Winning Words: connecting poverty to retirement security

Messaging challenges:

* Human brain likes concrete things, not abstractions. That’s why we do stories. But when we’re talking about the economy, it’s hard to not drift into abstractions.
* It’s obvious that poverty exists. The debate is about ***why*** it exists, and we need to use language that points to our theory of why.
* **Poverty** is tough to define. What is poverty? “Just world” hypothesis – the dominant narrative that *people are poor because they deserve it*. This leads and has lead to conservative policies. Our job is to counter that.
* **Important:** it’s OUR job to give people hope that something can be done to change things.

What is “framing”?

* Oftentimes progressives use frames that are counter-productive to our overall goals.
* **Framing** is simply the way we talk about what we do, what we believe in and the vision we have for the world.
  + **Safety Net vs. Foundation**: “safety net” is not a good metaphor for talking about the systems we want to protect. Why not? Why is foundation better?
  + **System vs. Program**: we use “system” instead of program
  + **Entitlements vs. Earned Benefits**: we don’t ever say “entitlements.” Ever. Instead we say “earned benefits” because we earn them.

**Main points of our new messaging:**

1. Low wages are impediments to financial stability that lead to retirement insecurity
2. Corporate profits soar while retirement savings shrink for most
3. Improving wages and expanding retirement security will especially help women
4. Expanding Social Security will protect young people even as it honors our elderly
5. Higher wages and increased retirement security benefits will propel our whole economy forward faster

**Ways we talk about Poverty:**

* Poverty is usually talked about as happening or existing with no agent, as if it exists on its own, and is visited upon us.
* The opponent framing talks about:
  1. Fighting poverty, etc.: What does that mean? When framed this way, it doesn’t talk about
  2. what poverty is or where it comes from.
  3. Poverty as a disease: that needs “curing” or “preventing”. Again, very vague. The problem is
  4. that it gets individualized.

**INSTEAD…** we should talk about poverty this way:

* 1. As a container or a trap. This is the best metaphor. Talk about it as an encasement that is
  2. tough to escape from. That implies that poverty is constructed.
  3. Use frames like: living “in” poverty or getting “out” of poverty; or being “deep” in poverty.

Don't: Instead:

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| Talk about poverty as existing alone without any agent. | Use words & phrases like **“confining”, “impediments”, “out of balance”** when talking about economy and poverty. This conveys the idea that poverty is **constructed** and therefore can be **countered** through action, different policies, etc. Other outcomes are possible! |
| Use passive language. | Use “active” language to reinforce your points and to make it clear who is behind our economic woes, i.e. a villain (big business, corporations, banks, etc.) |
| Say “entitlements” or refer to “programs” when talking about Social Security or Medicare. | Talk about “systems”, “earned benefits”, and use words that evoke infrastructure like “foundation” |
| Conflate *work* with *jobs*. (Lots of people work hard but don’t necessarily have a wage-earning job.) | Talk about how someone is struggling to get by “without a paycheck” |
| Say workers “deserve” a raise. | Talk about how people are paid inadequately for the labor they produce and should be compensated fairly. |
| Refer to “the poor” | Talk about “a person who is poor”. The former makes it sound like they belong there, it’s inevitable, etc. Takes away the *agency* of poor people. |

**PIVOTING OUT OF BAD QUESTIONS & BAD FRAMES**

Well, I don’t know about that, but…  What I think you're getting at is...   
But the real point is …  No, let me clarify...   
The only important issue is …  A more useful way to look at it is…   
That’s not the issue, the issue is…  What that means is…  
That's a point of view, but…  Let’s keep some perspective…   
Here's what the issue is …  Here's what I think the question should be…   
Here's what I think is really important...  I don't know...but I happen to believe...   
That's because...  As you know...   
Let me add...  It is important to emphasize...   
It is important not to overlook...  That deals with one aspect of a larger issue...   
Yes, and in addition to that...  I'm not sure about that, but what I do know is...   
Let me put this into perspective...  That reminds me of...   
Let me emphasize that...  What I think you want to know is...   
Those were important factors, but...   
I'm glad you asked me that. People may have that misconception, but the truth is...   
I’m not sure I know where you’re going with that, but I am sure that.   
It's a bit too early to talk about that until all the facts are in, but I can tell you...   
Along those lines, another question I'm often asked is...   
That's in the future. What I want to talk about now is... 