



The **Opportunity** Agenda
Moving Hearts, Minds, and Policy for Lasting Change

Public Perceptions and Attitudes Relevant to The Racial Wealth Gap

An Analysis of The Opportunity Agenda's *Opportunity Survey* of the U.S. Public

Introduction

Building public support to close the racial wealth gap requires a nuanced understanding of existing attitudes, as well as challenges and opportunities for change. This memo draws on the findings of the Opportunity Survey—a national study of public opinion commissioned by The Opportunity Agenda—to examine those attitudes, and to chart a path forward. It covers basic values, as well as views on discrimination, housing, the role of government, and other relevant issues.

Survey Methodology

Administered by Langer Research Associates, the Opportunity Survey was conducted between February 4 and March 10, 2014, among a random national sample of 2,055 respondents. The survey oversampled very low-income adults (those living below 50 percent of the federal poverty line), African American men, and Asian Americans—groups whose voices are frequently overlooked in opinion polling. And it includes a special analysis of the views of the rising American electorate—Millennials, people of color, and unmarried women—who have increasingly greater sway in elections. Respondents whose first language is Spanish had the option to take the survey in that language. The research also includes a cluster analysis that identifies the demographic characteristics, personal experience, values, and core beliefs that predict support for social justice policies and motivate people to action.

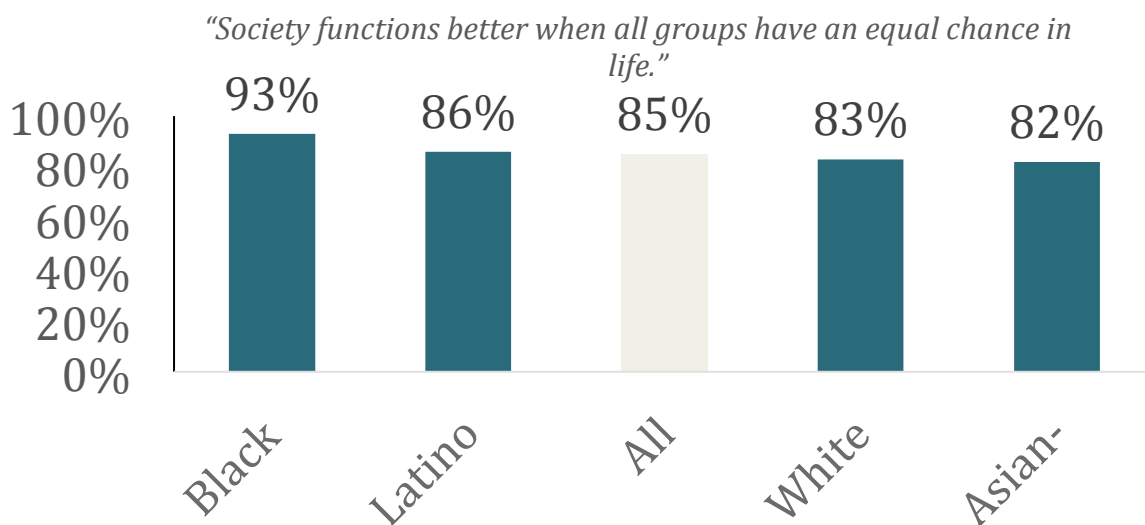
Major Findings

1. Americans Deeply Value Opportunity and Equality

The notion of opportunity is at the core of the American ethos. It evokes the belief that each person in our country can and should receive equal treatment, have a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential, enjoy economic security, and have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

In a broad endorsement of opportunity principles, an overwhelming 85 percent of Americans feel that society functions better when all groups have an equal chance in life, including 57 percent who feel this way strongly. Only 15 percent say it's better to have "some groups on top and others on the bottom." Likewise, just one in 10 calls it entirely acceptable for one group to have more opportunities in society than others, while slightly more than six in 10 call this unacceptable, including 23 percent who say it's entirely unacceptable.

These numbers reveal that Americans are deeply concerned with inequality, and the feeling that it is incompatible with their vision of American society and damaging to broader well being. Diving even further, the Opportunity Survey finds that seeing group inequalities as unacceptable is one of the top predictors of perceiving discrimination against groups as serious, seeing more discrimination in housing, supporting measures to address poverty and a path to citizenship, and being willing to act on a range of social policy issues.



At the same time, most Americans recognize threats to the ideals of opportunity and equality as well, with just 37 percent saying that society currently offers equal opportunities to most or all groups, while as many, four in 10, say just some or only a few groups have an equal chance to succeed. (The rest, a quarter, take the middle position, saying "a good number" have equal opportunities.)

While audiences may be split on how much opportunity is available, perceptions of inequality are widespread: nine in 10 Americans in the Opportunity Survey see unfair treatment of at least one minority group as a serious problem. Leading the list by a wide margin, 75 percent of the public views unequal treatment of poor people as a serious problem, including 35 percent who see it as "very" serious. Fifty-two to 60 percent see a

serious problem in unequal treatment of eight other groups tested, including people who have served a prison sentence, undocumented immigrants, black men, black women, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, women overall and Latinos.

Additionally, sixty percent of Americans report sometimes or often experiencing unfair treatment themselves because of their membership in one or more groups. Most prevalent, four in 10 say they've been treated unfairly because of their economic class. Three in 10 report the same based on their gender (32 percent) or their race or ethnicity (31 percent).

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap messaging: Leverage Americans' veneration for equality of opportunity by portraying economic gaps as a threat to that value. Emphasize how it should matter to all of us when we allow such gaps to persist. Show and tell how we're all in it together when it comes to economic opportunity, security, and mobility.

2. Perceptions of Equal Opportunity and Discrimination Vary by Group

Personal experience of unfair treatment because of one's group memberships has a profound impact on a person's attitudes about discrimination overall. Those reporting unfair treatment themselves are more likely than others to perceive unjust treatment of groups in general as a serious problem, to recognize discrimination in housing, and to say they'd take a variety of specific actions on behalf of issues and groups that are important to them.

Yet, simply having experiences with unfair treatment does not automatically translate to concern for other groups' experiences with it. Group members are substantially more likely than others to regard unequal treatment of their own group as a serious concern.

Eighty-three percent of black women and 79 percent of black men see discrimination against their groups as serious; just 54 and 56 percent of non-black women and men share those views. Asian Americans, LGBT Americans, Latinos, and women generally all are more likely than non-group members – by double-digit margins – to view disadvantageous treatment of their groups as a serious problem.

But the survey does reveal four important predictors of seeing discrimination against groups – not just one's own – as a serious problem:

- ▶ The extent to which people see group-based inequality as unacceptable,
- ▶ Belief in “linked fate” (i.e., the notion that the prosperity of one is linked to the prosperity of all),
- ▶ Personal experiences with unfair treatment, and
- ▶ The importance of group membership in one's self-identity.

Concern about inequality thus relies in part on feelings that it's incompatible with American society and damaging to broader well being.

Other predictors also are informative. Perceived seriousness of unequal treatment is less strong among those with a greater preference for tradition in general, and traditional morality in particular; among people who perceive basic systems of American society as fair; and among those who prioritize loyalty, respect for authority and behaving honorably. Increased concern among these audiences may then rest on the notion that discrimination and inequality violate traditional values of liberty, fairness and equal opportunity.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging:

- ▶ Underscore the values that are associated with caring about discrimination and unequal treatment: the importance of protecting and upholding equal opportunity, and the notion that we're all in this together.
- ▶ Frame unequal opportunity as a challenge facing all of us, with some communities facing particular—and particularly steep—obstacles.
- ▶ Segment audiences strategically: Most Americans have felt that they've been treated unequally, but fewer recognize unfair treatment of groups outside of their own. Consider the “base” for racial wealth gap messages as people of color. But then work with the Cluster Analysis (below) to think through who other allies might be in telling the story of racial gaps in economic power.
- ▶ Remind people when unfair treatment is a serious concern for their own group, and for our society as a whole.

3. There Exists Some Understanding of Structural Causes of Inequality

Most Americans, 70 percent or more, understand that group-based inequality is at least partially due to social conditions, rather than solely reflecting group members' own behavior. However, there is wide variability in this view depending on the group in question. At one end of the spectrum, most adults blame the unfair treatment of women and Native Americans mainly or entirely on social conditions; just 13 percent, in both cases, blame those groups' own behavior. That shifts dramatically when it comes to people who have served a prison sentence – 49 percent blame those individuals' behavior – or those who are undocumented immigrants, blamed by 36 percent.

These views make a difference. Those who tend to attribute inequality more to formerly incarcerated people's own behavior, for example, are significantly less apt than others to support policies focused on rehabilitation and re-employment. Similarly, support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants declines among those who see this group as largely to blame for the inequality its members' experience. In another example, while comparatively few people view poor people as responsible for their own plight, those who do are less likely to support anti-poverty programs.

While many recognize the role that society plays in protecting equal opportunity, most Americans still look to individual behavior to explain people's level of prosperity, with two-thirds believing that individuals are responsible for their own prosperity. Forty-two percent feel that way strongly. Far fewer, 32 percent, perceive linked fate – the notion

that the prosperity of one is linked to the prosperity of all. Those who are more inclined to believe that individuals are responsible for their own outcomes also are more apt to emphasize group behavior as the main cause of inequality.

Just like behavioral versus societal explanations for inequality, views on linked fate predict policy preferences and the intention to take action on inequality, as well as attitudes about discrimination more generally. Those who are more inclined to see prosperity as linked are more likely to view unequal treatment of groups as a serious problem, to support the opportunity-expanding solutions tested, and to express greater willingness to take action on opportunity issues. Elevating an understanding of linked fate, therefore, may move more people towards support for social justice issues and action. Additionally, emphasizing societal explanations for inequality, rather than perceived “deservingness,” will likely help combat the belief that some groups in society deserve to be treated better (or worse) and afforded more opportunities than others.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging:

- ▶ Emphasize the ways in which individual success and broader societal opportunities are linked, showing the underlying and historic causes of the wealth gap.
- ▶ Highlight the (often invisible) systemic causes of economic and racial inequality. Don’t rely on stories that focus solely on individuals to tell the story. Doing so can reinforce the individual-focused mindset that can lead audiences to block out systemic causes in favor of blaming or celebrating individual people. When telling human stories, choose ones that are inherently systemic and change-oriented, connecting multiple people, systems, and institutions.
- ▶ Consider starting with issues that may be easier for audiences to understand. For instance, discriminatory lending practices have been a barrier to home ownership among African American families. And because home ownership is an important pathway to building and maintaining economic stability, African American families have faced steeper obstacles to building wealth than white Americans.

Attitudes about Specific Issues and Solutions

Government Role and Efficacy in Protecting Economic Security

While perceptions of inequality are substantial, public discontent with public institutions is rife. Eight in 10 adults say the U.S. political system needs major improvements, including three in 10 who feel it ought to be redesigned entirely. Views of the economic, educational and criminal justice systems are almost as negative, with seven in 10 to three-quarters saying each needs major change. Fewer than 5 percent feel that any one of these is “as good as it can be.”

People who are more likely to see these systems as needing improvement also are more likely to see unequal treatment of groups as a serious problem, to see housing

discrimination as prevalent, and to support measures to address poverty and related issues.

Assessments of the success of the government's attempts to reduce discrimination are tepid at best. Four in 10 Americans think government programs to reduce discrimination are working well overall, including just 4 percent who think they're working very well. Six in 10 see such programs as largely ineffective, including 16 percent who call them completely unsuccessful.

These perceptions are another important element of support for opportunity policies. In statistical modeling, seeing government programs as effective independently predicts support for a range of initiatives, including anti-poverty efforts and criminal justice and immigration reforms.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging

- ▶ Show concrete examples of how policy interventions have worked to address racial wealth gap issues.
- ▶ When critiquing policies, make sure not to fall into criticizing government generally. Be specific about what needs to change, and who needs to change it.

Anti-poverty Programs and Policies

In terms of funding, the survey finds a division between preferences to maintain or to increase spending on four poverty-related government programs, with little constituency for cuts – albeit with sizable program-specific and group-based differences.

Spending on college loan and student lunch programs wins the most support: Forty-seven percent of Americans think funding for college loan programs should be increased and 43 percent think it should be held steady; it's a similar 44 and 48 percent for school lunch programs. Just 10 and 8 percent, respectively, advocate cutbacks.

There's slightly more support for cutting back on the two other items tested, "food stamps" (SNAP) and unemployment benefits, but it's still only about 20 percent. Forty-seven and 53 percent, respectively, favor keeping spending levels on these the same; three in 10 would spend more.

Political partisanship sharply divides these views. Averaged across the four items, Democrats are 32 percentage points more likely than Republicans to support increased spending. There also are double-digit differences between racial and ethnic groups, with African Americans and Latinos more apt than whites and Asian Americans to favor higher spending on these programs.

When it comes to Americans' priorities for various social policies intended to reduce poverty, improving public education leads the way; more than three-quarters say it should be a high priority for public policy, including 45 percent who think it should be a

“very” high priority. That’s followed by some bread-and-butter items: Avoiding cutbacks to Social Security, cited as a priority by 65 percent; holding down interest rates on student loans, 62 percent; and raising the minimum wage, 52 percent.

Americans give three other areas somewhat lower priority: Forty-five, 44 and 43 percent say high priority should be given to expanding government funded job-training programs, increasing spending on infrastructure, and cutting business taxes to encourage job creation, respectively.

Again there’s substantial political partisanship on these issues, especially views of the minimum wage, job training and infrastructure spending. Democrats are more apt to favor each of the policies tested, save one – cutting business taxes to encourage job growth.

Key predictors of prioritizing anti-poverty programs – and increasing their funding – have implications for framing these issues. The most important predictor, by far, is seeing unequal treatment of poor people as a serious problem. That’s followed by the importance of group identification, seeing group inequalities as unacceptable, frequency of personal contact with diverse group members, attributing inequality to societal factors rather than to group members’ own behavior, and seeing government programs to reduce discrimination as effective.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging

- ▶ Be sure to show how the wealth gap persists even when different racial groups have the same level of education. Give the history of why this continues to happen.
- ▶ Build on support for educational programs, but connect the dots to how those programs are not enough to address economic inequalities and must work with other policies.

Housing Discrimination

Housing discrimination provides a specific example of more general views on opportunity and economic inequality: the vast majority of Americans, 83 percent, believe that one or more groups face substantial bias when trying to buy or rent a home or apartment.

Such perceptions depend on the group in question. Seven in 10 adults feel that people who have served a prison sentence experience discrimination when they try to buy or rent a home, and 64 percent say the same of undocumented immigrants. Across the spectrum, just 15 and 16 percent, respectively, say the same about Asian Americans and women.

Other groups fall in the middle. Housing bias against Muslims is seen by 47 percent, against gay and lesbian Americans by 40 percent, against African Americans by 38 percent, against people with disabilities by 36 percent and against Latinos by a third.

Roughly a quarter see discrimination in housing against Native Americans and single parents.

Perceptions of housing discrimination against one's own group are highest among African American respondents, especially women, and lowest among whites and Asian Americans. For example, 69 percent of black women perceive either a great deal or substantial amount of housing discrimination against blacks, whereas just 15 percent of Asian Americans think Asian Americans experience discrimination when trying to obtain housing.

Given the overall level of concern, support for existing laws designed to prevent housing bias is broad. Just one in 10 says such laws are too strong; six in 10 think they're about right, and three in 10 say they're too weak. Among blacks, moreover, six in 10 say such laws are too weak.

As with other spending, the survey finds a division on whether programs intended to boost home-ownership and construction of affordable housing should be expanded or maintained as they are now, but very little support for reducing them. Forty-six and 44 percent, respectively, support maintaining current policies on the tax deductibility of mortgage interest payments and tax enticements to encourage development of affordable housing. Forty-three and 42 percent, respectively, say they should be expanded. Only about one in 10 favors cutting these back.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging

- ▶ Build on key audiences' understanding of housing discrimination to point out the link between home ownership and wealth accumulation. Use this understanding to make connections to how other forms of discrimination, historic trends, and specific policies have caused the racial wealth gap to persist.
- ▶ Leverage support for fair housing programs to explain how other policies work similarly to ensure fair treatment and to encourage and support economic equality.

Cross-issue Support

The Opportunity Survey reveals a great deal of cross-issue congruence. A key takeaway of this survey is the finding that views on issues are highly correlated, as is willingness to take action (detailed next) on those issues. These orientations derive from deep-seated values and experiences and often results in individuals showing similar support, or opposition, across a variety of social issues.

To examine these relationships, variables were created based on respondents' support for each issue tested. For example, the number of individual anti-poverty policies and programs each respondent supported was tabulated, with the public then divided into groups reflecting low, moderate and high levels of support for anti-poverty initiatives

overall. A similar strategy was used to group individuals by their support levels for each of the other issue categories.¹

There is a strong relationship between support for anti-poverty measures and support for each of the other social issues examined, with those Americans who support the highest number of anti-poverty initiatives between 28 and 36 points more likely than those who back the fewest anti-poverty policies to support a pathway to citizenship, view housing discrimination as a problem for many groups, and support reforms to the criminal justice system. This pattern of cross-issue support is robust regardless of the issues compared, and reflects a general orientation of support or opposition across the social policies tested.

Implications for Racial Wealth Gap Messaging:

Use the audience section (below) to identify groups who are most likely to support a broad array of social justice issues, as well as those who are likely to be persuadable or skeptical on those issues.

Audience Considerations and Strategy

The Opportunity Survey findings paint a rich picture of shared core values, beliefs, and attitudes that contribute to a social justice orientation, and reveal that a significant number of groups—including the “New American Majority” of Millennials, People of Color, and Unmarried Women—can be motivated to support more equitable policies. In addition, several stand-alone findings from this research indicate that the American public is now primed to tackle a number of social justice issues in the United States and positioned to drive lasting change.

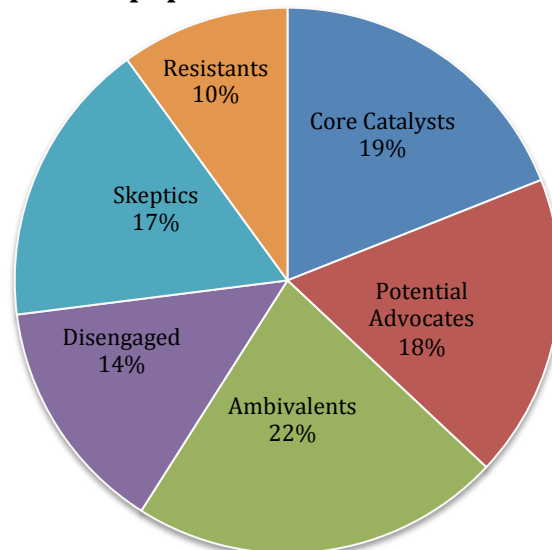
By identifying how attributes and experiences correspond with support for social justice policies and willingness to take action, the survey profiles key audiences—totaling 60 percent of the American public—that can be moved to help advance greater and more equal opportunity.

Cluster Analysis

Cluster analysis allows us to identify unique subsets of the population that are more or less apt to back social issues and be willing to take action. Using key attitudes and behaviors relating to social policy on opportunity issues, we identified six distinct population segments (Figure 2). These groups differ substantially in their values and concepts of equality, fairness, and tradition – and, in turn, in their policy preferences and openness to action.

¹ See Appendix D for details of these indices; the same items are used here, but as counts, rather than the average scores used in the regression analysis.

Figure 2. Six types of audiences identified in the population and their size



Source: The Opportunity Survey, 2014

Core Catalysts largely represent the engaged base of the opportunity movement, while Potential Advocates, and Ambivalents represent persuadable target audiences. Taken together, these three groups represent over half of the U.S. population, and are presented in more detail below. Among the remaining groups, the Disengaged are simply less interested (14%), Skeptics lean against these issues (17%) and Resistant are more firmly opposed (10%).

Core Catalysts (19%) are the most committed to advancing equal opportunity. Including disproportionate numbers of racial and ethnic minorities and political liberals, and slightly more women than average – especially unmarried women – members of this group are the most likely to have experienced unfair treatment personally, to think it's a serious problem and to be willing to act to address it. They have strong in-group identities, eschew tradition, reject notions of inherent superiority and are more apt than others to see people's prosperity as linked rather than as individual outcomes. They're also more confident they can bring about change, a precursor to taking action. Core catalysts are the only group in which equal treatment ranks first, followed by compassion and acting honorably.

Potential Advocates (18%) are less apt than core catalysts to have experienced unequal treatment but are highly attuned to it nonetheless. Including many white liberals, they broadly support an active social policy agenda, rank "equal treatment" prominently as a value and are more likely than average to attribute inequality to social conditions rather than to group behaviors. Yet they're among the least apt to have strong in-group identities of their own and much less inclined than core catalysts to believe they personally, or groups generally, can bring about change.

Ambivalents (22%) are conflicted. Many perceive inequality of opportunity, support policies intended to address it and think it's better when everyone has an equal chance. But they also hold some core values – including traditionalism, individualism and a stress on acting honorably – that militate against activism. They're the oldest of the six groups on average, with numerically the highest share of women.

Demographic Groups Most Open to Racial Wealth Gap Solutions:

A number of individual characteristics are highly predictive of either support or opposition to social justice issues and policies, even when beliefs, values and experiences are held constant.

The most supportive audiences for anti-poverty solutions and activism are Democrats, African Americans and Latinos.

Millennials, independent voters, and unmarried women are disproportionately open to anti-poverty solutions.

Low-income Americans understand the realities of living in poverty and are interested in change, have higher levels of personal and group efficacy, and more experience of unfair treatment – all of which predict higher likelihood of being willing to take action.

In addition:

Older Americans are more likely to:

- See unequal treatment as a serious problem,
- View housing discrimination as widespread,
- Favor greater efforts to address poverty,
- Be willing to act to improve opportunities for groups, and
- Say they would take specific actions on behalf of a social cause.

African Americans and Latinos are more likely to:

- See unfair treatment of groups as problematic, and
- Be willing to take action on behalf of groups and issues.
- Support anti-poverty programs.

Taking Action

Americans express a willingness to take a variety of actions on behalf of greater opportunity. A majority of Americans (67%) say they are likely to talk with people they know about their views (including 8 percent who say they already do) and 62 percent say they'd sign a petition (or have done so). Those compare with 52 percent who express a willingness to boycott products or vendors in pursuit of social change, and 46 to 50 percent for contacting an elected official, volunteering with a community or political

organization or donating money.² Many fewer, just more than a third, say they'd be likely to write or post something online or in print to persuade or motivate others on behalf of a cause (36 percent), or to participate in a creative or artistic project that brings attention to the issue (34 percent). And 27 percent say it's likely they'd take part in a protest, march or demonstration.

Notably, for each of the actions tested, far fewer indicate they're "very" likely to participate, and, as noted, only a handful say they've actually done so – highlighting the gap between willingness to act and actually taking action. Understanding the top predictors of expressed willingness to get involved might help bridging that gap. Most important is frequency of personal contact with members of different groups, suggesting that personal interactions with people from different backgrounds are particularly critical in motivating action on equality issues. Those who indicate a willingness to take action in support of one issue are generally more likely to act on other issues as well.

The finding that simply being willing to talk with others about one's views is so strongly tied to willingness to take other, more committed action suggests that convincing people to take even small steps ultimately can have a major impact. While 62 percent of the population stated willingness to sign a petition, those who expressed interest in talking to others about their views are nearly 20 percent more likely to say so. Similar differences arise relating to willingness to boycott products or vendors (52 percent vs. 68 percent), and every other type of action measured in this study. As decades of psychological research has shown, getting a person to commit to one small action makes it far easier to convince them to commit to bigger ones.

Recommendations

- ▶ Segment audiences using the cluster analysis. Strategically, we do not have to speak to or convince everyone, which is good news given that we all have limited resources. Instead, we can consider where we can find and reach the Core Catalysts, Potential Advocates and Ambivalents, what kinds of messages and spokespeople motivate them, and how to move them to action.
- ▶ Build messages that underscore the values that matter to target audiences, namely equal opportunity and opportunity for all. We know that people who prioritize these values are more likely to support our issues, so it's important to keep these groups highly motivated. But it's also important to raise the profile of these values in general so that they are consistently part of national conversations, expanding the groups of people who prioritize them.

² These items were asked of those who said, in general, that they were very or somewhat likely to take action, or already were taking action, on behalf of a group or issue. Those who did not indicate a willingness to take action in general (252 of the 2,055 respondents) are grouped in this analysis with those who indicated an unwillingness to take a particular action. Therefore, the percentages reported here reflect how many people in the population overall are willing to take each action.

- ▶ Remind people of their own experiences of discrimination when explaining types of bias that they are less familiar with, or skeptical of. But then quickly pivot to the kinds of solutions that can protect groups from discrimination. Remember that audiences are generally worried about the efficacy of government programs and will likely need a few concrete examples of success to motivate support.
- ▶ Balance audiences' tendencies to rely on personal responsibility as a solution to social problems with reminders of our linked fates. Show the interconnected nature of our economic and cultural lives and emphasize the shared responsibility we have for each other.
- ▶ Make sure to have a call to action. Even if you're just asking people to start a conversation about racial and economic inequality, getting them to act in some way is the first step in motivating them around more in-depth involvement in the issue.
- ▶ Structure messaging with a Value, Problem, Solution, Action approach:
 - Lead with values. Starting with shared values helps audiences to "hear" our messages more effectively than do dry facts or emotional rhetoric.
 - Introduce the problem. Frame problems as a threat to values. Include stories and statistics that are likely to resonate with the target audience. Where possible, include the cause of the problem, as well as who is responsible for fixing it.
 - Pivot quickly to solutions. Positive solutions leave people with choices, ideas, and motivation. Assign responsibility—who can enact this solution?
 - Provide a clear "ask" to your audiences that is aligned with your overarching goals.

Value: Access to an affordable home under fair terms is central to the American promise of opportunity, and to our nation's economic security.

Problem: But misconduct by the lending industry and inadequate rules and enforcement helped to wreck our economy and deny that promise to millions of Americans.

Solution: Fortunately, solutions exist that can prevent further foreclosures and restore the American Dream. They include steps like mandatory mediation, reducing loan principal to fair market rates, and ensuring that reforms of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac keep homeownership available to working Americans.

Action: Tell your member of Congress to work with the Administration to implement these solutions today.