Why we must talk about race to win better policy

Research conducted in partnership with Westen Strategies, LLC
The Center for Social Inclusion works with communities of color and other allies to develop strategies for dismantling structural racism and increasing well-being for all.

- **Ideas** – we develop policies that translate strategic ideas into concrete plans for structural transformation.

- **Leadership** – we support the ability of community leaders to impact policy debates.

- **Communications** – we develop tools and strategies for productive conversations about race.
Can we win talking about race?

- Conventional wisdom: avoid race
- CSI’s research shows: talk right about race
  - Not only can we talk about race, but we must talk about race
  - Empirical evidence shows if we talk about race, we win big and when we don’t, we lose
Race in the Obama age

- The election of Barack Obama energized advocates of a “post-racial” America on the Right and the Left
- Times of crisis lead to “out grouping”
- Race is still constantly used as a wedge to defeat progressive policy
- Supporters of progressive policy don’t know how to talk about race
Our opponents talk about race all the time
How the context of the debate shaped our messages

- **Healthcare:**
  - Right set the debate as “this will help criminals” (read: Latino immigrants)
  - Obama administration capitulated

- **Subprime:**
  - Right blamed people of color, ACORN, CRA
  - Again, Left had no effective response

- **Result:**
  - Range of messages that swing voters would be willing to hear shrunk and shifted right
  - We want more explicit, progressive messages
  - We have to speak to swing voters where they are and we rarely control the context
CSI’s communications research

- Several rounds of empirical testing
  - Partnership with the Kirwan Institute and hiring Westen Strategies

- CSI’s role: strategy
  - Developing methodology and research that the field can use
  - Driving strategies to translate research into usable tools
  - Building the capacity of leaders to use what works
  - Linking short term and long term strategies

- Research goals
  - Improve conversations on race, policy & opportunity
  - Eliminate the use of race as a wedge
  - Reframing race
What are cognitive frames?

- Mental structures we use (consciously or unconsciously) to interpret information
  - Values, metaphors, symbols, language, messages, and messengers
  - Often operate subconsciously and are irrational
  - People reject facts that don’t fit their frames or massage them until they do

- **Frame breaking**: challenging frames to help people question them
Four colorblind racism frames

Research by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

1. Disparities don’t exist
   - Blacks are doing as well or better than Whites

2. Disparities are due to genetics or culture
   - Latinos don’t do well in school because they don’t value education
   - Asians excel because they are naturally smart
   - Native Americans have a natural tendency towards alcoholism

3. Disparities are natural
   - Some group has to be at the bottom

4. Race-consciousness is “unfair”
   - Affirmative action is reverse discrimination
   - K-12 integration violates individual choice
CSI’s communications research

**Michigan** - 2006 Proposition 2 (anti-affirmative action ballot initiative)
- **Goal**: Test our ability to break all 4 colorblind racism frames
- **Methodology**: Written study of op-ed length messages
- **Results**: Messages that primed shared fate and attacked all 4 colorblind racism frames worked
  - 18.6% increase in support for “affirmative action programs”
  - 20% increase in “No” votes for Prop. 2 among respondents

**First Internet-based test** - 2008 presidential election
- **Goal**: Operationalize MI findings through shorter, more-deployable messages
- **Methodology**: Online study of several paragraph messages
- **Results**: Short messages did not produce the same effect as MI testing
Research methodology

**Goal:** blend emotion with policy to create deployable messages

- Chose current policy debates in which race has played a substantial role
  - Healthcare and Subprime Lending

- Developed storyboards
  - Emotional, visual, and ready for deployment

- Pitted progressive messages directly against a conservative message
  - Race-explicit messages: Brought up race through images and audio and took on race wedge
  - Race-implicit messages: Brought up race through images and didn’t take on race wedge
  - Race-neutral messages: Avoided race in audio and used images of all White people
Online dial-test of 900 registered voters

- Watched conservative and progressive messages
- Rated each message from 0-100
- Chose which message they preferred
- Completed a questionnaire
Strategic Messaging Results

Race and health reform
How convincing are the healthcare messages?

After each message, we asked respondents:
On a scale of 0 to 100, how much do you agree or disagree with the message you just saw? Please give a rating from 0 to 100, where 100 means you totally agree, and 0 means you totally disagree.

Average agree/disagree rating (0-100)

- Explicit race progressive: 76.2
- Populist (explicit): 74.9
- Implicit race progressive: 70.2
- No race progressive: 68.1
- Conservative: 63.9
# Key subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>MEN Mean</th>
<th>WOMEN Mean</th>
<th>Strong Dem Mean</th>
<th>Strong GOP Mean</th>
<th>Swing Voters Mean</th>
<th>Margin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit race</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/explicit race</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No race</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist (explicit)</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Margin = prefers progressive message
Dial-test results for explicit race message

Health care reform

Mean dial rating

Note: All groups move up steadily throughout, with only dip for GOP (in orange, at bottom) at mention of immigration
Dial-test results for no-race message

Health care reform

Mean dial rating

Note: All groups move up steadily at first, and then all go flat with abstract talk about infrastructures, systems, and pillars.
Attitudes toward healthcare for immigrants depend on framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wouldn’t be for any health care bill that covered immigrants.</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If illegal immigrants pay for their own health insurance under Obama’s health care plan, that would be better than having 12 million people in this country without health care.</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic Messaging Results

Race and the economic crisis
How convincing are the subprime lending messages?

After each message, we asked respondents:
On a scale of 0 to 100, how much do you agree or disagree with the message you just saw? Please give a rating from 0 to 100, where 100 means you totally agree, and 0 means you totally disagree.

**Average agree/disagree rating (0-100)**

- Implicit/Explicit race: 80.5
- No race: 69.6
- Explicit race: 66.9
- Conservative: 66.7
## Key subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
<th>Strong Dem</th>
<th>Strong GOP</th>
<th>Swing Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conservative</strong></td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit race</strong></td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implicit/explicit race</strong></td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No race</strong></td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Margin = prefers progressive message
Dial-test results for implicit race message

Economic crisis

Mean dial rating

![Graph showing dial-test results for economic crisis message]

Note: The dials shot up on explicit references to how the pain of losing your home is the same regardless of your race or ethnicity and kept climbing. All groups responded to this message with steady upticks.
Dial-test results for no-race message

Economic crisis

Mean dial rating

Note: The dials dropped substantially, particularly with swing voters (in green), with references to “misled homebuyers” and to any reference to government power.
Attitudes toward “equal opportunity”

Which comes closer to your point of view?

Equal opportunity policies are still needed to make sure everyone has a chance to make it, no matter where they were born or what color they are, as long as the emphasis is on hard work, fairness, and talent, not quotas.

Equal opportunity policies have gone too far in favoring minorities, and should be ended because they unfairly discriminate against whites.

Note: We used the term “equal opportunity” rather than affirmative action because the latter carries negative connotations with swing voters.
Conclusions – Primary Findings

- We need not run from race on racially charged issues.

- On both issues studied, a race-conscious message outperformed both the conservative message and a race-avoidant message.

- The key to succeeding is to get into voters’ minds about race without “getting in their face.”

- The extent to which implicit vs. explicit references to race are effective may differ by issue and message.
Conclusions – Secondary Findings

- Swing voters largely mirror the general electorate
- Gender differences:
  - Largely very small, with two exceptions
  - Women substantially more progressive on affirmative action
  - On an explicit race message on economics, men preferred the conservative position by 15 points, whereas women preferred the progressive position by 15 points
- Young people (age 18-25) are generally substantially more progressive in their responses
- Regional differences:
  - Largely small, and non-existent for strong messages
  - A progressive explicit race message wins by 22 points in the South
- Attitudes toward race and race-related issues are highly dependent on the message and question asked
Next phase of research

Pushing more explicit messages
- We’re going to take this research further
- Current messages are “middle of the fight”
- The possibility of what messages could be viable is much better if we can set the debate

Exploring new issue areas
- Immigration
- Health disparities
- Transportation
- Jobs bill
- Finance reform
- 2010 election

Improving understanding of responses
- Implicit bias testing
- Swing voter disaggregation
- More specific questionnaire
Big picture questions for long term success

- The long-term goal is changing the frame
  - Our current messages are not the end game
  - How do we balance long-term framing against the need for short-term campaign victories?
  - How can we use the short term to lay the foundation for the next level of discussion?
  - What beyond messages and language is necessary to change frames?

- How can we get ahead of the next fight and set the debate?

- Can we create the next fight?
Q & A

SOLUTIONS THAT WORK FOR EVERYONE

info@thecsi.org
http://centerforsocialinclusion.org/
http://www.facebook.com/centerforsocialinclusion
http://www.twitter.com/theCSI

CSI CENTER FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Westen Strategies, LLC