



# Preserving the American Dream for All

## *Talking About Solutions for an Equitable Economic Recovery*

September 22, 2010

This memo offers communications ideas and guidance around messaging to promote an equitable economic recovery that includes all Americans. It is based on analysis of recent public opinion research and media coverage on economic issues, as well as strategic communications principles.

To ensure that we create and sustain an economy that works for everyone as we emerge from the economic crisis, we must make the case to the American people that recovery efforts should be equitable, fair, and transformational. To move the national conversation toward support for an equitable economic recovery, we recommend a shared narrative that emphasizes restoring the **American Dream** through **commonsense policy solutions** that **strengthen our country** by creating economic opportunity for all.

### *Lead with Values*

#### **Primary Values:**

- ▶ Opportunity and Equality: Everyone deserves a fair chance to reach his or her full potential, and what you look like or where you live shouldn't determine the benefits you receive or burdens you bear in society.
- ▶ Community and the Common Good: We're all in it together, and we all share responsibility for the good of our society.
- ▶ Security: We should all have the basic tools and resources to provide for ourselves and our families.

#### **Secondary Values:**

- ▶ Mobility: Where you start out in life should not determine where you end up.
- ▶ Redemption/Renewal: People grow and change, and deserve a second chance after missteps or misfortune.
- ▶ Voice: We should all have a say in decisions that affect us.
- ▶ Accountability: People, institutions, and government must act responsibly and be answerable for their actions. *Use this value with care, as it can be turned around to focus on individual actions and punishment to the detriment of our larger messages.*



## *Organize Messages Around a Core Narrative*

To shape public dialogue, we have to tell a bigger story, rooted in shared values, that engages the American people as well as policymakers. To create such a narrative we recommend using the following broad themes to paint a larger picture about why equitable economic recovery matters for us all.

- ▶ **The American Dream.** This country stands for opportunity. We need to focus on expanding opportunity, not restricting it or allowing historic barriers to foster inequality among us. The American Dream is central to our country's success, and we can't let the current economic crisis force it into obscurity. Economic security and stability, too, are crucial to securing the Dream for ourselves and future generations.
- ▶ **Solutions.** We have emerged from crises before by relying on American ingenuity and know-how, so it is within our power as a people not only to bring our economy back from this recession but also to tackle the inequalities that excluded many communities before the downturn began. We need to move forward, with government paving the way, on a commonsense, practical agenda that expands opportunity for everyone here.
- ▶ **The National Interest.** The causes and effects of this economic crisis have illustrated how we are truly all in this together. When we allow inequality to fester and harm whole communities within our national fabric, it weakens us all. Recovery needs to be about mending and strengthening the entire cloth, so that we are prepared to face the future together.

## *Additional Themes and Considerations*

**Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.** The public, policymakers, and the media are all hyper-focused on unemployment and want to know that any potential policy solution will address that situation. We can leverage this concern by highlighting the need for good jobs that will support America's families, and by pointing out that creating jobs should be a top priority, even over deficit reduction for the time being.

**A positive role for government.** Talking about government can be tricky, given the popular narrative of "big government's" inability to solve problems. But holding up the government's regulatory and investment role, as well as its past successes, is crucial to building support for further intervention. For instance, we should make the point that economists agree that government intervention in the form of the stimulus has actually been successful, if insufficient. Other ways to talk about government include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Public structures</li><li>✓ Protector of opportunity</li><li>✓ Planner for the future</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Connector of Americans</li><li>✓ "Paving the way" for enterprise and innovation.</li></ul>
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**Acknowledge progress on equal opportunity**, while *over-documenting* the barriers left to address. Whenever we talk about inequalities, it is important to talk about the positive steps we have made in this country as well as where we need to go. The election of an African American president, among other things, convinces some that our work to address inequality is done. We need to explain why and how this is not the case, providing solid data and examples showing the barriers to opportunity and how we can knock them down.

**Tell thematic stories**, connecting human stories to systemic problems and solutions. *Show* how we're interconnected across communities, groups, and systems. Without sufficient context, audiences can limit a story's implication to the individual level, attributing successes and failures to personal responsibilities and actions that have little to do with the system-level change we are seeking in our immigration system. We therefore suggest balancing powerful individual stories with the systemic implications they help to illustrate. Doing so highlights the solutions we are hoping the public will embrace.

**Frame the opposition.** While we do not suggest leading with divisive rhetoric, it is important to have messages ready to show the contrast between our approach and solutions, and those who oppose them. When doing so, we can make the case that our opponents are focusing more on anger than solutions and are divisive, impractical, and partisan—too much anger, too few solutions. Their approach can be described as promoting a “you’re on your own” mentality, as well as short-sighted ideas that are counter to our national interest, and out of touch with everyday Americans.

### *Themes to Avoid*

**Avoid trashing government as inherently ineffective or corrupt.** We need to restore the public's faith in government and effective government solutions, not fuel the fire. Instead, talk about an American can-do attitude and how government can support it.

**Avoid leading with divisive rhetoric or accusations of racism**, which are unlikely to start a productive conversation with persuadables. Instead, talk about the American Dream and how inequality, particularly that which is based on what we look like or where we come from, is a threat to it.

**Avoid using a colorblind frame.** We want to emphasize that we need an economy that works for all, but that does not mean that the solutions can be one-size-fits-all. Different communities were at different levels of disadvantage before the crisis, so boosting everyone in the same way will only exacerbate those existing inequalities. This both violates our values and hurts the entire country. We need to address the cause and effect of historic, and recent, barriers to opportunity.



**Avoid raising the threat of crime or violence due to tough economic times.** This just reinforces unhelpful stereotypes about low-income and poor people. Instead, lead with the need for investments in education and other public structures, which benefit our communities.

**Avoid competition for scarce resources, or “leveling the playing field,”** which underscores the notion that someone has to win, while others lose. We need to find solutions that work for everyone. There is room, however, to talk about how greater and more equal opportunity will serve the nation’s need to compete in a global economy.

**Avoid emphasizing punishment for irresponsible behavior.** While it is true that those responsible for the economic crisis should be held accountable, making this a main theme of communications can backfire, as many have tried to shift blame to low-income communities and people of color. Instead, emphasize the need for commonsense regulation to prevent future crises.

**Avoid myth-busting.** There is a lot of misinformation in the public dialogue about the crisis and its causes. Some have attempted to blame poor people’s desire to own homes, for instance. However, there is evidence that simply refuting an assertion will not change people’s views and can instead further implant the wrong information in their minds. Worse, restating a myth can plant it for the first time with those who have not heard the misinformation before. An affirmative approach that states the real facts about the causes of the economic crisis is more effective.

## *Applying the Message*

In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message in a variety of settings, we recommend building messages by including **Value, Problem, Solution, Action** elements. Leading with this structure can make it easier to transition into more complex or difficult messages.

**Value:** Keeping the ladder of opportunity sturdy for everyone in our country is crucial to America’s future, and to a lasting economic recovery.

**Problem:** But despite the progress we’ve made toward equal opportunity for all, far too many Americans are unplugged from decent jobs, fair mortgage lending, or a shot at running a business. For instance, women in our state earn just 77¢ for every dollar that men earn, and women of color earn only 66¢ per dollar. That’s bad for our economy, and contrary to our national values.

**Solution:** Commonsense laws that protect equal opportunity are one important way to ensure that everyone has a chance to achieve economic security and contribute to our region’s economy. We should adopt those laws, along with others like loan counseling and worker re-training that also strengthen our economy.



**Action:** Host a community meeting or write a letter to the editor supporting an Opportunity Action Plan for our state, including strong equal opportunity protections.

### *Talking Point Suggestions*

*Our country is strongest when it protects opportunity for all. Recovery efforts need to focus on how to preserve and promote the American Dream for everyone. Anything less is bad for all of us.*

*We need an economy that works for everyone, with new, fair rules for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. This is about investing in our nation's future. Turning back the clock to pre-crisis conditions is not sufficient; we need a transformational recovery that moves all communities, particularly those that were hurting before the downturn even began.*

*America has the know-how to find the right solutions for the economy, and we have the determination to topple the barriers to full and equal opportunity. We have to renew our commitment to tackling these tough problems while redoubling our efforts to preserve our ideals of equality and a fair chance for everyone.*

*It's time for innovative, practical solutions that work, not divisive politics. Research and experience show what works in this area and what doesn't. Economists agree that we need to tackle jobs and the recession first, then turn to the deficit. The best way to reduce the deficit is to put Americans back to work, so they can buy goods and pay taxes.*

### **TALKING EQUITABLE ECONOMIC RECOVERY AT-A-GLANCE**

- ▶ **Lead with values.** Primary: Opportunity, Community/Common Good, Security. Secondary: Mobility, Redemption/Renewal, Voice, Accountability (use with care)
- ▶ Organize messages around a **core narrative** focused on **The American Dream, Solutions, and the National Interest**.
- ▶ **Focus on jobs:** Investment in quality jobs over immediate deficit reduction.
- ▶ **Acknowledge progress on equal opportunity**, while over-documenting barriers.
- ▶ **Emphasize Government** as a connector, planner, able to pave the way for progress.
- ▶ **Tell thematic stories**, connecting human stories to systemic problems and solutions.
- ▶ **Frame the opposition's solutions as** divisive, impractical, and out of touch.