

**Communicating About Poverty and Low-Wage Work:
A New Agenda**
Executive Summary

Matthew C. Nisbet, Ph.D.

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Report to The Mobility Agenda

Over 40 million jobs in the United States—or about one in three—pay low wages. The great majority of low-wage jobs lack benefits such as health insurance or retirement accounts and provide little or no chance for career advancement. These conditions translate into 35 million Americans who earn poverty-level incomes, while millions more struggle to make ends meet.

Despite these conditions, given recent trends and focusing events, many progressives express great optimism about achieving effective policy solutions. Proposals include raising the minimum wage; increasing access to health, disability, and life insurance; requiring retirement benefits and paid time off; offering job training and education; subsidizing child care; expanding housing vouchers and the Earned Income Tax Credit; increasing unemployment benefits; expanding Pell Grants for college; promoting unionization; and modernizing the food stamp and TANF programs.

The Communication Problem

Yet when it comes to building broader public support for these proposals, traditional appeals that profile the plight of individuals, lament the “unfairness” in hard-working Americans having to live in poverty, or that emphasize the moral duty to help the disadvantaged all run up against strong perceptual screens. While these arguments accurately reflect reality and may mobilize natural allies and constituencies, research suggests that such language only further reinforces individual, moral, and racial attributions of blame. Further, there is also no agreed upon blueprint for communicating the “big picture” on how proposals such as raising the minimum wage are connected to Pell grants for college, housing vouchers, or increased workforce unionization.

Analysis of polling trends show that American views about poverty are little different today than they were during the 1980s. The tendency for Americans to blame poverty on a lack of effort has held steady, feelings toward the poor have grown slightly cooler, willingness to aid the poor has stayed the same or diminished, and racial attitudes still color support for assistance to the poor. These enduring misperceptions continue to be reinforced by the portrayals found in news coverage and by leading political figures, even by moderates such as New York City’s mayor, Michael Bloomberg.

A Way Forward

If progressives are going to change public opinion, they need to develop a message that emphasizes shared common values and interests. Moreover, this language has to be systematically investigated and tested not with any particular party, candidate, or electoral goal in mind, but rather with an eye toward going beyond the progressive base, building and maintaining a diverse coalition around

meaningful policy action. Figuring out what meanings and themes connect the dots on proposals is central to building support across diverse segments of the public, not just the traditional progressive base. The task will also be central to shaping media portrayals, defining policy options, and insulating against attacks and counterarguments. Previous research suggests several paths forward.

Redefining What's at Stake. Framing research can serve as a very valuable resource for “going beyond the choir,” and engaging nontraditional audiences on anti-poverty efforts. To date, the most comprehensive evaluation of framing in the context of low-wage work and poverty was funded by the Ford Foundation and carried out by Meg Bostrom and her firm, Public Knowledge LLC. In a series of focus groups and survey analyses, Bostrom found that the most effective interpretation for activating support across diverse audiences was a “responsible economic planning frame.” This interpretation emphasized narrowly as issues the economy, jobs, and a prosperous future. In this alternative frame, responsibility was defined as resting with citizens collectively while the solutions were described as ultimately leading to stronger communities.

In Bostrom's survey analysis, when presented in this “responsible economic planning” context, progressive policy proposals were supported by net margins 4-11 percent higher than when framed in traditional terms of “sympathy for the poor.” Perhaps most importantly, in the survey analyses, the economic planning frame was able to generate added support for low-wage work issues among nontraditional segments of the public, audiences for whom the typical sympathy for the poor frame might actually activate increased opposition.

Lessons from the UK's “Social Inclusion.” The ability of the “responsible economic planning frame” to unify public support reflects closely the successful efforts in Great Britain by Tony Blair and the Labour party to redefine anti-poverty initiatives in terms of “social inclusion.” Instead of alleviating the condition of poverty and its implied moral and racial underpinnings, the new social inclusion direction in government was about improving “prospects and networks and life chances” rather than simply raising the dollar amount of wages or redistributing wealth through cash welfare benefits or taxes.

The language and metaphors of social inclusion are designed to focus attention on the structures and processes that exclude certain groups of individuals from full participation in society. Similar to the “economic planning frame,” the logic emphasizes that in a competitive global marketplace, the nation is stronger, more secure, and better off if more of its population can participate fully in the labor force and economy.

Besides engaging the public, in terms of policy, the social inclusion language also helped redefine in new and more politically successful terms the evaluation and measurement of long-standing problems of inequality. In other words, framing not only structures the interpretations of the public and the portrayals of the news media, but in contexts such as Congress, framing can also impact the specifics of policy decisions, altering the options that are considered and how they are measured.

A New Agenda for Communication

This report's synthesis of previous research suggests several key recommendations for moving forward. These include:

1. Do the research. Additional research is needed on how nontraditional audiences make sense of issues related to poverty and low-income work. Previous work funded by the Ford Foundation points to promising alternative ways to define the problem and solutions to poverty, and this research is consistent with historical lessons from Great Britain's "social inclusion" campaign. Not only do the specific frames matter, but there also needs to be the identification and testing of specific frame devices, i.e., the catchphrases, slogans, visuals, and allusions to history or culture that instantly translate these latent meanings. This last recommendation also underscores the importance of not only testing frames, but also further testing the types of opinion leaders who might be best at delivering these messages to specific groups.

2. Stay on message. As the progressive community comes together to fund and investigate new messages about poverty and low-wage work, the outcome of this research has to be employed systematically across organizations and policy efforts, otherwise little benefit will be realized. Progressives should partner with foundations to hold a series of national communication summits.

3. Break the tyranny of the news peg. Research should also focus on the types of staged news events and story pitches that successfully generate both print and television news attention, result in an emphasis on preferred frames, and reach key targeted audiences.

4. Sponsor social media campaigns. Traditional news coverage is not the only media that matters in engaging the public on poverty. With increasing frequency, documentaries are the catalyst for a "social media campaign," bringing together filmmakers with partner foundations and progressive organizations. Comparative case study examinations of similar social media campaigns would provide valuable insight into how films can be used systematically and strategically.

5. Facilitate incidental exposure. In today's media world, with so many competing content choices, the challenge is to find ways to "incidentally" expose audiences to coverage and information about poverty-related issues in media zones where they are not looking for it. The Bono-led and Gates Foundation-funded "One" campaign, with its focus on poverty in Africa, offers a leading example of how progressives can use entertainment media outlets to reach otherwise inattentive audiences.