

Majorities also agree that “government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to



sleep” (62 percent agree; 35 percent disagree) and that it should be “responsible for ensuring that its citizens can meet their basic need for food” (74 percent agree, 25 percent disagree; The Opportunity Agenda/BRS Survey, 2007) and education (83 percent agree, 16 percent disagree; “Americans on Socio-Economic Rights,” World Public Opinion, 2008). Support for the proposition that it is the government’s responsibility to “provide a job for everyone who wants one” is on less solid ground (36 percent agree, 63 percent disagree; The Opportunity Agenda/BRS Survey, 2007).<sup>20</sup>

**FIGURE 15. IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE CARE OF PEOPLE WHO CAN’T TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES.**



Source: “Key Findings from National Polling on Paid Sick Days and Paid Family and Medical Leave,” sponsored by the National Partnership for Women & Families.

Public support for government assistance diminishes when applied to more marginalized groups. For example, Americans think that “poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs” by a 72 percent to 22 percent margin (Pew Research Center). Although this majority has decreased from its high point of 85 percent in 1994 before “welfare reform” was adopted, it demonstrates the enduring strength of the public’s belief in overdependence by the poor.

*Affirmative action:* More Americans think that affirmative action programs are still needed (54 percent) than those who believe that these programs have gone too far and should be ended because they unfairly discriminate against whites (39 percent). Opinions vary dramatically based on race and ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, gender. Whites oppose these programs more than they support them. At the other end of the spectrum, African Americans by 10 to 1 and Hispanics by almost 4 to 1 agree they are needed; see table 5 (“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009).

**TABLE 5. IS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION STILL NEEDED?**

<b>Affirmative Action</b>	<b>Total %</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hisp.</b>
Still needed	54	51	56	42	81	74
Should be ended	39	43	35	51	8	19

Source: “Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” March 2009.

<sup>20</sup> This part of the analysis was originally conducted for The Opportunity Agenda’s “Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on Reproductive Justice,” May 2010.

*Workplace policies:* There is great support for a series of family-friendly policies in the workplace, including:

- ▶ A basic labor standard that would guarantee “all workers a minimum number of paid sick days to care for themselves or immediate family members (89 percent). A strong majority (71 percent) agrees that part-time workers should be included in paid sick day policies.
- ▶ Expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act to offer *paid* leave for a set number of weeks (76 percent) or that “business should be required to provide paid family and medical leave for every worker who needs it” (76 percent).
- ▶ Flexibility in employees’ work schedule (74 percent).
- ▶ More funding for childcare to support parents who work (67 percent).

A vast majority of Americans agrees that businesses that fail to adapt to the needs of modern families risk losing good workers.

These data are based on the Women’s Survey (“A Woman’s Nation Poll,” September 2009) and the Paid Sick Days and Paid Family and Medical Leave Survey (June 2007), sponsored by the National Partnership for Women and Families.

*Economic policy priorities:* Nearly all Americans think that the top priorities are not just creating jobs but creating **quality** jobs (91 percent) and **good-paying** jobs (90 percent). They also think that the following proposals are most likely to help the economy and are personally important to them (“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” 2010):

- ▶ More jobs with decent wages and benefits for low-income families: 73 percent say these are personally important and 88 percent believe that they would help the economy;
- ▶ More affordable education and training opportunities: 69 percent and 85 percent;
- ▶ Lower taxes: 71 percent and 79 percent;
- ▶ Equal pay and benefits for men and women: 74 percent and 79 percent;
- ▶ Health care that is more available and affordable and that is not dependent on your job: 72 percent and 75 percent; and
- ▶ Ending discrimination based on race, gender, and age: 63 percent.

Two out of three voters (66 percent) support raising income taxes on the wealthy—individuals making \$500,000 or more and households making \$1 million or more (“Bloomberg National Poll,” December 3–7, 2009).

*Government spending:* Connecting perceptions of disparities to possible remedies, Americans clearly believe—by a 9 to 1 margin—that government spending on assistance to the poor is too little rather than too much. However, when “assistance to the poor” is replaced with “welfare” in a question, support plunges: the share of those who agree that we do not spend enough drops from 70 percent to 25 percent, while the opposing statement bumps up to 38 percent support from 8 percent who think that spending on assistance to the poor is too much. This gap can be explained by the political and ideological weight of the word “welfare” (framing effect).

With respect to government spending on improving the conditions of blacks, Americans are ambivalent about whether more money should be spent on this priority similarly to their doubts about whether systemic challenges hold blacks back. Solid pluralities think that we spend just about the right amount (48 percent), while 38 percent say spending is too little.

# Strategic Recommendations for Advocates

## Recommendations

While the public mood is understandably gloomy, our research suggests a number of ways in which journalists, advocates, policymakers, and others can promote a better informed public discourse that builds support for greater and more equal opportunity in our economy.

*Media Strategies:* Changes in media outreach can create a more informed and accurate public debate that moves toward positive solutions:

- ▶ Within the context of the recovery process and economic inequalities, tell more stories about the direct impact of the recession on the lives of ordinary Americans. Without threatening the dominant thematic frame that benefits the discussion of social issues, drive home the issue of the economic recovery and the need for equality for people in terms that resonate better than figures and economic jargon.
- ▶ Encourage a less contentious and partisan discourse about the stimulus, which would help increase Americans' trust in government and embrace a larger role of government in the economy.
- ▶ Minimize historical appeals and colorblind arguments; avoid reducing all opposition to racism.

Narrative, Messaging, and Storytelling:

- ▶ Lead with values—opportunity, security, community. A large body of research shows that starting conversations with shared values instead of dry facts or argumentative rhetoric is more effective in building support for social justice. In this context, the most resonant values are **opportunity** (everyone deserves a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential), **security** (everyone should have the tools and resources to provide for themselves and their families), and **community** (that we are all in this together and share responsibility for each other and for the common good). Notions of equity, experience shows, are best expressed in terms of opportunity for all.
- ▶ Restore the American Dream, which most Americans want and feel they may be able to reach in their lifetimes. This is an important, overarching theme that can connect a range of issues, facts, and objectives. Americans are concerned that the American Dream, as they understand it, is in danger of slipping away.
- ▶ Promote an economy that works for all. Jobs and the economy are at the top of the list for Americans and news outlets. Illustrating how our issues and proposals are tied to this question and will assist the economy as a whole can increase interest, newsworthiness, and support.
- ▶ Suggest realistic solutions. Americans are in a problem-solving mood, despite their pessimism

about the role of government. Highlighting solutions that work over critiques and abstractions is likely to be more effective.

- ▶ Highlight solutions with high levels of support:
  - ✓ Equal pay and benefits for men and women.
  - ✓ More jobs with decent wages and benefits for low-income families.
  - ✓ More affordable education and training opportunities.
- ▶ Acknowledge the progress while highlighting the challenges and solutions. Acknowledging the nation's progress in securing equal opportunity is important in getting persuadable audiences to hear our subsequent points. That acknowledgment should be linked with specific evidence of barriers to equal opportunity and ways of overcoming them. Where possible, emphasize the causes of unequal opportunity, not just disparate outcomes.
- ▶ Talk about the greater, more essential "role" that government can play in the economy, but avoid talking about the government taking more "control" over it, which scores low with Americans.
- ▶ Refrain from emphasizing the role of government as a "safety net, which perpetuates Americans' dominant perception of it as a "last resort," rather than as the base that can contribute to without controlling one's pursuit of happiness.
- ▶ Avoid talking about "welfare" as one of the positive roles that government plays in our society. Support for welfare programs is low. If advocates have to talk about it, use alternative language, such as "assistance to the poor." Years of polling by the General Social Survey show higher support for "assistance to the poor" than support for spending on "welfare."
- ▶ Talk about the quality of jobs. The quality of jobs saved or created by the stimulus is rarely discussed in mainstream media. Rather, the focus is on the numerical success of job creation programs and the levels of job supply. Leverage the focus on jobs to talk about quality beyond quantity. Good jobs that offer a living wage and provide occupational safety and health are necessary for a healthy, productive, and competitive society.
- ▶ Make government's positive role visible. The structural role that government plays in the economy in terms of rules, like consumer protection; initiatives like FDIC insurance or Social Security; enforcement, like fraud prosecutions; and innovations, like the Internet; is largely invisible in today's reporting and in the public mind. Stories that illustrate that role in concrete terms can create a more balanced understanding of the public role.
- ▶ Over-document and accentuate the unequal barriers to economic opportunity. While there is some reporting on racial, ethnic, and gender disparities, there is a need for more, particularly stories that document and explain the unequal barriers facing different groups and communities. For instance, mapping geographical access to jobs, transportation, or other opportunities experienced by different communities can illustrate systemic and unequal obstacles that have systemic solutions.
- ▶ Highlight success stories. Many audiences are concerned about overall joblessness and even unequal opportunity, but see no actionable solutions. Pitching or covering stories about initiatives that are working on the ground can both inform and inspire problem solving in other places.

- Show the connections. Americans increasingly understand intuitively that we are all in this economic crisis together. But there is a need to highlight the considerable evidence and examples that document it. Research linking inequality to a weaker overall economy, for example, or inner-city initiatives that have revitalized an entire metropolitan area. Help to communicate this important reality.

Conveying a mixed reality on the stimulus media coverage has tended to depict either significant success or abject failure of the *Recovery Act*. More stories are needed that convey the more complex reality: that the stimulus has been important to averting wholesale economic disaster, but has failed to reach many groups of Americans fully or equally.

While the thematic framing of the economy has been helpful in directing attention to systemic causes and solutions, print coverage has often lacked a human face and, therefore, may have failed to convey the urgency that Americans are feeling. Stories should include people who are affected by the economy in ways that inform the systemic story; for example, participants in job training programs or those passed over for them; workers sidelined by public transportation cuts; or teachers whose jobs were saved by recovery efforts.



# Appendix

## Coding System for Media Content Analysis

The coding protocol of the media analysis was designed to reveal how key news media are interpreting the current economic moment. We coded news source, data source, story headline, writer/reporter, story type (news or opinion), people quoted or spokespeople, framing of story (thematic or episodic), dominant conservative or progressive narrative content, and demographic group reference.

A description of the coding protocol follows.

### Type of article

- ▶ News
- ▶ Opinion (Op-Ed and Editorial)

### Sources/Spokespeople

- ▶ Administration: President Obama and other federal government officials, state and local government officials
- ▶ Business leader
- ▶ Academic, economist, or other expert
- ▶ Individual (ordinary people)
- ▶ Advocate (Progressive or Conservative)
- ▶ Elected officials by party affiliation

**Reporter/Writer position** toward the role of government (pro or against an active role of government in the economy or indefinable)

### Framing

- ▶ Systemic
- ▶ Episodic

### Storylines (Primary and Secondary Topics)

- ▶ Jobs
- ▶ Abuse in the stimulus process, political process, or banking system
- ▶ Stimulus spending: Allocation and impact of funds; short- and long-term investment in the economy and the country.
- ▶ Equity and disparities in the economic recovery
- ▶ Elections
- ▶ Budget deficit
- ▶ State and federal governments on the allocation of *Recovery Act* funds
- ▶ Partisanship and legislative debate



- ▶ Transparency, open government, [recovery.org](http://recovery.org)
- ▶ Foreclosures (subprime mortgage market, which communities are affected)
- ▶ Role of government (see op-ed on [activist.gov](http://activist.gov))

## **Narratives**

- ▶ Inclusive economic recovery for all
- ▶ Interconnectedness of communities
- ▶ Attribution of causal and treatment responsibility for the economic challenges to the government: The *Recovery Act* was necessary
- ▶ Antigovernment spending and “waste” of resources
- ▶ The *Recovery Act* is effective
- ▶ The *Recovery Act* is not effective; strong criticism
- ▶ The *Recovery Act* is working, but it is not enough

## **Reference to Demographic Groups**

- ▶ African American
- ▶ Latino/Hispanic
- ▶ Asian American
- ▶ Poor
- ▶ Middle class
- ▶ Women
- ▶ Immigrants
- ▶ Disabled

# Public Opinion and Media Research Sources

“Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll,” January 2010.

“Americans on Socio-Economic Rights Questionnaire,” by World Public Opinion.Org. 1,174 adults nationwide, August 9–20, 2008.

“Bloomberg National Poll,” by Seltzer & Co., December 3–7, 2009.

Lawrence D. Bobo and Michael C. Dawson, “A Change Has Come: Race, Politics, and the Path to the Obama Presidency,” *DuBois Review* 6(1):1–14 (2009).

“BRS Survey” (see “Human Rights in the United States: Findings from a National Survey”)

“CBS News/*New York Times* Polls,” by CBS News and the *New York Times*. Multiple nationwide surveys conducted throughout 2008–2010.

“CBS News/NY Times Survey Poll” by CBS News and the *New York Times*. This poll was conducted among a random sample of 973 adults nationwide and included an oversample of African Americans. April 22–26, 2009.

CNN/*Essence* Magazine/Opinion Research Corp., July 2008.

“Community Voices on the Economy Survey,” by Lake Research Partners for the Ms. Foundation and the Center for Community Change. The survey included oversamples of African American women, Latinas, low-income women, and single moms. Conducted January 19–February 3, 2010.

“Congressional Connection Poll,” by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, *National Journal*, and the Society for Human Resource Management. 1,002 telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. (Sample: national adult.) June 3–6, 2010.

“Framing Budgets and Taxes: A FrameWorks Message Memo,” by Susan Nall Bales for the FrameWorks Institute, June 2009.

“General Social Survey (GSS),” by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Based on 2,023 personal interviews. (Sample: national adult. Part of a continuing series of social indicators conducted since 1972. The weight WTSSALL was used for the responses presented here. The study includes a national cross-section of the 2,023 cases, which is used here.) April 17–September 13, 2008.

“The Harris Poll,” 2,388 adults nationwide, December 9–15, 2008.

“Human Rights in the United States: Findings from a National Survey” (“BRS Survey”), sponsored by The Opportunity Agenda, conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS). 1,633 adults nationwide with oversamples of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, June 20–July 8, 2007.

Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1991.

“Key Findings from National Polling on Paid Sick Days and Paid Family and Medical Leave,” sponsored by the National Partnership for Women & Families, conducted by Lake Research Partners. 1,200 likely voters nationwide, June 20–27, 2007.

“Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on Reproductive Justice,” by The Opportunity Agenda, May 2010.

“More Americans Say U.S. a Nation of Haves and Have-Nots,” by the Gallup Poll. 1,935 adults nationwide with oversamples of African Americans and Latinos, June 5–July 6, 2008.

“NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll,” by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*. 1,000 telephone interviews conducted by Hart and McInturff Research Companies. (Sample: national adult including an oversample of Hispanics. The sample included 100 cell phone-only respondents. 200 Hispanics were interviewed. Results were weighted to be representative of a national adult population.) May 6–10, 2010.

“News Coverage Index,” by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008.

“The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor,” National Survey, by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, March 2010.

“Pew Economic Mobility Survey,” by the Pew Economic Mobility Project, an Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts. 2,119 telephone interviews conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research & Public Opinion Strategies. (Sample: national adult with oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, and youth under age 40. Results were weighted to be representative of a national adult population.) January 27–February 8, 2009.

“Political Survey,” by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 1,383 telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. (Sample: national adult; 1,024 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 359 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 132 who had no landline phone.) February 3–9, 2010.

“Polling and Message Research Landscape Scan,” by Jenifer Fernandez Ancona for the New Majority Campaign Coalition, February 2010.

Pollster.com: Job approval ratings on President Obama. June 2010.

“Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief,” by the Topos Partnership for Public Works: the Demos Center for the Public Sector, Alex Aubrun, Meg Bostrom, and Joe Grady, October 2009.

Public Opinion Monthly: Tracking Attitudes toward Opportunity,  
[http://opportunityagenda.org/public\\_opinion/january2010](http://opportunityagenda.org/public_opinion/january2010).

“State of the American Dream Survey™,” Xavier University Institute for Politics and the American Dream, March 2010.

“Survey on Financial Reform,” by the Benenson Strategy Group. The survey findings were provided to The Opportunity Agenda by the New Majority Campaign Coalition and Jenifer Fernandez Ancona, September 30–October 4, 2009.

“Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2007,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, March 22, 2007.

“*Washington Post/ABC News Poll.*” 1,079 adults with an oversample of African Americans, January 13–16, 2009.

“A Woman’s Nation Poll,” by *Time* and The Rockefeller Foundation. 3,413 telephone interviews conducted by Abt SRBI. (Sample: national adult including oversamples of blacks and Hispanics. The sample included 446 African Americans and 383 Hispanics. Results were weighted to be representative of a national adult population. The results of this survey appeared in “The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything.”) August 31–September 15, 2009.

World Public Opinion (see “Americans on Socio-Economic Rights Questionnaire”)

“2009 Religion & Public Life Survey,” by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. 2,010 telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. (Sample: national adult. 1,510 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 500 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 174 who had no landline phone.) August 11–17, 2009.

“2009 Values Survey,” by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 1,507 telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. (Sample: national adult. 1,132 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 375 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 129 who had no landline phone.) April 14–21, 2009.



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