Messaging to Rewrite the Rules of the Economy

Earlier this year, the Roosevelt Institute released its *Rewriting the Rules* economic agenda crafted by Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz. What it offered sounded like a new common sense: the economy is governed by underlying rules; they are a choice and we have the power to change them. But can this message and bold policies win the intellectual argument with elites and the public while defeating opponents and energizing and motivating a disaffected citizenry?

Since the report's well-publicized release, the Roosevelt Institute has partnered with Democracy Corps to determine whether its *Rewriting the Rules* analysis and recommendations were actionable in the short and long-term. This first phase of research included six focus groups and a national survey of 900 likely 2016 voters with an industry-leading 60 percent cell-phone rate. *The Roosevelt Institute is a non-partisan organization. Democracy Corps funded the political content in this poll and is responsible for these recommendations.*

A “Level the Playing Field” Economic Message

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<th>Level the Playing Field</th>
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<td><strong>We need an economy that works for the middle class, not an economy governed by trickle down. Today, people struggle to earn enough to sustain a family, yet corporations use donations and lobbyists to manipulate the rules in their favor. It's time to rewrite the rules to promote growth that benefits all Americans. We can't change everything overnight, but we can start by reducing the toxic influence of corporate money in politics. Then we can finally rebalance our tax code so those at the top pay their fair share and we can ensure CEOs behave in a way that helps America, not just their bottom lines. We can rein in the big banks, help small businesses get loans, make sure women get equal pay, and lift the burden of college debt. And we can invest in modernizing our infrastructure and training skilled workers. Let's level the playing field so we can grow the middle class and America again.</strong></td>
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The Roosevelt narrative and policies, which includes significant financial sector and corporate governance reform, were crystallized as a “Level the Playing Field” progressive message, and it is electorally compelling. This message:

- Engages the disengaged, particularly the target audiences of the Rising American Electorate;
- Produces stronger results than a mainstream economic message that lacks financial reform, is silent on inequality, focused on insecurity, and proposes only modest policy changes;
- Gets a much stronger and more intense response than the conservative message;
- Has the virtue of energizing the base, without diminishing its appeal to independents and swing working class voters.
The New Rules for Talking About the Economy

**A comprehensive approach is needed, starting with campaign finance reform**
Stiglitz calls for a comprehensive overhaul of the economy in *Rewriting the Rules*. The public is ready for a comprehensive overhaul, but believes it must start with campaign finance reform because they think CEOs and corporations are buying corrupt politicians. Sequence is key. If you want to get a hearing with the disaffected, you must acknowledge the problem of political corruption and promise to address it. Only after reducing the influence of unlimited money in politics will a comprehensive overhaul be successful. Only then will politicians have an incentive to reject a trickle-down agenda, clearing the road for reforms to taxes, the financial industry, and corporate governance and for key investments in wages and infrastructure that will help the middle class and create economic growth.

**Talk about the middle class.**
Though many Americans have fallen out of the middle class, it is their reference point. It is what they once were, are now, or aspire to be. A strong middle class is their gauge of a strong economy and country.

**Talk about the rules of the economy and the need to “rewrite the rules.”**
The public understands there are rules that govern the economy and that the current rules benefit a small group of people, not the middle class. This framework was intuitive for voters across diverse focus groups and they quickly picked up the “rules” language in their conversations. It has the added benefit of empowering a disaffected public and priming them for a robust economic agenda. They believe rewriting the rules of the economy is possible. There is no need to talk about the role of government.

**Talk about “leveling the playing field.”**
Leveling the playing field is how Americans say we fix the economy and the country and address inequality, in their own words. For some, leveling the playing field means redistribution, for others is means changing the rules so the middle class has an equal say; for others it means opportunity. Inequality is undefined, but for all forms of inequality—income and wealth inequality, racial inequality, gender inequality—leveling the playing field is the answer.

**Growth for all Americans is an electoral winner; brand opponents as pro-“trickle down”**
Trickle-down is widely rejected across the electorate and it is one of the strongest pejoratives Democracy Corps has tested. For voters, trickle-down IS the current economic and political order; it is just what CEOs and corporations fund lawmakers to do. There is a huge opportunity to brand candidates who advocate for trickle down as being responsible for an economy that doesn’t work for the middle class and Washington dysfunction. Candidates who embrace a leveling the playing field message that will create economic growth for all Americans will increase interest and enthusiasm to win in 2016.

**A progressive economic message beats a mainstream economic message**
A progressive economic message that incorporates the advice above and then proposes bold reforms to the tax code, corporate governance, and the financial sector so we can invest in Americans outperforms a “mainstream” economic message that is focused on economic insecurity, proposes only modest policy changes, and does not address the financial sector or corporate governance. The progressive narrative enjoys more intense support—particularly among key demographics like millennials, white working class women and minorities—and does a better job generating interest in voting compared to a mainstream message without tax, corporate or financial reform.