



# An America that Works for All of Us

*An America that Works for All of Us is a narrative about progressive values and beliefs that addresses many of the most pressing challenges facing our nation today. This document is designed to tell a powerful, understandable story as a whole AND to be a guide to communications separately about any of the issues addressed. You can apply this narrative frame in anything from a short soundbite on one issue, to organizing materials, email blasts, blogs and opeds, testimony to a whole speech. More materials, including a pocket guide, are at [progressivenarrative.org](http://progressivenarrative.org). We encourage this narrative to be used widely, by many organizations. No acknowledgment is needed.*

## An America that Works for All of Us

With all the partisan rancor in Washington, you might have missed that President Obama, Democrats and the Republicans are actually talking about how we need to do much more to create opportunity for hard working Americans to provide and care for their families and realize their dreams.

It is not a surprise that as candidates from both major parties announce they are running for president, they are talking about the crisis of opportunity facing the great majority of American families. The fact is that most people are working harder than ever, just to get by. Wages have been stuck in place for decades now and women are still getting paid less than men for the same work. We're actually working more hours but making less. There are still three Americans looking for work for every job opening, which is a true hardship for those folks, including the millions of long-term unemployed Americans that Republicans in Congress cut off. And it makes those of us who are employed pretty nervous, in case something happened to our jobs.

Too many of our children live in communities where instead of getting the extra educational resources they need to realize their full potential, they are crowded in classrooms in crumbling schools.

Young adults, even those with a college degree, are having a tough time finding work or are taking jobs that don't utilize their education. How will they ever pay back their student loans?

And for many, college is as distant as Mars. Instead, Black and Brown young men and women, even children, fear for their lives. Struggle to find a future that offers more than prison.

We worry about how we will retire, as companies have taken away pensions and our retirement accounts are subject to the market – and that’s for those of us who actually have one. Seniors are trying to make do on fixed incomes, worrying about whether they’ll have enough to live with dignity through their retirement and help their kids and grandkids.

But times aren’t tough for everyone: the rich are not only getting way richer, they are grabbing a bigger share of the wealth that we *all* helped to create. It’s not like the economy didn’t move forward over the past 30 years. If corporations had shared the nation’s economic progress fairly with their employees, the average family would take home \$23,000 more a year. Instead, powerful corporations cut our wages and benefits and shipped our jobs overseas, so that families have a hard time meeting the basics. CEO’s continue to take millions in pay, while lobbying for tax breaks that keep their tax rates lower than their secretaries. Companies like GE, Verizon and Wells Fargo Bank pay not one penny in federal income taxes on their billions in profits. Their TV ads proclaim that they care about Americans, but the reality is that every day they shirk their responsibility to contribute fairly to our country, to the communities in which they live, and to the Americans who do the hard work every day.

It doesn’t have to be this way. We can work together for an America that works for all of us; an America with the freedom and opportunity for all of us to realize our dreams, and provide security for our families and for our nation.

But getting there won’t happen by accident. It will happen by decisions we make together, understanding that we all do better, when we all do better. That’s an important expression of our values, but it’s more than just that. It’s a statement of what it will take to realize the American promise of liberty, justice and opportunity for all.

## **An Economy that Works for All of Us**

What powers our prosperity? Working families and the middle class – the engines of the economy. It’s not the stock market or corporate profits that make the economy work for people. When we have good jobs, we can educate our kids, care for our families, afford health care, shop in our own neighborhoods and retire in security, we move the economy forward.

They like to say that businesses are the job creators. But think about it. People are the job creators. Where would business be without customers? Where would business be without

workers? You can't sell to people who don't have the money to buy! You can't hire people who can't read!

No business could get its goods to market without publicly built roads and bridges. No business could trust that the contracts it signs, that the innovation it creates, would be valid without our courts. No business could find educated workers without our public schools.

We won't get there by accident. We'll get there by building a movement for a new vision. By organizing in our communities, at our workplaces, with our friends. Change happens when people are in motion, animated by a vision of a better world for our children.

Our history teaches us that change comes not in sips, but in gulps. Not in eddies, but in waves. And that change comes often when we least expect it.

The great wave of the Progressive movement broke just after the first Gilded Age, where robber barons ruled. And with it we won anti-trust laws, the income tax, protections on food quality, direct election of senators, women's suffrage, the first child labor laws, bans on corporate political contributions.

The next great wave of the New Deal broke after the Great Depression. That movement wave delivered the minimum wage, union organizing rights, Social Security, bank regulation, unemployment insurance and much more.

And then, after McCarthyism, the civil rights and labor and consumer and environmental movements won the Great Society - the voting rights act, Medicare, Medicaid, the Clean Air and Water Acts, consumer protections, food stamps, Row v. Wade.

Today again we are seeing new movements and new vision for an America that works for all of us. And like many of these movements, the change is bubbling up, first in cities and states, building towards the coming tsunami of national progress.

Occupy put the issue of economic inequality in the center of national debate. The occupiers may not be in the parks anymore... but the Fight for \$15 is in the streets, and at the fast food chains and retail giants and in City Halls and State Legislatures and on the ballot.

Los Angeles moved to a \$15 an hour minimum wage, a goal that seemed crazy less than two years ago when it was passed in the little Washington State city of Sea-Tac. Then Seattle. Chicago passed \$13. More cities are following. In 2016, voters in states across the country will be asked to approve initiatives for higher minimum wages.

And big employers are scrambling to catch up. Wal-Mart, McDonalds, the Gap, Target have raised their base wage. The CEO of Aetna Insurance raised it to \$16 and is telling his fellow CEOs, it's the better way to do business.

The Fight for \$15 is for \$15 and a union. We need to revitalize American labor law, to restore to workers the freedom to stick together and organize unions. We need to rewrite the law to make it works for today's economy - an age of global supply chains, huge franchise firms and temp workers.

But we know that decent pay alone is not enough to care for our families today. Campaigns are winning passage of paid sick day laws in cities and states.

We should establish paid family leave insurance, so we can afford to take the time we need to care for a new baby or sick parent. California and New Jersey have done that. And they will be the model for federal legislation when the next wave crests.

While we're at it, let's reduce the huge stress that working parents are under to care for their kids. We can make child-care more affordable, start all our kids at pre-K and have quality after-school programs at all our schools.

It's not just about making the jobs we have better. We have to invest in creating more good jobs. Our country has a long history of taking action to put more Americans to work. There is more than enough vital work to be done and Americans stand ready and eager to do it.

We can rebuild our crumbling roads and bridges. We can modernize our schools and our electric grid.

We see movement today in the people who chained themselves to the White House fence to stop Keystone igniting movement energy on climate. We have to reduce the carbon gases that are disrupting the climate, threatening our way of live, our lives and the very planet we call home. We can create jobs and safeguard our future by investing in clean, renewable energy.

We can focus investment in low-income communities. Where people need fast, affordable mass transit to get to work. Where people need safe, affordable housing to be healthy, for children to learn and families to stay together.

## **A Government that Works for All of Us**

Opportunity for all starts with good public schools in all our communities, which prepare children for college or for good jobs that don't require a college education.

To give all our children the start they need to realize their promise, their potential, we need to assure that every child in America – regardless of their zip code – has the opportunity to attend a great public school. Every student should have a qualified, well-prepared, caring and committed teacher, a teacher who is given the support and resources that matches her commitment.

Let's stop saddling our young people with tens of thousands of dollars of student debt, by lowering the cost of public universities and linking paying back student loan to earnings.

Security for all includes a secure retirement. The right has been calling for cutting Social Security. Even President Obama got on board. But now, progressive champions in Congress are changing the debate - pushing for boosting Social Security benefits – not cutting them.

And while we are talking about good jobs and health care, we must not go back to the time when insurance companies could deny you coverage for a pre-existing condition and where one serious illness or accident could result in bankruptcy. The Affordable Care Act guarantees that you will be able to get health coverage, even if your job doesn't provide it, at a sliding scale based on your income. Tens of millions of Americans now have the peace of mind of health coverage for the first time. Millions of young people are staying on their parents' plans. No insurance company – including the coverage you get at work - is allowed to stop paying benefits because you have a costly illness. People are free to leave their jobs and start small businesses, thousands of which are getting tax credits to make coverage more affordable. Seniors on Medicare are getting free preventive care and lower drug costs. We cannot go back to the days when insurance companies were in charge.

That's why it is a moral outrage that Republican governors and legislators have turned their back on millions of working families and children by refusing to expand Medicaid in their states. Even though the federal government is paying 100% of the cost, these partisan-blinded politicians are leaving families to face bankrupting health care costs, and saddling hospitals with more ill patients with no place else to turn. That's why hospitals, doctors and nurses and businesses are working across partisan lines to urge every state to expand Medicaid, so that all Americans have access to affordable coverage.

We can imagine an America of opportunity and security for all. So what is standing in our way? Some will say, "we can't afford it, we're broke." The fact is: we are not broke, but acting like we are is making us poorer. One of the biggest common misunderstandings is that governments

are like households, who need to tighten their spending when times are tough. But actually governments and households work in opposite ways; governments can and should spend more when times are tough. Government spending makes up for lack of spending by families and businesses, and it helps get the economy moving by getting people back to work, putting money in their pockets, contracting with businesses.

And when we hear the line “we are broke,” we have to remember that the truth is more like, “we’ve been robbed.” When we give tax breaks to big corporations to move jobs overseas, we’ve been robbed. When we allow billionaires to pay lower income taxes than their secretaries, we’ve been robbed. Our tax system is upside down; we need to turn it right side up. We can raise hundreds of billions of dollars by closing corporate tax loopholes and assuring that the rich pay their fair share, so that big corporations and the wealthy take responsibility for contributing to building strong communities.

We also can be sure that we spend money wisely, to benefit working families and the middle-class, instead of spending driven by lobbyists for huge corporations. The biggest culprit, bar none, are Pentagon contractors, who push what former Defense Secretary Robert Gates called “unnecessary and extravagant” weapons like the \$1.5 trillion F-35 plane. Lockheed has more than 1,000 lobbyists – that’s about two for every member of Congress. While funding for our troops and veterans are being squeezed, the just retired CEO of Lockheed Martin, the plane’s manufacturer, made \$128 million in just five years.

## **A Democracy that Works for All of Us**

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of opportunity for all? A system that works for the money, instead of the many. The issue is not the size of our government, it’s who government works for, the super-rich and CEO campaign contributors, or working families and the middle-class? It’s up to us to hold our elected officials responsible for providing opportunity for every American, not just those with the most money.

We should insist that they remove barriers to voting, so that everyone has the opportunity to make our voices heard. In Congress, we can start by modernizing the Voting Rights Act, to stop states from putting up politically-motivated blocks to people voting. Barriers put up in particular – just like before the Voting Rights Act – to make it harder for many people of color to vote.

We should demand that Congress revamp the way we pay for election campaigns. Candidates should be able to run for office without big money, relying instead on small contributions matched by public funds. That's what the Government by the People Act would do.

Just like we need a voice in our democracy, we need a voice at work. When powerful corporations cut our wages and benefits, workers need to be able to stand together. When CEO's give themselves multi-million dollar bonuses, while refusing to give their employees a nickel raise, workers need to be able to organize together to claim a fair share of the wealth they created. Workers organizing unions helped build the middle-class in America, which is why CEOs ignore and break the laws that give workers the right to organize a union. That's why we need to rebalance and modernize American labor law, to restore to workers the freedom to stick together and organize unions, so we have a voice at work.

## **A Nation that Works for All of Us**

Movements are led by young people. Today we see two movements led by young people to save their own lives, their families, their neighbors and communities.

Around the nation, we see young people declaring Our Black Lives Matter, reclaiming the moral energy and vision of the civil rights movement. They are tired of being pulled over for driving while Black – and the videos are showing whites for the first time just what this means. They are sick of seeing lives destroyed by a criminal justice system that targets Black and Brown men and women for harassment, arrests them for drug crimes at astronomically higher rates than whites, even though whites use and sell drugs every bit as often. And then denies them effective lawyers, threatens them with years and years of prison and coerces them to agree to plea bargains that leave them with criminal records – so they can't find work, they can't get student loans, they can't vote. That robs them of their futures and destroys their families.

The young leaders of Black Lives Matter are fighting the great fight for justice. For an America that really does work for all of us. They are standing up with their families.

We should join them. Join them to stop racial policing. To end biased drug enforcement. To restore opportunity and hope.

The other young movement makers, the other great risk takers, are the Dreamers. They are leading the movement to stay in the only country they know. To keep their families together. To remind us that welcoming immigrants has always been a core American value. Literally the

way we built our nation. It's time that we provide a pathway to citizenship for millions of aspiring citizens, who are working and living in communities across America.

## **Alone or Together?**

Most Americans – often an overwhelming majority of us – agree with this vision for how to create an America that works for all of us. But sadly, there's not a political consensus on these ideas. In fact, most Republicans in Congress and state legislatures reject these ideas out of hand.

*Note: The section below italics highlights Republican opposition to the agenda. It makes the document more pointedly partisan and is optional, depending on your audience. The section below that points out values distinctions, which come across as less partisan.*

*Raise the minimum wage, giving 16 million hard-working Americans a raise? Republicans in the House won't even allow it come up for a vote. Put some teeth in the law that requires equal pay for equal work for women? Republicans won't even let it out of committee.*

*Stop millions of Americans from losing their unemployment insurance? Republicans in the Senate stage a filibuster. Provide earned sick days? Republican state legislatures pass special legislation to block cities in their states from enacting paid sick day protections.*

*And what about fair taxes? When the President says let's stop giving corporations a tax break for shipping our jobs overseas, the Republicans say no. When the President says make millionaires pay tax rates at least as high as their secretaries, no again.*

*Every time there's a choice between CEO campaign contributors and working families, Republicans choose the rich and powerful. And when the people push back, by going to the polls and electing candidates that are willing to stand up for working families, Republican legislators around the country throw up new barriers to voting. The Republicans end early voting. They make it harder to register. They close polling locations entirely or limit their hours.*

*When Democrats propose giving candidates the option to run for office without taking big money contributions, to rely instead on small contributions from their constituents, not a single Republican in Congress signs on. They are scared of democracy because they know that if the many matters more than the money, they are on their way out.*



There's more than politics and campaign cash behind these differences – although there's plenty of that. The gap between Republicans and the positions supported by the majority of Americans are also a difference in values. Or I should say, in different concepts of values.

Take freedom. We all treasure the importance of freedom of speech, of worship and of assembly. But working families also treasure what President Franklin Roosevelt called “freedom from want.” We believe that you cannot truly be free if you have to worry every day whether you can pay the bills. If you lie awake at night wondering how you'll ever be able to retire. Or if you just graduated from college and already are trapped by tens of thousands of dollars of student loans.

Another values gap is in the concept of opportunity. As many Republicans tell it, the only path toward opportunity out is to work hard by yourself, with the help of your family. You are simply on your own.

We agree that opportunity includes working hard and being responsible to care for you and your family. But we also understand that nobody makes it on their own. Everyone has had help, in countless ways. And without that help, individuals and families are left behind. We understand that hard work that isn't rewarded by decent pay, shuts off opportunity.

We also understand that for many people, the game is stacked against them. We don't all start from the same place. Poor schools can limit your options, no matter how hard you study. Many of us need a lift to get to the same chances in life to get a good education and job and realize our dreams.

Republicans like to talk about personal responsibility. That is a core American value, to work hard, realize your full potential, care for yourself and your family. But there's more to responsibility than me, myself and I. Responsibility is also about caring for each other. Building strong communities. Each of us doing our fair share. Understanding the truth that when each of us does better, we all do better.

We believe that we have to face the challenges of our future through decisions we make together. Through building strong communities and making our government accountable to providing freedom, responsibility and opportunity for all.

## **An America that Works for All of Us**

Now there will be those who say what we seek is impossible. That an America that works for all of us, is beyond our reach.

But as Muhammad Ali said, “Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it.”

It is up to us to turn the impossible into the possible. To generate the next historic wave of justice, of progress in our nation.

It's up to build a movement. Our leadership, our vision, our organizing. It doesn't take a majority to build a movement. It takes a movement to build a new majority.

We believe that it's up to us to work together to build an America that works for all of us. An America with the freedom and opportunity to realize our aspirations, to care for and provide security for our families. Together, we **can** build strong communities, in which our families can thrive.

When you stood in school and took the pledge of allegiance, was it a pledge for liberty and justice for the few, for the wealthy and powerful? Or was it a pledge for liberty and justice for all? That's the pledge I remember taking, liberty and justice in an America that works for all.

It really is true. We all do better when we all do better. America works best when we all do our part and work together as one nation, indivisible and strong. When each of us does our part in exchange for the blessings of liberty, committed to the country we love. Our country's strength is grounded in our ability to work together as fellow Americans. Throughout our history, we have met the challenge. And we will meet the challenge of today, for us, for our children, for our grandchildren. We will organize our neighbors in communities across the country for an America that works for all of us, with liberty, justice and opportunity for all. We can do this. This is what America is all about.

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