



HOW TO BRIDGE THE ECONOMIC COMMUNICATIONS DIVIDE

New study shows conservatives and liberals fail to connect with everyday Americans about economic concerns, offers advice

After an election where voters ranked economic issues second only to the Iraq war, the nation's leaders are confronted with a mandate to address issues about jobs, incomes, insecurity, and inequality in ways that make sense to most Americans.

But when it comes to debating and deciding economic issues, public opinion poses three challenges for the nation's leaders: Americans are experiencing new forms of economic insecurity that extend well beyond the fear of losing their jobs. On important issues, particularly globalization, everyday Americans' views are very different from those of the economic, political, and media elites. And Americans often express ambivalent views about the economy – most notably, people tend to express optimism about their own economic situation and pessimism about the prospects for “people like them.”

Because of this ambivalence and the gulf between everyday people and elites, conservatives and liberals all tend to address economic issues differently from the way most people think and talk. Conservatives tend to ignore Americans' economic problems and anxieties; liberals tend to downplay Americans' sense of optimism and self-reliance.

These are among the findings of a new report being made public today by the Economic Policy Institute, [***Talking Past Each Other: What Everyday Americans Really Think \(and Elites Don't Get\) About the Economy***](#), which offers both fresh insights and practical advice. Authors David Kusnet, Lawrence Mishel, and Ruy Teixeira – experts in political rhetoric, living standards, and public opinion, respectively – explain Americans' ambivalent views about the economy, show how national leaders misunderstand public opinion, and recommend ways for advocates across the philosophical spectrum to speak more understandably and persuasively on these bread-and-butter issues.

“There is an enormous gulf between the experts who interpret the economy and the people who live it every day – and that gulf impedes developing a national conversation that can address our economic problems,” said Lawrence Mishel. “This research is the first, crucial step toward developing a common understanding and common language for discussing sound policy.”

The report synthesizes data from the authors' review and analysis of hundreds of national opinion surveys going back to the early 1990s from a wide variety of polling firms. Also included in the analysis are data from a new national survey and focus groups conducted by pollsters Stan Greenberg (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research) and Celinda Lake (Lake Research Partners). Greenberg's and Lake's detailed report on this new data, [***The Economic Disconnect***](#), is also being released publicly today.

“Even though the specific economic issues that are on people's minds have changed somewhat over time, the general patterns of their attitudes toward economic issues are remarkably consistent over the past 15 years,” said Teixeira. “The body of opinion research reveals a public whose views are far from confused or contradictory – rather they are concerned, yet hopeful.”

Liberals and Conservatives Both Miss the Mark

One central finding of *Talking Past Each Other* is that while Americans are anxious about the national economy and the prospects of “people like you,” they are, at the same time, optimistic

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that they will meet their own personal and family challenges. Conservatives tend to err by underestimating or disregarding the depth of Americans' economic anxieties, while liberals' mistake is downplaying the strength of everyday Americans' sense of personal responsibility for their families' futures.

The failure of both conservative and liberal elites to speak about economic issues in language that reflects and resonates with everyday people's experience and values, reinforces the sense of alienation that the economy's consumers feel from its commentators. This rift is a recurring theme that was powerfully expressed by a 2006 focus group participant who said, "The economists don't know what they're talking about."

Overall Findings

The study paints a clear picture of everyday Americans' understanding of the economy at ground level, one that reflects both their hopes and concerns. The chief findings include:

- People judge the economy in several seemingly contradictory ways simultaneously: the economy can be thought to be doing well even though people's incomes can be judged to be growing poorly; a person and his/her family can be judged to be doing well even though "people like you" are not faring well. This view reflects both people's preference for seeing themselves as masters of their own fate and the economic fact that individuals and families are continuing to move ahead, even if their progress begins at a lower rung on the ladder and proceeds more slowly.
- Because Americans prefer optimism to self-pity, people are reluctant to describe their personal situations in negative terms and, therefore, often discuss their economic problems in roundabout ways. Thus, the concerns they express for "people like me" can be seen as indirect acknowledgement of their own personal doubts and anxieties – a little like the classic seeking of advice for a "friend" with a problem.
- The New Economy has created new forms of insecurity that differ substantially from the kitchen-table concerns of earlier eras. In addition to worrying about getting and keeping jobs, today's Americans are also anxious about the offshoring of jobs, the conversion of permanent jobs into part-time or temporary positions, the erosion of health and retirement benefits, the lack of opportunities for career advancement in companies that have severely downsized, and the likelihood that, if they lose their current jobs, the only jobs available to them will pay less and offer fewer benefits. Not surprisingly, assessments of economic prospects run more strongly negative among groups facing the greatest economic challenges: low-income Americans, those with less formal education, African Americans and Hispanics, and women.
- While Americans tend to embrace change, there are several issues, particularly trade, which most people understand very differently from economic policy-making and opinion-shaping elites. Generally speaking, despite wide support for the general idea of expanded trade, the public remains unsold on globalization as defined by specific agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA.
- Instead of marching in lockstep with any economic approach, Americans are profoundly ambivalent about many issues and will agree with arguments that best express their experiences and reflect their values. As the authors note, liberals and conservatives have so far failed equally – although in different ways – at striking the right chord with the public.

The Economic Policy Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute – or "think tank" – that researches the impact of economic trends and policies on working people in the United States and around the world.

How to Speak American about the Economy

The final section of the book offers a 12-point how-to for putting the lessons of the rest of the book into practice, and crafting new ways to talk about the economy that will bridge the gap that now exists between policy elites and the people.

“Building public support on economic issues has to begin with acknowledging the people’s hopes, fears, and values around these issues,” Kusnet said, “and then incorporating those hopes, fears, and values into the national discussion about solutions to economic problems.”

His advice includes:

1. Explain how “The Big Picture” touches people’s lives.
2. No rosy scenarios, please – Americans are anxious about the economy.
3. Understand the New Economic Insecurity – it’s about more than just jobs.
4. Americans are anxious about the economy, but don’t address people as passive victims.
5. Recognize that Americans’ struggles to stay even, to get ahead, and to provide for their futures are central to their own identities – and to their moral judgments on economic issues.
6. Remember – the “middle-class squeeze” is moral as well as material.
7. “Opportunity” and “security” are both good words – so use them both.
8. Don’t condemn large corporations and wealthy individuals for doing well – criticize them for doing wrong.
9. Don’t forget that the elites and everyday Americans see globalization very differently.
10. When you’re talking about government, remember people believe government can’t do everything – but government does have a job to do.
11. If health care reform were easy to explain, someone would have explained it and achieved it by now.
12. Education and training are very important, but don’t call people uneducated or unskilled.

“Communication between the elites and the people are a classic case of the blind men and the elephant,” said Teixeira. “The liberals feel the trunk, the conservatives grapple with the leg, and the entire animal remains a big, poorly understood mystery. The challenge for policy makers is to craft a plan and language that incorporates and illuminates all the parts.”

About the Authors

David Kusnet is a former Clinton White House speechwriter, and author of *Speaking American* and the forthcoming *Love the Work, Hate the Job* (John A. Wiley & Sons, 2007).

Lawrence Mishel is EPI’s president and coauthor of *The State of Working America* (all 10 editions).

Ruy Teixeira is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and The Century Foundation, a fellow at the New Politics Institute, author of the monthly Web feature, *What the Public Really Wants*, and coauthor of *The Emerging Democratic Majority*.

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