

THE ECONOMY PROJECT

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This project begins with the failure of Democrats and the Clinton administration to win the confidence of working middle-class families on the economy and ensuring prosperity, despite the fact that the country is entering a fourth year of economic recovery and relatively low unemployment.¹ The stakes are very high. Democrats have won the White House in the post-World War period only when they have enjoyed lopsided advantages over the Republicans on making America prosperous.² But during most of 1995, the Democrats have trailed the Republicans on this issue, indeed, sometimes by over 20 points.

The Democratic “economic problem” begins in working and lower-middle-class America: *the Democrats have lost their hold on the economy because they have lost their hold on white non-college voters.* In 1994, it was the non-college electorate, particularly white blue collar men, who abandoned the Democrats and brought down the Democratic Congress.³

At the heart of the problem are white, non-college, married voters under the age of 50, almost all with children at home. Very few belong to a labor union. Yet they are the white working and middle-class families who make up the lion’s share of America’s emerging working class. They are an unhappy lot -- among the most pessimistic groups about the country’s

¹This project on the economy was funded by the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) and the AFL-CIO. I want to thank them for understanding the need for this kind of conversation with working and middle-class America.

²The Democrats have never had less than a 17 point advantage on ensuring prosperity when they have won the White House.

³ See Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers “Who Deserted the Democrats in 1994?” *The American Prospect*, Fall 1995.

direction, the state of the current economy and this new era of economic change. At the same time, they form one of the most anti-Democratic groups in the electorate. They voted heavily for George Bush and gave Ross Perot over 20 percent of their votes. Currently, the Democrats trail the Republicans by 23 points among non-college white men and by 15 points among non-college white women.⁴ (See chart below, Composition of Electorate.)

That the group most distressed about this changing economy is the group most hostile to the Democrats is a powerful statement about the character of progressive politics today. These voters feel increasingly marginal in this market economy, and Democrats -- and likely the labor movement as well -- barely know how to open their doors to them. However, it is hard to imagine a successful future for Democrats or the labor movement if they fail to build support with the working class electorate, broadly defined. In the absence of a strong initiative from the progressive side, many of these working class voters are sure to turn to a more conservative populist politics.

This critical downscale bloc of white, younger, non-college, non-union families comprises 14 percent of the total electorate (6 percent men and 8 percent women); it encompasses 20 percent when expanded to include those who are single (and the non-college, single men are quite Republican). The entire white and non-union, non-college bloc, regardless of age, comprises almost 45 percent of the electorate. We have not focused on the older non-college voters in this study, as half are seniors and two-thirds are over 60, where there are no doubt different issue opportunities. Still, the older non-college men are very Republican, while the women lean in that direction.

The rest of this broad working and lower-middle-class electorate is comprised of union members (14 percent), African-Americans (7 percent), and other minority groups, largely Latino

⁴Thermometer scores range from zero, very cool, to 100, very warm, with 50 a midpoint, neither warm nor cool. The findings are based on surveys conducted for the Democratic National Committee.

(7 percent), who form the other critical pillars for a new majority politics. Over 40 percent of union members and up to half of white union members have voted Republican in recent years, suggesting the need for a broader downscale progressive project. (The white college-educated, non-union bloc comprises 30 percent of the electorate.)

The non-college and non-union men, as we discovered in this study, feel more financially pressed than the women and seem very much on their own as they seek to grapple with this new economy. They are employed disproportionately in the private sector and in companies with more than 50 employees; they are working longer hours and more jobs, which consumes their time and energies. They are minimally engaged in civic or community organizations: they are one half as likely to attend church or participate in a youth or charitable organization as the non-college women; they are one fourth as likely to be involved in the school or PTA. They are also three times less likely to mention their wives in the course of an economic conversation as the non-college women are to mention their husbands.

The non-college women are very unevenly integrated into this economy, though heavily dependent upon it. In this study, 26 percent report that they are homemakers, 20 percent self-employed, and 40 percent working for small businesses with fewer than 10 employees. They are less involved in the private sector, work in more independent roles and in smaller economic units, and think of themselves as part of a family. At the same time, the women are much more integrated into their communities: a large majority participate in church, school, youth or neighborhood organizations.⁵

This research project, sponsored by the SEIU and the AFL-CIO, focuses primarily on these white, non-college, younger, married voters as a critical target audience, though it also encompasses younger labor union members and younger African-American men, where

⁵The participation rate for the non-college women was 59 percent; 47 percent for African Americans; 38 percent for non-union men; and only 30 percent for union members.

Democrats have lost some ground in recent years. The project employs a unique and intensive research methodology to explore how these voters experience the economy. Respondents were interviewed in person, one-on-one, using a structured, but open-ended, questionnaire to allow in-depth and free-flowing discussion.⁶ The result, we believe, is a rich, personal and poignant narrative which progressives will have to understand if they are to build bridges to this difficult section of working America. In the final phase of the project, we brought some of these voters together to view video presentations of economic themes. Using “dial meter” technology, the participants rated Republican and Democratic economic messages, which they then discussed in follow-up focus groups.

I have included an executive summary for those who want to focus on the main findings and recommendations, but I urge most readers to skip it and begin their reading with the economic experiences and thinking of these working and lower-middle-class voters, which is my starting point. Fortunately, their narrative and this report conclude with the elements of a new Democratic economic discourse.

⁶Greenberg Research conducted a total of 160 face-to-face interviews: 100 with white non-college, married voters under the age of 50 (50 men and 50 women), 22 with African-American men under age 50, and 38 with younger union members. The interviews were conducted at focus group facilities in Milwaukee, Atlanta, Riverside (California) and Woodbridge (New Jersey). The interviews were conducted between November 8 and 15, 1995.

THE MONEY SITUATION

This story about the economy begins with work but ends with money. People understand that having a job is the key to everything else, but work, as we shall see later, no longer provides the kind of raises or promotions that would allow people to keep up with rising prices or to achieve economic success or security. Thus, these working and lower-middle-class voters are consumed with their personal finances -- a mix of prices, bills, debts, and savings. And the word “money” dominates everything else, except “work.” An economic discourse about employment and jobs alone touches on a critical element of downscale economic thinking, but it fails to engage the voters’ preoccupation with the management of their personal finances. That is where these non-college folks see their failings and measure their successes. That is where their life story is centered.

The concept of work is diminished as an economic topic because these non-college voters live in an economic world without raises: 65 percent of the non-college men and 58 percent of the women say they have gotten no raises in recent years or have seen their wages go down. But even the 40 percent who acknowledge increased wages discount them because of rising prices or because of their own increased work effort.

Well the system doesn't seem to be geared for prosperity anymore, it seems to be geared to take jobs out of the country and the, the work we are doing now, I'm getting less than I got twenty years ago. (California, non-college man)

I guess about the same. It's gradually going up, but very little. With our company it's primarily because we went into a new salary plan, that you have to basically walk on water to get a salary increase. So they're just making it a lot tougher on people. It's not like it used to be. Where it was just expected and you knew it was going to happen. You really have to kill yourself to get anything. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Yeah, but it goes just as fast as it comes, I'm afraid. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Because I don't have anything else except these two jobs. There's no health benefits, nothing. Just five dollars an hour, both of them. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

My husband is on salary. And that's always the same. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

No, he's making a lot more. Overtime's been great. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

I would say I'm starting to make more. **Is that because of getting raises?** No, it's because I took on an extra job. (California, non-college man)

I'm making more but it's getting tougher. **You've been getting raises to make more?** Small ones. Working longer hours. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Making more and having less, if you know what I'm saying. Because by the time your deductions are taken out, you're making more, but you have less to spend. By the time you get done paying medical benefit deductions, and your tax deductions, and everything, you actually earn more, but you have less, bottom line. (New Jersey, non-college man)

I'm making more working at night. If I was staying on day shift I'd be making the same or possibly less. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

Without the overtime, we wouldn't be able to make it. And right now, we haven't had a raise in six years. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

The notion of stagnant “real wages” is not a theoretical concept. For the mass of downscale voters, it is simply a presumption. That is now the way the world works: one does not get raises that matter, unless one works longer hours, a higher paying shift, or an additional job.

While wages do not rise, bills do, thus creating the “money situation.” These individuals live in an economic world full of rising taxes, prices, and bills which create debt and deplete savings. Groceries are going up, and so are the co-pays for health care; and, of course, “the taxes are going up, everything's just getting higher and higher.” So the measure of well-being in this new economy is “making the bills.” When you are paying the bills, you are successfully caring for your family.

Surviving. ... Because right now we're going to pay all our bills. **Any other reason?** I'm

living. I'm paying my mortgage. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Getting somewhere. Two years ago we were living paycheck to paycheck, juggling bills, wait two weeks. We're finally to a point where we've been paying our bills when they're due, paying off credit cards, and our debt isn't quite what it used to be. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Surviving. ... Because we're not treading water. We are making the bills. It's tough. We have not been late on our house payment. We're able to eat and clothe the kids, so it's not abundance, but it is surviving. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Succeeding. Our bills are paid. We have our health. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I think we're getting somewhere. We are not in debt, like I said. We're doing well as far as living without the luxuries of new cars. Without the luxuries of vacations. We have managed to get a daughter through college, and we only have one more year to pay, and I think in that respect we're okay. There's no major debt in our lives, and that means a lot to me. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Surviving. We're not advancing greatly, but, by the same token, like most everybody else, we're managing to take care of bills, shelter over our heads ... (Georgia, non-college man)

Success is reaching a point in life where the bills are paid and one no longer has to be consumed by the “money situation.” The cars may be old, “but they’re paid for,” and one has “no debts,” “no major debts.” The house is paid for, and maybe one has “some extra money to put into retirement or save for a rainy day.” One has reached a point where you do not have “to worry about paying this bill and paying that bill” because you have “the money to take care of it.” One does not have “much worries at all as far as money matters.” That is living middle-class.

For a majority of these non-college voters (55 percent), the goal in life is simply “security” or “self-sufficiency.” Another quarter want “a better life,” but that may be no more than getting ahead of the bills. Barely 20 percent talk about “prosperity.”⁷

⁷ The union participants, by contrast, were heavily focused on “security” (54 percent), with another 27 percent saying “self-sufficiency.” The African-American participants were more focused than any other group on achieving “a better life” (35 percent).

Little wonder that the word “money” figured so prominently in the downscale discourse, even though we mentioned it directly in only one question. The non-college men used the word “money” 659 times -- the highest for any word in their discourse. “Work” was mentioned 594 times, but other common economic terms -- like “wage” (160 times), “income” (63 times) and “prices” (42 times) -- trailed far behind. The women mentioned “money” 345 times, behind “work,” which was mentioned 440 times. Among African-Americans and union members, “money” stood right at the top of their word list. (See Word Counts.)

THE SCRAMBLE

A large majority of working lower-middle-class voters believe things are uncertain and unstable: 66 percent of the men and 56 percent of the women. Only a minority (about 40 percent) believe these are “good times,” despite the economic recovery and relatively low unemployment. And for many of the more positive, “good times” means that things are “stable,” or simply that their wife has gone back to work, or that their family or marriage is strong.

The largest bloc of negative respondents (around 40 percent) sees this period as “in-between” good and bad times, but “in-between,” we shall see, includes a very tough view of the economy. In these assessments, one can see a mass of non-college families scrambling to piece together an economic life, even in this period of so-called economic recovery:

We're just getting over a rough period. My husband was out of work for five-and-a-half months last year. And then he was out again for about a month, so it's getting better. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

What do you mean, financially? Let's see, well because my husband is in the process of selling his business, and, you know, things are I don't know. I guess it's unstable...I don't know where we're gonna be this year or next year. (California, non-college woman)

We're 40 years old, and you would think it might be getting a little easier, and sometimes it doesn't feel like it is--financially is what I'm referring to. You have to start thinking about retirement, you have to think about your kids' education, and it just seems we scramble. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Money. I have two jobs, and my husband is working a job. He works twelve hours, I work sixteen. So we're catching up. Because I was laid off for six months. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

Well, ah, work comes and goes. My hours went down, and right now I'm trying to work them back up. (California, non-college woman)

I'd have to say something in-between. My husband's currently laid off, but I'm starting a new job on Monday, so we're, it's not too bad. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

There is something in-between, tough but moving along. There is light at the end of the tunnel. He just took a huge pay cut for a new job, but we're working on it. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I guess the only reason I would hesitate is that I have been laid off of work twice this year, but I am also starting self-employment out of my home in a field that I have been in for many years. So that is positive, but it is still going slowly. So it is okay. I would hope it would pick up. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

We're all doing well. [But I worry about] how much everything costs to live, that part is tough. I work a lot of hours, my wife works a lot of hours, so that is tough. (New Jersey, non-college man)

I'm working two jobs just to stay ahead. Very difficult. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Nine years ago, I was getting paid \$8.50, \$9.00 an hour. That was a union job. I'm really sickened when I think of jobs and the possibility that I would have to go and possibly to an employment, temporary agency because that is the most insulting job that you can have, in pay, dignity, and it's like what you have to do to raise your family. And I know, there are times I had three jobs just to raise my 20-year old. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

Some of the negative respondents speak of "hard times," including 21 percent of the non-college men. In almost all cases, "hard times" is connected to some period of extended unemployment.

People are piecing together multiple jobs, working longer hours and overtime, juggling bills, starting new jobs, and starting new businesses to try to create good times for themselves. They are able to scramble because the economy is generating a lot of jobs. They could not move from "hard times" to "in-between" times without the context of strong economic activity. If unemployment were higher and if fewer jobs were being created, the scramble would be much tougher to pull off. George Bush discovered what happens when high unemployment and slow job growth undercut the ability to piece together an economic life. During Bill Clinton's first two years in office, unemployment declined, and so did people's worries about the economy. But the result was not "good times," just the opportunity to scramble.

THE PARADOX OF LIVING STANDARDS

Climbing Above Average

While non-college workers take for granted that their wages are stagnant, they nonetheless believe their overall economic position is improving and taking them just above the average American. That is the apparent paradox of living standards. Still, people are gaining-- not because the economy is growing and not because their jobs offer advancement and certainly not because anybody is helping them. They are gaining because of their own personal efforts and the choices and sacrifices that their own families are making. They see themselves clawing their way up above the average to a better place -- and God help those who make it a harder climb.

We presented the participants with a ladder, with zero at the bottom, representing the lowest possible living standard, and 10, the highest rung, representing the highest; the 5th rung was the midpoint. Participants were asked to locate themselves right now and then to locate themselves 5 years from now. They were asked to locate the average American right now and, again, 5 years from now. Finally, they were asked to locate where their children would stand at a comparable point in life. (See the chart below, Ladders of Life.)

Both the non-college men and non-college women placed themselves just above the average (rung 5.5 and 5.8, respectively). The same holds true for the African-American men and union respondents, both of whom placed themselves just above the midpoint. Perhaps more important, all the groups expected to see their living standards rise over the next 5 years -- for the non-college men, up to 6.7, and for non-college women, to 7.3. Those are big jumps and, on the face of it, not very consistent with the reported stagnation of wages and struggles with bills and money.

At the same time, these non-college voters view the “average American” as just below average -- about 4.7 on the ladder. But unlike themselves, the average American is not going anywhere. In 5 years, he or she rises only a fraction of a rung to the exact midpoint, 5.0. The living standards of average Americans are seen as simply stagnant.

The non-college participants expect their children to reach a point close to where they are now, though usually below their own expectations for the next 5 years. That is not a bleak scenario, though it hardly fits historic notions of successive generations, each a step closer to realizing the “American dream.”

Peering Back Down

You have a sense from this exercise that people are peering back down at those who are stuck below the average, not able to get a handle on the bills, not able to save, not able to afford vacations, not able to get any further in life. Those are good, hard-working people who are not able to make it any further. That is the conventional experience of most hard-working Americans and the backdrop for the personal efforts of our respondents who are trying to raise their family’s living standards above the average.

People think of this ladder as a moral exercise. They do not spend a lot of time talking about or condemning those at the top. Their main focus is on the good people below, very much like themselves, who deserve a better outcome. There is a strong downscale consciousness, centered on those below the midpoint of the ladder:

What were you thinking of when you marked that that way? Umm, basically compared to a lot of the other people I know, my average living is probably in the middle compared to them. Because they are struggling, probably, three... three or four times harder than I am. (California, non-college man)

The monthly cash flow is very tight. We've got a great deal of debt right now. We don't have the ability to purchase new automobiles. We're driving older automobiles right

now. Very difficult to afford new clothing. So we're struggling, for us, struggling, and it's a lower quality of life than we've had in a long time. Now the reason I've got it marked 4 is that I know there are people struggling a lot worse than we are. We own our own home. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

But I said 4 because we are making more than a lot of people in this country but it's kind of hard to average that out when you have people who are making billions and people who are making \$12,000 a year. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Because there are a lot of people who are far, far wealthier than I am, but there's very, very many people in this country who have just not made it, for a whole number of reasons, but have not made it yet and are not going to be making it for a long time. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Five, I believe is little. I work hard. I do have two boys, and my family does eat. There are a lot of people who are doing a lot worse than me. There's a lot of people doing a lot better than me. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Because I feel I'm, my wife and I working, we're living comfortable, better than a lot of people. (New Jersey, non-college man)

I think life's getting harder for everybody. I think the stress level in this country and I think just getting through every day is much harder for people now than it was in my parents' generation. There's a lot more uncertainty, and it's very hard for your average person to deal with. It's hard enough for people who are above average to deal with. So I don't know how people who are at the bottom of the spectrum are managing. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Climbing Above the Average

This ladder exercise reveals people and families engaging in a personal struggle to get ahead -- against a backdrop of jobs that do not give raises and of average Americans and children largely stuck in place. This is an individual and somewhat heroic narrative of people making choices that raise their families' living standards. Set out below are the ways these individuals themselves account for their expectation of rising living standards in the context of stagnant incomes.

- 1. People expect to raise their living standards by working longer hours, doing overtime, or working at multiple jobs.** People talk about holding multiple jobs, getting more overtime or having a spouse who "is not a slouch" and holds two or three jobs.
- 2. Many intend to get the education, skills or certification to get a job that pays more:** "I'm seven quarters away from getting my degree in college, and I feel I will have

a better job making more money at that time”; “because five years from now I will be finished with my college education, and I'll have a lot better job”; “hopefully, I will have a new job; I intend to finish school in the next five years and do better for me.”

3. Many think about becoming self-employed or creating their own business or helping their spouse who is trying to set up a business on the side.

4. Nearly everybody presumes that when the children reach school age, the women (or wives) will go back to work and be able to bring in more money: “Because in five years, both my girls will be in school full-time and I plan on going back to work. So then we'll have two incomes coming in”; “I'm hoping that my new career will pay”; “My kids are getting older, which means I can be away from the home more, so I should be able to work more”; “When I stopped working to have my daughter, we were struggling financially. So now we're getting back on our feet a little bit, because I'm back to work.”

5. Later on, when the children have “moved out of the house” or when the “kids are raised,” the women will have the “freedom to take a job”: “Because the children will be out and on their own a little bit more, so there'll be less of those expenses, so it should allow for some savings”; “Less mouths to feed.... They could get better, because there will be a time I go back to work”; “Well, my oldest son just moved out of the house, went into the Navy. We're not supporting him any more.”

6. When the kids graduate from college, the tuition bills will suddenly drop.

7. At some point in life, the mortgage will be paid off, and people will have a lot more each month. This appears to be a special point in the narrative where living standards can really rise.

Because our mortgage, the one debt that we do have, will be five years down the road, five years it will be paid off, and my husband keeps making more each year, and in five year's time we will have two through college and only two at home, so those other kids will be making money. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

All of my children are grown, and I have really no responsibilities. My house is almost paid for. (New Jersey, non-college man)

We'll have our house paid off soon, the cars are paid off, we just have the income to do what we please with, instead of educating children and making house payments. (Georgia, non-college woman)

One has a sense that this is a life-time narrative that people fully understand, even early

in the process. They can raise the living standards of their families by acting responsibly, joining the labor force or working more hours, seeing the children grow up to adulthood and independence, and paying off a mortgage and owning something. The end point is a retirement that no longer requires that kind of scramble.

Time and Money

We proposed in the survey that people, particularly the women, entertain a different course -- working less and getting less money in order to spend more time with the family. But 80 percent of both the men and women rejected the idea. This scramble to piece together an economic life is driven by necessity in the face of long-term wage stagnation.

Right now, no. Because, uh, less money means less things my family gets. I mean sure, I'd love to spend more time with them, but I'd love to give them everything they wanted. (California, non-college man)

That'd be wonderful if our bills would be relative. Right now, we couldn't afford to take a cut in pay. So it's nice to spend time with the family, but if you can't put food on the table, what good is it? (New Jersey, non-college woman)

No, I need to provide for my family. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

It sounds wonderful, but you can't live on love. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

People's Personal Resources: What they have going for them

People are able to achieve a rising living standard because of their own qualities, their own hard work and determination, and because of the support of their families. There is no sign in this discourse of government or political parties or organizations. What people have going for them in this economy are their own wits.⁸

⁸Ralph Whitehead suggested this critical question, "As you think about what you had to do making a living over the last few years, what are the things you've got going for you?"

First and foremost, they have their own attitude toward work (29 percent of the men and 36 percent of the women) -- dependability, energy, a willingness to work hard, and an ability to work with people:

I don't give up. I've got a lot of vision, I make things happen, one way or another. Usually, anyway. (Georgia, non-college man)

I'm dedicated. I try very hard to do a good job, and I'm conscientious. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I'm there, I'm on time, and I'm not out, I'm not sick, I'm capable, I don't fool around, I do my job. (New Jersey, non-college woman, union member)

Persistence. Communication skills. Drive. Dedication. When I do work, I'm very loyal to a company. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

The only thing I can say is I am a conscientious worker, I'm a hard worker, and I care about my job. (Georgia, non-college man)

Because they were paying me my wages and I always believe that whenever you go to work that you're supposed to do the best job you can because when you do the best job you can, you're doing it not only unto the employer but unto God. (California, non-college woman)

Second, people rely on their families -- to support them, to provide moral support, to carry the main work load, to provide a supplemental income, to make it possible to get more training or education. The women tend to look to their families and husbands (38 percent) more than men look to theirs (24 percent), and women tend to talk much more about family and moral issues. Nonetheless, family is an important part of the economic strategies of all these non-college voters.

My husband's a very hard worker. The job that he has offers a lot of overtime, so he's really working hard. Last year, when he was out of work, after he went back to work, he was able to get a part-time job too to help things out since I don't work. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Wonderful husband, wonderful family and a wonderful church family. And my job is just fine because it's got flex hours. That's why I like it. (California, non-college woman)

A husband with an excellent education, good business acumen and good financial knowledge. (California, non-college woman)

That my husband has a very dependable job, and my strong faith in the Lord. (Georgia, non-college woman)

The wife's still very employable, so we're not hurting in that sense. (Georgia, non-college man)

My family, my wife, my little boy. Uh, at least I have a job. I revolve my life around my family and, you know, if I can make them happy, then that's, that makes my life complete. (California, non-college man)

The men are much more likely to view their current job as something they have going for them (38 percent, compared to 20 percent of the women). The men talk about the job as a “good” job and “secure,” one that offers the possibility of a decent wage or salary. When the women talk about their job as an advantage, it is usually to emphasize its flexibility or an employer who understands the family situation.

Many of these non-college participants point to their niches in small business or their ability to work independently/for themselves (16 percent of the men and 8 percent of the women). That enables them to escape the job market and, hopefully, its wage limitations. Participants talk about starting small businesses, getting out on your own, being your own boss. These independent economic activities have a broad range -- from opening a book store to providing child care in the home, cleaning houses, addressing and folding envelopes at home, landscaping, selling Herbal Life, and building a career in real estate or as a stock broker.

Finally, it is hard to overestimate how important education and skill training are to these non-college voters, perhaps the most important strategy for people to gain an advantage in this

stagnant economy. Education is a primary strategy for getting a better job and a higher wage (24 percent of the men and 25 percent of the women); lack of education is considered the biggest thing holding people back in their current careers and jobs⁹; and schooling and education, particularly a college education, stand out from everything else as people's best hope for their children doing better in life.

The focus on education carries across gender lines, though the men tend to focus more narrowly and practically on skill training and computers: "I went back to school for air conditioning and refrigeration"; "I am constantly reading computer books"; "I've learned technical things, like I've learned drafting"; "I'm in data processing ... you have a better chance than ... assembly line operators." The women, on the other hand, tend to focus on education in general and the use of education as a route back into the full-time job market.

Well, education number one. Are you talking about me personally? Education number one. Continued education. Always taking classes and improving and learning. A willingness and an openness to learn. A confidence that there's something out there to be learned. (California, non-college woman)

The little bit of computer classes made the difference in being able to move out of clerical into a quasi-professional. (California, non-college woman)

School is going for me, I have a wonderful husband who has been very supportive of my going back to college and has paid for it. I have a great daughter. She definitely makes me stop and take a lift. (Georgia, non-college woman)

And I did finally at least get to finish my second-year degree. And I'm going to be actually starting school again in January to get my four-year degree. So I guess you'd say I have a good education and experience. More marketable skills. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

People become even more graphic in speaking about their lack of education as a primary

⁹The men also worry a great deal about "age" as a primary factor holding them back, even though all the participants were under 50. Clearly, people are beginning to feel at an early point that they may not be able to go further.

obstacle to their making a good living. The college degree is a great divide, and most of these working and lower-middle-class voters find themselves on the other side, working very hard to make a living.

I didn't further my education. When I was working I couldn't get a good job because I didn't have any real good skills, but I consider myself an intelligent person, even though I don't have any of those degrees. (Georgia, non-college woman)

The property taxes are real high, the car insurance is real high, my husband doesn't have a college education, so he's a blue collar worker. So we really, he's got to kind of bust butt to get ahead. Unfortunately, we don't get a break. We're that middle-class. Sometimes it would be nice to get a little bit of some kind of help. I'm not exactly sure what, but some kind of break. We're just starting out, you know. Whether it'd be tax credit, whether it'd be something because it's hard, it's hard. I don't work, I have two small children, and we own a home, and it's real tough. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Going against me? Not enough education. I still don't have enough to move ahead. (California, non-college woman)

When I was employed, I had not graduated college, and a lot of jobs out there require a college education, unless you want to make \$4.50 an hour. I would say that would be the major drawback is lack of education, lack of skills. (Georgia, non-college woman)

It's a woman without a college degree, it's a woman with a family. I have four kids, so that usually puts an employer off right away. The shrinking job market. To do affirmative action, not to do affirmative action. Am I a minority this week, am I not a minority this week? (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

I need more education. Times can be rough when you don't have the money because your education is not good enough yet. You have to go to school to get more education to make more money. It's hard to buy a car...rent and everything else. (California, non-college woman)

These non-college participants are obsessed with education for their children as the one thing that can break them out of the current economic probabilities. The non-college women focus equally on children doing well in school (27 percent) and in getting a shot at college (27 percent). The men give a lot of importance to schooling (21 percent) but focus very heavily on

the college degree as the educational accomplishment that will move their children into a different class position and different set of economic circumstances (41 percent). In any case, education is what enables the children to reach a different point on the ladder:

Well, I'm trying to save for their future too, to ensure that they can afford to go to college, to better themselves. I wish we would've listened when our parents told us to go to college. So, hopefully, I figure if they go to college, they'll probably even be higher. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I think they'll be better. At this point, they all have intentions of going to college, and I think that that will increase their ability to have an income. (California, non-college woman)

Depending on her college education, really. If we can afford to send them to school, then you could be able to go up. But at this point, I don't know what's going to be in the future for college, and, fifteen years from now, if you don't have college, you'll be down at the bottom of the ladder. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

It's money that gets education, money seems to help to gain success. (New Jersey, non-college man)

We stress at home the need today with the economy, their education, education, education, and the more they get, the better off they're going to be. We're real tough about that. (Georgia, non-college man)

These parents worry that their children will not listen or will be distracted by other influences and thus miss the chance to break out of all this. One man in Georgia talked about his daughter giving up on college to join her new husband at the Marine base. Now she has two children and is delivering newspapers for \$8.50 an hour. "I didn't want it to go through," he observed, "because I knew that it would affect her schooling, and that, in turn, will affect her earning potential these days" (Georgia, non-college man).

ALONE

On Your Side

This struggle to rise above the average is highly personal. It depends on people's qualities and attitudes, on their personal determination to improve themselves and get an education. It depends on the support and work of family members. Without those things, one would struggle like the rest of America, not getting anywhere. But the resources and strategies are private; as one of the men bluntly put it, "unless you're willing to watch out for yourself or do something for yourself, nobody else is really going to help you." When asked, "who is on your side," the participants look to family (35 percent of the men and 30 percent of the women), to friends (8 and 13 percent) and to the church (18 and 34 percent). People are pretty assertive about being alone: "Basically, I think the only one that really is on my side is my family" (Wisconsin, non-college man).

People have little expectations that issue or civic organizations will rise to their defense or advance their interests. Barely anybody thinks of unions: just 6 percent of the non-college men and 2 percent of the women; but also only 4 percent of the African-Americans and, worse, only 13 percent of union members. (While most of the union members think unions make it "easier" to make a living, over 60 percent of all the other groups do not know whether unions are helpful or harmful.)

People fail to mention political leaders as a force on their side: just 7 percent of the men and 19 percent of the women mention any national or local political leaders. But it is not just an oversight, as people focus on their private lives and choices. People in these interviews go out of their way, without prompting, to point out that political leaders have failed them, that they are supposed to be helpful, but that you cannot depend on them to make things better for ordinary

people. People want a popular politics to help them, but unfortunately, the politicians are too busy helping themselves. That is why one must look elsewhere:

Politicians are supposed to do that. That's a big supposed to. They worked for it. There's people in the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, all sorts of different religious organizations. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I'd say my church. We go to church every Sunday, and we believe that God will provide. My parents are there for me, his mother's there for him. And I'd like to think the people that we elect are there for me too, but sometimes I'm not too sure. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

For some reason, right off the bat, I thought about Ralph Nader. He's off the wall, but at the same time, I like what he does. I think some churches do. I'm a big church believer, and I think some churches do. In the community, more so. I'm sure everybody wants you to say politicians. Sometimes I think they hinder us instead of help. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I'm real leery of government right now. So that question made me think of government. And my immediate reaction is that they aren't necessarily in our best interest right now. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Politically, I would say none of them. Church groups are really fighting for God's rights and what we believe in. The Red Cross, hopefully. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I don't tend to think anybody is on my side. My gut feeling is each family for themselves. I don't see government playing a huge part. They've taken away and taken away rather than given back. My church is behind me a hundred percent, 'cause we're Christians. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

Who's on my side? Myself. I don't think anyone can depend on, definitely, politicians, because they're on their side. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

They believe, frankly, that the ordinary people are on their own: "The little people have to pull together. Right now, to me, there really isn't anybody out there for me" (New Jersey, non-college woman).

Standing Against You: The government

When asked what is holding them back, these non-college individuals offer a highly politicized response -- the politicians, government, and, above all, "the tax man." People see themselves struggling to get ahead against the odds. Government is not there with a helping hand. Government is there with its hands in people's pockets, taking their money for taxes, sometimes for welfare. A striking 53 percent of the men and 46 percent of the women volunteer something about government and politics holding them back, with the emphasis on government, politicians, taxes, and the Congress, in that order. Overwhelmingly, people think the government makes things harder, rather than easier, for people (73 percent of the women and 60 percent of the men).

Well, if they kept their nose out of it, it would be easier. Since they have their nose in, it's harder, because they want more money. (California, non-college woman)

I think they make it harder. **Why do you feel they make it harder?** I think that they, I don't think that they have the average person in mind. (California, non-college woman)

Gosh, that's a tough one. I guess I would lean a little more towards harder, simply because of the taxes. You get taxed for everything. (Georgia, non-college woman)

It seems like sometimes, I don't know, like my husband's paycheck, there's like this huge chunk of money that obviously like you never see. There's no intervention on their part other than (inaudible). But in what we do, I don't really see any intervention that keeps (inaudible). I lost my train of thought, I'm sorry. I think there's ways that make it better and keep it safe and that. But ultimately, I don't know. I don't politically, I don't keep up with it. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Harder. They take too much of my money. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Taxes. When I look at what I make, what I walk out with, and think about where it goes and how it's wasted, that annoys me the most. (California, non-college man)

Sure. What little bit of money you're managing to save, you're not getting no interest on it. Just everywhere you turn, not just the federal government, the state government, all

the way down to your county government, it's taxes, taxes, taxes. (Georgia, non-college man)

In some instances they make it a little harder. Every loophole, it is very possible to get more money out of us during the year for taxes and taxes again at the end of the year. It does make it quite difficult because you end up working basically over half the year just to pay the tax. You're not making any money. (Georgia, non-college man)

I guess, on a personal level, it seems like you're getting a lot less for what your taxes are paying for and with Social Security, in 10 years, what will be here when I get of age? (New Jersey, non-college man)

This instinctive aversion to government is not about philosophy. It is about government imposing taxes on people who are struggling to make a living and, to some extent, a government beginning to threaten their retirement and health care. It is about a government that takes their money and that does not think much of the average person.

VIRTUE

These non-college voters see themselves as struggling to raise their family above the average, as scrambling to put together an economic life, as worrying constantly about the bills, and as falling back on themselves and their families. They think of themselves as virtuous. They have assumed responsibility for the bills, the children, going to work, and getting an education, without much help from anybody else. Above all, they have been *responsible*: 80 to 90 percent of the non-college men and women (as well as African-Americans and union members) say “responsibility” is the most important value. In almost all cases, the non-college participants combine the value of responsibility with the value of “hard work” or “self-reliance.” This reflects their lives.

These downscale voters believe that if everyone assumed responsibility -- and behaved as these non-college citizens have in their own lives -- so many problems would go away. “I think everything stems from it,” a non-college man from California stated:

Ah, someone who is personally responsible to, responsible to all of their endeavors. They are responsible in the workplace, they are responsible as a, as an employee, they're responsible as a, as a father, they're responsible as a mother ... People must be responsible for their actions. This nonsense about society made me do it, or the Devil made me do it is nonsense. Ah, everyone makes their own choices. And, to responsible people, don't always make the correct ones, but when they don't, they take responsibility for their incorrect ones. They don't try to blame someone else; it's not always the guy behind the tree. It's me, I did it, I screwed up. And ah, with that you have a turnaround in society.

The grievances of the downscale electorate are rooted in behavior that offends these virtues. They see the world through this prism: those who support their personal efforts and those that undermine them; those who respect their virtue and those who disregard or take advantage of it; those who live by the same values and those who do not. It is the tension

between virtue and grievance -- rather than labor and capital -- that animates the working and lower-middle-class electorate and that creates political energy. Political and economic messages will have to be rooted in this discourse about virtue if they are to capture the attention of downscale America.

The “good guys” in society are the working and middle-class people, the people who work, who are self-reliant, and who take responsibility; it includes the small business people who put everything on the line (47 percent of the non-college men and 22 percent of the non-college women). The non-college women also talk about the private sector and the rich (24 percent), though, as we discovered earlier, their focus is on small and independent businesses. Ultimately, the focus of the non-college discourse, among both men and women, is on the virtuous people who take responsibility:

It's hard to tell. In the economy, the good guys are the people out there working every day trying to make a living. The bad guys are well hidden. It's really hard to tell who the bad guy is. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Uh, well, I go for the independent person trying to make it out there because they get no support, and they have no, uh, they have no safety net. They're out there on their own trying to get ahead and, uh.... Well, they are usually the ma and pa store that barely makes a profit, and they're out there just making it, and I vote for them (giggle). ... They're the ones with the good hearts, that have the good intentions, that aren't out to screw everybody for a buck. (California, non-college woman)

The good guys are the guys out there working and busting their tushes, and the bad guys are the ones that are spending all the money that they should be trying to save to pay off their debts. (California, non-college woman)

Well, the good guys are the people who work with the system the way the system is supposed to work. And the bad guys are the people who try to subvert. (California, non-college woman)

Small business owners who are trying to make a go at it and do things right, that they're the good guys. The people that are honest, and have integrity, and want to do things right, that they're the good guys. And I feel like government right now are the bad guys because they make it difficult for you to have a business, to have, you know, have any

free time, and not so much emphasis is placed on the family anymore. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I don't know if there are any good guys. I'd, I'd, I'd say, you know, all those little entrepreneur guys who are out there and, you know, beating their hearts out and working their butts off, but 99% of those guys are out there doing it for themselves. (California, non-college man)

I think the good guys are people who got imagination and trying to make a life for themselves. Getting away from big companies. I admire the people who can go out on their own and make a living for themselves. (California, non-college man)

Working class. Because everything I have I have to work for. Nothing is handed. Middle-class has to work for it too, but nothing is handed to us. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

The “bad guys” are those that do not respect the struggle and the virtues of working and middle-class America. Government is a big part of the story, though not all of it. Almost a third of the men immediately point to the government, bureaucrats and taxes; almost 20 percent cite Dole, Gingrich and the Congress and almost 10 percent, Clinton. Over half the men begin with politicized responses about the “bad” forces. The women are somewhat less political and less certain about who the bad guys are: about 15 percent of the women start with government, and a third offer politicized responses. A number of the men and women talk about welfare as counterpoised to the “good forces,” which folds into the general sense of grievance:

Basically the people that try to get on the system, the people collecting welfare, the people on unemployment. I know a few people that they just play the game. I think we're paying, my husband and myself, trying to work and working every day and working hard and trying to save; we pay the price for people that are lazy, that just don't care. They're having babies, and the fathers take off, and we end up supporting them. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I hope the government hears this because, absolutely, for a guy in my class, there's zero help to, there's no assistance. There's people on welfare who've never worked a day in their lives, and there's people like me who work two jobs and just pay car insurance for people who don't have it, and they're still driving and so on and so forth. The government's doing nothing to help us. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Almost a third of the men (and about 20 percent of the women) focus on big business, the rich and powerful, and the greedy as “bad guys.” That critique of those at the top is not the dominant current, but it suggests that populist arguments may have some foundation within the downscale discourse. But as we shall see below, it is a very weak foundation.

THE POPULIST DISCOURSE

A populist discourse focused on those at the top is very weakly developed among working and lower-middle-class voters. Their first thoughts, when thinking about grievance and virtue, do not center on the rich and powerful, as we can see in numerous areas of this research:

Their economic language, as we can see from the content analysis, barely encompasses words like “rich,” “wealthy,” and “profits.” These upscale words score near the bottom of the word chart. (See graphs.)

When thinking about values that are important, the participants focus on “responsibility” above all, but populist values score quite modestly: “fairness” (23 percent), “community” (23 percent) and “solidarity” (2 percent). For most of these participants, “fairness” was defined as the “golden rule” (treating people as you would want to be treated), rather than in terms of equality. (Union participants were no more likely to talk about “fairness.”)

In the ladder exercise, very few talked with any animation about those at the top of the ladder. The focus was on the mass of people stuck just below the midpoint.

When asked to identify who makes things worse for them, most people focused on government and politicians. Only 6 percent mentioned the rich.

Large majorities of the non-college men and women say their employers make life “easier” rather than “harder” for them: 57 percent of the men and 64 percent of the women. These are largely pragmatic responses, emphasizing the ability to work overtime, to get benefits or flexible hours. There are a lot of complaints, to be sure, but the larger response is positive toward employers.

Though the populist discourse is highly undeveloped, many of these participants, particularly the men, lament the breakdown of the social contract at work -- a contract that made it possible to raise both a family and one’s living standards. Instead, companies are now focused

on the bottom line and profits, at the expense of the people who work in these companies:

Companies are down-sizing. There's a large work force, and they're capable of taking anyone's job at any time. So companies have no initiative to give anybody anymore. Basically the feeling is if you don't like it, there's the door, there's others out there. And they're right. So I don't see the average worker gaining anything for the foreseeable future. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

Just the way you see how the corporations are taking all their money and not distributing it to their workers, hiring temps. It seems to me that they're looking to get rid of their full-time employees, and the rate of pay that they're hiring the new people coming in is going down instead of coming up. So I just think the whole system is more going to be for the top and less for the bottom. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Some of the sharks on Wall Street are real bad guys. The vulture capitalist is a bad guy, although not to the extent it was in the '80s anymore, so I'm a little obsolete perhaps. (New Jersey, non-college man)

The (inaudible) are pretty much the bad guys because the bottom line is real important. All these mergers and acquisitions taking place, you read about 12,000 jobs gone, 15,000 jobs gone just to cover the bottom line. I lost my job on Wall Street basically because the manager/partner came down and the bottom line, 14 middle management people were gone. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Virtually every one of the participants described themselves as “loyal” to their employers and companies, and most of the women also thought that their employer was loyal to them (52 percent) -- remembering, of course, that most of the women worked in smaller businesses. Over half of the men (and over a third of the women) thought their employers were not loyal -- which increasingly seems like a fact of economic life.

I've personally known five people that have been at the company for 22 years. They put 'em into an office, said, sorry, we don't need you anymore. Here's a check, one week per year for every year they worked. Clear your desk out and leave. (Georgia, non-college man)

The days of the kind of respect that you used to get from your employers are long gone and hard to find. A lot of them feel as though ... we are a dime a dozen, and we are easily replaced. So there is no sense of loyalty. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

I just don't think, if my husband quit tomorrow, I don't think they'd blink an eye. I really don't. I think they'd replace him and pay somebody lower. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I don't think an employer feels a sense of loyalty to any employee. ... because I think they're out for themselves. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I can't think of any company that does any more, unless you're a dentist's office, and even that's going away. I think companies ... They don't have a heart, they don't have emotions. They have bottom lines. (Georgia, non-college woman)

People do express a genuine resentment of CEOs who take exorbitant salaries while cutting back employment or wages. That seems like an assault on the virtues that ordinary people live by: "Executive salaries are outrageous. They have all these people working underneath them. It's like, why do they get paid so much?"; "There's nobody worth all the millions that they're getting. They don't even understand what the little guy's up against." Executives are getting these enormous salaries, and they aren't even "movie stars and sports heroes."

Nonetheless, much of the discussion now takes these disloyal practices as the norm, maybe a necessity, given the changing, competitive economy facing companies today. These working-class voters almost understand too much:

I can't blame them at all. But they definitely, if they don't need you, you're out the door. (Georgia, non-college woman)

It's the money. It's the stockholders. They do what they do because they're in business to make money. It's nothing personal when somebody gets terminated or a whole office gets terminated. It's not because they don't like you. It's economics. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

A populist discourse, to be effective, will have to begin with a close identification with the struggles of those in the middle. That is the most important element of a progressive discourse that reaches these downscale voters. That lays the foundation for a critique of

government that has failed to act on behalf of people, of high-flying executives who give themselves big raises while downsizing their operations, and of Republicans who represent the most privileged rather than the ordinary voter.

VIEWING THE ECONOMY

The Job Situation: The ability to scramble

These non-college voters can only execute these personal strategies for building an economic life and raising their family's living standards if the economy is creating jobs. People no longer expect that those jobs will pay well and provide automatic opportunities for advancement. People expect to raise their living standards by working more hours, having the wife get back into the labor force, or paying off college or the mortgage. But those personal strategies are all contingent on an employment situation that allows them to succeed.

Jobs are clearly the first and most important point in evaluating the economy. When the Bush administration could not generate jobs, people could not scramble successfully, and Bush paid the ultimate price at the polls. When the Clinton administration brought unemployment down, people began to worry less about the economy and more about other issues, like crime and moral decline. People were now in an economic game where their personal strategies could work.

While these downscale voters share none of the elite's enthusiasm for the economy -- given the nature of the jobs and the absence of raises -- they do recognize that the job situation in the country is "good" and stable enough for them to organize a personal strategy to get ahead:

Single women are getting more opportunities, overall economy seems to be holding pretty steady. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I believe the unemployment rate is down a little bit. The taxes are somewhat stabilizing in our area anyway. I mean, for us, it's picking up. I mean, the work is steady. We're playing catch-up. We're getting a little bit ahead. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

The economy's getting better. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Not many good things. I think it has eased up. Even though I didn't vote for Clinton, I never liked Clinton, it has gotten better. And it is easier for younger women now to get jobs than it once was. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I think there's plenty of employment opportunity. (Georgia, non-college woman, union member)

From what I understand, unemployment is down; it seems like I heard we might have a tax cut in the next year or so. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I think there's a lot of opportunity out there for people who are willing to take a certain amount of what I consider calculated risk. But at the same time, I feel like there's becoming a bigger gulf between the middle-class and what I consider the people at the lower-middle-class. It's harder to make that transition for those people. I'm not sure why that's happening, but that's my sense. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Hopefully unemployment is down and people are working. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I don't really know. I mean, it seems like there's more jobs for people, that there aren't as many people looking for work as there were even just a couple of years ago. But I don't know that that's actually, that they're actually quality jobs. In other words, per head count, yes, more people may be at work. But what it is they're actually doing and whether or not it's full-time employment and if people are actually creating a livelihood and earning a livelihood, I don't know. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

But I think the economy by and large is absorbing everyone that wants to work. And I ... I drove a school bus when I was thirty-nine years old. A lot of people wouldn't do that. I'm not afraid to work. If you want to work, you can find a job. You may have to inconvenience yourself, and you may have to inconvenience your family. But I feel the economy is still generating enough jobs to keep everyone occupied. And again, not necessarily in a living, what's a living wage. But that in itself in a country this big with the world situation the way it is, I think is a plus. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

I think unemployment is down. (Georgia, non-college man)

I think there are jobs out there. The unemployment rate is very low. The (inaudible) rate is fairly low. (Georgia, non-college man)

Accepting that the unemployment rate is down is not the same as accepting that the

economy is growing, which likely implies something headier, like real income growth. When we presented people with a chart describing the economy, including the assertion that the economy is growing, the respondents simply rejected that idea. It seemed implausible: “It depends on what they mean by growth. If they’re talking like 1 tenth of 1 percent, well sure, it’s growth, but you’re not going to notice it until you look back 10 years from now”; “the economy’s growing, but ever so slightly, and I think the only reason it’s growing is because we hit rock bottom”; “Somebody’s lying. ... The economy is growing? Where is it growing?”; “it makes me feel our economy is nothing but a joke”; “But the economy is not growing for the regular people.”

The Bad Things

The bad things in the economy are those that make it more difficult for people to execute their personal economic strategies. Those are the economic pre-occupations that people want addressed, beginning with government spending and taxes.

Government spending and taxes. They stand at the top of people’s open-ended and close-ended discussions of problems with the economy. They are a bigger problem for the men than for the women, but government spending and taxes dominate the problem discussion across the board. The issue is not so much the federal budget deficits, which, in fact, ranked much lower. Above all, the issue is about money and taxes. As a California woman put it, “the more money they take out of our pockets, the less we have to spend and invest back in the economy”; or as a California man put it, “out of my salary ... half of it is gone. The taxes are too high for the area you live in, I mean, you can’t survive.” Another man in California put the tax issue in the context of the scramble at the center of their lives:

With everything that's going, you know, up, you got to be able to afford to live, eat and then my little four year old has, has those extras. ... So that makes it a lot harder. And the

jobs I do don't pay, you know, a lot -- minimum wage or just above, so it, it makes it real hard to and then they pull massive taxes out so you don't really have what you made. (California, non-college man)

The concern with government and spending also centers on welfare which seems to embody the absence of good sense and values -- people being taxed on their work in order to subsidize people who are idle. These non-college voters ranked welfare nearly as high a problem as government spending and taxes. A New Jersey and then a Wisconsin woman describe the offense against virtue: “my husband and myself, trying to work and working every day and working hard and trying to save, we pay the price for people that are lazy, that just don't care; they're having babies, and the fathers take off, and we end up supporting them”; “I get very upset that I'm paying for something that's so abused and they can't control it.” A New Jersey man added his anger, “I just see people who've never worked a day in their lives and continue to have money and nice cars and sit around on the corner drinking beer with their next check and not doing anything to help the economy.”

Medicare and Social Security. The second biggest economic problem is the threat to Social Security and Medicare, though for the non-college women, this was the top-ranked problem. These social insurance programs are not simply programs. For the non-college population, they are central economic considerations and elements in their life-time strategies for surviving and succeeding. This whole life struggle has a finish line where people are out of debt and have savings and a secure retirement, free of worries. Retirement symbolizes a successful life's journey for those who have lived a virtuous life.

I was thinking about my mother, who is old, on Social Security, and it's horrible what they do to older people. My aunt who is 82 has no pension. She gets \$800.00 from Social Security because she has to pay her rent which I think is \$555.00 quarterly. She has to pay? Then you see immigrants coming to the country, and they let them live for free. They do nothing about it, and I get angry because here are old people who have given their guts and what do they get? (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I looked for myself in the future, I look at my parents right now, and we wouldn't want to see them worse than we are right now because they are just probably very stable, being from a working class family. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

That's something that the government's supposed to give us back after you've given them taxes for the years that you work. And now there's a threat that it's not going to be there to help the people who need it. (New Jersey, non-college man)

Social Security is used for everything but what it's supposed to be used for. People pay into it all their life and live one year after they retire. (Georgia, non-college man)

(inaudible) people on the top (inaudible) what they believe. They make it worse. They're trying to get rid of Medicare and all of that. And I'm trying to support my grandmother. And I think if I wasn't alive, who would support her if they got rid of Medicare. (Georgia, non-college man)

Bad guys? People who want to take away what you worked all your life for. Which are like parts of the government, I'm sure. If taxes go higher, and your pension is not enough, and your Social Security, you can't live the way you worked all your life that you thought you could when you got old. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

The intensity of the responses may have been exaggerated by the debate over the budget, but it is likely that our political discourse may be dominated for the foreseeable future by the government's role in retirement security. The issue has intensity because it is about an unacceptable threat to the virtues of working middle-class life, where obviously progressives must center their economic discourse.

Downsizing. In the open-ended discussion of economic problems, about a quarter of the non-college men talked about the problem of downsizing and mergers. They are witnessing people losing their jobs after years of service, one person doing the work of three or four, and a decline of opportunity in larger companies. The tone of the discussion is descriptive and fatalistic, without any real sense that the problem is reversible or that some kind of intervention would change it. It is clearly a troubling element of the current economy that potentially undermines personal strategies for surviving and achieving security.

The Rich and Powerful. Barely anyone brought up the problem of the rich and powerful in the open-ended discussion, but when reminded of the issue, women ranked the problem quite high, equal to taxes and above that of illegal immigration. This was mainly about disproportionate power, rather than inequality or bad employer practices: respondents did not flock to issues, like the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer or the problem of employers cutting benefits and offering low wages. The non-college men showed only modest interest in the issue, ranking the problem of big business power well below that of the government, taxes, the budget deficit, welfare and Medicare.

It is important to underscore what economic problems did not emerge as major themes in the discussion of the larger economy:

Trade. The subject did not come up in the open-ended discussion, and it ranked near the bottom of the problem list -- whether presented as jobs moving overseas or as foreign imports.

Unemployment. Concern with unemployment did not reach double digits in either the open-ended or close-ended discussion of the economy. Apparently, many people believe there are acceptable levels of employment in the current economy.

THE DEMOCRATS AND THE ECONOMY

From the vantage point of downscale America, the Democratic Party does not have much to say. Barely a quarter of these non-college voters has anything positive to say about the Democratic Party and the economy. Less than one-in-ten of these downscale voters speaks of the Democratic Party as being for the working class or blue collar people. Only a fraction of respondents mention education and training as a Democratic approach on the economy.

A significant number of respondents speak of Democratic “handouts” and “giveaways,” but that is overwhelmed by a much stronger sense that the Democrats simply have no identifiable approach on the economy:

I don't know that they have any approach for making the economy stronger. (California, non-college man)

To be honest with you I don't think they have a good solid platform right now to help our economy. I don't, you know, they're too divided as a party to be much of a benefit to anybody right now. (California, non-college man)

I don't think they have any ideas. I think they've run out of ideas. (Georgia, non-college man)

I don't see where they have an approach to make it stronger. (Georgia, non-college man)

Well, I'm not sure they have one. Ah, it sort of seems to me theirs is a status quo. (California, non-college man)

I don't think they have an approach. And I think they have got some serious, serious problems. (California, non-college man)

I actually don't know. I have no idea what they're trying to do. (California, non-college man)

I don't think they have an approach. Ah, what they had for the most part didn't work. And they really haven't come up with any new ideas. I think the last new idea that they had probably occurred back in 1960, '61. And I don't think they have had one since.

(California, non-college man)

I don't have a clue. (California, non-college woman)

These working and lower-middle-class voters make little association between Bill Clinton and the economy. About a quarter talk about him as "trying" to do a good job. But only 2 percent of the men and 12 percent of the women actually said he is doing a "good job." The best the President gets among the non-college voters is a minimalist, off-hand positive that he has not been too bad on the economy:

Well, I don't think he's done too bad a job. (New Jersey, non-college man)

I don't think he's done that bad. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

He's doing as good as any other president I've seen in there. (California, non-college man)

I think he's handling it to the best of his ability. I think the economy's growing at a slow rate, but at least it's growing. I think he's trying to do his best. (Georgia, non-college man)

He's gotten a bad rap, especially from the right wing. He's done a reasonably good job of staying out of the way. So I think he's done a reasonably good job of staying out of the way, but he's done a poor job of making dramatic reforms that may benefit us. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

I get the feeling he has done probably just as good a job as anyone else could have done at the time. (Georgia, non-college woman)

At no point in these discussions did any of these voters suggest any idea or specific thing President Clinton might have done to produce a stronger economy. Nobody identified an economic policy or plan; nobody mentioned increased investment or deficit reduction. People granted the president only a generalized stewardship over the economy that follows from holding office.

THE REPUBLICANS AND THE ECONOMY

The Republicans are seen as having an identifiable approach on the economy, and that is a profound distinction from the Democrats. The non-college men pose a particular challenge. By almost two-to-one, they offer positive views of the Republicans on the economy, and there is real philosophic content to their views. They understand that the Republicans want to cut taxes, put money in people's pockets and encourage private investors to invest:

I think that, from what I hear, the Newt Gingrich type of Republicans now, that they really do believe in taking more money away from the government and letting individuals determine how it has to be spent more. It would help the economy and increase jobs. And I can see that angle. (Georgia, non-college man)

To lower taxes which will help increase money in the private sector and try to encourage business starts and new business growth. I guess it is more of an entrepreneur approach. I guess the American dream to start a business to have more cash flow so that the individuals can invest if they want to invest in things, they can. (Georgia, non-college man)

As a philosophy they don't believe that the government can grow the economy. They believe that the economy is an organic thing of its own that will grow on its own. You don't need to water it particularly with government dollars to make that happen. (Georgia, non-college man)

Their approach is to cut taxes and, at least the way I'm hearing it, is to cut the taxes, put more spending money in people's pockets and if they have more money, they'll spend more money. And that's considering that if they had money, they'd save it. (New Jersey, non-college man)

I think their trickle down economics, if it's worked out properly, would actually work. By helping the businesses and allowing them room to grow and increased wages. (Wisconsin, non-college man)

The women also have a better sense of what the Republicans would do on the economy, but they do not trust them very much. By almost two-to-one, they offer negative views of the Republicans on the economy and tend to favor the Democrats on any set of economic choices we

pose. Clearly, the women are a more immediate audience for a Democratic economic message, but they cannot be the only audience if Democrats are to build a broader working class base.

The first problem facing Democrats is the broad receptivity among working class voters to the Republicans' small-government-low-taxes economic message. It is a simple message that relates directly to the personal economic struggle of these non-college voters:

This approach says, get government out of the way so people, communities and investors can create a new prosperity. It says cut the federal deficit and balance the budget, cut government spending and bloated government and cut taxes across the board. That will allow individual freedom, investment and growth.

About 80 percent of the respondents initially responded positively to the approach. Some liked the support for entrepreneurship but, overwhelmingly, people like the approach because it promised relief from taxes. Even balancing the budget was largely about making it possible to cut taxes. Republican economics is, after all, about money:

It would just give us a chance to get ahead. If we didn't have to, if our taxes were lower and the government was saving money, then maybe they can offer different programs for the kids for a lot of other things that they had to cut in the past. Maybe if they cut out all the extra stuff. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Getting the government out of the way with lower taxes which, jeez, I want lower taxes. (Georgia, non-college man)

Because they're saying that I have to pay higher taxes to pay this thing, pay that thing for the government, federally funding, and if they didn't have this overhead, this deficit, I wouldn't have to paying taxes all the time. (New Jersey, non-college woman)
Cutting government spending, I'm all for. I'm tired of giving my taxes to the government and seeing how some of it gets spent. (California, non-college woman)

[It] would cut my stinking taxes. (California, non-college woman)

I think if the government wouldn't waste so much, we wouldn't have to be taxed so much. (Georgia, non-college woman, union member)

Because I think right now they do spend way too much. It's way out of line. And I do believe taxes should be cut. If they streamlined it, which is what I think they're saying here, balancing the budget and cutting government spending, that that will happen for your average American. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

Getting government out of the way. Government spending is the big thing. The more they spend the more they're going to tax you. They have to keep raising the taxes to keep up with the spending. And the less money you make, the less money you have to live off of. (Georgia, non-college woman)

I don't think the government has to get out of the way, but I do like that one. Because I think if we can cut government spending and taxes and give people the chance to have freedom and growth, that they could take care of themselves. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

I look to the '80 when people were... the government got off there backs in some respect and people started their own businesses. And when you start a business you hire people and they're paying taxes themselves. Buying things which employs more people...snowballs. (California, non-college man)

The Presentation of the Republican Economic Message

We brought together these non-college men and women to watch various Republican leaders present the Republican economic message. While they viewed more than twice as many Democratic messages, the recall after the viewing was quite focused and specific: Republicans are for balancing the budget, cutting taxes and cutting wasteful spending. The flat tax and the 17 percent rate made a strong impression; the balanced budget, a weak one. Overall, the Republican economic messages scored less well than the Democratic ones developed for this project, but the Republicans get a strong hearing to the extent that they insinuate themselves into the lives of these working and middle-class voters -- which means a discourse about taxes and the ability of families to have more of their own money.

The main findings from the video-dial-meter testing are highlighted below:

Newt Gingrich is a very weak messenger for the Republican economic message. Women are immediately negative, but neither men nor women respond very well to anything he communicates -- including his attempt to explain "the balanced budget bonus" of lower interest rates.

Forbes gets a strong initial response to scrapping the tax code: “We start by scrapping the tax code. Don’t fiddle with it, junk it. Throw it out. Bury it.” The response continues to move up for “lowers taxes to 17 percent” and for families not paying “taxes on the first \$36,000 of income.”

The Forbes anti-tax system attack produces an extraordinary immediate response among men (up 12 points in 4 seconds, 2.8 points per second). Women respond warmly to 17 percent, \$36,000 and to “no tax on Social Security, no tax on pensions, no tax on capital gains.”

Gramm wins a modest response when he talks about stopping “this 30 year spending spree” and an even more modest response when he promises to “make balancing the budget my number one priority.” He gets a powerful response, however, when he promises to *cut spending and taxes*: “I want to cut government spending, I want to cut taxes.” When taxes is presented as real money for families, there is another surge among the women: “I want to let families spend more of their own money on their own children, on their own businesses, on their own future” (women, up 20 points, 1.5 points per second).

Dole’s overall economic message gets a fairly flat response, but a couple of sentences about *taxes, debt and spending* produce one of the two strongest responses in the dial groups:

We didn’t dig ourselves into a 5 trillion dollar debt because the American people were under-taxed. We got that 5 trillion dollar debt because government overspends, and we continue to overspend.

The response was strong for both men and women, but for the latter, it was up 18 points (3.0 points per second).

Dole gets no response whatsoever to returning power to the states, for the 10th Amendment or, importantly, for achieving a balanced budget in seven years.

Buchanan is not warmly received by these non-college voters. He gets support, particularly among the non-college women, for identifying with the struggles of working Americans: “What is an economy for if not so that workers and their families can enjoy the good life their parents know, so that incomes rise with every year of hard work” (up 20 points, .8 points per second). He also gains for attacking a government that does not represent working people: “A government that does not listen anymore to

the forgotten men and women of this country who work in the forges and factories and plants and businesses of this country” (up 12 points).

Buchanan gets little response for attacking NAFTA, lobbyists and corporate contributions. In fact, the response among the men in particular, is quite negative, and the graph line heads downward. (Note: among the men, attacking government drove the line up; attacking corporations and NAFTA drove the line down.)

ELEMENTS OF DEMOCRATIC ECONOMICS

The Democrats, as we saw earlier, have not yet begun to join the economic discourse of working and lower-middle-class America. Up until now, they have found no simple entry point, like taxes, that insinuates Democrats into lives of non-college workers who are engaged in a personal struggle to raise the living standards of their families. Democrats are seen as having no identifiable approach on the economy or, worse yet, they are associated with government spending and taxes which seem to make it harder for people to have enough money to get ahead of their bills. It is hardly an environment conducive to Democrats being seen as the party of ordinary people.

Fortunately, many of the Democratic economic messages we tested in this project scored higher than the Republican ones, suggesting a genuine opportunity to join the downscale economic discourse.

The Economic Case for the President

The President does not get heard on the economy, in part because his economic discourse is too elevated and too distant from the life struggles of people. Indeed, sometimes the extravagant claims about growth just do not ring true in working and lower-middle-class America; from that vantage point, there is little evidence or prospect of income growth. But the president's stewardship of the economy has everything to do with the struggle of working people. Creating millions of jobs and moving the country toward full employment makes it possible for working people to pursue their private strategies for creating an economic life and raising their family's living standards. Indeed, voters seem willing to acknowledge the president's efforts and intentions, particularly when contrasted with the Bush years, when no

jobs were created.

We presented voters with two sets of economic “facts”: first, that the Clinton administration created 8 million new jobs, and second, that the Clinton administration created the lowest unemployment and inflation rates in decades. The men were quite cautious about the 8 million jobs, raising questions about the types of jobs, but the non-college women were receptive to the job “facts.” Indeed, both men and women seemed pleased to hear about the economic indicators central to their money situation: “outstanding,” “that’s great,” “the man is at least trying.”

The key, we shall see later, is not to present the economy in glowing macro terms but to show that the President understands the scramble of ordinary Americans to do well for their families, and that helping them to succeed is the core motivation of administration economic policies. That is what low unemployment and low inflation are about. George Bush and the Republicans never understood it, but Bill Clinton does. There are more powerful message options discussed below, but it is important that this Democratic administration glean as much as possible from its stewardship of the economy.

The President's Economic Message: Looking ahead

We tested the President's current discourse on economics -- one segment using his presentation of the new information age and the role of education and another segment on values, government and education-training. Unfortunately, neither speech segment proved particularly compelling for these non-college voters, and no aspect scored as well as the anti-government/anti-tax message for the Republicans. The main points of this dial-group test are highlighted below:

These non-college voters do not connect to the President's elevated analysis of the "information age" or the analysis of countries with low education levels: "... we are moving towards people in rich countries with low levels of education are going to be pounded."

Clinton gets his first positive response when he says, "we are never going to get anybody's income up until we educate everyone" -- though the response is modest (up 5 points). In the DLC speech, Clinton gets a modest response from women for stating, "We know above all we must give people the tools, the skills, the opportunities to make the most of their own lives."

Clinton's strongest response, though only for the women, comes from stating, "we ought to help more kids get started right." When combined with smaller classrooms and higher standards and greater accountability, the statement moves the line up 14 points for women (1.6 points per second). The lack of response among the men produces a large gender gap.

In the DLC speech, Clinton gets a positive response for a statement about personal responsibility: "We know we should not ask government to do for people what they ought to be doing for themselves."

The President's entry point is America at this point in history. Even though he gains some credit here for discussing responsibility and pushing for people to have the skills to make the most of their own lives, he does not situate his economic discourse in the lives of these non-college

voters. With that, it is difficult to be heard on Democratic economics.

The Role of Government: The lives of ordinary citizens

There is room to educate downscale voters on the role of government in making people's lives easier and safer. Instinctively, these voters think government makes their lives harder, but it does not take a lot of argument to move many of these voters to think differently about the issue. We read the respondents a simple list: minimum wage, 40 hour work week, COBRA, work place safety rules, family and medical leave, college loans and the right to organize unions. (We did not include Medicare or Social Security). After hearing it, 18 percent of the non-college men and 36 percent of the women changed their minds about government.

I guess I didn't realize, we don't realize the full scope. I am more what impacts me personally than what impacts the community. (California, non-college woman)

I think it's great that all that's out there. Maybe it's something that a lot of those I have just taken for granted, like \$4.25 an hour or having set wages and having COBRA, because that has been around for awhile and I'm familiar with it. I don't see it as something new. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Before I was thinking just within my husband's company. Each of those things you read off I think are extremely important. Whether they help you in your career or not is one thing but they do help each of us, ensure each of us safety and security so you're not eating tainted food and you're not working in an environment that is toxic without precautions being taken. (Georgia, non-college woman)

They do all these things you just quoted to me? They do that? If they really did all that, I would go over and quit what I said last time and say no, but I don't believe they do, so I still believe that. (Georgia, non-college woman)

In general that we get forgotten. There are some good laws. There are laws to protect everybody and they do protect everybody. They do protect the lower class and they protect...there's a bigger [impact] there. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Well, because you brought it to my, all of the things that the government is regulating and God forbid, without some of those things, we really would be in deep doo-doo. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

Certainly COBRA did apply to me when I left my other company, I am on COBRA now and that did apply to me and that is very important and I would say that everybody should have that. There shouldn't be anybody that should not have health care. (New Jersey,

non-college woman)

Democrats might find greater receptivity for their overall economic message if they reminded voters of how government now makes it easier for people to build their economic lives and, perhaps more important, to what extent Republican governance threatens these protections.

The Building Blocks

Contained in the downscale narrative are the building blocks for a Democratic economic message that can reach and move working and lower-middle-class voters.

Populist Identification with Working People

The starting point is obviously a simple identification with the personal struggle of non-college voters trying to raise their living standards in a stagnant economy. Part of that identification is an affirmation of the personal responsibility that has allowed people to struggle ahead. That identification re-establishes the Democratic Party as a party of ordinary people, long lost from the downscale discourse.

Retirement and the Lifetime Economic Story

Retirement is a critical part of people's personal economic lives -- a point of hope for stability after a lifetime of work, managing money and bills and trying to save for retirement. The Democratic economic discourse will have to address retirement, not as a defense of programs, but as a defense of the kind of responsible lives that working people have been living. In this context, Democrats can align themselves with virtues of working and lower-middle-class America and fight the assault on their retirement savings -- whether in private pension funds or in Social Security and Medicare. The fight for Medicare is not about a fight for government spending; it is about defending the virtues of working America.

We have already underscored the reaction to Medicare being under attack. People are also adamant about the defense of private pension funds from corporate raids: "If I could, I'd vote twice ... because that money doesn't belong

to the employer”; “the employer has no right to be in there”; “keep your hands out of my cookie jar”; “the employers should absolutely not borrow from the pension fund.”

Middle-Class Tax Relief

Democrats will not be heard on economics unless they have something to say about the tax burden of working and middle-class Americans. Frankly, it is a threshold argument that allows these non-college voters to hear the rest of what the Democrats intend to do to build a stronger economy for working people. A key element for these voters is opting for the Democratic approach over the Republican: “we need to have some sort of tax relief for low wage workers”; “I’d like to see a tax relief.”

Education, Job Skills and College

People understand that education, job skills and the ability to go to college are the resources that non-college people can use to escape the stagnation and the scramble of current economic realities. A Democratic commitment to education is a Democratic commitment to change the likelihood for non-college voters trying to successfully claw their way above the average and to change the world for their children.

Broad Class Identification: Making it Easier for Ordinary People to Climb the Ladder

These non-college voters identify with the struggle of all “average” voters who are responsible and whose economic lives are stagnant and troubled by rising prices and bills and work without raises. Their circumstances hang over their personal project. Thus, there is strong support for an approach that helps make the economy work for everyone, that “takes care of the little people” -- an approach that raises the minimum wage, increases tax relief for low-wage workers, expands education, training and college loans, and more affordable health insurance and Medicare. Initially, more than two-thirds of the men and almost 90 percent of the women said that was a good approach. More important, 40 percent of the men and 54 percent of the women preferred this approach to the anti-government-tax message of the Republicans. The non-college voters responded because they believed that the Democrats were pursuing policies that would aid people in their personal economic struggles:

Because it would give the people, the low-wage workers, the lower class

and the middle a chance to get above that poverty line and not working just from paycheck to paycheck and afraid that if . . . (New Jersey, non-college woman)

It's helping people to help themselves. And I believe that that is how people help themselves is if they get more education and better jobs. (Georgia, non-college woman)

Well, education and training, that can only help to make a low-wage worker into, to move up the ladder. By making college more affordable. (Wisconsin, non-college woman)

It allows people to make more money, live in better homes, be able to get an education and be covered for medical. It covers the necessities of life. (New Jersey, non-college woman)

It teaches people to be responsible. ... I may have more government, but it has more of the right kind of government. When I think of the bad kind of government, I think of people in Congress granting themselves to almost double their salary. That doesn't help anyone but them. When I think of this type of government, I see them giving it back to us to enable us to help ourselves. (Georgia, non-college woman)

There is power in this economic message because it helps people be responsible, to make the personal choices that enable them to build an economic life and to raise the living standards for their families.

The broad class identification with the middle establishes a contrast with the Republicans who work, not for the average person, but for those at the top who already have it pretty easy.

Health Insurance

There was also strong support in these groups for an employer mandate on health care. While people certainly worried about the possible impact on small businesses, the centrality of health insurance costs to their own struggles won out over these concerns. These non-college voters, particularly the women, just felt people were entitled to health insurance at work. They have watched too many women, caught in these part-time jobs, struggling to maintain insurance. One of the men in Georgia asked, "Why do we treat our people so badly?"

Viewing the Democratic Economic Messages

Based on the narrative of these working and middle-class Americans, we constructed prospective Democratic economic messages to be viewed and tested in these same dial-group sessions. (See the separate section at the back on Democratic economic messages.) Overall, the Democratic economic message scored better than those for the Republicans, particularly among the non-college women. There was a strong positive response to the Democratic identification with people's personal economic struggles, with the Democrats' commitment to education and college loans, to protecting retirement and Medicare, and to middle-class tax relief. The messages would likely have proved stronger had there been less emphasis on growth (which we now understand does not seem real to the downscale), had there been a bolder statement about middle-class tax relief and had Democrats developed any approach to small business. Populist attacks on the wealthy and big corporations did not score well, particularly with the men, though populist attacks on the Republicans are a different matter.

The reactions of these non-college voters in the dial-group sessions to the Democratic economic messages are summarized below:

The Democrats get some of their strongest positive reactions when they show that they understand the life-time struggle of people, being responsible, to make things better for their families.

People work hard and save for a lifetime to have a dignified retirement. They work hard, raise their kids and try to give them a good start in life. They pay their taxes and pay into Social Security. They've played by the rules. (Medicare and Retirement, up 15 points, 1.7 points per second)

Most families today are working longer and harder just to enough to pay the bills, save for education and retirement and maybe a vacation from time to time. ... These hard working families deserve a break. (Recognition and Money, up 18 points, 1.6 per second)

But average Americans are still struggling, working longer hours and still straining to get the money to pay their bills and maybe

even save a little. Well they need a raise too. All of America needs a raise. (Growth and Equity, a steady rise upward, stronger for women, both respond)

Democrats make their biggest gain -- and the single biggest gain in any of the message statements, Democratic or Republican -- when they affirmatively and specifically commit to supporting people trying to raise their incomes, their families and achieve a secure retirement. The response is strong for both men and women, but it is particularly strong for the men.

We need a raise, improved benefits and a secure retirement. We should invest in education, not cut it. (Men up 16 points, 4.0 points per second)

This statement begins with a raise and benefits which suggests the gains are in wages and salaries, rather than in government benefits; retirement caps a life time of work; and education is the punch line of a statement focused on raising income from work.

The strongest consistent responses among the Democratic messages were to an affirmative commitment to education, college and skill training so people can be successful in this new economy.

If America's going to be successful in this new economy, then our people will need to be well educated, with access to colleges and skill training. We need to lead in technology, communication and transportation. (One Nation, initial response up 12 , 3.0 per second, and total response, up 19, 2.0 points per second)

We need to concentrate on raising the education, skills, and income of average Americans. Then we'll have a strong people, strong economy, and a strong country. (One Nation, women reach peak point of 83 and men rise a rapid 7 points)

America should be investing in education and training, promoting new technology and skills. (Investment, men and women, up 11 points)

The women, but not the men, move up further when the statement moves on to schools: "We need safe schools and higher standards, more affordable student loans." In another message statement the men respond more to a college-oriented statement: "We've got to make college affordable and available to the middle-class."

Retirement wins a strong response, particularly from the women, though the men move as well when the statement is linked to a life time of work. As we mentioned above, one of the strongest responses in the dial groups came on the affirmation, “People work hard and save for a lifetime to have a dignified retirement.” The response is also strong when combined with the pension issue:

It’s just plain wrong. We want to protect people’s pensions and protect Medicare because we believe America should be honoring a lifetime of work. (Medicare and Retirement, up 10 points, 2.5 per second)

Statements about individual responsibility get positive responses, particularly from the men: “We should demand responsibility from top to bottom and help create a more unified, stronger and prosperous country” (up 10 points). On the other hand, statements about “our shared sense of responsibility and community” do much less well.

Showing understanding of the breakdown of the social contract at work produces a strong positive response with both men and women, though after that, women are largely unresponsive.

Remember when workers felt loyalty to their companies and companies felt the same way? People worked hard, but they were rewarded with a fair wage or salary, health insurance and maybe even a pension (Social Compact, up 14 points, 1.2 per second)

Identification here is somewhat less powerful than for identification with the life-time economic struggle. In any case, neither the men nor the women respond very strongly to the proposed changes to rebuild the community at the work place. They might well support the policies, but they do not form a thematic message connected with people’s lives, particularly for the women who are only unevenly integrated into the economy.

The trade message produces a very strong response with the non-college women who seem to be listening to the America-first message:

Too often, we don’t stand up for our people and our country. ... We let China keep out our products while we open our doors to their goods, even if they’re made with slave labor. Our own corporations keep cutting back on American employees, on wages, on benefits. (Trade and Nation, women up 19 points, 1.9 per

second)

The men responded positively to the trade message, though not dramatically. They jumped up on the statement, “America needs a raise” and on the statement “America needs to invest in its people so they will have the education and skills they need to be productive with higher paying jobs.”

Populist statements directed at the most privileged were well received by the women, but indifferently by the men. The men’s graph line drifted down on a whole series of statements:

And we need a country where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, not just the most privileged. (One Nation)

We want a growing America where it’s not just the top executives getting all the raises. (Growth and Equity)

Of course, the big corporate executives aren’t suffering. Somehow, they give themselves huge salary increases and they get all the tax cuts too. (Conservative Cutbacks)

These messages produced powerful responses that gained Democrats a larger audience among working and lower-middle-class voters. (See the graph below, Impact of Messages.) After watching the Republican and Democratic economic messages, the Democrats gained 26 points on being “on your side” (from 24 percent before the session to 50 percent afterwards); the Republicans gained only 10 points (from 24 to 34 percent). The Democrats gained even more, 32 points, on “having good ideas on how to make things better for you and your family” (from 24 to 56 percent). The Republicans gained as well, though less impressively (18 points, from 24 to 42 percent). At the outset, the Democrats and Republicans scored almost identically on these key indicators about advocacy and ideas, but afterwards, the Democrats had about a 15 point lead on both. There is clearly genuine power in these economic messages.

A PROGRESSIVE ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

Based on the exploration of people lives and economic thinking and based on the message testing, we have tried to construct a progressive narrative on the economy. This is not a set of slogans or television spots. It is a new discourse that should allow progressives to gain an audience among working people and to challenge the conservative, anti-government orthodoxy that has left the progressives on the defensive.

Most families today are working longer and harder just to make enough to pay the bills, to pay their taxes, to save for education and retirement and maybe a vacation from time to time. They've taken responsibility. They've had to do it on their own. Well, these hard working families deserve a break. They need a raise, improved benefits and a secure retirement. America needs a raise.

It's time we stood up for our own people and our own country.

We should abolish this tax system that leaves ordinary people without enough money to pay their bills, but gives loopholes to the wealthiest so they have the money to pay their lawyers. (Working middle-class families should be able to deduct everything they spend to educate themselves and improve their skills.)

Government should be on the side of ordinary people.

We should invest in education, not cut it. If America's going to be successful in this new economy, then our people will need to be well educated, with good schooling, with access to colleges and skill training. We need to lead in technology, communication and transportation.

We should make sure people who work hard and save for a lifetime have the chance for a dignified retirement. They pay their taxes and pay into Social Security. They play by the rules. Now, some politicians want to use Medicare as a piggy bank. Some politicians want to let corporations borrow from their employee pension funds. Well, that's just plain wrong. We want to protect people's pensions and protect Medicare because we believe America should be honoring a lifetime of work.

Our goal is to give our own people a raise -- tax relief for the middle-class, education, college and skill training, and a secure retirement. Our goal is a strong

people, strong economy, and a strong country.