

MEMORANDUM

TO: CONNECT FOR KIDS
FROM: HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES
DATE: MAY, 2004
SUBJECT: PUBLIC INVESTMENT MESSAGE FINDINGS

Hart Research, with assistance from Lake Research, has conducted focus group research on behalf of Connect for Kids to provide guidance in developing a message framework that supports increased federal investments for families and children. Specifically, the research examined the effectiveness of different message approaches for confronting and overcoming powerful anti-government narratives frequently employed by opponents of public investment. Three initial sessions were convened with swing voters: one session in Richmond Virginia with women and two sessions in Harrisburg Pennsylvania, one with men and one with well-informed voters of both genders. In addition, portions of two other swing voter focus groups sponsored by Connect for Kids, held in the suburbs of Baltimore, devoted some time to discussing these same issues. This memo reviews the main findings from the focus group research.

Confronting Anti-Government Sentiment

In all of these sessions, we talked to swing voters about the idea of federal investments in children and families, and had them react to a variety of pro-investment messages. However, before getting to those discussions we took two fundamentally different approaches to framing the discussion. As it developed, this had a significant impact on their later receptivity to pro-investment ideas.

In our first session with women swing voters, we began with a discussion of the impact government had on their own lives. Just two out of ten participants rated government's impact on her life positively (7 or higher on a scale of 0 to 10), while eight rated the impact as neutral or negative. For the most part, these middle class women struggled to think of any ways in which

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government had ever helped them or those they cared about. When pressed, some volunteered that older relatives had benefited from Medicare and/or Social Security. Thinking further, another recalled receiving some form of assistance with the cost of college education, but no one thought to mention public schools. Eventually, one woman offered that her husband was permanently disabled and had been on government assistance for years. While the group acknowledged this was an important (and legitimate) benefit, even this dramatic example did not serve to change the general sentiment that “people like us don’t get anything from government.”

We then broadened the discussion to what government’s role should be in order to achieve the nation’s goals. The response was decidedly negative, with half the respondents wanting the role of government reduced and the other half comfortable with the status quo – but none in favor of an expanded role. When participants considered the proper role of the federal government, they turned reflexively to traditional conservative concerns such as their preference for local over federal government and a belief that the federal government undermined personal responsibility and wasted money.

I think people should be accountable for their own actions. I do not believe the government should involve themselves into our personal lives.

Federal government has too much uncontrolled and unnecessary spending, which needs closer monitoring. The state and local government, I feel, could monitor more clearly and keep agencies accountable.

I am not sure the names of the programs, but maybe they are into too much. Give them back to the state and then big government wouldn’t need much money.

When we then turned the discussion to what government should do on behalf of low-income families and children, these women were very resistant to considering expanded investments. None gave this proposal a positive rating, while a majority responded negatively: *The federal government should devote substantially more resources than it does today to helping low-income working families and children, making more investments in areas like education, health care, job training, housing assistance, and childcare.* In part, the reaction reflected unfavorable views of programs for “low-income” people, which brought out many familiar anti-welfare views. These women feel government has done little or nothing for them, and are somewhat resentful of its perceived generosity to the non-working poor. In addition, their previously stated opposition to

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a larger role for government in general carried over to this discussion. They could not get past their ideological opposition to “big government” even though the proposal focused on programs they concede have some value, such as health care and job training.

In a similar vein, the subsequent pro-investment message frames could not move these women off of their anti-government perspective. They did differentiate between the various frames, rating some much higher than others (making the discussion valuable). However, in the end they stuck to their previous position that increased federal investment was not needed (or unproductive).

In subsequent sessions with swing voters, we again began with a discussion of the perceived impact of government on participants’ own lives. The response was similar, with 24 out of 31 rating the impact as neutral to negative, and few people able to volunteer important ways in which they or their loved ones had personally benefited from government programs. So at this stage, the outlook seemed similarly negative.

Being of the middle-income level, I feel the government helps the poorer and the rich, but middle income suffer when it comes to benefits and consideration

Never had a need to ask for government assistance. I feel we pay more to help foreigners than necessary. Reduce taxes and make foreigner pay their own way.

Some programs have been effective. Most, I believe, cause harm in an insidious way.

However, at this point we tried framing the larger discussion of government’s agenda differently. Instead of asking how large or small a role was appropriate for government, we asked people to consider two different views of how government needs to change--one conservative and one progressive—and asked which came closer to their own view.

STATEMENT A: America needs a government with the right priorities that does more to help working families. OR

STATEMENT B: America needs a government that does less and costs less, and lets the free market work for everyone.

The results now were much more favorable than with the larger/smaller role formulation, with twenty respondents clearly preferring government with the right priorities and just seven

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preferring a government that does and costs less. Another fourteen ended up in the middle, attracted to both sentiments. When the discussion is framed as a choice regarding *who* government should serve, rather than along the dimension of government's *size*, voters' more progressive instincts are engaged.

In two sessions, we also asked participants to consider two different critiques of government. Again, we found that people were drawn to progressive sentiment when it was expressed in terms other than explicitly defending or advocating more government. Far more agreed with statement B's populist indictment of government than with the traditional conservative critique expressed in statement A.

STATEMENT A: The main problem with government is it's too big, too costly, and interferes too much in things better left to individuals and businesses, OR

STATEMENT B: The main problem with government is it's too concerned with helping wealthy special interests and does not do enough to help average people.

While the choices made by voters in these two exercises are encouraging, more important was the impact on the discussions that followed, which had a much less anti-government character. For example, swing voters in these sessions respond much more favorably to the idea of investments directed at low income families and children (see table). The response to the pro-investment messages also proved to be much more positive.

The government should do much more than it does today to improve opportunities for low-income working families and children, making more investments in areas like education, health care, job training, housing assistance, and childcare.					
	Rating of <u>0 to 3</u> #	Rating of <u>4 to 6</u> #	Rating of <u>7 to 8</u> #	Rating of <u>9 to 10</u> #	Avg #
After discussion of size/role of government	5	2	1	2	4.5
After choice of small govt. vs. govt. that helps working people	4	5	8	3	6.0

When we talk to swing voters about what they want from government, we find a genuine hunger for government action on behalf of average people. We asked swing voters in Harrisburg

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to complete this sentence: “More than anything else, I want a government that ____.” Few volunteer that their first priority is “smaller” or “cheaper” government. Instead we heard these responses:

That has the best interests and welfare of the masses in mind.

I like a government that helps the little man!

Works for me and protects the American workers.

I would like the government to work together, for us.

Recognize inequities in economic working classes.

Understands the average American’s situation, realistically.

Keep its promises; keep its interests in our country, not every other one.

Could be more efficient, helpful, and would plan better for the future in all aspects.

More than anything, I would like a government that is not as concerned with special interest groups.

Gives every American the opportunity to achieve a decent standard of living.

Looks out for America first.

Looks out for its people’s needs, not special interests.

Cares about all people.

Does what it takes to keep Americans buying and producing their own products.

Listens to the people, the “middle class.”

Listens to the needs of the American people so that everyone can live the American dream.

Helps the truly needy.

Does not take so much of our money in taxes.

If people are asked to choose between more and less government, or bigger or smaller government, their conservative values and instincts often come to the fore. But size is not necessarily the most relevant dimension for voters; they care more about government’s priorities and on whose behalf it operates. What most Americans are looking for is a government that works for them, rather than for powerful special interests.

We would identify two principal advantages to employing such a priorities framework – “we need a government with the right priorities that does more to help working families” – in talking to voters about government and public investment.

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It allows us to engage people who are dissatisfied with government. Many swing voters – including moderate-income voters who could benefit personally from an investment agenda – are deeply frustrated with government. While it may serve others, both above them and below them on the economic scale, helping them does not seem to be a priority for government. The focus groups suggest that taking on this anti-government sentiment head-on will usually not be effective, and just causes people to entrench. However, by expressing and ratifying people’s perception that government does not do enough for them – instead of trying to convince them they get more from government than they realize – we can engage them in further discussion. It opens the door for further communication, allowing us to suggest a different explanation for the flaws they see in government – that it is beholden to powerful interests, not that it is too big and intrusive. Without some acknowledgment of government’s shortcomings, many people simply aren’t interested in hearing the rest of our message.

It unites the interests of the middle class and those below. At the heart of the conservative anti-government framework is an implicit message to the middle class: you have more in common with the wealthy – as taxpayers, you pay the bills – than with the poor, who are the beneficiaries of government generosity. The priorities approach draws a different line across the economic spectrum: it says that middle class and low-income families are both ill-served by a government that focuses too much on serving the wealthy and big business. It points the finger of blame at the powerful, rather than the “undeserving poor,” and establishes common ground between middle- and lower-income voters.

This approach to talking about government – offering a competing critique, rather than a defense – would represent an important change in approach for many pro-investment groups and leaders. However, it is not clear that assuming the burden of justifying “government” to a skeptical public is necessary or productive. And the payoff from a new approach could be considerable.

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Testing Pro-Investment Narratives

The remainder of the focus group sessions was devoted to discussing a series of pro-investment narratives. Each statement contained two paragraphs, one providing a statement of the problem and one stating an affirmative agenda. Based on feedback in early sessions, some statements were modified and strengthened for later sessions. This process produced four strong message frameworks: “Populism,” “Opportunity,” “Investing in the Next Generation,” and “Declining Middle Class” (full text is included at conclusion of memo).

Reviewing the statements which won the strongest support from participants, it is clear that messages which speak to the concerns of the middle class – and not just low-income families – are the most effective. This is perhaps a predictable finding, but nonetheless an important one. More specifically, messages that tapped into the public’s concern about the declining quality of jobs -- and the threat this poses to the middle class -- did particularly well.

FEELINGS TOWARD STATEMENTS IN FAVOR OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT				
	Ranked 1st to 2nd	Ranked 3rd to 4th	Ranked 5th to 7th	Average
“Populism”				
<i>All participants</i>	26	19	3	2.42
“Opportunity”				
<i>All participants</i>	23	18	7	2.83
“Investing in the Next Generation”				
<i>All participants</i>	21	15	12	3.13
“Declining Middle Class”				
<i>All participants</i>	12	8	8	3.14
“Balance to Grow the Economy”				
<i>All participants</i>	9	7	12	3.89
“Honor work”				
<i>All participants</i>	4	7	17	4.39
“Two Americas”				
<i>All participants</i>	1	2	6	5.22

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Reinforcing the earlier findings about government's priorities and people's concern that government mainly served the wealthy and powerful, the message entitled "Populism" was ranked as the single most persuasive. The statement included this language: "Today the government is too focused on serving the wealthy special interests, and not on helping middle class Americans who built this country and pay the taxes... We need a government that works for everyone, not just the wealthy and powerful."

The idea of providing everyone in our society with *opportunity*, especially through quality education, tapped into an important American value. People do not expect, or want, government to guarantee equal outcomes, but do believe that everyone deserves to have the same opportunity to succeed and achieve their dreams. However, the phrase "equal opportunity" conjured up the issue of racial discrimination for many of these white swing voters, and so phrases like "opportunity for all" or "opportunity for all Americans" are stronger expressions of this idea.

We want to highlight one message frame in particular, "Investing in the Next Generation," because it scored well despite having a more explicit focus on meeting the needs of lower-income children and families. Variations on this message have also tested well in other research we have conducted, and the focus on planning for the nation's future also tested very well in research conducted by Meg Bostrom and Doug Gould for the Ford Foundation.

America became a great nation because each generation sacrificed for their children and made sound investments in the country's future. But too often today, our leaders make short-term decisions instead of doing what's right for America's future. Soon, the baby boom generation will start to retire, dramatically increasing the ratio of retirees to workers, and placing new demands on government. The only way this can work is if the next generation gets the training, education, and job opportunities they need to stay competitive in the global economy and build a strong American economy.

We need to start planning and investing now for a strong America tomorrow. Helping low-income families and children is not just the right thing to do – it is one of the smartest investments that we can make. We'll get back much more than we spend now, with a productive workforce, better health, and stronger communities.

The coming retirement of the baby boom generation is of course often invoked by fiscal conservatives as a reason to reduce government spending, that is, as an anti-investment rationale. This message seeks to turn that argument on its head, and convince people that the only way America can survive – and thrive – as its population ages is by investing now in the workers of

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the future. It will be important to test this idea more thoroughly in future research, and learn how best to express this important but complex idea.

Two of the messages focused exclusively on the plight of low-wage and low-income Americans: “Two Americas” and “Honor Work.” Our predominantly middle-class respondents did see some merit in the ideas expressed in the Honor Work statement. As we have seen in other research, Americans have genuine sympathy and respect for people who work but remain poor. Nonetheless, these messages fail to give middle class voters a real stake in the investment issue. It poses the issue as something that should be done for other people, and years of experience tell us that such an approach will not ultimately win the day.

A successful message frame must persuade middle class Americans that they will benefit – as a society, if not directly as individuals – from an agenda of expanded federal investment in families and children. Elements of the four top-rated narratives all contribute to that effort. We do not conclude based on these few focus groups that any one of them is the “silver bullet” that will win more support for investment. However, future research should build on these findings and explore potentially more powerful ways of expressing the important ideas contained in these winning narratives.

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Pro-Investment Statements

Honor

work

Americans value work, but too often today hard work is not rewarded. For generations, if you worked hard in America you earned a livable income, benefits, and security. That promise has been broken. Today thirty million Americans, one out of every four workers, makes less than \$8.70 an hour. And more and more jobs provide no health insurance and no retirement benefits. Yet these workers do essential work for our economy – caring for children, cleaning, harvesting crops, cooking, caring for the sick and elderly.

No one who works full time in America should have to live in poverty. Government should make sure that work pays, by raising the minimum wage, providing childcare assistance, and increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit for working families. Government should be on the side of Americans who work hard, pay taxes, and play by the rules.

Declining Middle Class

The American middle class is being squeezed, and we are increasingly becoming a nation divided between the rich and everyone else. Too many good American jobs are moving overseas. Much of our manufacturing base is already gone, and now even companies like Microsoft and IBM are moving white-collar jobs India and China. Good jobs that pay a decent wage and provide health insurance and retirement benefits are the foundation of a strong economy, and today that foundation is growing weaker.

Protecting and creating good, middle class jobs should be a priority for our government. We need to close tax loopholes that encourage U.S. companies to outsource our jobs, and reward companies that keep jobs in America. Public investment in roads, schools, health care, and new technologies can help create jobs at home. And we need to invest in education and job training, so American workers have the skills they need to get ahead.

Populism

Today the government is too focused on serving the wealthy special interests, and not on helping middle class Americans who built this country and pay the taxes. Lobbyists write laws that protect HMOs and the big drug companies, while health costs for average people spiral out of control. Large corporations move our jobs overseas, and then government gives them a tax break to reward their lack of loyalty and patriotism.

We need a government that works for everyone, not just the wealthy and powerful. We need rules that require employers to pay a living wage and provide health coverage. We need trade policies that protect good American jobs. And we need the wealthy and big business to pay their fair share of taxes, instead of cutting health care and childcare assistance for thousands of low-income working families.

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Balance to grow the economy

The global economy and new technologies have fundamentally changed the economy, the workforce and the prospect for quality jobs. Many good jobs are being sent overseas and are never coming back. A healthy economy requires good balance between the role of government and the free market. When we get the balance right between government and the market, the economy does well -- job opportunities improve, wages rise, and savings grow. When we get it wrong, people lose their jobs, their savings, and their hope for the future.

We need smart public policies that ensure we have a growing economy that works for everyone. We need major public investments in research, roads, and technology that help spur economic growth. We also need investments like early learning and quality childcare, job training, and access to higher education that help strengthen the workforce and improve productivity.

Investing in the next generation

America became a great nation because each generation sacrificed for their children and made sound investments in the country's future. But too often today, our leaders make short-term decisions instead of doing what's right for America's future. Soon, the baby boom generation will start to retire, dramatically increasing the ratio of retirees to workers, and placing new demands on government. The only way this can work is if the next generation gets the training, education, and job opportunities they need to stay competitive in the global economy and build a strong American economy.

We need to start planning and investing now for a strong America tomorrow. Helping low-income families and children is not just the right thing to do – it is one of the smartest investments that we can make. We'll get back much more than we spend now, with a productive workforce, better health, and stronger communities.

Opportunity

Everyone who works hard in our society should have an equal opportunity to realize their dreams. The American Dream is a good paying job you can raise a family on, a safe neighborhood and home, and access to good education and health care. With millions of our jobs being exported overseas and the costs of education rising, more and more Americans today are losing the opportunity to create better lives for themselves and their families.

We know that education is the foundation of opportunity in this country. That's why we need to work to invest in reforms that are proven to work, like smaller class size, full funding of Head Start, and financial assistance for college and vocational programs. This way, workers will be prepared for the jobs of today as well the jobs of tomorrow. We need policies that help give all working people a real opportunity to achieve the American Dream for their families.

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Two Americas

We are becoming two Americas, one for those who come from a position of privilege and one for everybody else. We have two economies -- one for those who already have economic security and know they are always going to be okay, and another economy for families who live paycheck to paycheck, can't afford to save for the future, struggle every single day to build a better life for their families. Today there are 35 million Americans who work hard every day and still live in poverty – most with no health insurance, no pensions, and no economic security.

That is wrong. What we need now is a government that will work for hard working low-income families, with policies like health coverage, nutrition assistance, and childcare and job training so parents can get and keep jobs. We need to expand the earned income tax credit, to supplement the wages of the lowest-paid workers. And the wealthy need to pay their fair share of taxes so that no child or struggling working parent has to do without these essentials.