



## African Americans and Immigration:

- Summary of May 2009 Focus Groups Findings<sup>1</sup>
- Message Guidance

*Different audiences are more alike than they are different.*  
-Lake Research Report

This memo lays out recent research with African American audiences and offers ideas about talking with them about immigration reform. However, it should be noted that while there do exist some strategies for talking effectively to African American audiences in particular, the key strategy should be to stay with the overall campaign narrative of **workable solutions, values, and moving forward with urgency and leadership.**

### African American Focus Group Participants:

- Are firmly in a problem and solution-oriented frame of mind;
- Generally support immigration reform, but – along with U.S. born Latino and progressive white voters – are not in a punitive mood and reject harsher aspects of any proposal;
- Motivated by values of Equality and Fairness:
  - Equality: No group or nationality of immigrants ought to be treated differently than any other.
  - Fairness: Both fairness to immigrants and fairness to American citizens. The system treat people fairly but should not allow immigrants to collect benefits or receive opportunities that citizens cannot get (which they believe to be happening).
- Do not know much about the immigration system, laws, and specific problems, even those who are highly attentive and engaged;
- Have little appetite for restrictionist or xenophobic rhetoric;
  - But do not perceive the existence of an extreme or ideological debate. Explicitly linking anti-immigrant voices to racist or other extreme groups will probably only work with very attentive or sophisticated audiences.
- Draw clear distinctions between documented and undocumented immigrants;
  - Largely favorable views of legal immigrants; some concern that they get benefits African Americans do not.
  - Worry that undocumented immigrants are straining public systems, lowering wages, providing too much competition for jobs. Strong belief that they get benefits African Americans do not.
- Tend to believe that immigrants *should* learn English, but not necessarily that it be a requirement;
- Recognize that undocumented workers are often exploited and almost universally consider employers to be more at fault than their undocumented workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Lake Research Partners conducted eight focus groups in Seattle, Chicago, Richmond, and New York with African American, U.S.-born Latino, and progressive white audience. The groups occurred on May 11, 18, 20, and 21 respectively. This summary focuses on findings with African American voters.



## Successful Messages

### Overall:

*When it comes to immigration, we need workable solutions that uphold our nation's values, and move us forward together. We need to fix our system so that individuals who contribute and participate can live in the United States legally. That means creating a system where undocumented immigrants can register, get legal, learn English, and apply for citizenship.*

### Tailoring for African American Audiences

- Focusing only on wrongs to immigrants can sometimes draw resentment from African American audiences who feel that their communities continue to experience many of the same wrongs, but that no one cares.
- African Americans see their story and place in America as unique and do not like the idea that messages might attempt to “piggyback” onto the Civil Rights movement.
- Any message that singles out black people or treats them as somehow separate from other Americans is likely to be perceived as patronizing.
- More successful among African Americans was a populist, anti-corporate message that pins the blame for the still broken system on the appetite of big business for cheap, easily controlled labor. (However, it should be noted that this message did poorly with college-educated white voters who saw it as un-Obama like. So it won't work in instances where messages are meant for broader consumption)

*It just doesn't make sense that we could have an immigration system that's been broken for so long when Americans want it fixed. One reason for this is that Big Business likes cheap labor that they can control. We need a system that protects workers from exploitation and allows us to all rise together. What we don't need is those with only an eye on greed and profit dictating how the immigration system should work.*

- Messengers are key. The strongest messenger in support of comprehensive reform and immigrants in general is President Obama. To be consistent with language the president is likely to use, it will be best to avoid more confrontational language.

*One of President Obama's central messages has been that our policies must recognize that we're all in it together, with common rights and responsibilities. As a candidate, Obama promised to pass comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office because he understood that our broken immigration system does not reflect those American values. Now it's time for us to stand with him against the forces of intolerance who would rather play politics with people's lives than solve real problems.*

For more information and guidance about immigration communications, including long term opinion trends and media analyses, go to <http://opportunityagenda.org/category/tags/immigration>.

*The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to [www.OpportunityAgenda.org](http://www.OpportunityAgenda.org). The Opportunity Agenda is a project of the Tides Center.*