



CENTER for  
COMMUNITY CHANGE



The **Center for Community Change** has launched a major initiative to dismantle the barriers that create and sustain poverty. The Center aims to galvanize a social movement to generate the strategies, leaders, and moral urgency to build a society in which we all have what we need to thrive.

### Language Analysis

Using cognitive linguistic analysis, we looked at underlying assumptions about poverty. From problematic metaphors to reliance on passive voice, much of **existing language unintentionally reinforces poverty as beyond our control** rather than focusing on how working people produce America’s wealth.

### Listening Sessions

In 7 states and D.C., we held 14 listening sessions with African Americans, Latinos and whites at or below the poverty line. From formerly incarcerated men in Youngstown to immigrants in Tennessee, their responses demonstrated similar reasoning. Despite an impressive grasp of systemic injustice, participants **didn’t self-identify as poor** nor gravitate to language of “poverty.”

### Advocate Interviews

Twenty-five **advocates on the front lines** shared their thoughts on poverty’s origins, winning words for public debate and favored solutions. These interviews and the data from the listening sessions, helped us articulate and refine the messages we took into testing.

### Dial Testing

With Lake Research Partners, we tested messages to engage our base, persuade the middle and alienate the opposition. More than 1,700 people completed the survey, and we oversampled African Americans, Latinos, people under 30 and people at or below 200% of the poverty line. This sample is the **first of its kind**.

### New Approach, Winning Results

Beyond sample size and attention to conceptual traps, much sets our process apart from past attempts.

- We began our analysis and **constructed language with our “choir”**: poor people and advocates for economic justice. This increases *intensity* of support so our base prioritizes this issue. Typically, research begins with and draws from moderates.
- We sought messages that **engage the base, persuade the middle and alienate the opposition**. This ensures we’re persuading people to solutions we favor, not activating status quo beliefs. Conventional wisdom measures success by how much of the opposition agree, when we actually need to isolate the opposition.
- Rather than avoid **race and gender**, we included these in our analysis, in messengers used and language tested. Except with staunch opponents, our messages perform well with people of color and women messengers. Normally, white male messengers garner higher marks than others.
- We tested messages with advocates because **if our words don’t spread, they don’t work**. Typically, we assume advocates will use new messaging no matter what, then lament the lack of an echo chamber.
- We unpacked respondents’ perceptions of our economy, wealth and poverty; as well as how we can rebalance the system. We **set high bars** – like a \$15 min wage – to see who’s “with us.” Typically, data is cut along party line, not attitudes toward the issue.
- Our messages emphasize **what all people need, do and desire**. Further, we didn’t lead with the middle class as the main concern. Typically, arguments for economic justice privilege “growing” the economy and/or helping the middle class.

## Key Principles

Make affected groups agents in their own story; focus on how **barriers impede** people’s efforts to do right and thrive.

Don’t: Focus on how people are passive victims of poverty and position NGOs as saviors here to fix problems for the poor.

Make clear that economic hardship results from deliberate policy choices

Don’t: Use the passive voice. It obscures where poverty comes from and what can be done about it.

Start with shared values, especially **family & freedom**.

Don’t: Start with policies & programs.

Speak from shared experiences (child rearing, caring for sick relative, paying bills).

Don’t: Focus on abstractions and rhetoric about “the system”.

Position need for change in a populist context rooted in **fairness**.

Don’t: Rely on making the middle class your hero or goal, it doesn’t cement support for addressing inequality or helping the poor.

Name real things people want (time with family, a secure retirement, a decent life).

Don’t: Talk abstractly about “change”.

Focus on what **people need**. When you mention the economy, describe it as something **out of balance** that we can fix.

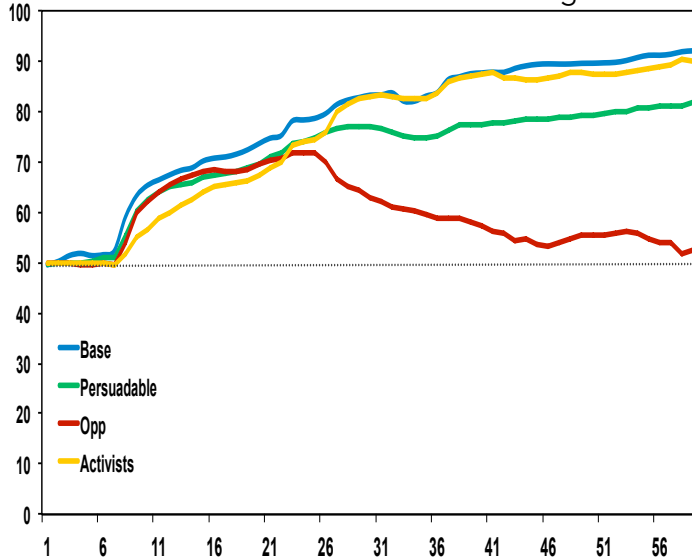
Don’t: Position desired change as intended to help/boost/benefit “the economy”.

Words to avoid	Words to embrace
poor; working poor; low income	can’t make ends meet; living on the brink; working to provide for family
safety net	basic living standards; Resources for our seniors
entitlements	your health and retirement security
the top; the bottom	wealthiest; poorest
unemployment rate rose	CEOs fired more Americans; X handed out pink slips
workers	people, mothers, fathers, servers, cooks, nurses, etc.
gap between rich and poor	barriers between rich and the rest of us; obstacles for those struggling
reform social security/medicare/welfare/etc.	improve, enhance, shore up social security/medicare/welfare
we	you and I
America’s children; future generations; seniors on Medicare	“that newborn you swear already smiles”; “your mom going her last round with cancer”
systemic inequities	greedy few rigged the game; corporations/CEOs have taken advantage
fight poverty; war on poverty; casualties of poverty	barriers to success; obstacles to economic stability
(economic) inequality	economy off kilter; out of balance

## Winning Messages

Using an online survey to register moment-to-moment preferences and attitudes toward poverty and competing policy solutions, we dial tested a sample of 1,726 representative registered U.S. voters, including oversamples of African Americans, Latinos, people under 30 and people at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Below are our four top messages that **beat leading opposition arguments by over 10 points**. Research was led by **Anat Shenker-Osorio**, author of [Don't Buy It: The Trouble with Talking Nonsense about the Economy](#), analyses political discourse through a cognitive linguistic lens. Dial testing was led by **Celinda Lake**, President of Lake Research Partners and author of [Public Opinion Polling: A Handbook for Public Interest and Citizen Advocacy Groups](#) in collaboration with Senior Analyst Jonathan Voss.

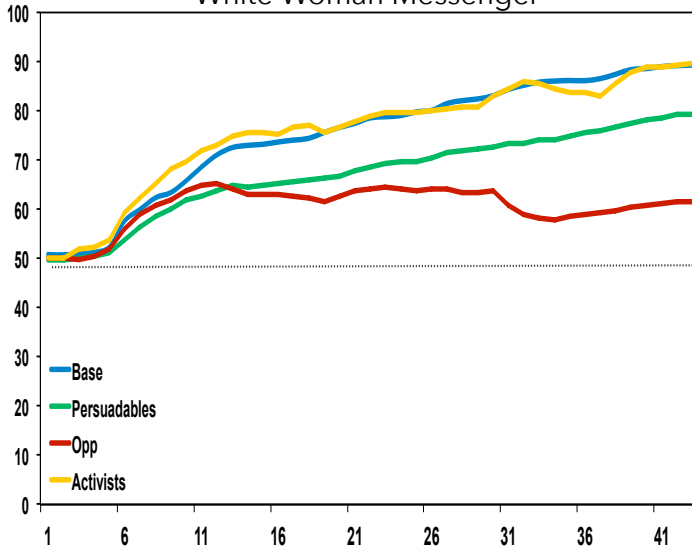
African American Woman Messenger



Family Comes First

They may drive you crazy but everyone knows family comes first. Whether it's for that newborn you swear already smiles, your elderly mom or your spouse who got laid off, providing for your family and being there when they need you isn't negotiable. Every working parent should get paid enough to care for their kids and set them off toward a great future. If politicians want to talk "family values," it's time they start valuing families - and that means making sure America's dedicated strivers and builders make ends meet. We work in order to make the future brighter for our kids and more secure for our families. Hard working Americans deserve to make more than a decent living - they deserve to have a decent life.

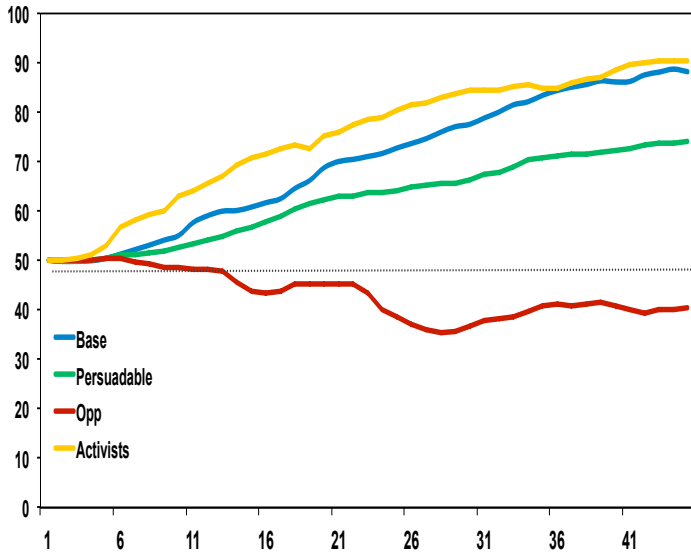
White Woman Messenger



Community

Our country's strength is grounded in our ability to work together. We are stronger when we recognize we rise or fall united, and are weaker when greed insists we be left to fend for ourselves. You and I know, our society is at its best when we grant every striver the opportunity to fulfill their potential and pursue their dreams. The USA cannot stand for "You Stand Alone," but must stand for "us". America succeeds when every worker is paid enough to care for his or her family, when every entrepreneur has the tools to make their vision a reality, and when every American can retire in dignity. America works best when we look out for each other and work together as one nation, indivisible.

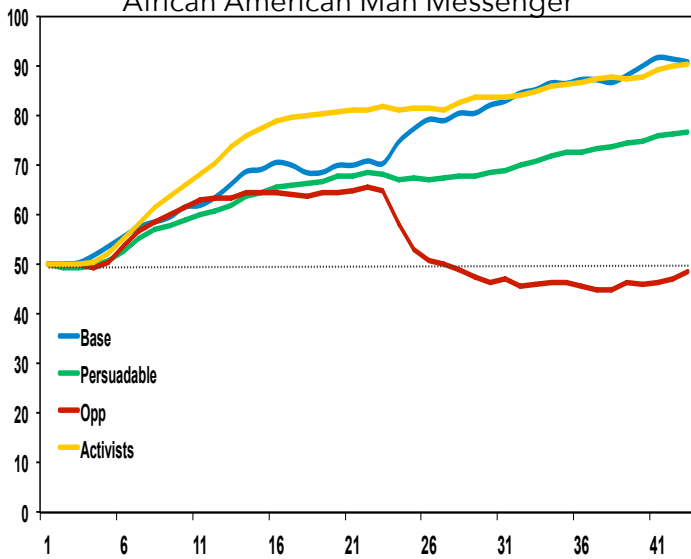
White Woman Messenger



Container (with overt gender)

You wake up at 4:30, take two buses to work, skip meals you can't afford, get home after the kids are asleep - to come up short at the end of the month. Especially in industries where women work, with wages held down, irregular schedules and childcare that costs a paycheck, most women can't pull ahead - no matter how hard we try. Corporations have taken advantage of us, raking in profits by cutting everything our families need to survive. We need to get women off this treadmill of work that doesn't pay the bills so moms can see their kids, customers have money to spend in our stores and all of us can come together to build stronger communities. When we do right by women, communities prosper. It's time we got America back on track by changing the rules about work and wages.

African American Man Messenger



We Can Do It

America's gone through tough times before and came back to build a middle class the world envied. After the Great Depression, we banded together through government to build roads, open schools and guarantee work paid enough to live on, and retire in dignity. We unleashed opportunity for most Americans and became a better country for it. But then a greedy few rigged the game in their favor. Today, many jobs don't cover our needs - let alone enable our dreams. It's time to do right by those who clock in and out everyday to keep America working. If we value everyone's freedom, we need adequate pay for our work, time to be with family and a secure foundation on which to build a good life.

Our research confirms that we lack a powerful, sustained, social movement to address economic inequality in part because we do not speak in human terms about the lives of, barriers and possibilities for those struggling to make ends meet. This research provides vetted messaging and narrative guidance to enable us to speak effectively about the policy choices that trap one third of our nation in poverty and create real opportunities to join those most affected by these barriers in a unified movement to dismantle them. The Center is committed to operationalizing this language in campaigns with our grassroots partners, through sharing learnings with our national allies, and by holding the media accountable to speak about people who are living on the brink.

For more information contact [jparcher@communitychange.org](mailto:jparcher@communitychange.org)

