



Toward an economy
that sustains people
and the planet

Reframing the Economy

A Project of the New Economy Network, Framing and Messaging Working Group

Progress Report: December 2, 2010 (v2)

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Executive Summary

There is broad agreement among those active in the field of economic transformation that the framing currently used falls short in terms of its impact on political discourse and policy change. This is manifest both in the recent election and in the tone of the ongoing public debate over the future of the U.S. economy.

Recent interviews among leaders of organizations working in this field confirm the need for more compelling framing, and emphasize the importance of getting the process right to achieve credibility and adoption. An effective process will engage major players on an ongoing basis, build on the framing research and application currently available, and seek to create new frames that garner broad support from a range of opinion-leading individuals and organizations.

We recommend an approach structured as a “table” or a series of convenings informed by a synthesis of available research. At a minimum, this will enable the field to better digest and leverage the valuable research already conducted. At best, the process will inspire key players to move forward in a joint effort to achieve convergence around frames that are morally-compelling, systemically-oriented and succinctly constructed. Convergence around such frames is essential for progressive economics to make headway in the coming decades.

Background

The [New Economy Network](#) (NEN) identified framing and message as a major area of concern for our field, and urged the creation of a “Framing and Messaging” working group to address it. There was broad acknowledgment that, as a field, we need to develop better ways to communicate to the public *why* America needs fundamental economic change, and *what* a transformed economy would offer. The mid-term elections reminded us all of the stark deficiencies in progressive framing about the economy.

The core of the NEN Framing and Messaging Working Group consists of Sarah Stranahan of NEN, Allen White of Tellus Institute, Mitch Rofsky of New Voice of Business and Better World Club, Barry Kendall of Demos’ Progressive Ideas Network, and it is led by David Brodwin of NEN and Brodwin & Associates.

The working group launched a series of fact-finding interviews with individuals representing many groups active in economic transformation: think tanks, advocacy organizations, polling and research firms, foundations, and some individual strategists and thought leaders. About 20 interviews were conducted at various times in late 2009 and 2010, with the majority conducted in mid-late summer of 2010. Some of the interviews were conducted according to a script; others were conducted on a more open-ended basis.

At this point, the first wave of interviews is complete, and they have yielded enough information to assess the situation and design the next step in the process.

Interviewees:

Interviews were conducted with individuals representing multiple stakeholders in the field of economic transformation: think tanks, advocacy organizations, polling and research firms, foundations, and movement strategists.

Person	Role	Organization (as of 12/31/2010)
Dimple Abichandani	Program Officer	Proteus Fund
Dean Baker	Co-Director	Center for Economic Policy Research
Susan Nall Bales	Founder and President	Frameworks Institute
Robert Borosage	Founder and President	Institute for America's Future
Deepak Bhargava	Exec Director	Center for Community Change
Heather Booth	Steering Committee	Americans for Financial Reform
Robert Bray	Comm. Director	Four Freedoms Fund
Chuck Collins	Founder	Wealth for the Common Good
Lew Daly	Director and Sr. Fellow	Demos
John Halpin	Senior Fellow	Center for American Progress
Rob Johnson	Exec Director	Institute for New Economic Thinking
Gene Karpinski	President	League of Conservation Voters
David Korten	Co-chair	New Economy Working Group
Chuck Marr	Director, Tax	Center for Budget and Policy Priorities
Doug Miller	Founder	Globespan
Lawrence Mishel	President	Economic Policy Institute
Steve Phillips	President and Founder	PowerPAC
Maggie Priebe	Program Director	Working America (AFL-CIO)
Andrew Rich	President and CEO	Roosevelt Institute
Betsy Taylor	President	Breakthrough Strategies and Solutions
Dave Walker	Vice President	Quinlan Greenberg Rosner Research
Stewart Wallis	Executive Director	New Economics Foundation
Rob Weissman	President	Public Citizen

Summary of Findings

In general, the interviews confirmed a widespread perception that our framing is not working as well as we need it to work, and it must be strengthened. At the same, there were cautions not to expect too much from framing, and reminders of the work yet to be done in policy development, message delivery, and mobilization. Interviewees also underscored the difficulty of working on framing across a broad and diverse field, and

they pointed out that the process must carefully designed and well-managed if it is to be of value.

- There was general agreement that the framing and messaging of broad issues has been poor to mediocre, and that the opposition does a much better job. That said, some tactical campaigns have done a good job with framing.
- Some parts of our framing are particularly problematic: most notably we have yet to figure out a way to convey to general audiences the need for an active government that guides and structures the market. The public debate is now dominated by those who frame government as incompetent, corrupt, or overly intrusive.
- Structuring and managing a framing effort will be very challenging. Inclusiveness is important to generate buy-in and commitment; however, at the same time, inclusiveness and the search for consensus can lead to compromised language that is flaccid and uninspiring.
- A range of concerns were expressed about the feasibility of a framing effort to benefit the entire field, and these concerns need to be addressed in the design phase. It is our belief that effective framing can transcend these concerns, as it has on the Right despite the potential for disagreements between factions of the conservative movement. The concerns include:
 - Tensions between more transformational and more incremental approaches
 - Tensions between different approaches to the policy solution, e.g. is the goal “no growth” or “responsible growth”?
 - Concern about whether this framing effort would absorb too much money and hurt efforts by individual groups.
 - Concern that any effort must maintain a close coupling between the academic and think tank work and the groups that work at the grass roots level and can quickly validate whether a framing concept has power.

- Concern that extensive primary research has already been conducted but not fully digested or deployed. We should not commission more research until we digest and employ what we have.
- There may not be one overall framing of the New Economy; we may need multiple interrelated message structures designed for different segmented audiences, e.g. policy elites vs. the mass public, class-centric groups vs. environment-centric groups, groups focusing on politically feasible reforms vs. those focusing on for radical transformation.
- Framing alone won't solve our problems and we must be realistic in our expectations. The lack of a worked-out policy agenda, the lack of certain parts of economic theory that we need, and the lack of "spine" in the administration, are all important challenges in addition to framing. These issues must be addressed in parallel with a framing effort.
- Respondents were asked to prioritize the various kinds of activities that a framing effort could support. In general, the activities seen as most important focused on the development and dissemination of frames at a long term, strategic level, rather than support for day-to-day dissemination of messages in campaigns. Although there was some range of opinion, in general the higher priority activities were:
 - Develop an overall frame and message that all the groups working for economic change could utilize.
 - Convene workshops to craft better messages and build better message alignment across groups.
 - Create a clearing house for sharing non-proprietary information from research already commissioned.
 - Commission and share the cost of opinion research and media analysis
 - Assist with response to breaking news to take advantage of opportunities to inject our frames into coverage

- In contrast, lower priorities were:
 - Develop and execute large scale programs for public education (as inspired by Inconvenient Truth) – *Some saw this as an issue of whether the field could agree enough on what this should be.*
 - Develop and distribute talking points on key issues – *It was pointed that some groups already do this on their own.*
 - Hold periodic calls among ED's or communications directors to strategize and coordinate. – *CAF already holds a regular call; others "war rooms" are convened as needed*
 - Create a shared PR capability to help organizations get their message out, where their own resources are limited. – *Larger organizations already have this capability, and see this as not adding value; there were questions about whether we can get sufficient alignment at the tactical level for this to work.*

Where Do We Go From Here?

The overall picture painted by the interviews conveys a clear need, coupled with a strong caution to get the process right. This suggests a step-by-step process that works more as a "table" or series of convenings rather than as a classical deliverable-driven project.

- There is broad agreement on the usefulness of sharing existing research and potentially new research, so we should start here. Both Demos and CAP have extensive research on framing that would be helpful to share with other groups, if the necessary permissions can be secured. Other interviewees have important content as well.
- The first convening should address the following questions:
 - What framing research has been conducted to date and what does it tell us? (This would need to be fully analyzed in advance of the meeting so it can be cogently summarized and presented.)

- Which of the important questions are answerable from research already done, and what important questions remain unanswered?
 - What does “success” look like? How can we measure our progress towards framing and messaging objectives with each important segment of the populace?
 - What are the best ways to address the important unanswered questions about how to frame the economy?
 - How can we answer the questions in a way that stays close to and leverages the strengths of those working day-to-day in the field to canvass and mobilize?
- Participants in this convening would be the executive directors and communications directors of advocacy organizations and think tanks in this field, plus selected service providers (e.g., pollsters and framers) who can contribute toward the solution.
 - In parallel, NEN should explore how to move forward the key pieces that must advance in parallel with framing:
 - Identifying more specifically the holes in our conceptual structure for the New Economy, and inventory the potential sources for missing content.
 - Developing strategic initiatives which involve sequences of politically feasible incremental policy advances, which are stepping stones towards transformation change while at the same time serving as galvanizing points for the base and educational opportunities for the public at large.¹

¹ Consider for example the “partial birth abortion” initiative on the right. This initiative had little to do with the actual number of abortions using this rare procedure, and much to do with educating the public and mobilizing the base.

Appendix – Detailed Results

In this section, the text in blue represents the questions or topics as stated in the interview guide. Responses for each topic are highlighted. Individual respondents were promised confidentiality; accordingly, comments are not identified as to who made them.

1. Broad, field-wide perspective

In this section, respondents were asked for their perspective on the overall strengths and weaknesses in framing of the entire field of organizations engaged in economic transformation. Numerical ratings where given were on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent.)

1.1 Overall, how well is our movement doing in framing and delivering a compelling message or narrative – one that can build support in the American mainstream for fundamental economic change?

The preponderance of respondents rated the field's overall capacity as poor to mediocre, generally a 1 or 2 on a scale of 5.

Several respondents cautioned that we should not expect too much from framing and pointed to a lack of message delivery capacity, a lack of “backbone” on the part of the administration, the very challenging economic climate, and the typical dynamics of off-year elections.

Several cautioned that we do not have one “movement,” instead we have a variety of segments which may need to be approached with different frames (e.g., administration insiders vs. progressive base; elites vs. mass public; and those focused on class vs. those focused on environmental limits)

1.2. What are our main strengths in framing and message as a movement?

There was broad recognition that given the current state of the economy, an increasing portion of the population is no longer enthralled by unfettered markets – but they are too suspicious of government to advocate for major change in market structure.

Other comments showed little pattern to the areas of perceived strength.

- Distinguishing “real economy” from “casino economy”
- The liberal position being more on the side of ordinary people
- Shared values, even if little agreement on how to operationalize them.
- Analysis of and understanding of the framing problem.
- Programs for training scholars and journalists to resist the conservative framing
- Access to the “lived experience” of low income and minorities
- Getting different progressive voices together

1.3. What are our main weaknesses?

The following themes were mentioned multiple times:

- Lacking a good narrative for the role of government in the face of widespread public mistrust in the honesty, integrity and competence of government.
- Lacking a good narrative about debt and deficit: what kinds of spending, under what circumstances are good, and what are bad.
- Lack of “spine” (or other anatomical reference for fortitude) among administration and party elites to articulate the message
- Lack of ability for message delivery, rather than the message content. How can we get the message out given that conservatives have much more control over the media?
- Tension between the progressive embrace of inclusiveness (which in this case means bring everyone to the table) and the perception that inclusiveness and compromise often results in dull, compromised language that doesn’t grab people.

1.4. Considering both strengths and weaknesses, where should efforts to build more capacity be focused?

Some respondents treated this as more of a “how” question”

- Don't do this in a vacuum of think tanks and messaging specialists: engage with grassroots organizations to get their input and quickly test potential solutions.
- Do this more as a “table” than a deliverables-oriented project.
- Don't push too much for consensus or inclusion.

Others suggested a focus on particular content areas:

- Make the case for an active, effective government
- Make the case for why people should care about inequality even when it doesn't affect them personally
- Make the case for shortcomings of the current economic system – for example, that wage and job stagnation are here to stay.
- Make a stronger connection between our policy proposals and people's day to day lives
- Position ourselves within the Left-to-Right spectrum as it is generally understood, rather than on the outside, where we are today.
- Develop a marketing plan for our policy vision as both FDR and Reagan did

2. Assessment of Field-wide Strength and Weakness by Area

In this section, respondents were asked to rate the framing and messaging capacities of the field (meaning all organizations engaged in economic transformation work.)

Respondents are not rating their own organizations.

2.1 Our ability to understand what ordinary Americans think and feel about economic issues? (on a scale where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent)

Median score = 3. Comments:

- We talk too much within our own circle
- We have to be careful not to condescend when we address the mainstream.
- We understand “their pain” but we don’t understand why they interpret it to support what they support
- Our elites have failed to recognize the pain that’s going on.

2.2 Our ability to articulate and present a unified economic agenda rather than a series of individual policy proposals?

Median score = 1.75. Comments:

- Issue-specific narratives divert attention from the meta-level issues and themes
- Obama won more on general disgust with Bush than with any narrative he advanced on his own.
- It really doesn’t matter if we have an overall agenda; what matters is whether our messages trigger the right associations.

2.3 Our ability to frame our economic agenda in ways that appeal to the broader public?

Median score = 2. Comments:

- We lost the narrative of government as a force for good
- NEN may be too environmentally focused, and a frame without room for economic growth can’t succeed with the broader public.
- Reaching out to the broader public is of paramount importance.

2.4 Our ability to align our message on individual issues and campaigns with a broad, over-arching long term message. (for example, how the right uses the free market narrative to fight any regulation regardless of the focus.)

Median score = 1.75. Comments:

- We are not doing this at all.
- There may be multiple broad, overarching messages – for example one on the failing economy and another on the need for environmental sustainability and social justice.

2.5 Our ability to test how well frames and messages are working and what impact we are having on public opinion?

Media Score = 3. Comments:

- Some of the organizations already test extensively, others don't test at all.
- Some of the field mobilization / canvassing groups are implicitly testing thousands of times a day but we are not capturing and building on what is learned as a result.
- There is a danger in too much testing. We should focus on how to change conventional wisdom, not simply measure it.

2.6 Our ability to get ordinary Americans to see the connection between their overall economic prospects and conservative / Republican policies?

Median score = 2. Comments:

- It's hard to do this as long as the Democrats are in power; it is much easier to attack from the outside.
- The approach needed here varies a lot by segment.

- We get snookered here when the ruling class causes economic problems which require an expansion of government to solve, and then they criticize the expansion.

2.7 Our ability to tap the distress that Americans feel about the economy and convert it into support for progressive economic policies?

Median score = 2. Comments:

- We are greatly hindered by the fact that benefits of economic and health care programs have not yet yield visible benefits for most people.
- There is energy at the grassroots level to rebuild in this area.
- People are distressed, but our ability to mobilize this discontent is limited by people's greater mistrust of the government and willingness to treat problems in the market as isolated "bad apples" rather than systemic issues.

2.8 Our ability to influence how journalists frame economic issues when they cover them?

Median score = 2.5. Comments:

- Tom Friedman is our best spokesperson, but he's still committed to the mainstream growth paradigm.
- Conservatives have "more fire in them" now and it's hard to counter that.
- Good ideas don't covered; what gets covered is what's deemed possible in the D.C. context.
- This is very hard to do; the idea of objective numbers has been denigrated. Coverage gets expressed in terms of the political combat, not the underlying issue.

3. Relative Importance of Different Potential Services

This section asked respondents to rate the importance of different services that could potentially be provided by a collaborative framing effort. The ratings ranged from 1 (not useful) to 5 (extremely important)

3.1 Develop an overall frame and message that all the groups working for economic change could utilize.

Median score = 4.5

- Recognize that narrative alone won't win the battle. Mobilization and other factors are important as well.
- Think in terms of multiple frames for different situations and segments, not one frame for everyone.
- Diversity of messages is o.k. within a coherent overall theme.
- We need both the core ideas themselves, and the capacity to disseminate them.

3.2 Develop and execute large scale programs for public education (as inspired by Inconvenient Truth)

Media score = 3.75. Comments:

- This is good, presupposing we can get sufficient agreement on its content.
- Not convinced there is a "silver bullet"
- Can be done in a way that meets the criteria established by foundations.
- Good idea considered on its own, but depends on resources and competing priorities.
- An approach of a single big project is too risky.

3.3 Assist with response to breaking news to take advantage of opportunities to inject our frames into coverage

Median score = 4. There was a lot of divergence here, with the larger, better funded organizations already having the capacity to do this and not seeing it as a need, whereas some of the smaller organizations saw this as more important.

- Already doing this internally, no need for another activity.
- Not very practical
- Must be selective here, and focus on major events and opportunities
- Don't get drawn overly into the tactical day-to-day squabble.

3.4 Develop and distribute talking points on key issues

Median score = 3.5. This was seen as closely related to the prior item, and there was a similar range of responses.

- Assumes agreement on common frames can be reached.
- Nice idea, but a question of resources. Not the highest priority.
- The focus should not be so tactical.

3.5 Convene workshops to craft better messages and build better message alignment across groups.

Median score = 4. There was strong interest in this, and as mentioned earlier some saw an interactive process as key to the success of the entire effort.

- Must be done carefully to avoid too much inclusiveness or negotiation leading to a watered down result.
- Lakoff tried this and ran into problems due to groups being at different points on the political spectrum and not able to find common ground.

- Done successfully in U.K. by NEF

3.6 Create a clearing house for sharing non-proprietary information from research already commissioned.

Median score = 4. Several groups offered to contribute or to house it. There was a general impression that this could be very helpful and would not require much resource to support.

3.7 Commission and share the cost of opinion research and media analysis

Media score = 4. Two groups that have already done a lot of research (CAP and Demos) indicated that there may not be a need for much more primary research. Few groups were aware of potentially relevant research done by others.

3.8 Hold periodic calls among ED's or communications directors to strategize and coordinate.

Median score = 2.25. Several people noted that there were already calls along this line run by CAF, and others on an as-needed basis. There was not a great need for other structures of this kind.

3.9 Create a shared PR capability to help organizations get their message out, where their own resources are limited.

Median score = 1.75. The larger groups see no value in this, since they already have resources of their own. Others were skeptical about the ability to get enough unity to make this work.

4. Concluding Question

Overall Importance of Moving Forward

The overall response was a qualified 4 to 4.5 on a scale where 1 is low importance and 5 means high importance. The qualifications that were raised tend to stress that further

work on framing has to be done right, if it is to be worth doing at all. The issues raised include:

- Framing must be approached not as one message but as a collection of related messages.
- It may be better to just “put it out there” if you have a better idea and not try to build a process.
- Need more agreement about the underlying economic system we are aiming for. (e.g. “no growth” vs. “responsible growth”.)
- In a prior or parallel effort, need to flesh out the underlying economic ideas that are missing. (For example, is there a valid case for restricting global competition for the sake of strong local American economies -- or is globalization an unchallengeable feature of any modern economy?)
- The process needs to be designed to get engagement up front (otherwise the work will be ignored) but at the same time we must avoid the perils of too much consensus-seeking.
- The work must be coupled closely with groups in the field doing grassroots organizing and mobilizing support for specific policy actions.