Talking about Race Right
How to Win By Addressing Race

Introduction

Today we face new challenges to our efforts to talk productively about race. Both sides of the political spectrum view Barack Obama’s election as evidence that we are now in a post-racial America. Obama himself has repeatedly suggested that race-neutral policies will equally benefit people of color. And yet, conservatives have implicitly and explicitly used race as a wedge. For instance, some have blamed the financial meltdown on “irresponsible” and “risky” borrowers of color, as well as on legislation ensuring the availability of banking services in communities of color, like the Community Reinvestment Act. They have also attacked important universal reform bills, like healthcare, by raising fears of “criminals” depicted as Latino immigrants.

The challenge presented by this current context requires that we confront race in order to solve our most pressing problems. We at the Center for Social Inclusion recognize that without effective communications strategies, we will not be able to achieve better transformative policies. Over the past four years, we have partnered with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity to develop ways to talk effectively about race and policy by making use of existing social science research. Through empirical testing, we hope to demonstrate that we can and must find effective race-explicit communication strategies and equip advocates and leaders with the tools to use them.

Our most recent round of testing, conducted with Westen Strategies, LLC., used one-minute storyboards with audio messages. The messages tested responses from a national sample of 900 voters on healthcare and banking regulation—two policy debates in which race currently plays a substantial role. Using emotional content that meets swing White voters where they are, we found that not only can we talk about race, we must talk about race. Messages with explicit references to people of color and multi-racial images out-performed both conservative messages and race-neutral progressive messages. The most effective messages were those that primed the linked fate of all communities and dominant American values of hard work and fairness.

Our findings make clear that we must affirmatively include race in current and emerging policy debates. Only in doing so can we more proactively set the discourse, making space for more progressive and transformative messages and policies. Messages alone, however, will not get us there. Communications strategies must include both policy vehicles and people to carry them out. This means: (1) working with advocates and policy makers to identify nationally relevant and locally driven policy strategies that emphasize the linked fate of all communities; (2) building the capacity of both local advocates and policy makers to use communications tools; (3) contesting with more aligned strategies when elected officials are not going far enough; and (4) continuing testing connected to what local communities are and should be fighting about. This research represents one step in a larger strategy for moving us in the right direction.