

# THE FIX WE'RE IN

What Americans Have to Say About  
Opportunity, Inequality and the  
System They Feel Is Failing Them

A Public Agenda Learning Curve Research Report



**The Fix We're In—What Americans Have to Say About Opportunity, Inequality and the System They Feel Is Failing Them**

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The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research.

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# Introduction

How do people think and talk about opportunity and inequality in the United States? Certainly these are themes we hear about quite a lot these days, from economists, from the philanthropic community, from political pundits and among the slogans and sound bites of recent political campaigns. But what do “regular” Americans think, and what helps people engage these themes and the challenges they represent in productive ways?

This report is based on qualitative research employing Public Agenda’s signature Learning Curve Research focus group methodology. Whereas traditional focus groups convene small groups to explore their views on a topic, these Learning Curve Research groups extend the process by exploring how people’s thinking and views develop as they learn more and deliberate with others. (For more on the number of groups conducted, where and when they took place and other aspects of the methodology, please see the Methodology section, page 29.)

Our aim in Learning Curve Research is to gain insight not only into people’s opinions as they currently stand, but also into the trajectory of public opinion as it evolves and the factors that help or hinder that development.<sup>1</sup> Doing so enables us to develop hypotheses about how to engage people productively, in ways that deepen their understanding of a complex problem and its potential solutions.

If the research suggests one overall headline, it is this: Many Americans feel trapped in worsening economic straits by an impenetrable and disempowering political system. They view our economic and democratic problems as deeply intertwined and feel stuck in a system in which opportunity to better one’s lot is increasingly limited by a public policy that serves wealthy special interests rather than people like them. Only a more empowering and responsive brand of politics, where citizens and communities have a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives, will enable us to create remedies that can give everyone a decent life and a shot at advancement.

<sup>1</sup> On the evolution of public opinion, from knee-jerk reactions to more stable and responsible “public judgment,” see Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), and Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman, eds., *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

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Certainly, for a sizable subset of Americans, deficits of economic opportunity and political equality and empowerment are nothing new—that has been the experience of too many since the founding of the Republic. What our research suggests is new is that this sense of limitation and disadvantage has become a broadly shared American experience, contributing to a powerful and widespread sense of dissatisfaction, mistrust and frustration with our democratic process and institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This research lends qualitative nuance to this broad sentiment. In undertaking it, we set out to learn something useful about where the common ground might be in our divided country, if there are real-world remedies that most people might be willing to support and how to create the conditions that make it easier for Americans to engage these questions effectively.

While one should not draw broad conclusions about “Americans” with full confidence based on qualitative research, a robust series of well-designed focus groups can suggest strong hypotheses about broadly shared sentiments. Among those suggested by this research, elaborated on in the report, are the following:

- Many Americans believe that a better brand of politics, one that is more empowering for and responsive to people like them, is necessary if we’re to have a fairer economy with more opportunity for all.
- People often gravitate toward “magic bullet”-type answers as they begin to engage a knotty problem, a stage they often have to go through before they’re ready for the hard work of weighing trade-offs and settling on real-world solutions. Among the “easy answers” we encountered by some respondents was the notion that immigration is at the heart of our economic challenges or that job-replacing technology can be stopped by individual consumer choices.
- It is difficult to engage people in productive conversation on a sprawling and amorphous theme such as “opportunity and inequality.” But if the topic is broken down into more concrete subtopics, people do much better. We chose three: strengthening democracy, alleviating poverty and creating more middle-class jobs and economic security.
- To strengthen democracy, people in our focus groups gravitated toward measures that inform and empower individuals and communities, as well as those that limit the political influence of wealthy special interests.
- To alleviate poverty, people tended to place their bets on improving K–12 education, supporting kids in their communities and increasing the minimum wage.

<sup>2</sup> While mistrust of governmental power has been part and parcel of American political culture since the Republic’s founding and is a central principle of our Constitution’s design (checks and balances), it has grown increasingly intense and widely shared since the 1960s and 70s. See, for example, Pew Research Center, “Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government” (2015), <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/1-trust-in-government-1958-2015>, and Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions” (2016), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

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- To strengthen the middle class, people want to make sure college is affordable, along with other fundamentals such as housing. Investing in infrastructure also makes sense to people as a means of creating jobs.
  - To gain needed resources to do any or all of the above, people believe that moderate tax increases on the rich are warranted. This is not to bring the rich down, but rather to raise everyone else up through needed investments in opportunity and to make sure that all Americans contribute their fair share to support the common good.
  - Compelling stories and data can have significant impacts on people's thinking, especially once they're in a problem-solving frame of mind. We give some examples of how we saw this in our groups.
  - While our groups suggest that many Americans perceive a strong connection between political inequality and diminished economic opportunity, people of color and white people experience this somewhat differently, creating the potential for common cause on the one hand and for tensions on the other.
  - The research offers a number of clues for effectively engaging the public on questions of inequality and opportunity, including framing the problem in ways that acknowledge and address the interconnection people see between poor economic opportunity and disempowering, unresponsive politics.

The task of engaging the public in a search for solutions to America's crisis of opportunity and inequality could not be more important. As Dan Yankelovich, co-founder of Public Agenda, recently wrote, "My fifty-plus years of experience in interpreting public opinion tells me that if equality of opportunity continues to erode, extremist political movements will inevitably arise, making our present polarization far worse and ripping to shreds our social contract."<sup>3</sup> The bitter divisions on display throughout the recent election season reveal these words as prescient.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, "Without Social Mobility, Our Society Doesn't Work," *Rebooting Democracy* blog, June 3, 2014, <http://www.publicagenda.org/blogs/without-social-mobility-our-society-doesnt-work>.

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# I. The Fix We're In

## People think the economy is working poorly for most Americans

To start off our conversations, we asked people a simple question: Generally speaking, do you think the economy is working well for most Americans or not? It was no shock that many people we spoke with think the economy is not working well, but we did not necessarily think it would be a near universal sentiment among our respondents. We also wanted to hear how people talked about the topic, how they frame and elaborate on it. The picture that emerges is one of broadly shared economic insecurity, with people running faster and faster just to stay in place. The notion of actually getting ahead and realizing some version of the American Dream is conspicuous by its absence.<sup>4</sup>

I don't think the economy is working that well for Middle America, the common man. I think everyone's really struggling to make ends meet...<sup>5</sup>

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*

On the surface the economy looks like it's doing well, but when you just scratch that surface you see people really are living paycheck to paycheck.... It doesn't take much to tip the balance.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 60s; white; upper-income; Republican*

Across the years, I went from one retail job to two or three... just to make rent, to get by, to make things work smoothly. And still it's not smooth enough.

*San Francisco-area resident; in her 30s; Hispanic; lower-income; Democrat*

<sup>4</sup> For related qualitative research findings, see the upcoming report from Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation on public discussions through the National Issues Forums network using the issue guide "Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?"

<sup>5</sup> In some instances, quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

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Some, not all, talk about this economic insecurity and struggle in the context of economic inequality.

It's the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer.  
I think it's almost like slave labor...

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; black; lower-income; Independent*

If somebody can't even have a safe place to sleep and doesn't even have enough money for food, isn't that the most obvious sign of economic imbalance?

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 30s; white; upper-income; Democrat*

### **People draw a straight line between dysfunctional and disempowering politics and their limited economic prospects**

A number of our respondents referred to big economic forces affecting the economic prospects and security of Americans, such as technology and globalization. But there was one factor that the vast majority of our respondents viewed as paramount to explaining our current problems: the power of wealthy interests to control the policy agenda and steer the economy to their own advantage, and the concomitant utter failure of political leaders to put the public interest ahead of special interests.

We look at how the economy is run, and it all circles back to special interest groups and the decisions being made. A lot of people are swinging the hammer and working hard, and they may vote, but really votes don't matter and the money and the interests of big business are making the decisions.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 30s; black; middle-income; Independent*

Our democratic process is in shambles, it's so bad. I think that is why there is extreme poverty, because everyone's not on a fair playing ground.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 30s; black; upper-income; Democrat*

Our government is more worried about their pockets than they are worried about helping the people.

*San Diego-area resident; in his 40s; Hispanic; lower-income; Republican*

The issue now is Wall Street, all that money that's getting funneled into campaigns. What are they buying? Who are they buying?

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; white; middle-income; Independent*

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The baseline of the economic problem is policymaking. And the major corporations run the policymaking.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in her 30s; Asian; middle-income; Democrat*

**Female 1:** These capitalists buy politicians, and the politicians therefore pass or support legislation that benefits their industry.

*Teaneck, NJ–area resident; in her 40s; black; lower-income; Democrat*

**Female 2 (responding):** They're all bought and sold.<sup>6</sup>

*Teaneck, NJ–area resident; in her 60s; white; lower-income; Republican*

Our groups thus suggest that economic opportunity and political inequality are tightly linked for the public—or at least large segments of it. They see the latter choking off the former in a system that is rigged against them. “It’s the political economy, stupid,” seems unlikely to be the next great meme, but it does capture a core truth for the people with whom we spoke.

## Most do not resent wealth, they resent unfair advantage

Despite thinking that wealthy interests are tilting the playing field against them, most people we spoke with do not seem to resent wealth or the wealthy per se. Rather, they tend to respect those who make it big, especially if they do so through ingenuity and hard work, and hope to do the same themselves.

It’s not easy to start a business or to have that much success. It is much, much work.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in his 50s; black; middle-income; Democrat*

It’s what wealthy people work for. They just know a better angle to get there.

*San Diego–area resident; in her 30s; white; lower-income; Republican*

Let’s face it, wealthy people start businesses. They’re able to hire people. So I’m not going to mudsling at them. I do feel differently about the guy who maybe came in and was put in charge who didn’t build that business from the ground, but still gets paid that much money.<sup>7</sup>

*Washington, DC–area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

<sup>6</sup> For a related finding from a survey of residents across the New York City metro region, see “Most Residents Say Government Responds Mostly to the Needs of the Rich” [chart], in “What’s at Issue Here? New York Metro Area Residents on the Problems That Concern Them Most” (New York: Public Agenda, 2015), <http://www.publicagenda.org/media/chartatissue07.jpg>.

<sup>7</sup> For related survey findings, see “Is New York No Longer the Land of Opportunity?”, Public Agenda and WNYC press release, October 12, 2015, <http://www.publicagenda.org/press-releases/is-new-york-no-longer-the-land-of-opportunity>.



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This indicates a set of ambivalent attitudes toward the wealthy that many people seem to hold. On the one hand, the wealthy tend to be viewed as talented, hard-driving and smart, and they deserve to reap the rewards of their hard work—as most people would be happy to do. On the other hand, they are tilting the system to their advantage, and that’s unfair.

I also agree with the comments that were made about not taxing the rich too much. Not everybody inherited money. I’m sure they worked very hard for it.

*Secaucus, NJ–area resident; in her 40s; Hispanic; upper-income; Democrat*

The wealthy are getting wealthier because they don’t pay taxes. They know how to work the system.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Republican*

The ambivalence seems to tilt toward the negative pole when people see the rich getting richer while they themselves feel they are falling further behind or barely treading water. That’s when people’s frustration with undue, unfair influence really seems to kick in. This became apparent in our focus groups when we exposed people to the fact that in 1980 CEO pay was about 30 times that of the average worker, while today it is closer to 300 times.<sup>8</sup> This felt shocking, excessive and unfair to most people.

I’m a little stymied, too, with wages being held flat for a long time. You look at things and companies are making record profits, but it’s not trickling down. Where is it going? Why are only some people making a lot of money?

*Washington, DC–area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

Without the people doing the jobs, the CEOs wouldn’t be making the money they’re making or wouldn’t have a company to be a CEO of. They need to, I think, acknowledge the employees.

*San Francisco–area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*

Something is wrong with all these people making all this money.

*San Francisco–area resident; in her 50s; white; upper-income; Republican*

<sup>8</sup> The graphs Public Agenda used to facilitate the focus group discussions are available upon request from [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

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## II. The Search for Solutions: Preliminary Findings

After an initial period in our focus groups of probing respondents' views of economic opportunity in the United States and of their own economic prospects, and another in which we reviewed several data presentations on wages, job growth and related topics (more on this in the Methodology section, page 29), we asked people to focus on the sorts of solutions that might improve things for those who are struggling to get ahead. We began with open-ended questions and then explored ways of tackling several big challenges relevant to the larger topic: strengthening democracy, alleviating poverty and creating more middle-class jobs and economic security.<sup>9</sup>

### **The search for solutions often begins with (too) easy answers**

The economic insecurity and political frustration respondents expressed left them in a quandary about how to move forward. They desperately need solutions but are not sure what they are or how to bring them about in a political system in which they feel they have little power.

Some did appear confident that they had landed on a solution to the problem of diminished economic opportunity and political equality and efficacy, but, as we'll see in a moment, their solution did not always match up with the breadth and depth of the problem. This was no great surprise: Our experience in studying public opinion for decades has taught us that when people search for answers to an anxiety-provoking public problem, they often first turn to solutions that promise a painless path forward, a stage that people often go through before they're ready to deal with real-world trade-offs and decisions.<sup>10</sup>

We recognize that it's tricky to try to analyze what does and does not constitute such an "easy answer" in the highly charged and partisan election season that overshadowed this writing. But it remains important to try, if we are to understand the dynamics of public opinion and offer useful insights for productive dialogue and engagement.

<sup>9</sup> We consider these findings "preliminary" because engaging the public on solutions to such a complex and multisided topic as the present one is itself a complex process. We were able to begin it in this round of research, but many important questions remain. We hope to do another round in 2017 that builds on this one, confirms or fine-tunes its findings and goes deeper into the public's take on solutions to America's opportunity and inequality challenges.

<sup>10</sup> Yankelovich and Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 2010.

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One possible example of an “easy answer” put forth by some respondents was the notion that limiting immigration would go a long way toward solving our economic problems, as these quotes imply.

We got plenty of low-end jobs, too, that some of the people that are coming here illegally are taking because they’ll work for less money.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

I think maybe there’s more immigrants coming and the government is trying to redistribute all the moneys and the jobs to other people to help them out...taking away from American jobs.... I’m talking about the...ones that come here illegally.

*Teaneck, NJ–area resident; in her 60s; white; lower-income; Republican*

It’s not only Mexicans, but other people from other countries. I know Asian people, when they immigrate over here, they really know how to take advantage of the system.... Yet, here we are paying for taxes and stuff like that. It’s not fair.

*San Diego–area resident; in her 50s; Asian; middle-income; Republican*

It’s a factor when you raise your kids in this country and you can’t get a scholarship because we’re giving scholarships to illegal immigrants. Now we have a whole economy that we’re supporting. You talk about education, you talk about housing, you talk about all these things. Well, all this illegal immigration is affecting all that. It’s really a shame. I don’t know what the solution is to it.

*San Francisco–area resident; in her 50s; white; upper-income; Republican*

To be clear, we’re not suggesting there is anything invalid about arguing the pros and cons of immigration and the kind of policy we ought to have. What we question is the idea that immigration is a major negative factor in the economic well-being of communities and the nation. The preponderance of evidence indicates that drastically limiting immigration will not positively transform the economy; in fact, it would more likely limit economic growth.<sup>11</sup> It’s in this economic sense only that we suggest immigration may be viewed as an “easy answer” that people might need to complicate in order to find viable solutions to diminishing economic

<sup>11</sup> The evidence we’ve seen suggests that, at worst, immigration might occasionally have a small, temporary negative impact during economic downturns on American workers with low levels of education. See, for example, Daniel Costa, David Cooper and Heidi Shierholz, “Facts About Immigration and the U.S. Economy: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions” (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2014), <http://www.epi.org/publication/immigration-facts>.

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opportunity in the United States. This observation was supported as the groups turned toward more fully discussing solutions. At that point, even those who had cited immigration as a prime cause of economic decline did not dwell on immigration policy as a means of improving people's economic prospects. As they dug deeper, they were on to other solutions.

Another possible "easy answer" that we encountered in our groups was the idea that one could stem the advance of technology in the workplace through individual consumer choices, such as opting for human checkout tellers rather than mechanized ones.

I tell people the reality is let's look at how many jobs have been lost to technology. I still walk into a bank. I still pick up the phone and I call GEICO. They're like, 'You can go online.' 'No, I don't want to. I want to talk to a human. I want to keep you employed.'

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

Certainly consumer action can sometimes be an effective force, but it seems unlikely that the genie of workplace mechanization can so easily be put back into its bottle. Just as with the immigration "easy answer," however, participants who espoused this view didn't dwell on it once the conversation turned to digging into solutions.

## Breaking the problem down to aid public discussion

An early observation in our focus groups was that inequality and opportunity are big, amorphous themes that are hard to attack in a problem-solving mode (see section III, page 20). But breaking down this large, complex topic into digestible problem-solving chunks helped people gain a sense of efficacy and enabled a better conversation.

Consequently, we proposed to our respondents that if the country could make headway on three fronts—strengthening democracy, alleviating poverty and creating more middle-class jobs and economic security—we would go a long way toward making progress on the big problems of opportunity and inequality. Those are three large and difficult topics themselves but are better defined and more pragmatically approachable than "opportunity and inequality in modern America."<sup>12</sup> In the rest of this section, we look at the kinds of solutions that made sense to people as they considered these three arenas of work.

<sup>12</sup> We don't claim that this is the only good way to break down the larger topic for the public, just that it is one good way that seemed to help people engage and think things through. The three subtopics corresponded to the top three items people selected when we asked them to rate by importance a list of problem statements about the economy. Moreover, we asked people in the groups if they agreed that progress on these three goals would represent major progress on the nation's overall economic problems, and there was a strong consensus that they would. For more on the specifics of the focus groups, see the Methodology section, page 29.

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## On strengthening democracy

Consistent with their view that dysfunctional, unresponsive, corrupt and disempowering politics is a major cause of our economic problems, people agreed that strengthening democracy to lessen the ability of the wealthy and powerful to tilt the economic system their way and to give people like them a stronger voice is a crucial part of any answer to America's current challenges.

If we don't start with the democratic process, then we won't all get involved to make our vote count, we won't bring all the issues to the table and make it a whole. The democratic process is weak.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; black; lower-income; Independent*

Strengthen democracy so that economic policy says everyone can have a chance to benefit, rather than favoring special interests.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 30s; Asian; middle-income; Democrat*

As to how to make progress in this area, some participants placed an emphasis on bottom-up, grassroots action by individuals or communities, while others focused more on changing public policy to make government more accountable and responsive to the people.

Those who emphasized civic education and action by individuals and groups from the ground up said things like the following:

If people were educated about—myself included—how to contact your congressman, or how to organize a petition...that seems to be what democracy is. Rather than saying the people at the top make all the bad decisions.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

People just don't understand what's happening.... For me, it would really be about educating young people these are some terms to look out for, this is how politics works.

*San Francisco-area resident; in her 20s; black; lower-income; Democrat*

Knowledge is power.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 30s; black; lower-income; Democrat*

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A more community-based version of the bottom-up emphasis on civic learning and action became apparent after we explained the concept of “participatory budgeting” to our groups.<sup>13</sup> A good number were intrigued by it as a mechanism that gives communities direct influence on public decisions that affect their lives.

That’s where the power is. That way they can’t ignore you if you’re making the decisions yourself. You can put your [ideas] online and they can swipe right or swipe left and not pay any attention. When you’re spending the money yourselves, that’s different.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; white; middle-income; Independent*

I am involved in my community council in my neighborhood, and many people in my neighborhood are highly involved. I think that everybody should be able to have a say in their local budget and be able to participate in their community. I think change can come from that.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 30s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

Others emphasized fixing the imbalanced political system from the top down, for example through campaign finance reform.

Reform the campaign finance system so that the sources of contributions are always made public, and that small donations from regular people are encouraged over large donations from wealthy individuals and interest groups. I think that would be one really great way to undercut some of that influence.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; white; middle-income; Independent*

Provide an alternative to big money.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

There are no solutions compared to addressing the influence of special interest money. You can have all the meetings in all the communities of the United States all you want. It’s not going to overcome billions of dollars from Coca-Cola.

*San Francisco–area resident; in his 30s; white; upper-income; Democrat*

<sup>13</sup> Participatory budgeting (PB) is a process by which residents decide together how to spend part of a public budget. It is among the fastest-growing democratic innovations in the United States and Canada, expanding from 1 process in Chicago in 2009 to 60 processes in 22 cities by 2016. For more on the current scope of PB in the U.S. and Canada, see Carolin Hagelskamp, Chloe Rinehart, Rebecca Silliman and David Schleifer, “A Process of Growth: The Expansion of Participatory Budgeting in the United States and Canada in 2015–16” (New York: Public Agenda, 2016), <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-process-of-growth>.

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Overall, we observed a willingness to try many things to attack the problems of our democracy by increasing public access to information, empowering communities, increasing voting and battling the influence of money on politics.

## On alleviating poverty

In discussing a range of ideas that might help alleviate poverty, most people with whom we spoke gravitated toward two in particular: making sure everyone has a good basic education and raising the minimum wage.

On the importance of an education that gives people a shot at economic success and well-being, people said:

If you don't have education, you're lost. You just have to know the basics to get by anymore. Even the high school diploma, you're lucky to get a job as far as that goes.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*

Going back to our ladder chart [that showed that most who are born into poverty end up in poverty as adults], maybe it would make a difference if starting in childhood and teenage years you have some direction as far as a job skill directed to you by good schooling. It doesn't seem like the schools right now are funded well enough to do that.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; middle-income; Republican*

As part of the discussion about education's potential to help people climb out of poverty, some also emphasized the need for preschools, social supports and guidance for young people.

Somehow we need to provide, encourage and support positive role models over negative role models for these young people to see.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

If you think about kids in poverty, a lot of times they're functioning in survival mode. Now with preschool, they get a head start and there are mental health services.... There are a whole lot of other services that support families who are also in poverty.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 30s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

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As far as education is concerned, teaching young people about life before they have the chance to make stupid decisions is also important, because so many people screw up their lives because they don't know any better.... Education I think is really the key to getting a workforce that's competitive and that can fill those high-paying jobs that are available.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

When it turned to the minimum wage, the conversation grew more complicated as people argued both sides of the question.<sup>14</sup> In one group in Washington, D.C., we were able to take more time to dive deeply into the issue to really engage participants on the pros and cons. Those who argued for raising the minimum wage brought up such considerations as the following:

Raising the minimum wage actually helps the economy overall because those people aren't going to just save the money or send it away.... That money is going to go right back into the economy.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 30s; black; middle-income; Independent*

My belief is the role of government is to level the playing field... and they need to step in because we don't have unions. At Aldi, a German-owned grocery store, you start at \$13 an hour. Now you tell me how they can pay that, how they can give their people health care, and American businesses can't do that. I'm not buying it, America!

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

Wages have been flat for years. Prices have gone up.... I do believe that you can raise the minimum wage to pay people good living salaries. We did it before, we can do it again.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 60s; white; upper-income; Republican*

<sup>14</sup> For related qualitative research findings, see the upcoming report from Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation on public discussions through the National Issues Forums network using the issue guide "Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?"



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And participants also brought up their concerns:

The minimum wage is...meant to be an entry-level wage... You work your way up as you become more in-depth at what you do, get a better job, progress through life. To have it some other way, you start telling businesses how to run themselves and there's already a huge amount of government intrusion into the way businesses operate.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

I think raising the minimum wage will also in turn raise the prices of everything else because now people can afford it.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 30s; other race; lower-income; Democrat*

You get back to the whole technology thing because what you hear some businesses saying is, 'Fine, raise the minimum wage. We simply will automate and then we won't have to pay the workers. Then you've lost the job completely. That's a concern.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 60s; white; upper-income; Republican*

In the end, and across all of our groups, most people supported the idea that if you work full-time, you should be making enough that you're not also living in poverty.

I also think that our minimum wage is too low, which is a little bit counter to what folks might think from the other things I said, since I'm a market-driven guy. If a person's gainfully employed, they should be paid, and they shouldn't get in the single-digit dollars.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

If you live in an environment where everything around you is costing more and going up except your wages, that's not going to work. Is it fair to say to someone, 'Everything is going to cost more for you, your groceries, your transportation, your health care, your school, everything, and your rent, but we can only pay you 10 bucks an hour'?

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 30s; white; upper-income; Democrat*

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## On Creating Middle-Class Jobs and Greater Economic Security

Respondents appeared open to a number of measures aimed at creating more middle-class jobs and economic security. The solutions that gained the most attention in our discussions involved the importance of college, the need to create more and better-quality jobs and the growing problem of affordability.

A strong consensus emerged across the groups for making community and technical colleges and four-year public universities more accessible and affordable.

People should be able to afford to get the college education if they want to have it, instead of feeling like they have to stay at the level of job that they have the education for.

*San Francisco–area resident; in her 20s; white; middle-income; Democrat*

I think education is such a basic foundation for the workforce, and you have to have a competitive workforce in the world... I think that is really important.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

I think it should be a fair chance for everybody to go to the colleges and universities and then compete in the job world.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in her 30s; Asian; middle-income; Democrat*

It's nice to see technical colleges in this discussion, because I think that everyone is so focused on sending their kids to four-year universities when there are a lot of great jobs that just need skill to make a decent living.

*San Francisco–area resident; in her 50s; white; upper-income; Republican*

Maybe do loan forgiveness [to make college more affordable] if you complete your studies in a certain amount of years.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 30s; black; lower-income; Democrat*

Some also pointed out that better college access was only part of the answer, especially if there were too few jobs for college graduates, and emphasized the importance of job creation itself.

Even if everybody has this great education and technical skills, if the jobs aren't there, what good is it?

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; middle-income; Republican*

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Provide tax incentives to businesses that create good jobs in the U.S. and bring back jobs from overseas.... There's thousands and thousands of jobs that we already have. We just got to bring them back to the United States.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 30s; white; upper-income; Democrat*

I feel that the infrastructure is in dire need and we have tons of people...to fulfill those jobs.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 30s; black; middle-income; Independent*

In one group, in Cincinnati, we spent extra time on the theme of the last quote above: whether investing in infrastructure would be a good way to create more and better-quality jobs and a stronger economy. The conversation went back and forth, with some arguing for the proposition:

There's a lot of people involved all the way through: people to get the materials, people to build. There would be the worker that didn't bring their lunch for that day and they would need to go to the neighborhood mom-and-pop country kitchen and get their lunch. It's going to circle around for everyone.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Republican*

I think that investment in infrastructure would help make it easier to ship and receive goods, and I think that would help us compete in the global market.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 30s; black; upper-income; Democrat*

And some voicing concerns:

Can we trust the government to do a good job with this? The government should try to run the government, not become a construction industry or an infrastructure industry.... I don't see efficiencies there.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

What about all the women who are not skilled labor? What about all the women who are not working in construction?

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; black; lower-income; Independent*

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The consensus at the end of the discussion was virtually unanimous that infrastructure is a sound investment given the multiple benefits of jobs, greater public safety and convenience.

As an army brat I've seen a lot of the highways and byways of this country and they are falling apart. I don't really think we have the choice. The government tends to wait until enough people have died to put money into making a repair; they're even to the point of turning off lights on the highway.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; white; middle-income; Independent*

It's imperative, anyway. Infrastructure has to be taken care of.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; black; lower-income; Independent*

Yet another theme that emerged consistently across our groups with respect to rebuilding the middle class was that life's essentials need to remain affordable.

My top [priority] was to make essentials like housing, healthcare, and retirement affordable. I think what the middle-income jobs were years ago are the low-paying jobs nowadays. I don't think there's a middle income anymore. It seems like you're rich or you're just surviving.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*

Make housing and health care affordable. Those are the basic foundations of life. You have a healthy outlook on life when you have a roof over your head, you can afford it, and your health is good.... Then everything else can fall into place.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

Overall, our impression was that people had moved in these discussions about middle-class jobs and economic security beyond "easy answers," displaying a willingness to consider a variety of solutions, with some themes front and center, such as the importance of higher education. People appear to be in an action-oriented mind-set that is not rigidly constrained by ideology, willing to experiment.

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## Moderate tax increases on the rich are an important way to gain resources to invest in opportunity

Our groups lend support to other public opinion research<sup>15</sup> that most people are willing to raise taxes on the rich, at least modestly. This appears to be less about diminishing wealth, and thereby lessening economic inequality, and more about creating the means to invest in opportunity and upward mobility for everyone. That is, most people appear more comfortable with raising the economic floor than with lowering the ceiling, but they also recognize where there are resources that can help make that possible. Some disagreed, but for many it was a matter of both practicality and fairness that the wealthy pay their “fair share” to support overall economic well-being.

The rich are not paying taxes. They need to pay.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 50s; white; middle-income; Independent*

Will they really feel the pinch of paying a little bit of the tax?

Not at all.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 30s; black; middle-income; Independent*

There are people who are making a lot more [who should] just give up some. I think that’s one of the ways the economy might get better.

*Teaneck, NJ-area resident; in his 20s; black; lower-income; Independent*

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, CNN/ORC Poll 13, August 5–7, 2011, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2011/images/08/09/poll.aug10.pdf>, and Kathleen Weldon, “If I Were a Rich Man: Public Attitudes About Wealth and Taxes,” Roper Center Public Opinion Research archives, February 4, 2015, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/public-attitudes-wealth-taxes>.

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## III. Observations Relevant to Public Engagement

A central purpose of these Learning Curve Research focus groups is to gain insight into what helps people grapple effectively with a complex public issue. The goal is to help people consider an issue more completely in order to decide what they think and want to do in relation to it. We thus help them consider an array of ideas and evidence in a fair-minded way so they can figure out where they stand and better recognize the implications and consequences of their views.<sup>16</sup> These qualitative research insights can then provide a basis for broader efforts at public communication and engagement that support more fully considered public opinion and civic participation. In this section and the conclusion that follows it (page 26), we discuss our most important observations and their possible implications for public engagement.

### **Members of the public often respond to “inequality” differently from the way experts use the term**

Based on these focus groups, people do not always think of the concept of “inequality” in the same way that experts, politicians and members of the media do. If asked, for instance, “Where do you see inequality in your community?” participants only occasionally mentioned income inequality or the widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Instead, many focused on their struggles to afford education, health care and housing with stagnating wages.

Some, moreover, associated “inequality” with unfairness to the middle class vis-à-vis the poor rather than the rich. They spoke of how “some people”—the unemployed, welfare recipients, immigrants and kids of poor families who received Pell grants—“get things for free” while they (the middle class) had to work hard to stay afloat. Notwithstanding their sense that the rich enjoy unfair advantages, they are also often quick to blame the government or the poor for these problems.

The middle class kind of gets screwed, where you’re a hard worker and yet you still have to pay all this money, yet there’re some people who are choosing not to work and they’re getting all this financial aid to go to school. That’s very unfair.

*Secaucus, NJ–area resident; in her 20s; white; upper-income; Republican*

<sup>16</sup> See Will Friedman, *Reframing Framing* (New York: Public Agenda, 2006).

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Only a few participants critiqued the divide between haves and have-nots when given this prompt. These participants talked directly about income inequality, inequality of opportunity and an unequal playing field or made comparisons between themselves and “the rich.”

Here, in America, it’s like the rich is getting richer and poor is poorer —like a bigger gap here.

*Secaucus, NJ–area resident; in his 30s; Asian; lower-income; Independent*

The programs in the schools differ a lot depending on where you live. Not everybody, unfortunately, is given the same opportunities.

*Secaucus, NJ–area resident; in her 40s; Hispanic; upper-income; Democrat*

Based on this observation, early in our research we adjusted the framing from the concept of inequality to one focused on how well today’s economy is working for most Americans. This frame was more successful in opening up a conversation on economic opportunity and mobility, fairness and, indeed, income inequality as well. And it revealed the interplay people see between limited economic opportunity and a brand of politics that fails to respond to or empower regular people.

## **Expect personal responsibility and mistrust of government to be part of the conversation**

Public Agenda has conducted many thousands of individual interviews, focus groups, community forums and surveys with Americans on a wide range of complex public issues over the course of its 40-plus-year history. We can recall no issue in which personal responsibility and mistrust of government were not significant themes as people talked about solutions. Such was certainly the case here.

If you want to get assistance, you should have to volunteer...  
I volunteer with an organization to pack groceries to give to people who are needy. Those needy folks, some of them come up there and pack it, too.... It should be that way, rather than you just sitting here in the line with your hand out.

*Washington, DC–area resident; in her 50s; white; lower-income; Democrat*

As far as inequality is concerned, if you push yourself, yeah, you can get a higher job. If you’re not willing to go to school, then yeah, you’re just going to stick around on the low-paying jobs.

*San Diego–area resident; in her 50s; Asian; middle-income; Republican*

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People have lost trust in government, and to gain that trust back, they [in government] have got a lot of work to do.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Republican*

I don't know what they do with the money they deduct from my paycheck I get paid. They make promises. Once they're in power, are you really keeping those promises? I don't think so. How many corrupt politicians have we had?

*Secaucus, NJ-area resident; in her 40s; Hispanic; upper-income; Democrat*

There are two questions we should engage people on regarding these perennials of our public discourse. First, how do they apply to the issue at hand? Second, what else is important—for example, are there government policies that ought to be considered? Can/should business play a role? What about civil society institutions? In order to get to the second set of questions, it's often necessary to pay due attention to people's thinking about personal responsibility and to their lack of trust in government, political leaders and other formal institutions.

## **Race and other forms of prejudice are integral to this conversation**

Our focus groups suggest a widespread sense of diminished economic opportunity caused and/or maintained by an unfair political system. Watching the conversations unfold revealed an at times uneasy sharing of a related challenge and set of experiences across racial and ethnic lines.

From the standpoint of the moderators—and surely this is a generalization with plenty of exceptions—it sometimes appeared as if white participants were suffering from a fresh insult that for people of color constituted an old wound. Similarly, it sometimes felt as though white participants were upset about losing ground while people of color resented never having had much opportunity to gain any. As people interacted, there appeared to be instances of, and potential for, both common ground and tensions around these shared, but far from identical, experiences of economic and political limitation in contemporary America.

For example, discussions emerged in several of our groups about the role discrimination plays in people's economic prospects.

You also get discriminated against—race is huge, but also by your looks, by your appearance. If you're going for a job to be some, I don't know, some executive secretary or something high profile, they're going to want some model-looking kind of person there. They don't want your average Joe.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*



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In our Cincinnati group, there was a related exchange about whether racial prejudice that limited people's job prospects was more problematic than other forms of prejudice, such as gender or age discrimination. While there was no clear resolution to the discussion, white respondents were clearly deeply affected by the following story told by a black woman:

**Female:** My first name is [considered typically black], and I got out of my master's program and I looked for a job for months, and months, and months.... I redid my résumé and instead of putting my full name, I just put my first initial, then my last name. Voilà.

**Moderator:** How do you feel about that?

**Female:** It's sad. It's sad. I personally named my daughter a white-sounding name so that in the future, when she gets old enough to get a job, she can get a job because her name sounds white.

**Male:** Wow.

**Female:** I considered that when I named her. It's sad.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 30s; black; upper-income; Democrat*

In our follow-up interviews with respondents several days after the group, a number of people said this story stayed with them, including two white males.

## **The stories people told of their struggles to get ahead and the obstacles they face stuck with people and seemed to affect their thinking**

As the above anecdote suggests, over the course of our groups we sometimes saw participants affected by people's stories. High-impact stories included personal testimonials that made the economic challenges people are facing less abstract and more palpable. As participants told us in follow-up interviews:

I thought that I had many problems. People who are living here have more problems, like two jobs and debt and high expenses, and I have never thought about those problems. It helped me in understanding my life in a better way, too.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in her 30s; Asian; middle-income; Democrat*

Other people talking about their struggles in life, it's a lot of tough things out there—I mean, you have to have sympathy for people, I mean, you just can't ignore things like that.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 50s; white; lower-income; Independent*

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High-impact stories also included those that displayed the possibility for positive change, such as this one recounting the power of community action:

In this discussion we were talking about homelessness. Just recently our city decided to buy a portion of land...that's been empty for years...and now they're talking about putting those little tiny homes out there. Right now they have twice-a-week mobile showers and a mobile laundry room. Underneath that freeway there's so many families with newborn babies that can't even make things work because they can't afford rent. The community came together, one of the local churches got involved, and then people just started donating all these supplies to make these things work. For me, going into the communities and letting people know what's going on and what needs to be done to help other people, I think that's going to make this a better place to live, because people are going to be like, Oh, you're helping? I want to get in on that, too. And then it just spreads the love.

*San Francisco-area resident; in her 30s; Hispanic; lower-income; Democrat*

It was apparent during the focus group that several people were impressed and inspired by this story:

In a city where something's happening and a lot of people weren't really noticing it, you've got to let the community help, get people together, and have a meeting and talk about it and figure ways and make foundations to eliminate that. That will help out in the long run.

*San Francisco-area resident; in his 20s; Hispanic; middle-income; Independent*

That's a fantastic idea, you know? It's all little stuff that matters and really kind of makes a difference.

*San Francisco-area resident; in her 50s; white; upper-income; Republican*

## **Data can also have an impact once people are in a problem-solving mode**

We've often observed in our work that simply presenting data to people on a topic has little impact on their views. But if people have gotten into a problem-solving mode in which they are exploring a problem and trying to figure out solutions, it raises questions for them. At that point, data can penetrate and stimulate fresh thinking.

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In this research, about midway through the focus groups we experimented with exposing respondents to various kinds of data on opportunity and inequality, some of which clearly stuck with participants and affected them. One example was data illustrating the lack of mobility for children born into poverty, which showed that among children born in the bottom fifth of family income, 70 percent remain below the middle fifth, with only 4 percent ending up in the top fifth.<sup>17</sup> This was often referred to throughout the rest of the group discussion and was also mentioned by numerous participants in follow-up interviews.

That really stuck with me. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, I didn't know it was that bad.'

*Cincinnati-area resident; in her 20s; black; lower-income; Democrat*

A graph showing the relationship between income and life expectancy was a similarly high-impact presentation for many.

What really stuck with me is how low-income families—low-income people—die faster than the people that make all that money. And I know that probably has to do with health care... That kind of really stuck with me, that they live longer than people in poverty.

*San Diego-area resident; in his 50s; Hispanic; lower-income; Independent*

A data presentation that showed how wages have remained flat for most people in recent decades and have gone up precipitously for a much smaller number also had an impact. The same was true for one that showed the rising cost of basic goods and services compared with the lack of increase in median wages. In particular, the increase in the cost of higher education hit home for a lot of respondents, including one self-professed “market-driven guy” who was shocked that the market had allowed such an increase to happen.

Higher education went up like 62 percent or some number like that. Why did that go up so much more than other things? That one stuck with me more than the others. I tried to look into why education has gone up so much. There's something causing it to go up a disproportionate amount. That would help the economy if we could somehow turn that around.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

<sup>17</sup> The graphs Public Agenda used to facilitate the focus group discussions are available upon request from [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

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## IV. Conclusion: Implications for Public Engagement

From our learning curve perspective on public opinion formation, it's a good sign when people acknowledge that issues of this magnitude are not simple matters. This can be hard to achieve in the "real" political world of fake news, spin, spectacle, pandering and simplistically polarized debate. But in the environment of our focus groups, we can more easily create conditions conducive to civic dialogue and deliberation, and we often saw people realize that things are not as simple as they sometimes seem and open themselves to the need to dig deeper to find solutions.

It sounds like there's an easy fix, but there's not.

*Cincinnati-area resident; in his 50s; white; middle-income; Republican*

The kind of problem that we're talking about you can't pick one solution. Everything works together. It's a big, complex thing that works together. This goes up. This goes down. This goes sideways. It all has to be looked at at the same time.

*Washington, DC-area resident; in his 70s; white; upper-income; Republican*

I believe whatever choice is made it's going to affect someone in a negative way somewhere. Maybe not us, but someone. But we have to do something.

*Teaneck, NJ-area resident; in her 40s; black; upper-income; Democrat*

For those who would support better public conversation and civic engagement on America's issues of opportunity and inequality, the implications of our research include the following:

- **Frame the problem in ways that:**
  - Recognize the economic frustration people are feeling, whatever the current traditional macroeconomic metrics might indicate.
  - Encompass poverty and the middle-class squeeze alike, because in the end people think both are important.
  - Acknowledge the connection people see and feel between our problems of economic opportunity and political equality and efficacy.

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- Within the larger frame of the problem, focus on significant, concrete and actionable modules of problem solving, so people can gain traction as they search for solutions. In our research, we focused on strengthening democracy, alleviating poverty and rebuilding the middle class.
  - Expect personal responsibility and mistrust of government to be early factors in people's considerations as they engage these issues. The question is how they apply these considerations to the issues at hand, as well as what else is important once these fundamentals are acknowledged.
  - Expect race and various forms of prejudice to be critically important parts of the conversation as well. But whereas "personal responsibility" and "mistrust of government" are easy for people to talk about, race and prejudice are much harder. The question here is less "How does this apply and what else is important?" and more "Let's find a productive way to talk about this."<sup>18</sup>
  - People's thinking on opportunity and inequality can be stimulated by compelling stories that make underappreciated aspects of the issue more real for them. And once people are in a problem-solving frame of mind and generating questions, their thinking can be informed by accessible presentations of data.

Our focus groups suggest that many Americans believe their economic prospects have dimmed in large measure because our democracy is functioning poorly. The yearning for a better life has run headfirst into the wall of dysfunctional, unfair, disempowering and even corrupt politics.

While it is hard to say that the set of attitudes explored in this report are the most fundamental ones affecting the national discontent displayed throughout the long, divisive election season that just ended, we suspect they are major ones and will remain so for some time. The themes of economic opportunity and political equality have been fundamental since the founding of the nation, and the American Dream looms large for most Americans.

We believe, and hope, that this report not only helps clarify our national discontent, but also reveals seeds of America's resilience and continued willingness to solve problems. As we saw earlier in the report (see section II, page 8), many appear to be willing, with just a little encouragement, to dive into the topics we've considered here and to deliberate on and grapple with various potential remedies. The democratic imagination lives, and people remain able, if given a fair chance, to engage one another on workable solutions to big problems and envision a nation with more robust economic opportunity and a fairer, more functional brand of politics.

<sup>18</sup> For tips on engaging people on race or racially charged issues, see Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 314–18.

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We believe that a crucial task for the nation is to help as many Americans as possible, not just the handful we spent a few hours with in our groups, have better opportunities to think through the hard question of how to move our economy and politics in a better direction. There are critical roles in this for the media, for civil society, for thoughtful public officials and business leaders and, of course, for individuals and communities themselves. We hope that this report helps inform them in this needed work.

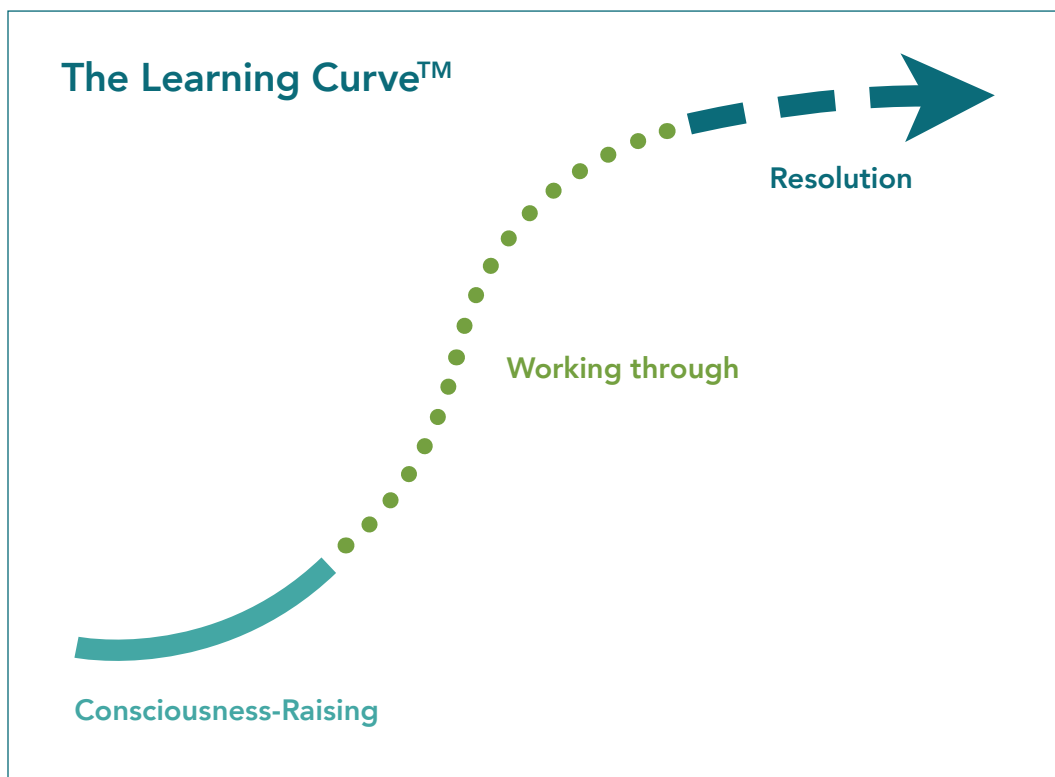
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# Methodology

Public Agenda co-founder Dan Yankelovich made a fundamental contribution to the study of public opinion in his classic work *Coming to Public Judgment*. He made the argument that it is crucial to distinguish shallow, knee-jerk opinions that people really haven't thought much about from opinions that people have wrestled with in depth. And he presented a stage theory to describe the process people go through in their learning curve as their opinions on an issue mature into a more stable and responsible "public judgment." Roughly speaking, these stages proceed as indicated in the graphic below:



Public Agenda's Learning Curve Research methodology is designed to shed light on people's current opinions, the stage of public judgment they are in, the trajectory of their thinking as they dig deeper into an issue and the conditions that make it easier or harder for them to do so.

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Learning Curve Research focus groups are distinct from standard focus groups in several respects. They are longer—three hours rather than the standard 90–120 minutes. They involve a deliberative component, as people take in new information and discuss the pros and cons of possible solutions. And we call participants up within two to five days to debrief with them individually.

The current project’s Learning Curve Research focus groups sought to examine such questions as the following:

- How do people think about inequality and opportunity? How do they define the problem of economic inequality, what do they really care about on the topic and how much urgency do they feel around the problem?
- How does their thinking compare with expert, policy and political discourse?
- What stories, data and discussion help them understand the issues better, and how does their thinking evolve when they have an opportunity to learn and talk to others about it?
- What do people think about different public policy and civic approaches to address the problems associated with increasing inequality and diminishing opportunity?

We convened three regular, two-hour focus groups followed by three extended Learning Curve Research focus groups between December 2015 and July 2016, with a total of 57 Americans in six locations across the country. The three standard groups were conducted in San Diego, California; Secaucus, New Jersey; and Teaneck, New Jersey. The three Learning Curve Research groups were conducted in Arlington, Virginia, right outside of Washington, D.C.; Cincinnati, Ohio; and San Francisco, California. In all groups, participants were recruited by professional market research firms according to Public Agenda’s specifications, to represent a broad cross section of the public in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and political ideology. Focus groups took place in market research facilities, and all participants were compensated for their time.

The Learning Curve Research focus groups proceeded along the following structure. Participants engaged in three-hour focus groups divided into three main parts:

1. The group began with a general conversation about how well today’s economy is working for most Americans. Participants were encouraged to share their views and personal stories, and it was in this early, relatively open-ended phase of the conversation that many of the quotes in this report came forth on the economy not working well for most people and the interplay between a poorly functioning economy and a political system that is unresponsive to regular people.



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To further the discussion, facilitators prompted people toward the end of this phase to complete an exercise in which they ranked by order of importance the following perspectives on problems with the economy and then discuss why they prioritized the list the way they did:

- **We are creating too few secure, middle-wage jobs.** We have a growing number of insecure low-wage jobs, and a smaller number of well-paying jobs at the top, but too few in the middle.
- **Government regulations and high taxes are stifling innovation and business expansion.** Unless we liberate business, we'll never generate the jobs we need to improve everyone's economic well-being.
- **Too many people are trapped in poverty.** The occasional individual with great talent and luck will succeed, but too many are held back because they start life facing profound obstacles.
- **The wealthy and special interest groups have too much political influence, and the people overall have too little.** This makes it hard to make the changes needed to create a fair economy where everyone has a good chance to get ahead.
- **Discrimination limits the opportunities of large segments of our population to get ahead.** As long as people of color and women face discrimination in hiring, wages and promotions, our economy will fail to work as it should.
- **Too many people want a free ride.** There needs to be a lot more hard work and personal responsibility if people want to do better economically.
- **Too many wealthy people and corporations do not pay their fair share of taxes.** As a result, there's not enough money to invest in opportunity for all Americans.

Respondents were also provided with space to write their own additional perspective on economic problems if they did not feel it was represented by the choices.

2. About an hour into the group, facilitators presented participants with a series of data points that spoke to various aspects of economic and political inequality in the United States, to see if they made an impression on people's thinking. The presentation included data on wage stagnation, job recovery since the Great Recession, life expectancy by income and political campaign contributions. Participants responded to the information, asked questions and discussed as a group. In many cases, the data confirmed people's preexisting positions; in some cases, the data seemed to stimulate fresh thinking. This information is available upon request from [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

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3. After a short break, participants deliberated over how we can best go about setting our economy on a better course. This discussion was divided into three “clusters” that focused on different challenges to address in order to forge progress on problems associated with economic opportunity and inequality: strengthening democracy, alleviating poverty and rebuilding the middle class. For each cluster, participants were asked to complete an exercise in which they ranked from “most promising” to “least promising” a set of policy ideas and actions to take in order to achieve the goal of the cluster. Each focus group also did a “deep dive” into one solution, in which participants were presented with pros, cons and trade-offs of the idea and were provided with the opportunity to deliberate further. The three “deep dive” solutions were the following:

- **On Strengthening Democracy:** Holding more groups like this one, as well as larger community forums, so that people can learn about issues facing their communities and work together with community leaders and public officials on how to address them.
- **On Alleviating Poverty:** Raising the minimum wage so that no adult who works full-time has to live in poverty.
- **On Creating Middle-Class Jobs and Greater Economic Security:** Investing in improving our country’s infrastructure to create more middle-class jobs in the short run and a better environment to do business in the long run.

Finally, we conducted one-on-one follow-up telephone interviews with all participants, within a week after the focus groups. Each follow-up interview lasted an average of 15 minutes. The interviews explored what participants took away from the conversations and how they were thinking about the various policy ideas, data points and other elements of the discussion after they had the time to “sleep on” the experience and perhaps discuss them with others. These interviews also gave participants opportunities to express views they may not have shared in the groups.

The graphs and problem- and solution-ranking activities Public Agenda used to facilitate the focus group discussions are available upon request from [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

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#### **About Public Agenda**

Public Agenda helps build a democracy that works for everyone. By elevating a diversity of voices, forging common ground, and improving dialogue and collaboration among leaders and communities, Public Agenda fuels progress on critical issues, including education, health care and community engagement. Founded in 1975, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in New York City.

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