

How and Why Progressives Should Talk About the Economy in Ways that Appeal to Black, Brown, *and* White Pennsylvanians

PBPC has long focused not just on what policies to adopt but how we can build support for them. The [policy papers](#) we wrote for our We The People–PA campaign and our [Roadmap to a New Pennsylvania](#), as well as the narrative for the campaign, focus on messaging as well as policy. In this piece, we weave together some of that work as well as the poll-tested messaging that is coming from the Race/Class Narrative and the Winning Jobs Narrative efforts, while adapting it for the Pennsylvania context. At the end, we provide some links to polling data to support each theme we highlight here.

1. Progressives are unlikely to build enough support for the public policies we care about simply by appealing to upper-middle-class Pennsylvanians with college degrees. No doubt, there is much about right-wing politics today that scares them—the attacks on democracy, the implicit and explicit racism, the abortion issue. But playing defense doesn't by itself build support for our economic policies or the advocates who advance them. And we must recognize that a deep gender gap in the upper middle class reduces the impact of these issues—with men more conservative on cultural and economic issues than women. To build support for economic policies we care about we must build a larger base, especially among working-class and small business-owning Pennsylvanians who do not have college degrees.
2. Working-class and small business-owning Pennsylvanians are divided. Black and Latino non-college-educated Pennsylvanians are overwhelmingly progressive. Our side has to focus on economic issues to mobilize them, especially those in our big cities, to attend issue advocacy events and to lobby legislators. White, non-college-educated people are increasingly less supportive of progressive stands on economic issues, and they make up a large portion of the state. So our side's task is to reduce the animosity toward progressive economic policy among white, non-college-educated Pennsylvanians and encourage them to see why they benefit from such policies. .
3. Polls shows that both white and Black working-class people care more about economic issues than cultural ones (as do many upper-middle-classmen). Progressives simply cannot avoid talking about economic issues out of fear that it will remind Pennsylvanians about the difficult state of the economy. Ignoring the economy won't stop conservatives from focusing on it. We need a strong message in response.
4. We need to understand how economic issues have become intertwined with cultural issues in a way that makes our usual economic appeals less effective. We need to talk about the economy in ways that undermine the Right's effort to connect economic issues to cultural / racial / gender issues in a way that diminishes support for economic liberalism.
5. Non-college-educated white men and women—especially married women—believe that their ideals and their status is disrespected by progressives, who they associate with “elitist” intellectuals, professionals, and managers. They believe that these elites seek to create more jobs for themselves by expanding government to give undeserved benefits to Black and brown people, single women, and sexual/gender minorities. None of this is true. These upside-down beliefs are powered by two things. (1) First is the deep-seated racism and patriarchy embedded in the US way of life for most of the country's history. White supremacist thinking has led people to believe that racial and gender inequality is the result of the failure of Black and brown people and women to live up to the American ethic of working hard. So, any effort to address racism or sexism is seen as giving Black people and women benefits they don't deserve. Especially in our state, this theme is reinforced (2) by the steep decline in economic well-being among white working-class people and those who have small businesses in much of rural Pennsylvania. These Pennsylvanians believe that progressives have not protected them and are inclined to believe conservatives who tell them that they're suffering because liberal economic policies take from them to give benefits to underserving Black and brown people, women, and foreigners living in our cities.
6. Some of these Pennsylvanians are no longer reachable. We can't mobilize them to support our economic policies. But some of them can be reached by making it clear that progressives share their ideals. Progressive

advocacy campaigns can't hedge on helping Black people, brown people, women, and immigrants. Doing so would not only mean abandoning our ideals but would rightly cost us crucial support in our cities. We cannot go back to the days when progressives ignore the voices of those who aren't white men. By focusing on six themes, our advocacy campaigns can and must show that progressives stand with non-college-educated, white Pennsylvanians in a way that also appeals to Black, Latino, and immigrant Pennsylvanians.

7. The first is the ***value of hard work and individual effort as the key to individual and collective success***. At the core of the distaste for progressives held by many white, non-college-educated people is the belief that we no longer value hard work and think that economic rewards should be determined by government bureaucrats. Many of us on the Left believe, with much justification, that our country puts too much emphasis on hard work and not enough on expanding leisure time, which is critical to physical and mental health and to building community. And we worry that the value of hard work is too closely tied to racist and sexist distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor. But modifying the ideal of hard work is a long-term task and one that we can't let interfere with the imperative of building support for our side in the short term. It is critical that progressives focus on the value of work and the importance of encouraging and rewarding it, especially since *the vast majority of Black and Latino people, native-born, and immigrants, as well as white people*, embrace it. Progressives must embrace this ideal in their rhetoric and should demonstrate that no matter where they live or what they look like, people in Pennsylvania do so as well. We should make a point about standing with native, immigrant, Black, Latino, Asian, and white working people, who have their own stories to tell about working hard to support their families.
8. The second theme is that ***government plays a critical role in providing freedom and opportunity for hardworking people to succeed***. Center-right Pennsylvanians are distrustful of progressives because they think we want to help people do well regardless of whether they work hard or not. To implicitly refute that claim, we have to *focus the role of government on providing opportunity for individuals*. Doing so *links our stands on cultural or social issues with economic issues by drawing these connections*. (a) We ***oppose discrimination*** on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender because it undermines the opportunities for hardworking people to choose their own path in life and get ahead. (b) We support the ***right to abortion*** because it allows women and their families to choose when and whether to have children, a fundamental choice that has serious economic consequences. And (c) we support ***the safety net and education programs*** for the same reason—because they provide an opportunity for people to work hard and succeed, as well as helping those who cannot work through no fault of their own.
9. The third theme is that ***Working people who are white, Black, and brown; who live in cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas; and who are native-born or immigrants have much in common***. They are heavily burdened by the cost of health care, child care, food, housing, and gas. They all worry about whether schools are giving their kids a decent education. We have to defend education spending at all levels—including worker training—as creating the opportunities that our working kids need to succeed in life, take care of their families, and contribute to their communities. So we have to defend the government's role in helping people afford health care, child care and senior care; food; housing; and gas *because it makes it possible for people to work*. If people can't take care of young kids or elderly parents, or pay for gas, they can't work. If they can't afford housing where jobs are, they can't work. Progressives should emphasize that government doesn't replace the hard work individuals do to succeed—*it makes hard work possible* while also protecting those who for no fault of their own can't work. And the best way to ensure that people don't feel that these programs are taking from one group to give to another is to make them be universal as much as is possible.
10. The fourth theme is ***that progressives aim to fix an economy that has been rigged to benefit wealthy corporations at the expense of workers and small businesses***. Progressives should not attack all businesses, let alone call out capitalism. But they should say, repeatedly, that politically connected, wealthy corporations get huge hand-outs from government, pay way less in taxes than they should, keep wages low, and charge too much for the goods they sell to small businesses. Poll after poll shows that everyone, including a majority of conservatives, believes that corporations use their wealth to tilt the economy in their direction at the expense of everyone else. Focusing on the corporate-rigged economy provides the enemy that all political campaigns

need—and by uniting all of us against a common enemy it replaces the conservative attempt to divide us by pitting Black against white people and men against women.

11. The fifth theme is to ***call out the Right for dividing us***. The right-wing strategy of dividing us works when there is no alternative enemy and when it is allowed to act unchallenged. But, fundamentally, the majority of Pennsylvanians, like people everywhere, would rather live in a world in which we're united behind some common goals. Each of the three previous themes are designed to show that Pennsylvanians have much in common. Conservatives seek to divide us and then serve large corporations once they are in power.
12. Finally the sixth theme is that ***we must protect our democracy so we, the people, can come together as we have done before to create the opportunities that are so important to all of us***. While we suggest that progressives start by talking about opportunity for hardworking individuals, we ultimately have to remind people that opportunity comes from our common efforts to create a political world that recognizes the dignity of everyone by giving them the same opportunities. A government that doesn't make it easy to vote denies a fundamental right and equal respect to everyone, and it tilts the political field towards the corporations that rig the economy in their favor. And a government that undermines the personal autonomy of women denies them the equal respect they deserve.
13. Progressive campaigns need some broad-stroke public policies that exemplify these themes. But even more—it needs ***stories***. We need to share real-life stories that ***exemplify what we all have in common—white and Black, and people working hard on the job or in school. Urban and rural Pennsylvanians have the same concerns about schools, gas prices, paying for child care, and where their aging parents will live and receive care***. The key to overcoming the distaste among right-wing supporters for progressives is not in presenting policy proposals. It is in showing that we are on the side of working people in every part of the state.
14. There are some fairly straightforward policies that address these themes. In doing public issue advocacy we don't need to spell these policies out in great detail but must say enough to show how they exemplify the five themes.
 - a. Creating a tax system that rewards work, not wealth. This is the central idea of We The People—PA's "fair share tax," which lowers tax rates on wages but not dividends and capital gains.
 - b. Raising the minimum wage so that workers are paid for their efforts.
 - c. Asking multi-national corporations that pay nothing in Pennsylvania to pay what they owe. (This is not inconsistent with cutting corporate taxes on PA-based businesses.) And demanding the frackers pay the same severance tax they pay in every other state.
 - d. Ensuring that every kid goes to a school that is funded well enough to provide an education that prepares them for the future.
 - e. Making post-secondary education affordable for all, including worker training programs and community and four-year colleges.
 - f. Focusing all economic development on workers, not businesses. Legislators should insist that no business will get a dime of state money if it doesn't create good jobs—and that the state will take back funds if jobs are not created.
 - g. Promising help to every family in the state to afford food, housing, gas, child care, and senior care.
 - h. Protecting the right to vote, ensuring voting is as easy as possible, and ensuring that all legitimate votes are counted.
15. The thread that runs through all these issues is creating ***a government that respects and works for all of us. Like the ideals of democracy and the right to abortion, an economy that creates opportunity for everyone is one that serves all Pennsylvanians, no matter where they live or what they look like.***

Materials, including polling, from the Winning Jobs Narrative group can be found [here](#).

Material, including polling, from We Make The Future, the home of the Race / Class Narrative can be found [here](#).