

Applying What We Know: What Previous Research on Taxation, Government and Wealth Can Teach Us About Messaging Inequality

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Introduction

This report summarizes findings from 10 investigations. It is meant to accompany my language analysis report entitled, *Bridging the Gap, Leveling the Field*. The work included here represents, to our knowledge, a comprehensive set of what's known about talking about topics related to inequality from a progressive perspective. Some of these findings are from polls and focus groups; others are explorations into how people reason about issues such as government, prosperity and "the wealthy."

These summaries **only** include findings germane to inequality; much of what each investigation offers is intentionally left out. None of the research had inequality as its main topic. However, the report from Cognitive Policy Works was commissioned for this project -- it represents the authors' application of previous findings to the topic of inequality. We are not currently aware of rigorous research on inequality apart from the aforementioned analysis that accompanies this report.

These are volatile times for the economy and public perception of it. The various investigations here occurred recently; however, "current" with regards to people's views is impossible to pin down. Thus, in detailing the methodology, I also note when the research took place.

Finally, the potential applications of these studies' findings to the issue of inequality are entirely my own. In other words, the authors did not suggest these applications. When relevant, I offer my own assessment on the effectiveness of the recommendations, in light of my findings about language used in discourse on inequality.

Summary of Studies

Death & Taxes: Story-based Strategy Brief on the Commonwealth & Estate Tax, SmartMeme

Methodology

This report details recommendations for effectively messaging the estate tax based on structured conversations with advocates and experts on this issue in November of 2007. SmartMeme intends this as an exploratory analysis, offering insights based in narrative analysis. The recommendations haven't been tested.

Relevant Findings

The authors suggest focusing attention on the small group of super-rich families who seek to repeal the estate tax. They recommend calling them "whiners," attempting to get

out of paying their due. The idea here is to evoke a visible villain -- the 18 families seeking to repeal the estate tax and narrating this issue as conflict between them and “regular” millionaires.

They hone in on certain values and offer suggestions for activating each:

Fairness -- These families want to get out of paying their due.

Opportunity -- The estate tax allows others to become the entrepreneurs of tomorrow. It ensures good jobs, quality education and other elements necessary for a vibrant and healthy economy.

The Commons -- Shared infrastructure such as our highway and telecommunications systems helped these people amass their wealth; this is our common good and requires our investment.

Democracy -- The estate tax ensures democracy; it stops dynasties and with them concentration of power in a ruling elite.

Legacy -- The estate tax is about a lasting contribution to the country. “It’s about passing it on, paying it forward, and leaving our country better than you found it.”

Finally, they recommend renaming estate tax a “one time fee” and offer the phrase “a way to pay dues” as a way to quickly explain why certain people should pay it.

Application to Inequality

In discussing inequality, it’s common to name various groups. Most often, these groups are labeled “the poor”, “the middle class”, “the rich” and synonyms of each.

When talking about the wealthy, we may want to apply the suggestions given here. Namely, getting more specific and providing concrete details and images rather than a catch-all label like “the rich” or even “the top 1%.”

Using names will certainly help to focus in on who is winning in our current economic set up. However, unlike the estate tax where a bill was up for consideration and specific people opposed it, we are attempting to prime broad recognition of equity.

Further, the getting specific and naming a villain strategy may actually backfire for talking about inequality. First, it could seem unfair of us to target individuals. We then risk looking like hypocrites in not remaining true to our own “we’re all in it together” values. Second, this primes the classic “a few bad apples” notion that is common to thinking about any complex topic. If we criticize individuals, we risk making that the story when we actually want to highlight systemic failure.

Looking more closely at the values and suggested ways to invoke them may lend approaches for talking effectively about inequality. Prioritizing shared riches may help

Questioning the Findings

“Legacy” may backfire. Those against the estate tax argue it inhibits their ability to leave everything to their children. Legacy is generally understood as what you intended and elected to leave, not what an external authority determined you should. Because legacy is already salient here, evoking it will most likely lead to this undesirable and much more commonplace understanding of it.

bring us above the divisive fray that prevails now. Further notions of democracy -- especially inequality as a barrier to a functioning participatory system may also work.

Preliminary Results from the Initial Survey, Harstad Research

Methodology

These recommendations are based on a survey of 904 voters conducted in June of 2009. The survey tested reactions to tax increases for the wealthy,

using both broad questions and specific messages.

Relevant Findings

A majority of people are amenable to tax increases for the wealthy especially when linked to retaining existing services and, less so, spending on other priorities such as health care and education. Increasing taxes to offset the deficit is the least effective message. Appeals for increased taxes must be paired with naming what they will fund otherwise people default to unproductive ideas of government waste.

“Paying their fair share” is a popular formulation to justify tax increases on the wealthy and corporations. But, just describing progressive taxation “where the wealthy pay a higher percentage of their income than the middle class” isn’t as effective.

Across the board, *accountability* was cited as the most important value in this issue. However, for Democrats the next most important value is *compassion and fairness* while for Republicans it’s *personal responsibility*.

Further, the pollsters suggest employing a cluster of values over a single one -- but it’s clear that this is easier for anti-tax arguments. It flows easily to pair fairness to personal responsibility in an anti-tax argument. This is the classic, “I worked hard for my money and it’s unfair to take it away and give it to others” line. No pro-tax frame they tested evokes two values well. The best contender was a patriotic one -- “keep America great” -- that evoked for people both fairness and personal responsibility.

Application to Inequality

While the purpose here was to test messages about taxation, we can glean some insight into how to talk about inequality. Singling out one group, in this case the wealthy, is acceptable as long as it's understood as promoting overall fairness. This may be an indicator that talking about what the economy provides for different groups will work if we evoke the idea that it's not fair.

Accountability, especially for government was incredibly important to people. However, we must consider the possibility that accountability is effective now but not forever. It may be tied to perceptions of the crisis and the egregious lack of accountability but eventually lose its hold. Further, accountability is a *contested concept* -- there are multiple interpretations of its meaning.

Questioning the Findings

It's difficult to ever assess what *values* people ascribe to a behavior or message. Values matter precisely because they are the deeply-held, often unconscious, associations we maintain -- asking us to name them outright only yields what we *think* we believe. Further, values mean so much precisely because their meaning is so personal -- one person's "fairness" differs widely from another's.

Consider, for example, the difference between *accountable to* and *accountable for*. *Accountable to* suggests an ongoing relationship, the reporting party is continuously watched and evaluated. This is an excellent formulation for government -- accountable to its people. In contrast, *accountable for* can be a one time thing -- "who is accountable for this error?" The purpose here is to place blame and apply punishment. This belies the notion of systemic failure or the need for ongoing monitoring and collaborative problem solving.

The better version of *accountable* acknowledges that "count" or *tell* is its basis. In other words, *accountable* can mean able to explain what occurred and why. This meaning holds promise for describing inequality. Especially when we employ formulations that indicate that inequality is a deviation from an expected standard. This lays the groundwork for demanding an explanation for why things are not as we expect them to be. In turn, this both presupposes that egregious difference is unacceptable and forces those responsible for it to "account." It rests on the notion that we are very much interdependent and must work together to get things right. It's far less simple than finding someone to blame.

Unfortunately, current usage of accountability is generally relegated to impugning government. A tempting practice but, ultimately, not beneficial for suggesting government steward our economy and enact policies to redistribute wealth. We would need to apply accountability to broader ideas of society or the economy itself -- as in

“the economy is accountable to the workers who make it strong” or “we must hold society / ourselves to account for the conditions in which all of us live, from the jet-setting billionaire to the person seeking a meal.”

Finally, these authors note “one dimension to the problem may be that paying taxes is a discrete event that is experientially removed from the disparate benefits they provide – there is no immediate reinforcement for paying taxes.” This problem -- the difference between concrete, lived experience and far-off, conceptual notions is at the heart of communicating about complex issues. Inequality is no exception. People have the experience of working hard, seeing their paycheck, paying their bills. On the other hand, notions of classes, struggling under different sets of starting conditions or of entrenched social dynamics and policies that favor certain groups are abstract and intangible. We can't see unconscious bias anymore than we can hold and smell “the little people.” Just as it's critical to bring in real examples of what taxes pay for, it's essential to vividly illustrate inequality with examples people have experienced or can easily imagine.

Results and Observations from Online Focus Groups, Harstad Research

Methodology

These findings come from two online focus groups with 28 voters in OH and PA, not including anyone with extreme attitudes toward taxation, in June and July of 2009.

Relevant Findings

People polled want order and stability. They express a sense of obligation to the country, as we saw above. And they are more favorable toward messages about “restoring and fixing”, not “improving and investing.” In other words, their immediate desire is for stability, not achievement.

Application to Inequality

The readily understandable desire for stability offers two potential paths for talking about inequality: evoking the negative, potential further destabilization of the economy or focusing on the positive, potential gains to be had. Fortunately, these aren't mutually exclusive. One may work better for certain contexts and messengers than the other. Further inquiry might help us determine how to employ each most effectively.

Research Findings from the 2009 Federal Revenues and Investment Project, Harstad Research

Methodology

This report details a series of opinion research efforts: the survey of 904 voters just discussed, online focus group in PA and OH just discussed, online dial test with 600 voters and a survey of 1007 voters.

Relevant Findings

While the majority of respondents think taxes on the wealthy should be increased, this is not the case for the estate tax. Using words like “trust funds” and “loopholes” as opposed to earnings, wealth and accounting methods increased support for taxing the wealthy. When people were told what additional taxes would fund, e.g. public services or deficit reduction, their approval of increases to the estate tax went up.

Voters will consider taxes on “big corporations” but not on “business.” They would feel much more favorably to increasing taxes if they knew what government was spending them on; as we saw above, accountability is the key value. Unfortunately, there isn’t a strong association between taxes and benefits -- instead there’s a perception that taxes fund government waste.

The notion that the rich aren’t “paying their fair share” is, once again, effective. This finding, along with the information about perception of government leads then to recommend using “responsibility to country” to frame arguments for taxes.

The pollsters offer us specific phrases to use and avoid:

Language to use	Language to lose
trust funds and other assets	taxable assets
do what’s right/ not paying fair share	do what’s fair/ it is not fair
something to fall back on	guarantees from government
vital public services	government programs
Middle Class	poor, low-income
share a responsibility to America	obligation to America

Language to use	Language to lose
getting rid of tax loopholes	getting rid of tax deductions
honoring commitments, keeping promises	duty, obligation
the wealthy get away with	the wealthy avoid
investing in America	funding government programs

Application to Inequality

Judging by these recommendations, we may be tempted to make “the wealthy” the target of our appeals to ameliorate inequality. If we adopt this approach, the recommended language above can be applied pretty directly to messages about inequality.

However, unlike the somewhat simpler issue of increasing taxes on the rich, addressing inequality requires a much more complex understanding of how value is created and distributed in the economy. It remains to be seen whether focusing ire on one group will prove effective. Certainly, we see this as a strategy on the right among the Tea Party crowd and others bashing the pay and pensions of public employees. This approach leads, however, to the conclusion that government is the problem and rejects measures to redress disparities in wealth.

Coalition for America’s Priorities Estate Tax Polling, Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, Inc.

Methodology

These results come from telephone interviews with 910 registered voters. The report is dated February 2006.

Relevant Findings

This research appears to offer good news -- most people polled wanted the estate tax left as is. However, after details about the estate tax were offered, only respondents who initially said “don’t know” changed their answer to “leave as is.” Otherwise, more information yielded an increase in respondents who wanted to see it repealed.

Worse yet, after presented with what repealing the estate tax would do, there were fewer people who wanted it left as is. Instead, they know “didn’t know” or wanted to see it “reformed” (made applicable to fewer people).

While these pollsters see hope in the results that, given more information the number of people who want to see the estate tax left as is or “reformed to include fewer people” increases, reform isn’t actually a victory on this issue. Further, among the people who answer off the bat they want to see the estate tax repealed, this number actually increases after an explanation of the tax and then -- with further arguments -- falls but only to the initial level. In other words, arguments were only persuasive with people who began the survey saying they had no idea; people who were originally anti remain or become even more opposed to the estate tax.

Application to Inequality

It’s hard to draw a direct lesson to inequality from this. However, there is a broader -- entirely applicable -- point to learn about messaging and persuasion. Namely, arguments, even well-crafted ones, won’t necessarily sway audiences. Hearing “the facts” isn’t enough. If these facts contradict or simply don’t reinforce the default assumptions people have about a topic, people find ways to reject, ignore or discredit the messenger. Note, only respondents who didn’t know what the estate tax was at all -- and thus had no or few unconscious associations with it -- were swayed with more information.

Proof, once again, that what we *imply*, the unconscious assumptions we embed in our language, are just as important, perhaps more important, than our outright assertions.

American Views of Reforming the Financial Sector, Lake Research Partners

Methodology

This report details the findings of a survey conducted in 2009 among 900 people who had voted in the previous (November 2008) general election. It also includes findings from 10 focus groups conducted in 5 states in September of 2008.

Relevant Findings

Responses indicate there is a clear and promising shift away from belief in an unregulated free-market to the view that government is needed to get the economy on track. Further, “Corporate America” is seen as obstacle to turning economy around. And an arguably progressive version of the American Dream still resonates -- this means a living wage, health care and secure retirement.

Voters are not keen on government oversight without stated parameters, but supportive of specifics. Language about “regulation” is not popular; instead, “oversight,” “safeguards,” and “protections” are more effective.

Avoid framing the issue as government versus business, but rather collaboration to improve both. Despite frustration with the financial sector, voters still think favorably of private industry and unfavorably of government. People feel government is part of the solution but lacks accountability.

Finally, the majority of people polled think it’s highly likely someone they know will lose their job and/or health insurance this year. However, they see the current crisis as a temporary issue, not a permanent shift in the economy.

Application to Inequality

This is a mixed and admittedly speculative set of “facts” to apply to improving discourse on inequality.

The disapproval of suggesting an antagonistic relationship between business and government may serve as a lesson to minimize reliance on pitting entities against each other. In the case of inequality, for example, rich versus poor. Whether or not this is a fair lesson to extrapolate, it’s clear that government alone won’t be credible as a “solution” to inequality. It’s important to underscore how inequality hurts everyone and requires that everyone pitch in to address it.

The positive response to the American Dream as formulated in this survey may indicate this is still an effective framework for describing what all people ought to have. Similarly, though bleak, people’s real fears of economic trouble for their friends and families means the problems of “the poor” are no longer an abstract impossibility. If people can imagine themselves jobless and without health care, it’s much easier for them to understand why these situations are unacceptable and not the fault of the individual.

Taxing the Top Messaging, Institute for Policy Studies

Methodology

This memo summarizes findings of various surveys of unnamed sample sizes and participant types conducted between October 2008 and April 2009. These polls explored public sentiment about taxes overall and taxing the wealthy specifically.

Relevant Findings

Americans are not deeply interested in the tax issue but do agree that the wealthy are not paying enough. “Redistribution” is not an effective tag-line. Surveys cited here echo the one just mentioned: it’s critical to tie tax increases to service improvements. People displayed less positive reaction to repealing Bush’s tax cuts than to taxing the wealthy more. (I can only guess that this stems from what economists call *asymmetric loss aversion*, the tendency to feel more strongly about losses than gains of the same size.) Finally, “rebalancing” is a potential way to talk about taxing the wealthy more.

Application to Inequality

Although surveys have yet to prove it, it’s a safe bet that Americans are probably not deeply interested in the inequality issue either. As with taxes, garnering interest and support for redressing this problem requires enumerating not just what’s wrong but how fixing it will result in improvements in our quality of life.

If redistribution doesn’t work to sway people about taxes, it’s surely also a non-starter for conversations about inequality. We can also learn something from people’s reluctance to take away a perceived existing benefit -- Bush’s tax cuts -- in comparison to their approval for essentially the exact same thing framed as applying a “new” perceived harm. This indicates we must work to not imply we seek to punish the wealthy or take away what they have. In fact, taking something away implies we agree it was theirs in the first place. Because we feel that they don’t rightfully own what they now have, we should argue for policies we favor without directly bringing up the need to “take things away.” Mathematically, taking away an asset is the same as applying a tax of the same amount. Conceptually, these are legions apart. Finally, as I discuss in detail in the language analysis report, a certain kind of “rebalancing” messages may work for inequality as well.

Framing Budgets and Taxes: A Frameworks Messaging Memo, Frameworks Institute

Methodology

These authors set out to find how well people connected taxes to the revenue they generate for public needs; their associations with “the craft of budgeting.” This work is based on 25 in-depth interviews conducted in Philadelphia, Cleveland and Baltimore with a cross-section of people in November of 2008, as well as six focus groups segregated by educational attainment, race and party affiliation in Phoenix, Charlotte and Kansas City, KA in March and April of 2009.

Relevant Findings

When people are asked to think about budgets -- they don't have strong associations or clear prior knowledge to employ and thus their thinking devolves into generally negative ideas about government. Basically, their default reasoning heads straight to a "rot at the top" notion of government mismanaging public money. Similarly, when people are asked to think about taxes without budgets provided as a context, they immediately go to thinking of government robbing me of "my money."

This study reports that "budgets are very hard to think" -- people have trouble grasping what budgets mean and revert to thinking of budgeting as an outcome, not a process. Factor in another abstract (and not currently positive) concept like "government" and they see whatever budgeting is as something taking place secretly on a scale they can't hope to grasp.

Attempting to bring things down to comprehensible scale, by making, for example, comparisons to household budgets is problematic. This encourages thinking about what am I getting for what I spend, emphasizes government irresponsibility and makes borrowing seem bad.

Instead, the authors suggest discussing budgets as the country's shared priorities or shared future -- this gets people thinking collectively. Taxes and budgets shouldn't be talked about as an end onto themselves but rather a tool for an end we seek -- shared prosperity, specific policies, etc.

It's critical to get people engaged in a budgeting process to appreciate the challenges it poses. Disconnection and lack of knowledge about taxes and allocation are what make people feel negatively about taxes and budgets. There's a big issue with fairness -- after actually thinking it through, people decided "fair" is when everyone pays the same.

Application to Inequality

The lesson here about how complex topics can trigger unproductive reasoning is a critical one for talking effectively about inequality. Without a clear explanation of what we mean by "inequality," we allow people to fill in the blanks -- most likely leading them to think about lack of individual initiative

We must assume that, absent compelling information, people's default understanding of most things is to lay attribution -- positive and negative -- on individuals, not systems. If, for example, we bring up redistribution as a solution without adequately laying the groundwork of the ills of inequality, people will revert back into

individualistic mode too. Namely, I made this money and you want to give it to someone who did nothing for it.

Another possible application to inequality is to steer clear of naming addressing inequality as the desired end. This is, after all, somewhat abstract. Instead we may elect to emphasize tangible outcomes like better education, health, security and minimize or even eliminate references to income or wealth outcomes.

Distrust of government as a competent problem solver also makes it easier to think inequality is hopeless, inevitable. When people feel divorced from government it's much easier to believe inequality isn't real or is a problem of bad governance -- not their problem. We must convey that we are the government so people can't resort to washing their hands of the issue, claiming it's government's problem.

Finally, the findings about scale -- the larger the numbers the harder to grasp -- may indicate that emphasizing huge discrepancies actually makes it harder for people to understand this topic.

How to Talk About Government A FrameWorks Message Memo, Frameworks Institute

Methodology

Researchers conducted a multi-year investigation into public perceptions about government starting in March of 2004. The findings detailed are informed by (1) a meta-analysis of over 100 surveys on government (2) 20 open-ended interviews with ordinary people (3) 12 focus groups with engaged citizens (4) various other data collection including an unspecified number of telephone interviews, questionnaires and "experimental designs" and (5) a national survey of people's reactions to various priming ideas and messages of unspecified size.

Relevant Findings

People can think positively about government, and the role of the collective, when primed and taken away from default associations. However, the word "government" itself is unproductive. Too readily, listeners default to thinking about government as the individuals in office -- for whom they have little regard or trust. Otherwise, government is, for them, some undifferentiated morass, "the bureaucracy" and similarly unappealing. Both of these make it very difficult to see government as "we the people" and thus feel connected to and supportive of it.

People believe the private sector is more accountable and efficient. (However, note this research predates the economic crisis.) The public sector, on the other hand, lacks a

readily graspable objective. Not surprisingly, there's also a perception that these two sectors, private and public, are in opposition to each other.

Respondents did want to see themselves as an engaged and productive part of seeking long-term solutions. However, they didn't see a vehicle for this as they assumed government is engaged in short-term, issue-specific, problems -- not to mention infighting and self-interest.

FrameWorks explains "one of the profound challenges faced by advocates for better thinking about government is the relative 'fuzziness' of people's concepts of government." Thus it's not surprising that the dominant models are concrete instantiations of some facets of government -- a political party (with its symbols, colors, logos), specific politicians, or civil servants in the bureaucracy. Their solution to this challenge was to create a concrete simplifying model they name Public Structures to make government more real and tangible while foregrounding more positive aspects of it.

Application to Inequality

Inevitably, if not initially, a comprehensive discussion about inequality will touch on government. Thus, some of these findings are directly applicable -- when the conversation turns from naming the problem to advocating for solutions.

Beyond this, these insights about government reaffirm what we saw above -- getting people to think about abstract, large scale concepts is hard. And it often triggers entrenched negative notions. Thus, we must take care in messaging about "the poor" or "the economy", not to mention "inequality" itself -- what we believe we're saying may not be what people hear. Again, the lesson is to make experiential and tangible, to the extent possible, what is large and abstract.

Another important lesson here is to provide a role for the audience. As this report indicates, people do want to be part of solutions but we need to make sure they feel they have something to do. Their role in a conservative framing of economic prosperity is very clear and repeated often -- work hard, make money, educate their children, don't get divorced (yes, it goes that far.) What things are we asking them to do?

Deconstructing Prosperity, Cognitive Policy Works

Methodology

There is no information provided about the methodology nor the date this research took place. This brief was completed in December of 2009 and commissioned for our

inequality project. This analysis employs tools from various integrated social sciences to examine how people make sense of complex concepts.

Relevant Findings about Inequality

The authors contend that efforts to address economic inequality are rooted in competing ideas of prosperity. That is, our perceptions of what makes us as individuals and a society fare well shape our receptivity toward accepting inequality as a problem and proposed solutions to it.

The report details two world-views: “Shared Prosperity” and “Individual Wealth.” The Shared Prosperity frame emphasizes the resources available to us all. Often termed “the commons”, examples include public education, transportation infrastructure and a legal system that allows us to enforce contracts. Thus, in this framework, a form of wealth the authors call “diffuse” is recognized along with the more traditional accumulation of assets. Wealth is understood as “anything that promotes well-being in society.” With this emphasis that the origin of individual assets is actually from shared resources, people believe they have a responsibility to maintain and grow these common sources of prosperity. This offers the logic for progressive taxation -- those who use more common resources pay more back into the common pot.

The competing frame of Individual Wealth ignores diffuse wealth, recognizing only owned assets. Wealth is created by human activity and the only relevant actors on the scene are individuals. People with greater wealth have demonstrated their superiority; they work harder than others and are entitled to more rewards.

Not surprisingly, the logic of the first worldview is consistent with attempts to highlight the problems of inequality and make a strong case for addressing it. Language and images that trigger the second understanding deeply hinder any efforts to convey to the public why inequality is unacceptable.

Conclusion

The studies here represent a range of methodological approaches and topics. The purpose is to bring these findings into one place, creating a single resource for seeing past lessons to improving communication applied to inequality. It bears emphasizing that the proposed applications to inequality are entirely speculative. They not been tested, and understanding views of inequality was not the initial aim of these studies.

What this exercise highlights is the problematic lack of rigorous analysis on messaging about inequality. It is our hope that this document and the accompanying language analysis constitutes a useful foundation for addressing this deficit.