

Talking Economic Recovery and Equal Opportunity

Promoting Social Justice Values and Policies in Tough Economic Times

This memo offers communications advice for promoting greater and more equal opportunity during the current economic downturn. It draws on recent opinion research, media analysis, and experience from the field to offer promising approaches and messages.

While the public mood is unquestionably gloomy, we also see some important opportunities for talking positively about social justice issues and solutions in the context of economic recovery. For instance, the downturn has inspired conversations about our interconnectedness as a nation and as a people—the notion that we’re all in this together. Current and future stimulus policies offer chances to ensure that our most vulnerable and historically overlooked groups and communities are included in any recovery plans. We can use opportunities like these to create messages that promote our shared values, center social justice issues in the national conversation, and inspire solutions that expand opportunity for everyone living here.

It’s in our nation’s interest for everyone to have economic security and the opportunity to move forward. We are all in it together in this economy; allowing barriers to opportunity to exist for any community hurts us all. Recovering from this financial crisis demands new rules for a 21st Century global economy that connect all groups and communities to economic recovery.

Talking About Opportunity

We believe that speaking about social issues in terms of opportunity is a good strategic choice. Opportunity—the idea that everyone deserves a fair chance to live up to his or her full potential—is an ideal that most Americans instinctively support. Framing policy and research in terms of opportunity can help to persuade new audiences and inspire action—tapping into hopeful, forward-looking values, while challenging Americans to support transformative policies. While some feel opportunity is there for the taking, most realize that our collective decisions and the resulting policies shape access to opportunity in profound ways. Measuring policies by their impact on opportunity can help connect complex policy ideas to core national values.

General Communications Principles

Lead with Values. Beginning with shared values helps to connect with audiences better than dry statistics or stories of despair. The most compelling values when talking about economic recovery include:

- **Community:** We are all in it together in our society and share interests and responsibilities for each other and the common good.
- **Opportunity:** Everyone deserves a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential.
- **Security:** All people should have the tools and resources necessary to support and take care of themselves and their families.
- **Mobility (Moving Forward):** Everyone in our society should have the chance to move forward in economic and educational status, no matter where they started out.
- **Equality:** What we look like or where we come from should not determine the burdens, benefits, or responsibilities that we bear in society.
- **Redemption (Renewal):** People grow and change over time, and deserve a chance to start over after missteps or misfortune.

Connect the protection and expansion of opportunity to our shared progress. Linking the economic progress of communities of color, immigrants, women, and other historically overlooked groups to our national progress and shared prosperity of all Americans is key in times of financial crisis. Our communications should be less an appeal to self-interest or charity as an appeal to the common good.

Promote practical solutions. Policymakers in particular are seeking pragmatic, achievable approaches to today's difficult problems. The more we can be *for* workable and positive solutions rather than only against negative outcomes, the more traction we are likely to get with these audiences. Emphasizing solutions taps into Americans' pride and counters people's inclination to see a parade of social and economic ills as impossible to solve.

Don't let divisiveness dominate our messages. There is more than enough blame to go around for the current crisis. However, pointing fingers at whichever group is taking the fall at the moment is not the best long-term strategy for our communications. This is not to say that messages cannot express anger, demand accountability, point out how certain trends and policies have been harmful to our economy and our country, or highlight how certain groups and communities have suffered long-term neglect while others have experienced the benefits of a booming economy. However, shoring up people's community-spirited tendencies will, over the long run, serve us more powerfully than allowing divisive arguments to dictate the tone and spirit of our messages.

Frame messages thematically. While there are countless individual stories that underscore the hardships faced by Americans of different backgrounds, communications need to emphasize *systemic* causes and solutions. The public is more and more open to understanding that complex and thematic issues are at the root of the current crisis. We can expand on this understanding to highlight how various economic and social systems have negatively affected many groups of people over time. In some instances, this calls for selecting compelling human stories that are directly tied to systemic causes and solutions—e.g., the pastor who sees a wave of foreclosures in his congregation, or the doctor seeing more and more patients who are losing their insurance.

Use VPSA Messaging. In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message in a variety of settings, we recommend structuring opening messages in terms of **Value, Problem, Solution, and Action**. Leading with this structure can make it easier to transition into more complex or difficult messages.

Value: When it comes to the economy, **we're all in it together. It's in our nation's interest** for everyone to have economic security and the opportunity to move forward.

Problem: But the current economic recovery effort threatens to leave some groups and communities behind, **and that hurts us all.**

Solution: Recovering from this financial crisis demands **new rules for a 21st Century global economy** that **connects all communities to economic opportunity.**

Action: We call on the new Administration to adopt the use of an **Opportunity Impact Statement** as a lens through which to target the investment of public funds. The Opportunity Impact Statement is a road map that public bodies, affected communities, and the private sector can use to ensure that **public investments offer equal and expanded opportunity for everyone and lift the common good.**

Talking Point Suggestions

- Opportunity, the idea that everyone should have a fair chance to live up to his or her full potential, is a cherished ideal and one of our nation's most valuable national assets. The promise of opportunity consistently inspires us—motivating innovation and hard work, bringing

newcomers to our shores, and giving hope to future generations. But for far too many Americans, the promise still rings hollow. For example, even in 2007, one in eight Americans (12.5%) lived in poverty.

- The nation has made great strides in increasing opportunity in some areas and for some groups and communities. But many groups of Americans are being left behind in ways that hard work and personal achievement alone cannot address. In 2007, of those living in poverty, 10.9% were year-round, full-time workers.
- Even before the current economic downturn, different American groups and communities experienced starkly different levels of opportunity. The African American male unemployment rate in 2007 (11.4%) was more than twice as high as the white male unemployment rate (5.5%), and the Latino male unemployment rate was also much higher (7.6%). There is real reason to believe that the current crisis is affecting some groups and communities far more severely than others.
- It's in our nation's interest for everyone to have economic security and the opportunity to move forward. We are all in it together in this economy and allowing barriers to opportunity to exist for any group hurts us all. Persistent problems such as the wage gap must be addressed—in 2007, women made only 78.2% the median income of men, African Americans only 75.2% of whites, and Latinos only 72.6% of whites. Recovering from this financial crisis demands new rules for a 21st Century global economy that connect all groups and communities to economic recovery.
- Any economic recovery policy should not only jump-start the economy in the short-term, but also invest in lasting opportunity for all. We must address inequalities that challenge our ability to move forward together, such as the fact that African American median household wealth is only one-tenth that of white households. As our economy continues to falter, stimulating greater and more equal opportunity remains crucial to both short-term rescue and long-term prosperity.
- Promoting opportunity should be a key factor each time our leaders consider investments in our nation. Plans like the economic recovery package can serve all Americans fairly and effectively, or they can create and perpetuate unfairness and inequality based on race, gender, or other aspects of who we are. It is up to all of us to ensure that these investments help all Americans by calling for the right spending, implementation, and monitoring of funds.
- Investments in opportunity—such as expanding skill-building job training, investing in education, and rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure—would inspire the American people and restore consumer confidence while helping struggling folks to catch their stride. And such investments would not only address the country's short-term woes but also invest in our long-term strength.
- The recent economic stimulus package has addressed some of the issues facing our communities, but we have to make sure that investment is spent in communities where it is needed most, and where it will create lasting opportunity. We have a better chance at success in these areas if we come together to ensure that all affected groups, including women and communities of color, and immigrants can participate and contribute to our economy.

Some Specific Areas of Concern:

Immigrants and Economic Recovery

- It is critical to remember that a lasting economic recovery must also include immigrants, who are an integral part of our economic and cultural life. We need everyone's help and know-how to restore our economy. Instead of divisive and unrealistic demands, we need workable solutions that uphold our nation's values and move us forward together, to repair our economy, improve

education, and generate jobs.

Racial and Gender Gaps in Economic Opportunity

- Research shows that assets and incomes vary broadly between groups, reflecting significant gaps in opportunity across race and gender. We cannot live up to our promise of opportunity as long as these gaps go unaddressed.
- The current financial crisis has shown more than ever that, when it comes to the economy, we're all in it together. It's in our nation's interest for everyone to have economic security and the opportunity to move forward. That means improving economic security and mobility for everyone while bridging the gaps in economic opportunity that still too often break along lines of race and gender.
- Despite the real progress we've made in our country, there is still a racial gap in economic opportunity that must be addressed if we're to move forward as a nation. The racial gap is caused by a mix of historic forces and current barriers to equal opportunity. We must address each of them head on—in fact, we have practical solutions that expand opportunity for all while closing the racial gaps that hold us back.

Education

- One way to see if we're making progress in protecting and expanding opportunity is to look at our education system, and ours is not living up to its promise for many students. For instance, high school status drop-out rates increased from 2005 to 2006 by 3.8% for women and by 2.9% for African Americans. While status drop-out rates for men and whites decreased during the same period, a true economic recovery will need to renew the promise of mobility for all of our children.

Housing

- It is in everyone's best interest to ensure a future we can all take part in. This means protecting what has historically been the most secure path to building wealth: homeownership, which has rippling effects on the national economy. But even prior to the current downturn, households of color experienced a large homeownership gap with white households. In 2007, the white homeownership rate was 75.2%, while the rate for African Americans was 47.2%, the rate for Latinos was 49.7%, the rate for American Indians was 56.9%, and the rate for Asian Americans was 60%. Where recovery efforts directly address the foreclosure crisis, programs must directly address gaps in homeownership that have been exacerbated by predatory lending practices.

Poverty

- Even before today's recession, opportunity was unequal and at risk for millions of Americans. In 2007, 18% of all children in the United States were living in poverty. Moreover, a full 34.5% of African Americans children were living in poverty, over three times the poverty rate for white children (10.1%). This is an insult to our core values. Denying children the opportunities afforded by an economically stable upbringing poses great risks to our nation's future. That some groups of children are more likely to live in poverty than others hurts us still more. Standing by while these threats to equality, security, and mobility persist is not an acceptable option. Restoring the economy to 2007 levels will not be enough—it is in our national interest to expand opportunity to all of our country's people and communities.

The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. The Opportunity Agenda is a project of the Tides Center. Visit us at www.opportunityagenda.org.