

Villains and Heroes on the Economy and Government

Key Lessons from Opinion Research

At Our Story – The Hub for American Narratives we take the narrative part literally. Including that villains and heroes are key to any story about how people view the world.

If we are to effectively communicate with people about how we create broad-based prosperity and economic security, and the role of our government in doing that, we need powerful villains and heroes in our story.

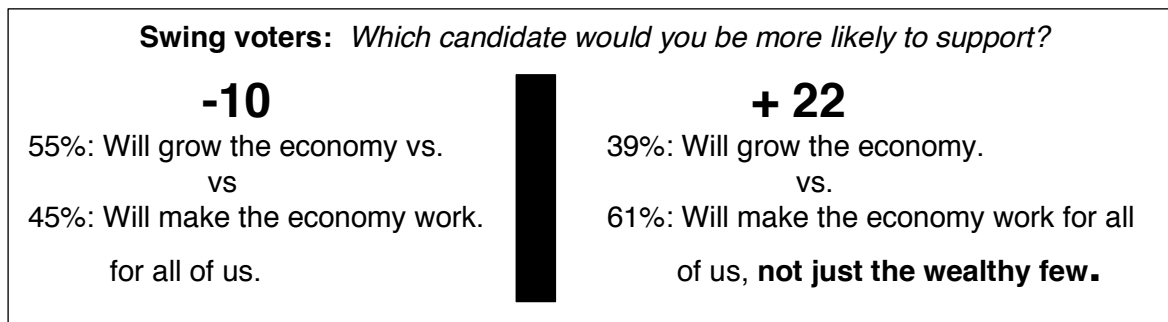
As part of work I’m doing with some progressive thought leaders around how we empower working people and replace trickle-down with inclusive economics, I put together a memo on the villains and heroes in the public imagination about the economy and government, which I thought you’d find interesting and hopefully of value in your communications.

In the following memo I discuss:

- Where is the public overall on the economy and government?
- How do people view specific heroes and villains on the economy and government: the wealthy; corporations; small business; working families and the middle class; people who depend on government; immigrants; and government.
- Heroes and villains in an inclusive economy.

Where is the public now? Who the economy and government benefits:

I think it’s helpful to begin with one of the few poll findings that remains startling, deeply revealing and actually led to the broad left often sharing a common message (which is as rare on the left as it is common on the right).



A 32-point switch from adding a few words (this was replicated in 2014 and 2015 with virtually the same point switch) is almost unheard of in polling. ***What’s going on?***

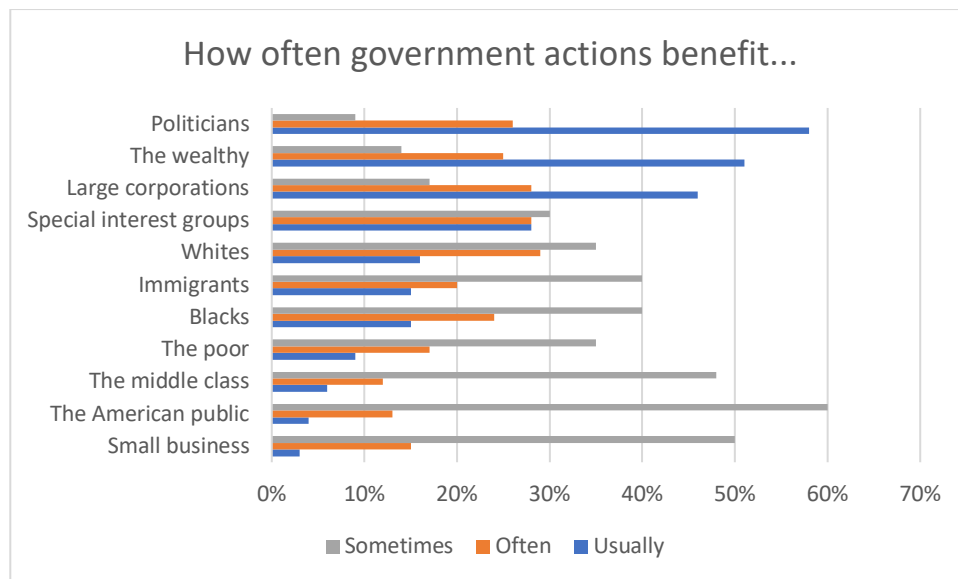
By itself “an economy that works for all of us” sounds like pablum; the kind of bland reassurances that people get all the time from every politician. But when the speaker adds “not

just the wealthy few” people hear that the candidate actually understands what’s going on in the economy and in their lives. By naming what almost everyone sees happening – that growth is only benefiting the wealthy few – the speaker earns credibility. The candidate is seen as being willing to take on the forces that people understand control the economy and government. Americans are convinced that the economic system unfairly benefits powerful interests. Pew’s major annual research project [found](#) in 2017:

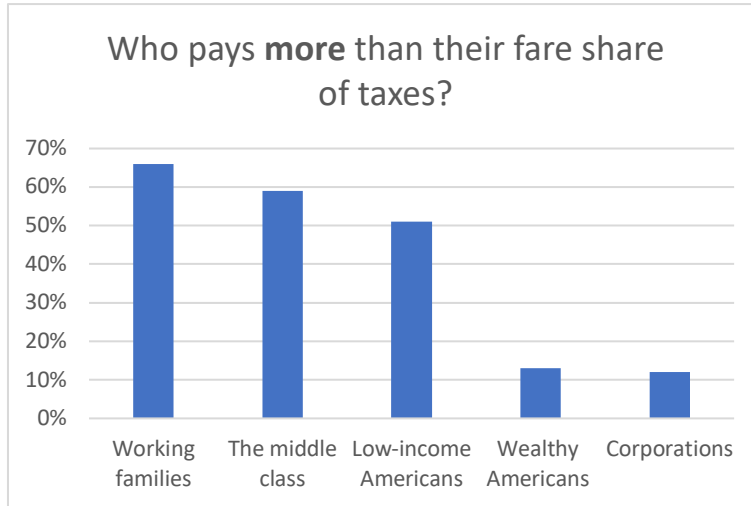
+ 33% with all adults.	
65%: The economic system in this country unfairly favors powerful interests.	32%: The economic system in this country is generally fair to most Americans.

All demographic groups agree that the system benefits the powerful. Even Republicans are split. But Pew identifies one Republican group in their [typology](#), which they label “Market Skeptics,” for whom only 5% say the economic system is fair; they make up 27% of Republicans and 12% of the electorate.

This chart (taken from the Topos [research](#) on government conducted in 2016) reinforces the point that people see government (and politicians) benefiting the wealthy (76% usually and often) and large corporations (74%) overwhelmingly more than the poor (26%) or middle class (18%).



Another window into the same finding is this research on taxes, taken in 2017:



Recent research reinforces the continued power of the core message against the familiar conservative economic message. Here is a test that was just done in Colorado by SEIU this past June (as part of an economic narrative project I did with a coalition there).

“Here are two different visions for Colorado’s future that have been mentioned by various candidates for governor. Even if you find them both appealing, please tell me which is **MOST** appealing to you personally.”

	<p>+ 27% with all voters +53%! with drop-off voters</p>
35%: A Colorado with limited and accountable government, low taxes, and a prosperous and growing economy.	62%: A Colorado where our economy and democracy work for all of us, not just the wealthy few

In April, a major message [project](#) for a coalition of national progressive groups aimed developing a message for the 2018 elections (I helped on the project) recommended the following as the top message:

We need a country that works for the middle class and working families, not just the wealthy and big corporations. Though unemployment may be low, the cost of living is high, and too many people are living paycheck to paycheck. Trump and Republicans in Congress are making it more difficult for working people to negotiate better wages and benefits. We need to get out and vote to elect leaders who will boldly rewrite the rules of the economy so it works for working families and the middle class again.

Who is a hero and who's a villain:

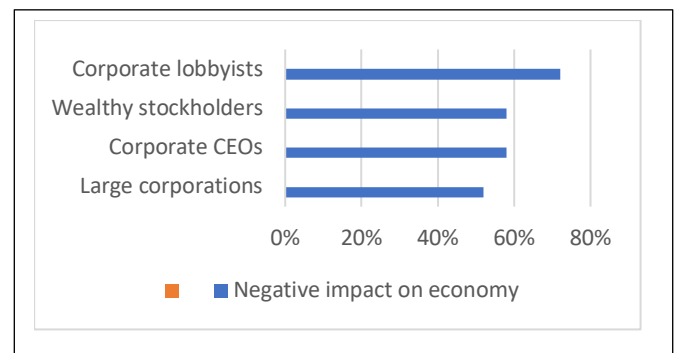
In the following, I take a closer look at how groups of Americans view villains and heroes.

The wealthy: I'm not delving here into people's complex views of the wealthy: their own aspirations to wealth, etc. My focus is strictly in economic terms and can be seen clearly in the following:

- Not only do 92% of people agree that we should “eliminate tax loopholes and make the wealthiest pay their fair share” but big majorities strongly resent the wealthiest getting a bigger tax cut than them. Asked “I do not mind if the wealthiest Americans get a bigger tax cut if I also get some kind of a tax cut,” only one-third (33% agreed). Even among those who earn \$100,000 or more, 64% disagreed to 36% who agreed. Among White swing voters, 72% disagreed, including 48% who strongly disagreed.
- Americans are very down on “wealthy shareholders,” with a 38-point lead among those with negative views. Even among their biggest demographic boosters – White college men – wealthy shareholders are down by 16 points. They do better among Republicans, where they are negative by 2 points.
- When asked about their impact on the economy, “wealthy stockholders” are still seen bleakly: six-out-of-ten Americans say that “wealthy stockholders” have a negative impact on the economy, including 42% of people who say they voted for Trump. That is a sentiment shared by almost all major demographic groups with the exception of White college educated men.

Corporations: Most Americans are more negative than positive about large corporations. They are very negative on corporate lobbyists and CEOs. A few notable findings:

- “Large corporations” are viewed unfavorably, but not as much as their wealthy shareholders. Among the public as a whole their net negative is 14 points. They are particularly reviled by younger voters and are much more disliked by women. Only White men are divided. But there is a sharp partisan divide: Dems are net -56; independents -25; but Republicans are positive 35.
- When asked about their impact on the economy, “large corporations” do better, with the public divided between negative and positive. Blacks are their biggest doubters and White college men are the only group strongly in their court. And yes, there is a big partisan divide.
- When asked about the impact of “corporate CEOs” on the economy 58% of Americans are negative, including 49% of Republicans (only 31% of whom have negative views of the impact of the large corporations the CEOs run).
- Just about everyone reviles “corporate lobbyists,” with 72% saying they have a negative impact on the economy, including two-thirds of Republicans, Trump voters and non-college Whites.



Small businesses: American’s perceptions of small business are the opposite of large corporations. Small businesses are American heroes, boosted by the Horatio Alger/Steve Jobs meme, the iconic role of entrepreneurship in the American story, the leading role that local business people often play in community life and the **myth** most new jobs are created by small business.

I’m not going to review the wealth of data that exists to prove this point; rather I’ll just point to the placement of small business at the bottom of the chart on page 2 about who government benefits as the chart is the inverse of who people think government should benefit. And observe that while the public does not believe that tax cuts for the wealthy will create jobs and is divided on whether tax cuts for large corporations will create jobs, *85% believe that tax cuts for small business will create jobs.*

Working people and the middle class: These (along with small businesses) are American economic heroes. I explore three questions: 1) is one label better than the other; 2) do people still believe hard work will lead to success; 3) should we talk about “hard work.”

- Working families vs. the middle class:
 - The net favorability ratings of both “working families” and “the middle class” are huge: 65 points and 56 points respectively in one poll. As this data indicates, working families do rate higher than the middle class with almost everyone. The only exceptions are Republicans and White college women, who are tied and White college men who rate the middle class a few points higher.
 - When forced to choose between “an economy that works for working people” vs. “an economy that works for the middle class,” working people wins 56% to 43%. Interestingly among Republicans working people came out 19 points ahead as compared with 5 points among Democrats. Among Whites, non-college men (+26) are the most enthusiastic about working people, followed by non-college women (+10). College educated White men and women choose working people by 2-3 points.
 - BUT WE SHOULD NOT CHOOSE. As illustrated in the progressive coalition message above we can easily use both! That makes sure everyone (other than our villains) sees themselves as our heroes.
- Hard work and success: Americans cling to – or at least they claim to cling to in the Pew polling – the notion that hard work leads to success.

+ 25% with all adults.	
61%: Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard.	36%: Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.

All major demographic groups hold to this belief. White college women and white millennial women are closer than other groups. However, Democrats are divided, with 49% saying that hard work is still a ticket to success.

- Why we shouldn’t talk about “hard working Americans.” A favorite phrase of pollsters is “hard working Americans”. There are several reasons why I recommend against using that frame:

We can start with the finding above. We know that low-income Americans who aren't getting ahead are among the hardest working Americans. Every time we emphasize that hard work makes one deserving of success we imply that people who are not successful are not working hard enough; that it's their fault. And we reinforce the idea that anyone who takes government benefits is clearly not working as hard as they should. (Mathew Desmond has a powerful [piece](#) expanding on this idea in the New York Times Magazine this September 11th.)

- If we want to give people more time for family and self, we shouldn't fetishize hard work. Paid sick days, paid family leave and paid vacation are all benefits we believe should be basic to work. As it is, Americans don't take off the paid vacation time they have because taking vacation is seen as not doing everything one can for the company, as slacking off. *Let's not ever reinforce that story.*
- ***It puts the blame in the wrong place.*** Consider the following two memes:
 1. If you work hard and play by the rules you should be rewarded.
 2. Working people should be paid enough to care for and support their families.

The first puts the emphasis on people working hard; while the intent is to convey that they should be rewarded, from a framing point of view, this phrase can create doubts that people who aren't rewarded are really working that hard.

By contrast, the second phrase places the blame where we want it; on the corporations who aren't paying working people enough and providing benefits (like paid leave) so they can care for and support their families.

- ***It's enough to say working Americans, without adding "hard working Americans."*** The data above shows that working families/people are already American heroes; we don't need to add "hard work" to up their popularity.

People who depend on government. These are villains on the right, an idea that has resonance with a substantial minority of Americans. But it is a minority. Again, a basic question from Pew's annual survey provides insight:

	+ 15% with all adults.
38%: Poor people have it easy today because they can get government benefits w/o doing anything.	53%: Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently

The most startling demographic divide here is among White men and women. White non-college men say the poor have it easy by 8 points. White non-college women say they government benefits don't go far enough by 14 points; a 22-point difference. Among Whites with a college education, both men and women put the onus on the lack of benefits, but women are more likely to say so by a margin of 27 points. And as expected, there is a huge partisan difference: 76% of Democrats vs. 25% of Republicans come down on the side of more benefits.

Immigrants: Immigrants are now the dominant *bête noir* for Trump and his Republican allies; but you'll note that the story that they are driving is about crime (from Mexican rapists at the beginning of his campaign to murder victims now.) A fascinating body of research, reported by Thomas Edsall, highlights that the counties in the Midwest that most switched to Trump were ones with the biggest jump in immigration from 2000-2015, rather than the ones with the most

immigrants, emphasizing that otherness and cultural threats are driving the fear and animus towards immigrants rather than economic factors.

But how do Americans see immigrants when it comes to the question of whether they are a boost or drain on the economy? Once again, Pew provides a basic guide post.

+ 39% with all adults.	
65%: Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents.	26%: Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health.

Yes, that’s 39%! Even Republicans are split: 42% to 44%. Even White non-college men understand the contributions of immigrants by a margin of 14 points.

Government: Conservatives make big, intrusive government the villain. I believe that the best way to reframe the right’s story about government is to tell the truth: government is not in itself good or bad; it depends on what it does and that depends on who controls it.

This is a conclusion that Topos Partnership also reached in their major [study](#) of public attitudes toward government. The summary of their findings starts on a depressing note: “Americans feel more like ‘subjects’ than ‘citizens’ – and living in 21st century America feels like living in another kind of country altogether, not the democratic society we are supposed to be.”

Topos goes on to say:

Not long ago, many Americans’ central concern was whether government had gotten “too big”. Now, that question seems less relevant as people focus more on the question of whom government serves.

Most Americans believe government actions benefit politicians, the wealthy, large corporations, and to a lesser extent, special interest groups. In other words, Americans believe that government actions are primarily intended to benefit the leaders making the decisions, e.g. by making them richer. Far fewer believe government actions benefit any other category or class of people.

Communicators must address this resentment about who runs government and who benefits from it if we are to achieve the shift in cultural common sense we seek.

In a simple test of this point, Topos found that by a margin of 73% to 24% people agree that “It is not the size of government that matters. It’s who government works for that matters.”

In the Colorado poll taken this spring we stress tested this core story against a powerful version of the conservative story about government and the economy, one that the pollster drew from the Republican party in Colorado. Note that this version of the conservative story, with its

emphasis on individuals and entrepreneurs, is likely to be particularly resonant in a Western state. But it still lost to the progressive alternative:

	<p>+ 11% with all voters +36% with drop-off voters</p>
<p>42%: Prosperity and opportunity come from the ingenuity and hard work of individuals and entrepreneurs, not from government. In Colorado, we must ensure government does not expand its reach into functions more appropriately left to the private sector.</p>	<p>53%: The question is not whether government is big or small, it's who government serves. In Colorado, we want a government that works for working families and the middle class, not just the very wealthy and big corporations.</p>

One finding to note is that while White college voters were divided, White non-college voters chose the progressive story by 15 points, largely driven by White non-college women.

Can government be a tool in our heroes' hands? Our easier task is communications: we can tell the story over and over again to recast government from a villain into a tool that can do good or bad depending on who controls it. The hard part is getting the public to actually believe it can be a tool in their hands, rather than in the hands of the wealthy and powerful.

No matter how powerful our story is, that won't be nearly enough to convince people they can make a difference. Looking at American history and my experience as an organizer and campaigner, I'd say that the only way to do that is organizing campaigns and movements in which people defeat the powerful and demonstrate that government can be a tool for the common good.

Heroes and Villains in our Narrative Shift: ***Differing heroes and villains are central to the narrative shift we need to make in how Americans think about the economy.*** For trickle-down, the heroes are *businesses as the job creators*, the entities that drive growth and *the wealthy*, who deservedly profit off their business brilliance and make investments in the businesses that drive growth. Government is the biggest villain as its taxes and regulations steal from the heroes, forcing them to lay off people and impede their role as the engines of growth and prosperity. Their villains also extend to the people who depend on government, not business, for their livelihoods.

By contrast, the [Progressive Economic Narrative](#) centers working people and the middle class as the heroes; when they are paid enough to care for and support their families, they drive the economy forward and create growth and broad-based prosperity. Our villains are the large corporations and their owners who by holding down wages and benefits, and by taking bigger and bigger shares of the wealth that working people generate, put the immediate enrichment of their CEOs and major stockholders over the long-term growth of the economy and the prosperity of American families. Government is neither a hero or villain; it is an instrument that can be do good or harm depending on who controls it.

The narrative shift turns trickle-down on its head. In our story it's working people who are the heroes and whoever holds down their wages, makes it harder for them to care their families and puts their own greed before the interest of working people and America are the villains.