



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

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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.

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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”¹ 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

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,² 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).

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.³ 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.

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.