

Research Highlights: Communicating About Race and Equity

These Research Highlights share insights from a variety of sources to spark ideas for communicating about race and equity in ways that motivate people to support Lumina Foundation and its partners' work. To compile these insights, we consulted with Ian Haney López, director of the Racial Politics Project at the Haas Institute and professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley, and Dr. Katherine McCabe, professor of political science at Rutgers University. We'll discuss findings from this research to answer questions such as these:

- How do we talk specifically about race, without activating zero-sum thinking?
- How do we use the word “equity”? How can we get beyond the buzzword and define it in our own terms?
- How do we reveal inequities in a way that resonates with our audiences?
- What are the most effective ways to increase support for equity as the solution?

Answering these questions will help us develop language for an equity frame organized like this Narrative Framework:

NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

The **Narrative Framework** provides a structure for communicating with maximum motivating power. It puts your audience (**People**)—business and policy leaders, employers and educators, all of whom haven't been part of the conversation about equity—and their aspirations around postsecondary education (**Goals**) front and center, so that your work speaks to their motivations, and shows how you help them overcome inequity to achieve their goals (**Problems** and **Solutions**).



As you read the insights and ideas below, we have suggested questions for you to consider. We look forward to discussing them with you.

A Short Introduction to Framing

The first thing you say about a topic influences the perceptions, judgments and emotional responses that your audience will have in relation to your topic. “Framing” a topic effectively means using words (as well as images and symbols) that reflect values and beliefs people already hold, and which encourage them to actively support your goal or point of view. To maximize support for your position, you will speak to values and beliefs that are meaningful to the majority of people who comprise your audience. Otherwise, your words will fall flat—or even activate ideas that raise opposition to your position.

For example, talking about taxes as a “burden” on taxpayers activates negative feelings and attitudes. Talking about taxes as a “contribution” we make to our communities and country can make people feel more positive about the same topic.

When the LGBT movement framed marriage equality in terms of “civil rights,” most people couldn’t relate, and opposed the movement’s position. However, a solid majority were persuaded to support marriage equality when the topic was framed in terms of “love and commitment.”

In developing a persuasive equity frame, we’ll explore the most effective ways to communicate about people, goals, problems and solutions in terms that are true to your values—and also resonate with the people you must persuade and engage in order to achieve your goals.

INSIGHTS AND IDEAS FROM RESEARCH



People: How do we put people in the picture and talk specifically about race, without activating zero-sum thinking?

INSIGHT Messages that explicitly mention race in an inclusive way can build support for policies that promote economic and racial justice.

A recent study found that a message explicitly addressing race in terms of “white, Black and brown” won more support for policies that advance equity than a message that did not mention race.

TESTED LANGUAGE

Persuadables: Which of the following comes closer to your opinion?

No mention of race
+33 percentage points
from opposition message

“To make life better for working people we need to invest in education, create better paying jobs, and make healthcare more affordable for people struggling to make ends meet.”

vs.

Mention of race
+41 percentage points
from opposition message

*“To make life better for working people we need to invest in education, create better paying jobs, and make healthcare more affordable for **white, Black, and brown people** struggling to make ends meet.”*

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Dēmos, Anat Shenker-Osorio (ASO Communications) and Ian Haney López (author of *Dog Whistle Politics*) are leading a multi-phase research project that recently included the Race-Class Narrative National Dial Survey Report. Lake Research Partners administered a nationwide dial-testing survey in 2018 to test messages about racism, how Americans achieve financial wealth, and the role of government in Americans' lives.

They identified 59 percent of Americans as “persuadable,” or open to progressive messages on these issues. Persuadables were more likely to be men and younger, and their partisan identification and racial composition closely reflected the demographics of the general public. People identified as “base” (23% of adults) think not enough attention is paid to race, have strong concerns about bias toward people of color, and are more likely to be women, African American, Latino, and Democratic. “Opposition” (18% of adults) think wealthy people achieved success on their own, are concerned with “reverse racism” and are more likely to be over 65, white, and Republican.

FROM THE RESEARCH

Evoking race with language “white, black, and brown” resonates more strongly with persuadables in the context of articulating an agenda to make life better for working people, beating an opposing agenda by a greater margin.

Learn more: [Race-Class Narrative National Dial Survey Report](#)



Question to consider: Should we adopt similar inclusive language to address race, i.e., “black, brown and white?”

INSIGHT Describing people of different races as “contributors” can counteract negative stereotypes.

TESTED LANGUAGE

*“We work hard to support our families and **all our contributions help make America great.** Doctors and nurses make us healthy. Teachers help our kids learn the skills they need. Construction workers make our homes, offices, and bridges. Firefighters make our communities safe. Home health aides make life better for senior citizens and people with special needs.*

Today, we live in tough times. Despite playing by the rules, far too many of us are struggling to find work and to make ends meet. It hurts the same to lose a home or job—whether we are White or Black, male or female, a single parent or a two-parent family.”

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) conducted research to reframe race in the eyes of the general public by framing communities of color as contributors to our economy—as “makers,” not “takers.” CSI wanted to explore “how racially explicit in language and images we could be and still move people toward progressive fiscal policies.” Research conducted from 2012–2014 included a national online survey, focus groups in Michigan and California, and a follow-up survey to test updated messages and messengers.

FROM THE RESEARCH

The dominant narrative about people of color has labeled them as “the takers” of the economy while hardworking White American taxpayers are “the makers” of the economy. All too often, people of color have been depicted negatively, which furthers existing racial disparities. In an effort to combat this narrative, we have to re-frame people of color as positive contributors.

Learn more: [Let's Talk About Race](#)



Question to consider: Do we want to include a “contributor” frame in the equity frame?

INSIGHT Asset framing—describing people by their aspirations and contributions—encourages empathy and respect.

Deficit framing—defining people by their challenges—can reinforce negative stereotypes.

RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE

Deficit framing (not aspirational)

*“We help **at-risk** kids in **high-crime** neighborhoods to stay on track and graduate in order to **avoid becoming negative statistics**.”*

vs.

Asset framing (aspirational)

*“We help students who are **hungry for an education** to learn and **achieve the goals that they set for themselves**.”*



EXPERT INSIGHT

Trabian Shorters heads [BMe](#), an organization focused on reconfiguring the narrative surrounding black men by focusing on their positive contributions to society. Shorters champions asset framing, which is about defining people in terms of their positive qualities and aspirations, rather than problems and needs. He developed this approach while serving as Vice President at the Knight Foundation.

FROM THE RESEARCH

Asset framing is defining people by their aspirations and contributions, then acknowledging the challenges—which extend beyond them—and investing in them for continued benefit to society. Deficit framing is defining people by their problems, ignoring their contributions, then remediating them to be less burdens on society.

Learn more: [Trabian Shorters' Stanford Social Innovation Review Keynote](#)



Question to consider: Are we currently using asset framing or deficit framing?

INSIGHT First-person narrators and unexpected, diverse messengers generate greater support for policies favoring and protecting people of color.

Counter-stereotypical cues, such as images of people of color in traditionally “white” places, can dampen the impact of racial predispositions. First person narratives increase the social presence of outgroups and lead to greater support for policies that protect them.

TESTED LANGUAGE

First-person narrative

“My name is Simon, and I am a foreign worker in Singapore. This is my story. I came to Singapore three years ago. I wanted to work here because it is a good country with nice people and I can earn enough money to support my family.” [abridged]

vs.

Third-person narrative

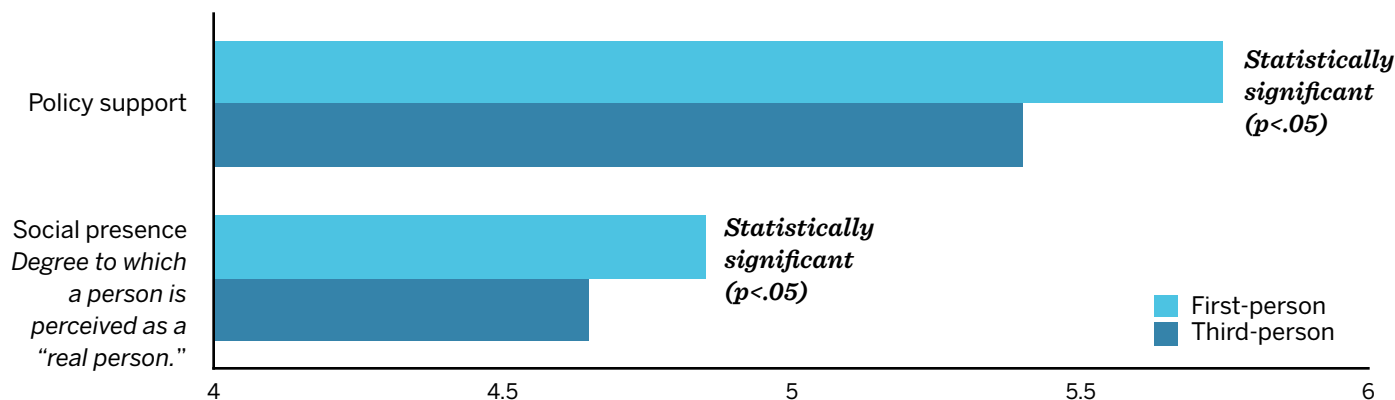
“This is the story of Simon, a foreign worker in Singapore. This is his story. Simon came to Singapore three years ago. He wanted to work here because it is a good country with nice people and he can earn enough money to support his family.” [abridged]



EXPERT INSIGHT

Magdalena Wojcieszak is an associate professor at the Department of Communication at

University of California Davis who studies “ingroup/outgroup” communication, that is, how communications can influence people’s attitudes about others who are not in their own social group. Her research explores messages that can improve ingroup attitudes toward outgroups, emphasizing what kinds of written and visual messages can sway ingroups to be more accepting and empathetic.



FROM THE RESEARCH

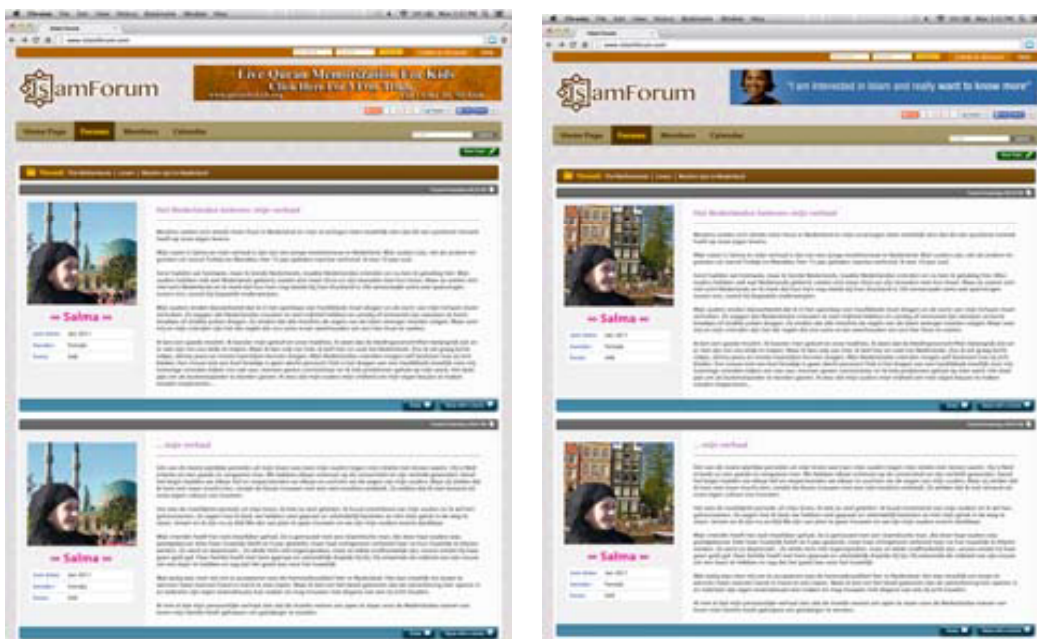
First-person narratives make an outgroup protagonist seem more “present,” generate greater support for policies favoring and protecting the outgroup, and influence policy attitudes through social presence [the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in communication] compared to third person narratives, which in turn leads to greater support for outgroup-related policies.

Learn more: [Selected Publications from Magdalena Wojcieszak](#)



Questions to consider: Who might be effective messengers about equity? How might we highlight them in our communications?

TESTED IMAGES



FROM THE RESEARCH

A message accompanied by a subtle ingroup visual cue [i.e., an image of a woman in a hijab standing in front of typical Dutch canals, versus in front of a mosque] led to greater message acceptance among those with anti-Muslim attitudes and lower social distance. Average scores on a feeling thermometer toward Muslims increased 6.55 percentage points.

Learn more: [Selected Publications from Magdalena Wojcieszak](#)



Question to consider: What is the best way to put people in the picture?



Goals: How do we use the word “equity”? How can we get beyond the buzzword and define it in our own terms?

INSIGHT Defining abstract words in vivid terms can help people see things your way.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

In a recent study of messages promoting policies to advance “diversity” in higher education, the Hattaway team tested messages that defined the abstract concept in concrete terms. Instead of using the term “diversity” on its own, we used it as an adjective and described what a “diverse society” and “diverse learning community” might look like.

*To succeed in our **diverse society**, you need to know how to work with **people with different backgrounds, life experiences and perspectives**.*

*All students benefit from a **vibrant, diverse learning community** where **students from all walks of life can share ideas and learn from each other**.*

FROM THE RESEARCH

This language was informed by other linguistic research showing that many people value America’s diversity because the country benefits from a wide variety of perspectives and ideas. A narrative using this language increased support for considering racial and ethnic background in college admissions from 39% to 55% of voters surveyed.



Question to consider: Does this inspire thinking about how to talk about equity in a similar fashion?

TESTED LANGUAGE

*“Each and every one of our kids needs a quality education. That means **relevant and rigorous instruction, engaging enrichment opportunities, and support for learning and growth** both in and out of the classroom.”*

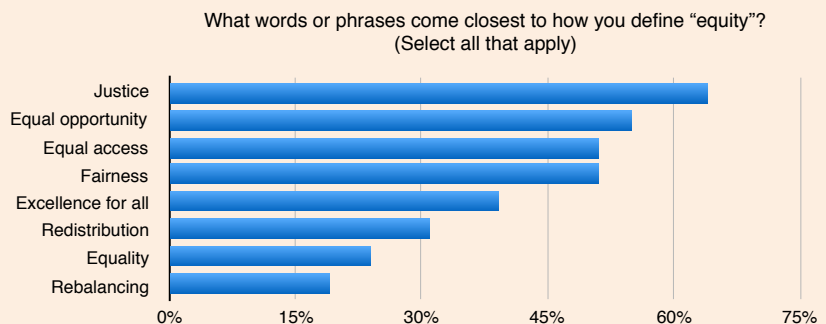
RESEARCH SUMMARY

With the support of the Ford Foundation, Hattaway Communications surveyed 110 of the foundation’s education and social justice grantees and peer funders to explore perceptions about equity, and test messages encouraging communities to advance equity in education. Research found that advocates and practitioners defined the term in many different ways. Language that painted a vivid picture of a quality education for “every one of our kids” was highly motivating to the respondents—and provided a common way to talk about equity in education without getting caught up in buzzwords.

In response to this research, tested messages purposefully did not use the term “equity.”

FROM THE RESEARCH

Seventy-nine percent of education and social justice leaders surveyed said they consistently used the term “equity” to describe their work, but defined the term in a variety of ways. People identified the following words and phrases to describe what they mean when they say “equity:”



EXPERT INSIGHT

Ian Haney López is director of the Racial Politics Project at the Haas Institute, and John H. Boalt Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley. He has written a number of books on race in American politics, most notably 2013’s *Dog Whistle Politics*. Lopez briefed the Hattaway team on his research. He pointed out a potential downside to the word “equity” and encouraged us to craft a narrative that celebrates difference.

From the expert

Equity sounds like “sameness” in a world where people realize we’re all really different. We want a story to think about difference—not a way to lose the difference. You need a story that doesn’t center around a word that connotes sameness. You need a story of differences that are wonderful, that are appreciated, create space for them, not use [our] differences to distract while the rich defund our schools and take away our healthcare. Instead, talk about what we want for our families.



Question to consider: Should we use the word “equity”?



Problem: How do we reveal inequities in a way that resonates with our audiences?

INSIGHT “Bridging narratives” can create a sense of shared humanity while recognizing our different situations.



EXPERT INSIGHT

John A. Powell, director of the Haas Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, is an expert in the fields of racial identity, structural racism and civil rights. He's a champion of targeted universalism: setting universal goals that can be achieved through targeted approaches. He advocates constructing “bridging” narratives between different groups of people that highlight their **shared destiny** while acknowledging their differences and targeting policies to address inequalities. He also recommends showing how policies to advance equity benefit society at large and contribute to “**shared success**.”

From the expert

There is almost always a way to frame, link and connect a group's struggles with another group. This is called 'bridging.' This happens when the causes of immigrants and the currently and formerly incarcerated are connected to fight for housing, labor rights and full civic participation. This happens when Latinos and African Americans join forces to fight against gentrification and displacement. This happens when Muslims and disability advocates jointly call for greater accommodation in schools and workplaces for prayer and physical access.

The solution to breaking [narratives that divide]—which is also othering, as it denies the full humanity of the 'other'—is not 'sam-ing' or creating a false universal that erases the needs or situation of the suffering group. The solution is bridging and belonging. While belonging can recognize that we are not all similarly situated in our interest, or structures, we are not categorically different but situationally different. Belonging can recognize the 'other' without engaging in othering.

Learn more: [“How Bridging Creates Conditions to Solve Problems”](#)



Question to consider: How can we use framing and bridging to help audiences see themselves in the problem of inequity?

INSIGHT Invoking shared circumstances among people of different races can build support for policies to address inequalities.

RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE

*“Today, we live in tough times. Despite playing by the rules, far **too many of us are struggling** to find work and to make ends meet. **It hurts the same** to lose a home or job—whether we are *White or Black, male or female, a single parent or a two-parent family.*”*

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FROM THE RESEARCH

People are experiencing feelings of ‘shared fate.’ We can and need to highlight race in our narration. Our conclusion is that we do need to talk about race explicitly so that we are able to move people significantly on fiscal policy. Just like the conservative right effectively calls out race to mobilize voters to vote for their conservative policies, we must address race directly and combat the race wedge to influence people toward progressive policy.

Learn more: [Let’s Talk About Race](#)



Question to consider: What are the words you’d use to describe the emotional experience of inequity, in ways that our audiences could relate to and understand?

INSIGHT People across the political spectrum understand that “equal opportunity”—the idea that we all have the same chances in life—is a myth.

Reminding people that “where you were born” shapes your opportunities in life can start the conversation about equity on common ground. People of all walks of life intuitively understand that opportunity is not equal in America.

TESTED LANGUAGE

*“Everyone in America who is willing and able to work hard should have the opportunity to get ahead. But your **opportunities in life are shaped by where you’re born and what you look like**. And when government and business don’t listen to regular people, the economy favors the wealthy and well-connected. America works best when everyone has the tools and opportunity to build a good life—like a good education and a good job.”*

RESEARCH SUMMARY

In partnership with the Ford Foundation, Hattaway Communications conducted dozens of ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and surveys of more than 2,000 Americans to explore cultural narratives that shape perceptions and attitudes about America. Our team of linguists then analyzed a bank of more than 200,000 words people used to describe what it means to be an American.

FROM THE RESEARCH

Nearly everyone in focus groups across the country acknowledged that there is more opportunity for some people than others. Even more than that, most people expressed a common narrative about inequality of opportunity—that “where you were born” shapes your opportunities in life. Frequently people referenced local neighborhoods to make their point, but their comments were always very grounded in the concrete—where were you born? What schools did you go to? What were your parents like?

Learn more: [American Aspirations](#)



Question to consider: Is the myth of equal opportunity an effective way to frame the problem in our narrative about equity?

INSIGHT

A message about people from different backgrounds respecting each other and working together can counter racially divisive politics, if it positions the motives of “politicians” and “special interests” as the actual problems driving divisions in society.

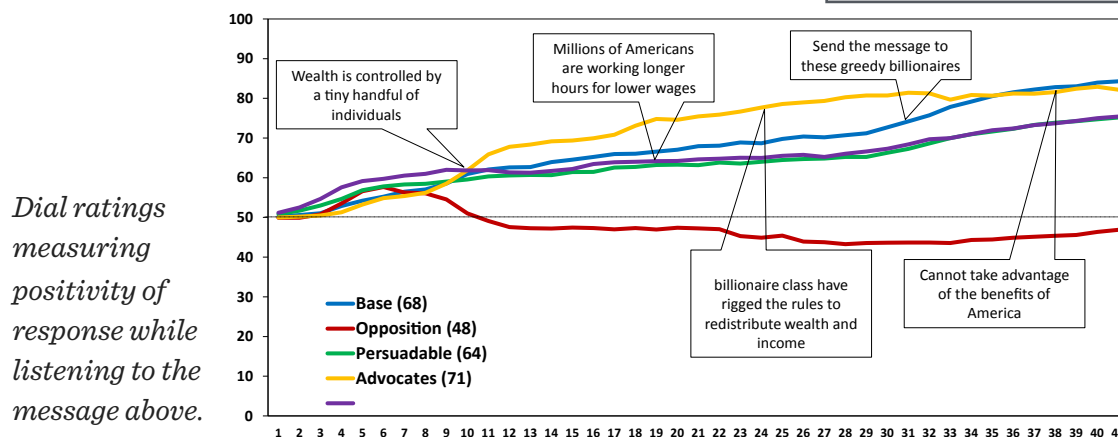
The Race-Class Narrative National Dial Survey Report tested a narrative to counter racially charged, divisive politics. This type of language could be included in our toolkit to help counter political attacks against policies and programs that advance equity.

TESTED LANGUAGE

*“America is a place where people come together from different places and different races to make a better life for themselves. Despite our differences, we work together, try to be good neighbors, and teach our children to respect everyone—women, people of color, new immigrants, people with disabilities, and working people with no college degree. But now **special interests and certain politicians are rewriting the rules to line their own pockets while they deliberately distract us with fear mongering, especially along racial, ethnic and religious lines. We need to come together and elect new leaders who respect all of our families and will govern for all of us.**”*

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FROM THE RESEARCH

[This message was quick to] take off for persuadables. Base and persuadables dial up [on positivity measure] on “we work together, try to be good neighbors, and teach our children to respect everyone,” while the opposition dials down on “now special interests and certain politicians are re-writing the rules to line their own pockets.” Base and persuadables dial up on strong call to action to “come together and elect new leaders who respect all of our families and will govern for all of us.”

Learn more: [Race-Class Narrative National Dial Survey Report](#)



Question to consider: Is it important to counter political messages or call out political actors?



Solution: What are the most effective ways to increase support for equity as the solution?

INSIGHT Increasing “opportunity” can be an effective values frame.

People seem to respond better to solution-oriented messages about improving people’s lives than to language about closing gaps.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Opportunity Agenda is a communications lab that produces language to advance social-justice issues. Its message recommendations are rooted in research such as the [Opportunity Survey](#), a nationwide survey to examine what the U.S. public thinks about opportunity in America. Their research suggests that people respond better to messages about *increasing opportunity* for people than about *closing gaps* in the abstract. Research conducted by the Hattaway team on the racial wealth gap supports this view. It seems that more people are persuaded and motivated by solution-oriented, positive language than problem-oriented, negative language.

FROM THE RESEARCH

Opportunity—defined as “a fair chance to achieve one’s potential”—enjoys support from most Americans, and speaking about issues in terms of [increasing] opportunity as opposed to [closing] deficits and gaps inspires more support for a cause.

Opening conversations with values like opportunity helps to emphasize society’s role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations here does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from shared values to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling those values for all. Doing so can move audiences into a frame of mind that is more **solution-oriented** and less mired in skepticism about the continued existence of discrimination.

Learn more: Opportunity Agenda’s [Ten Lessons for Talking About Race, Racism and Racial Justice](#)



Question to consider: Should “opportunity” be central to our narrative about equity?

INSIGHT Highlighting the shared benefits of equity can help overcome zero-sum thinking—the idea that someone’s gain has to be someone else’s loss.

By showing how the solutions we offer create greater opportunity for everyone, we can make people more optimistic about an equitable future and inspire more of them to support our work.

TESTED LANGUAGE

To help counter the “contraction mindset,” we embedded themes about expanding opportunity in messages on different topics:

“When everyone has the tools to build a good life, we’re all better off. Policies like raising wages and paying employees sick leave put more money in the pockets of working people, who drive economic activity.”

“Forty percent of America’s top companies were started by immigrants. When hard-working immigrants come to America, they bring their new perspectives and skills, and start businesses and create jobs for everyone.”

RESEARCH SUMMARY

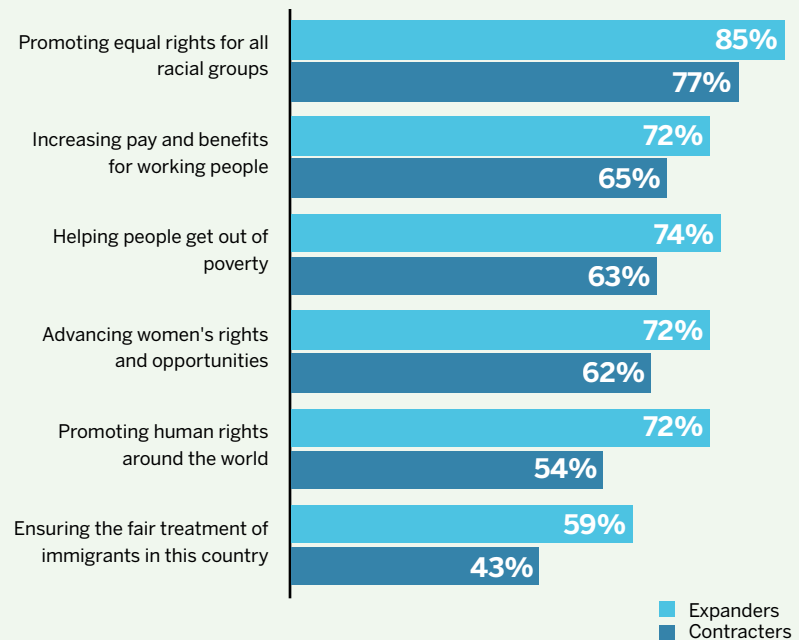
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FROM THE RESEARCH

In our research, zero-sum thinking was associated with the perception that opportunity is contracting in America—that tomorrow’s generations will have less opportunity to succeed than previous generations. American Aspirations research has found that people who share this “**contraction**” mindset are less likely to support measures to address inequality and other social problems in the world today. Across the board, people were more likely to support goals like those shown below if they were “**expanders**”—that is, if they thought the next generation of Americans would have more opportunity.

Learn more: [American Aspirations](#)

Percent of Americans who describe each of these as a high priority



Question to consider: What are examples of shared benefits can we highlight in our narrative about equity?



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