

# Strategic Messaging

Speaking of children

## Making children a national priority



*Research conducted for First Focus by  
Westen Strategies*

July, 2010



# Strategic Messaging

Three principles

## Three principles of effective messaging

# Principle 1: Tell a coherent, memorable story

## Three principles

- We are a story-telling species
- Shopping lists of facts, policies, and 12-point plans lack
  - Emotional resonance
  - Memorability
- The moral of the story: values and principles
- What happens when you don't tell a coherent story?
  - You lose

# The Republican message on health care, 2009

## A coherent story

The Democrats want a **government takeover** of our health care system, because **they believe government bureaucrats know better than you do** what you need. They want to **put a government bureaucrat between you and your doctor**. They'll set up boards of bureaucrats to **make up rules for when you live and when you die, and they'll decide which babies born premature or with birth defects are worth saving**. Because there's only so much money to go around, **they'll raise taxes on the middle class and cut Medicare benefits to seniors**. And all of this talk of a "public option" just gets at their *real* motives: to drive out the private sector entirely, so we *all* have the public option, which means **taking away our freedom to choose**, because ultimately they don't believe in the **American ingenuity that has created the greatest medical care on earth**. We all agree that we need reform and we'll have reform, so that people with pre-existing conditions don't have to worry about getting health care. But we don't need **socialized medicine** to accomplish that.

# The White House message on health care, 2009

## A tale of incoherence

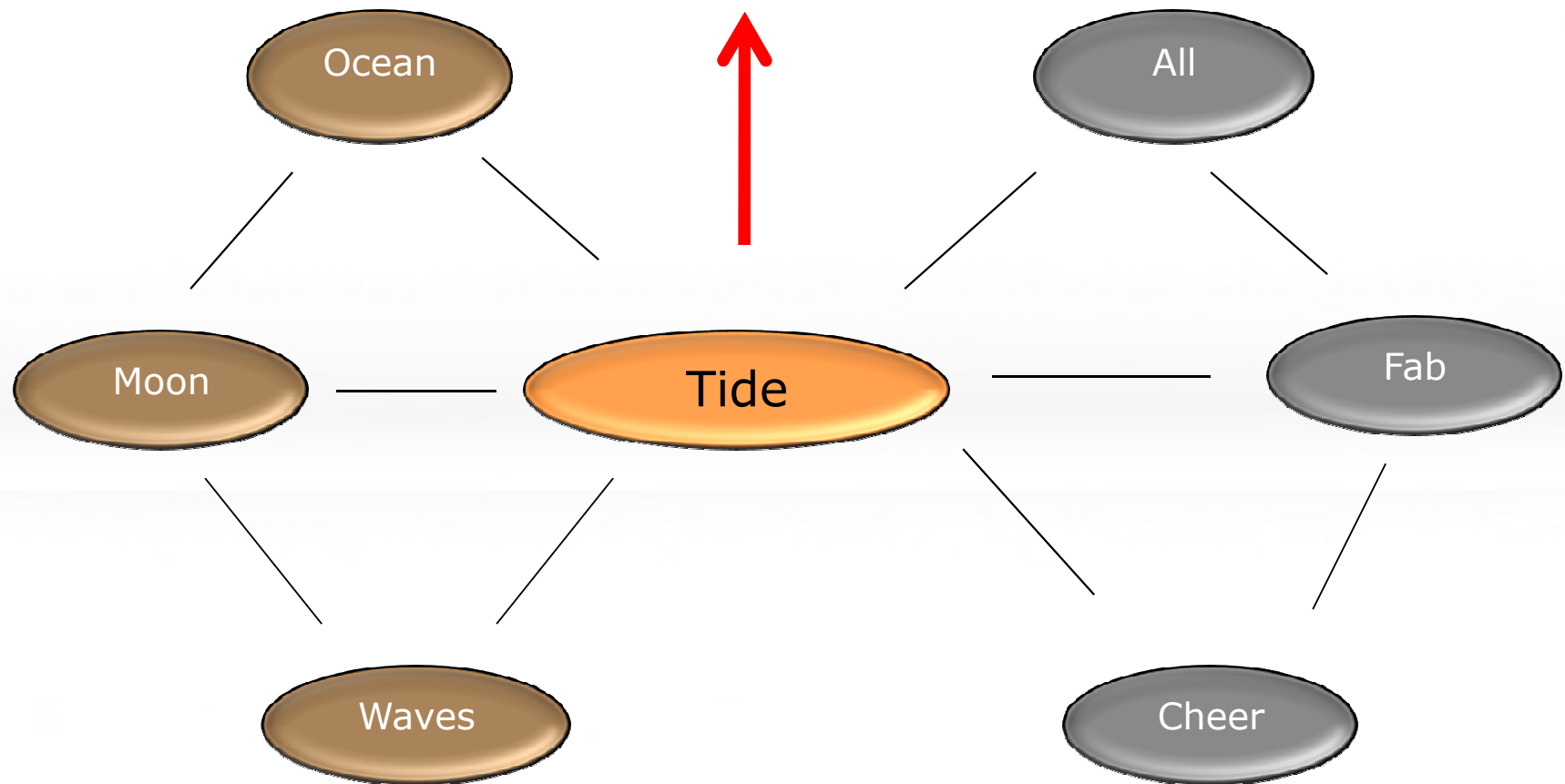
46 million people don't have health care in this country. Hmm....that's no good—we need a story that appeals to the middle class. Okay, scratch that. Costs for the average person are rising out of control. So we need to cover 46 million more people while cutting costs at the same time. Oh, that's a little hard to believe... OK, doctors should stop giving unnecessary tests, because we've all had the experience of having our doctor foist on us unnecessary tests—haven't we? Hmm.... Alright, try this: We should tax the really good plans that some middle class people get from their employers because...we don't like working people to have really good plans? But we need a public option, because it's essential to creating competition in the health insurance market. Okay, maybe not essential. Maybe a co-op. Or a trigger, so when this all starts in 2014, if it doesn't work out, maybe someone will pull the trigger, say, in 2020. We shouldn't really have a public option anyway because Congressional Republicans don't like it, and we have to have a bipartisan solution, even though voters repudiated the Republicans in the last two elections, because true virtue lies in mixing failed ideologies with new ideas. And health care for all is a moral imperative, because I'm talking to an evangelical audience today, and our internal polling says they like that kind of thing.

## Principle 2: If you don't feel it, don't use it

### Three principles

- Human behavior is motivated by emotion
- If it's emotionally inert, it's politically inert
- Greatest hits of Democratic communication I: Dukakis on Kitty
- Greatest hits of Democratic communication II: Gore on Medicare
- Jim Webb's response to the State of the Union
- The point isn't to "dumb down" our messages
- It is to increase their emotional intelligence

## Principle 3: Know what networks you're activating



# Examples

## Three principles

- S-CHIP
- The unemployed
- The poor
- Universal health care
- The public option

# The challenge

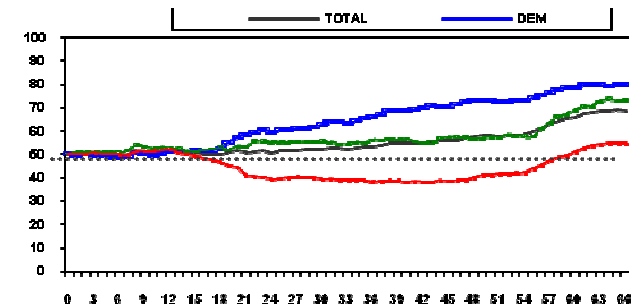
## Speaking of children

- Particularly in difficult economic times, concerns of children and families readily get lost in the national agenda
- How do we make children a national priority?
- We need shared narratives and a shared lexicon with which to speak effectively about the needs of children
- The research questions:
  - To identify compelling narratives that “move the needle” on children as a priority
  - To identify compelling messages for specific policy issues

# Methodology

## Speaking of children

- Relied on prior research and knowledge to “map the networks” of public opinion on children’s issues
- Tested messages on making children a national priority against a strong opposition message
- Tested messages on 5 specific issues/policies
  - Preserving children’s health insurance
  - National Council on Children
  - Early childhood education
  - Children’s poverty
  - High school drop-out rates
- Tested taglines on making children a national priority
- Online dial-test survey of 900 registered voters
  - Random national sample, Dec 11-16, 2009



# Sample characteristics

## Demographics

- Random national representative sample
- **900** likely voters
- **Gender:** *Male: 48%      Female: 52%*
- **Partisan identification:** *Strong Dem      Strong GOP      Swing*  
*20%      14%      65%*
- **Age:** *18-24      25-39      40-54      55+*  
*5%      22%      46%      28%*
- **Ethnicity:** *White      African American      Hispanic      Other*  
*80%      13%      5%      2%*
- **Education:** *HS or Less      Tech/2yr      Undergrad      Post Grad*  
*21%      44%      21%      14%*
- **Region:** *Northeast      Midwest      South      West*  
*19%      25%      36%      21%*

# Strategic Messaging



General messages

## Making Children a Priority

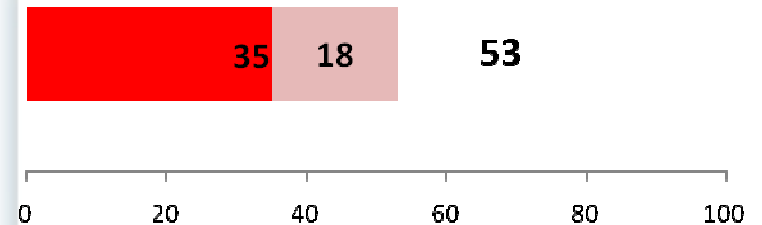
# Opposition message

**These are tough times, and they call for tough measures.** Spending is getting out of control, and we have to rein it in. The massive bailouts of the financial industry and the auto companies have already cost taxpayers billions of dollars. We have to make tough choices... All kinds of programs that benefit children are available, and we have charities for a reason, so the federal government doesn't have to pick up the tab for every worthwhile cause. The main effect of government interventions is only to exacerbate the problems we face, because you can count on government to be wasteful and inefficient. And every program we create for children just gives parents the wrong message, that they can shirk their parental responsibility and somebody else will pick it up. Government can't provide for everyone, and children are no exception. Given the country's economic crisis and the growing federal budget deficit, American taxpayers simply can't afford anymore.

## Message Rating, 1-100

■ % Rating 80-100

■ % Rating 60-100



# How did pro-child vs. opposition messages fare?

1<sup>st</sup> tier messages

	Mean Rating	Percent preferring pro-child	Percent preferring opposition	Margin
<b>Opposition message</b>	<b>57.6</b>			
<b>Back to basics</b>	<b>79.6</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>+32</b>
<b>American leadership</b>	<b>74.8</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>+33</b>
<b>American Dream</b>	<b>73.9</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>+32</b>
<b>Greatest generation</b>	<b>76.5</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>+25</b>
<b>Invest in our children</b>	<b>77.4</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>+24</b>

# How did pro-child vs. opposition messages fare?

## 2<sup>nd</sup> tier messages

	Mean Rating	Percent preferring pro-child	Percent preferring opposition	Margin
Helping responsible parents	70.6	55	33	+22
American ingenuity	68.3	54	32	+22
Lost generation	68.7	53	35	+18
Growing and graying	66.5	54	34	+20

# The structure of an effective message

What resonates?

- *Connect with voters with an aspirational statement.*
- *Describe the problem in a way that is concrete, visual, and evocative.*
- *End with a solution that evokes hope that something could actually change, and return to the central theme with which the message began.*

# Take the high ground on core values

## What resonates?

- American leadership
- American Dream
- Personal responsibility
- Back to basics
- Investment
- Security
- Character
- Intergenerational legacy
- Small business
- Mentoring
- Opportunity
- Hard work
- Community
- Accountability / effectiveness
- Partnership
- Common sense
- Populism

# 1<sup>st</sup> tier pro-child messages

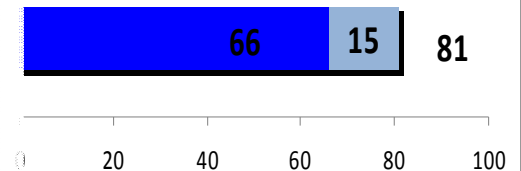
## Back to basics

**When it comes to America's children, it's time to get back to basics.** That means protecting their health and safety, protecting them from harsh economic times, and *helping them develop their God-given potential*. America shouldn't be at the bottom of the list of industrialized nations in the health and safety of its children. We need to make sure every woman has prenatal care, every child has a doctor, and every toy we give our kids is free of poisons like lead... *No child in this country should ever go hungry*. We need to reduce child poverty, increase child tax credits for middle class families, and help out homeowners, not the bankers who are foreclosing on their homes and leaving millions of children without a place to sleep. *And getting back to basics means that our kids should have the top math and reading scores in the world, not competing for number 30*. We invented public education, and it's time we reinvent it. That means raising the quality and the pay of teachers, *encourage parents to get more actively involved in their children's education*, and *make college affordable*. **Our children are our future. It doesn't get any more basic than that.**

### Message Rating, 1-100

■ % Rating 80-100

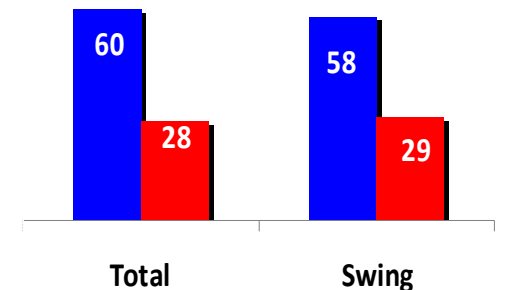
■ % Rating 60-100



### Voter Preference

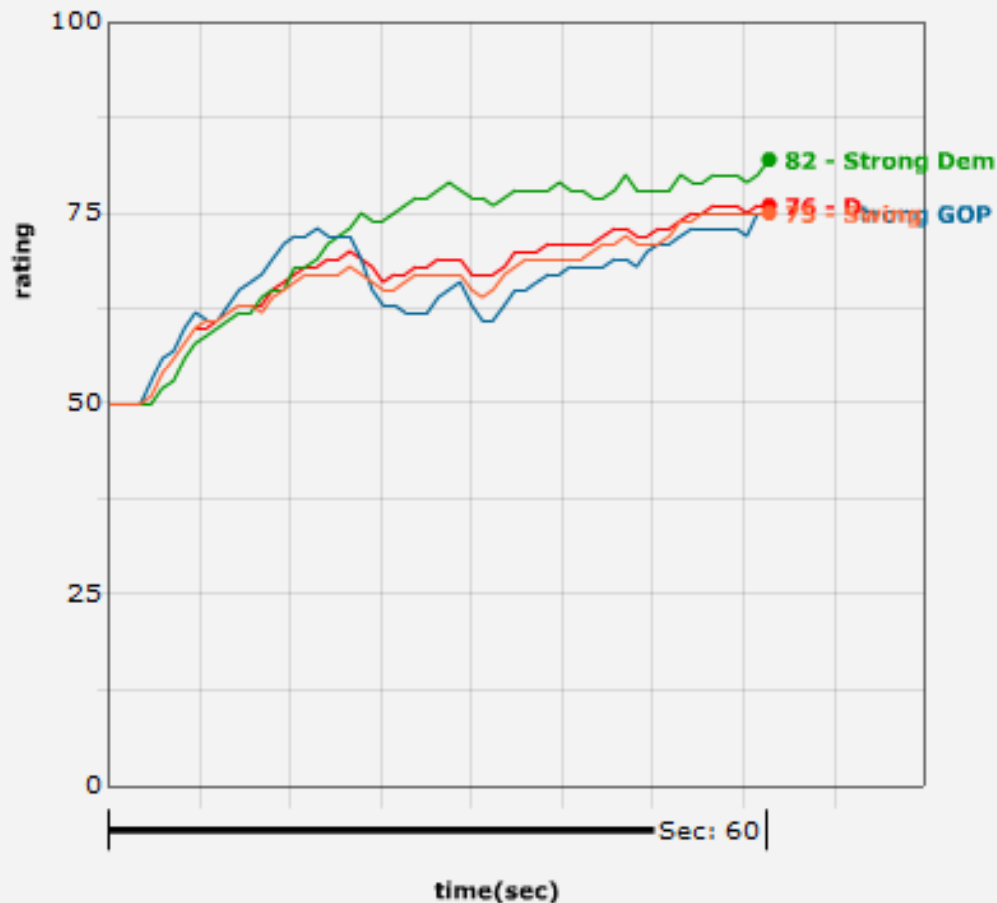
■ Progressive

■ Conservative



# Dial-test results for “Back to basics”

## General messages

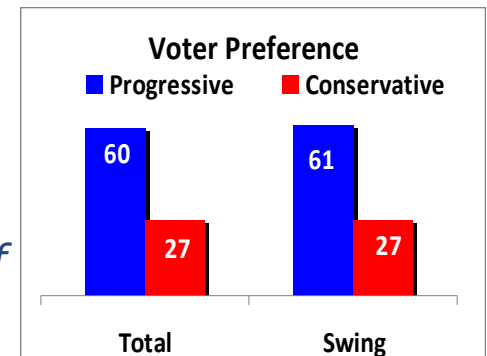
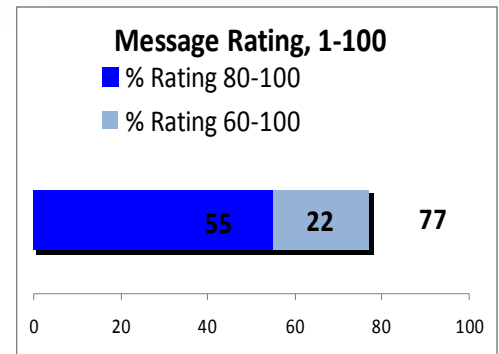


Voters of all partisan orientations went virtually straight up in their dials from start to finish.

# 1<sup>st</sup> tier pro-child messages

## American leadership

**It's time to restore American leadership, and the place to start is by investing in our future: our kids...** In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy challenged us to put a man on the moon in a decade, and we did it. But you can't reach for the stars, let alone balance your checkbook, if you can't do basic math. The math scores of American children are now 27th in the world, not number 1. Why? Because we don't invest in education. We have the lowest rates of preschool education of any modern nation. Our children won't be able to compete in the global economy in adulthood if they don't start school ready to learn in kindergarten. *We lead the world in science, technology, and innovation. But there's no excuse for leading the Western world in teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and child poverty. It's time to recommit ourselves to the kind of America JFK inspired us to imagine, a nation that sets high standards for the physical fitness and academic achievement of all its children and demands accountability. We won't solve this problem just by throwing money at it. It takes a partnership of parents, schools, and communities to grow strong minds and bodies. But you can't expect returns on investments you don't make, and it's time we starting investing in our children again.*



# 1<sup>st</sup> tier pro-child messages

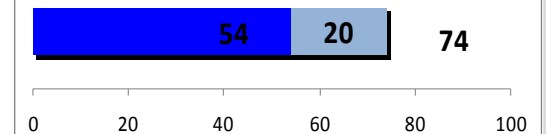
## American Dream

**For the first time in American history, most parents don't believe their kids will have the opportunities they had to lead a happy, healthy, and prosperous a life. When Americans no longer believe in the American Dream, it's time to reclaim our heritage.** *Our parents and grandparents knew that if they worked hard and played by the rules, their kids could expect a shot at a home, a college education, and the opportunity to develop their gifts to the best of their abilities. But in the last 10 years, CEO salaries and bonuses have skyrocketed while the rest of us are just happy to have a job. One out of every five kids in this country is born into poverty, and working and middle class Americans are losing their jobs and homes at record rates. The consequences are staggering. Scientists have found that kids whose families go through rough times during a recession are likely to suffer permanent damage. They can expect lower-wage jobs, less education, and poorer health than kids whose families survived tough times. America has always risen to the challenge of ensuring a brighter future for our children. It's time we rise to that challenge again.*

Message Rating, 1-100

■ % Rating 80-100

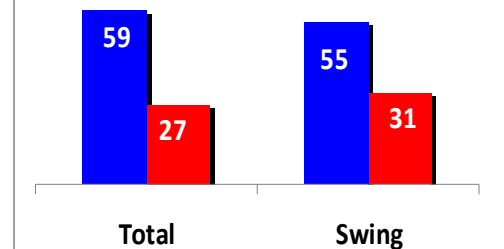
■ % Rating 60-100



Voter Preference

■ Progressive

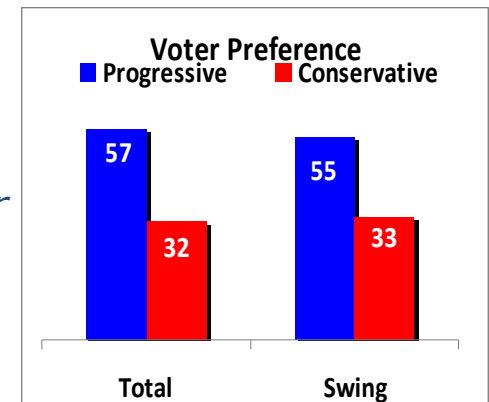
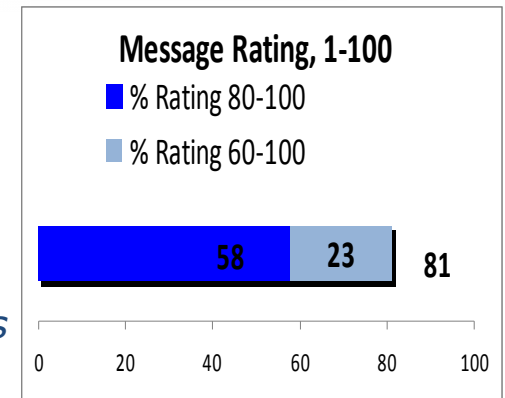
■ Conservative



# 1<sup>st</sup> tier pro-child messages

## Greatest generation

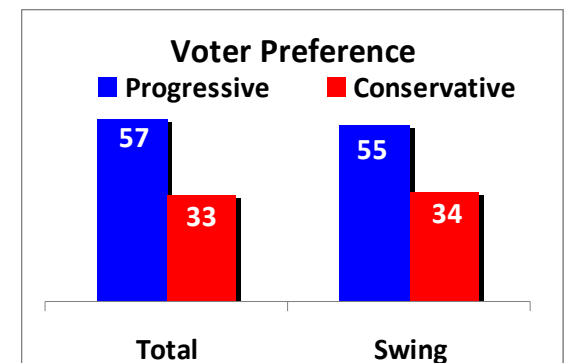
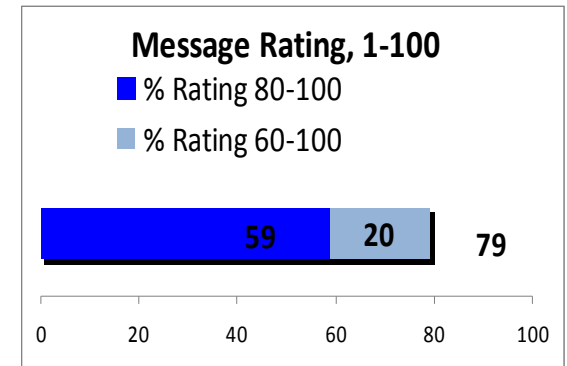
**The greatest generation of America's last century survived the Great Depression, fought and defeated global tyranny, and built the great American middle class. The greatest generation of this century is yet to come.** America's children will grow up to face challenges we can already see on the horizon and new ones we can't yet imagine. But the time is now to begin preparing them for school, work, and life. *Every dollar we spend on early childhood education is an investment in the future workers of America and is money saved over the next five decades in our criminal justice system. Too many high school kids from disadvantaged communities know more people who've gone to prison than to college. We need innovative programs that prepare them for college and work, like providing mentoring and work experience as part of their high school education. And it's time we give tax credits to working and middle class families to help pay for child care and family leave when a new child is born. We need to do everything we can to help parents and teachers instill the values of hard work, personal responsibility, and community that have always defined our nation, and to make the education, health, and character of our children a national priority.*



# 1<sup>st</sup> tier pro-child messages

## Invest in our children

**Investing in our children is investing in America.** *When we help children grow and succeed, we are paving the way for our country's next generation of workers and leaders. Investing in our children means investing in a world-class education, making sure every child can attend pre-kindergarten and every teenager who aspires to a college education can afford one. Investing in our children means recognizing that we are social by nature, and that children learn the values of community, respect, and responsibility in strong families and safe communities. And investing in our children means investing in those who are most vulnerable, by taking care of the millions of children who are abused and neglected; helping parents in poor communities protect their children from poverty, violence, and drugs; and providing mentors and role models so that all our nation's teenagers finish high school. Supporting children isn't just the right thing to do. It's one of the best investments we can make as a nation.*



# Strong language from second-tier messages

## Speaking of children

- **Investing in America's children and helping parents exercise parental responsibility are two sides of the same coin, not competing options.** It's hard to exercise parental responsibility when you're working two or three jobs or struggling to meet your mortgage and barely have time to see your kids, let alone to read to them or check their homework.
- **We should deal with problems facing America's children ...by keeping what works, eliminating what doesn't, and *making investments that pay off in the long run.***
- The answers to the problems that confront our children don't lie in either throwing money at them or throwing our hands up and hoping the problems will go away. The answers lie in throwing our weight behind proven solutions, and *drawing on the American ingenuity that's always allowed us to solve our problems.*

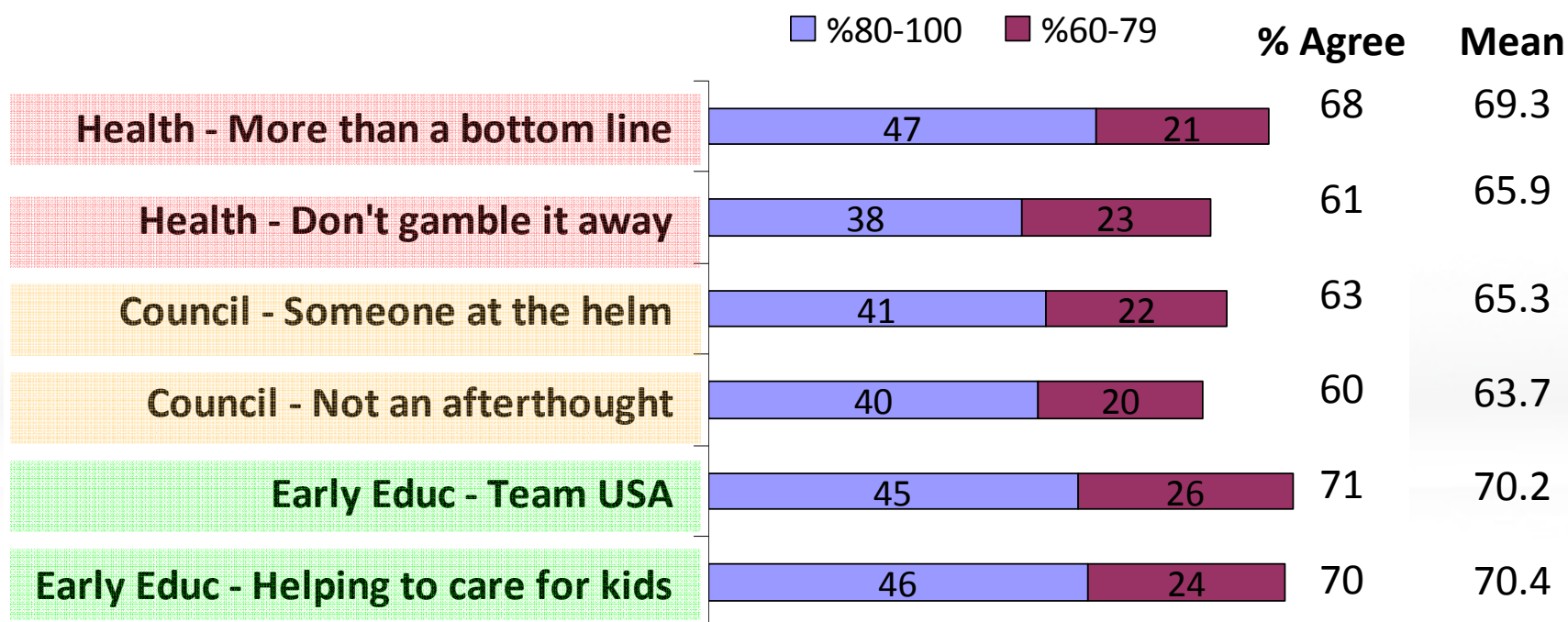
# Strategic Messaging

Specific issues

**Messages on specific  
issues**

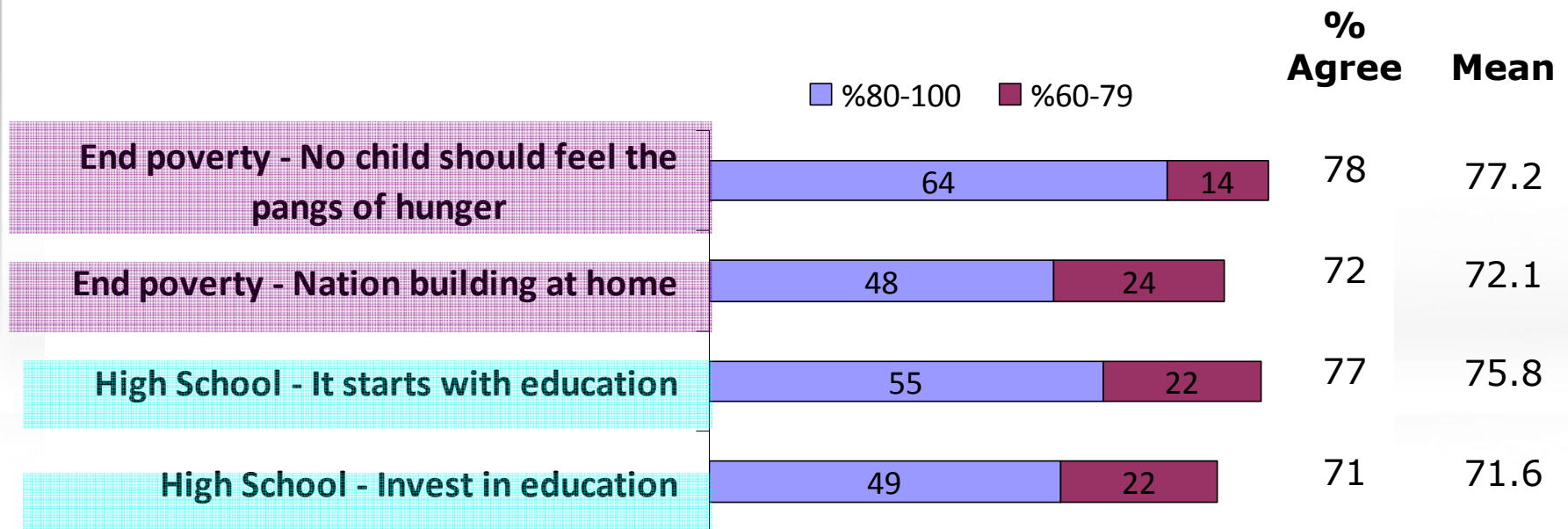
# How convincing are these messages?

## Specific issues



# How convincing are these messages?

## Specific issues

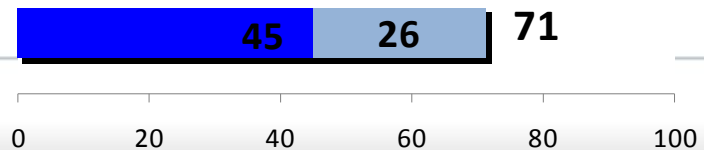


# Early childhood education

## Effective Message

**Whether our goal is reducing crime, increasing high school graduation rates, or creating tomorrow's educated workforce, the evidence is clear that investing early in our kids' education today can make all the difference tomorrow.** *It's not just the right thing to do; it's one of the soundest investments we can make.* Scientists estimate that every dollar we spend on high-quality early education programs produces a return on our investment of between \$3 and \$15. Now that's a stock worth buying. *And it's our stock, our kids, our future.* We now know that the longest-lasting effects are on precisely the kids who need it most: disadvantaged kids, who aren't likely to get the same enrichment at home, and for whom *two nutritious meals a day and a warm, firm, loving hand at school* may be their lifeline to a productive adulthood. That's something we can all take to the bank. *Our kids are going to have to compete in the global economy with kids from Japan, China, and India. Let's make sure they get off to a running start for Team USA.*

Rating

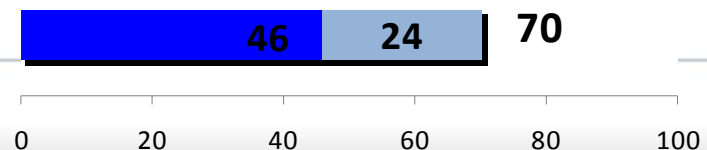


# Early childhood education

## Effective Message

**Too many working and middle class parents go to work each day wondering how well their kids are being taken care of. And for good reason:** We have no national standards for the care of young children, and we're the only major country in the world that doesn't make affordable preschool and pre-K education available to all its children. And it's not as if all preschools are created equal. Most pay caregivers such low salaries that they can't attract or retain people who understand the developmental needs of young children. The scientific evidence is now clear that it makes a big difference what kind of preschool kids are in, particularly if they come from disadvantaged homes. Unlike low-quality programs, the best early education programs hire skilled caregivers and offer help not only to kids but to their parents. And they produce effects that can be seen years later, from greater educational achievement to dramatically reduced rates of crime and teen pregnancies. Whether rich or poor, black or white, there's one thing we all care about, and that's our kids. **It's up to parents to take good care of their kids, but it's our responsibility as a nation to make sure all parents have the opportunity to do that.**

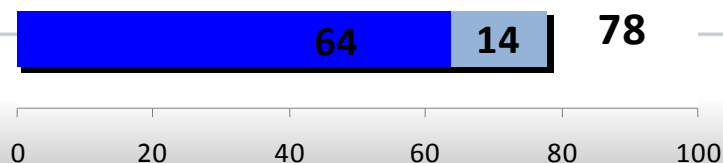
Rating



# Childhood poverty

## Effective Message

**No child in the United States of America should ever feel the pangs of hunger.** Yet today, a million American kids will go hungry. No child in America should be forced to live on the street. Yet with the economic downturn, millions of families have had their mortgages foreclosed and lost their homes, through no fault of their own. And no child in the America should go without health care. Yet 1 in 5 American children never see the doctor every year, denying them the preventive care, vaccinations, and dental care that growing children need. It's just not right that a child can go hungry because her parent lost a job, while the Wall Street banker who gambled with their lives pockets another 25 million dollar bonus. And it's not right that for the first time in our history the middle class is shrinking, as people who work or want to work can't find a job or earn enough to take care of their families, and as CEO's salaries and bonuses have skyrocketed while the rest of our income has stagnated. It's time we start growing the economy and stop shrinking the middle class. It's just not fair that you can work full time and still not have enough money to put food on the table for your family. A fifth of our kids shouldn't live in poverty. That's the bottom line.



# Childhood poverty

## Effective Message

**If we can spend over a trillion dollars on nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, we can do some nation building here at home.** With the economic downturn, more and more of our children are hungry. Half of all American children receive food stamps at some point in their childhood. And it isn't limited to any one group. Nearly 40 percent of white kids will get food stamps and over twice as many African-Americans, including kids whose parents have lost their jobs, are in the armed forces, or who've felt the pain of poverty their entire young lives. Eliminating hunger and poverty isn't something any one person or organization can do. It's going to take a partnership of business, government, and community and religious organizations to do it. And it's going to require moving away from programs with a track record of failure to innovative programs with a track record of success, like one that provides visiting home nurses, who work with parents who want to help themselves,. That program dramatically reducing welfare rates, teen pregnancies, and dropout rates years later. We've never faced a problem in this country we couldn't solve. It's time we solve this one, and there's no better time than now, when so many families need a hand up, not a hand out.

Rating

48

24

72

**Westen**  
S strategies, LLC

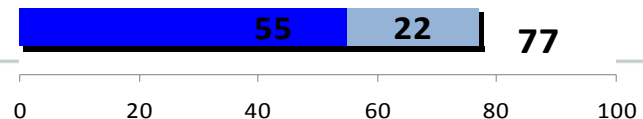
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# High school drop-out rates

## Effective Message

**Every day, another several thousand teenagers drop out of school. Without a diploma, these kids don't stand a chance:** Boys who quit school are far more likely to be unemployed and to cycle in and out of prison. Girls who don't graduate are ten times more likely to become teenage mothers. But this is one problem we can fix. The first place to start is with high-quality early education, which has enormous effects on graduation rates over a decade later. The second is to focus on the roughly 10% of schools that produce 50% of all dropouts. The problem isn't just in the schools. They're underfunded and dilapidated, and their students often come to school hungry and surrounded by violence. And their parents need to be more involved, taking responsibility for their children's education. And the third is to turn to innovative programs, like those that mentor kids at risk, engage experts and members of the community who've opened a small business to be part-time teachers or inspirational speakers who can serve as role models, and provide work experience to students. **The best cure for poverty is a good job, and the best place to start is with an education.**

Rating

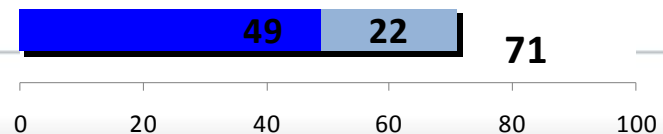


# High school drop-out rates

## Effective Message

**If I had to invest in a thousand colleges and technical schools or a thousand prisons, I'd invest in higher education any day. And that is exactly our choice.** Today, nearly a third of all high school students who start 9th grade don't graduate. The problem cuts across racial and ethnic lines, but it's most severe among African-American and Hispanic youth, of whom only half go on to get a high school diploma. The costs of dropping out are staggering. Half of students who don't graduate are chronically unemployed and wind up in a revolving door to prison, costing society on average about \$300,000. But in this case, we can do something about it. We know that 9th grade is a pivotal year, when kids enter high school and either discover that they have the skills to make it or they don't. Only 10% of kids who fail 9th grade ever graduate. No one wants to feel dumb, especially when you're 14 or 15. There's no single answer, but two of the best things we can are to focus on mentoring, tutoring, and support for those 9th graders who are struggling, and to catch the problem years earlier with high-quality preschool for at-risk kids, which cuts their chances of dropping out dramatically years later. When our kids fail, we fail. Let's commit ourselves to success.

Rating



# Strategic Messaging

Taglines

**Putting children first:  
Top taglines**

# Effective taglines

## 1<sup>st</sup> tier taglines

	Mean Rating	80-100%	60-80%
All children deserve the chance to grow, thrive, and live long, healthy lives.	81.1	52	10
Every kid counts	79.4	51	9
Our children, our future	78.5	45	13
Our future leaders are in our care today. It's our responsibility to teach them well.	78.3	44	12
The greatest investment we can make is in our children.	78.1	44	11

# Conclusions

## General messages: Key findings

- We can win by 20-35 points over a tough fiscal constraint message with multiple different narratives
- The best messages draw on a range of values associated with both the right and the left, including getting back to basics, American leadership, investment, opportunity, hard work, personal responsibility, partnerships, and strong communities
- The best messages elicit a range of emotions, from concern and anger to pride and hope
- The best messages wed reason and emotion, concern about what is with hope for what could be, and clear solutions

# Conclusions

## Specific messages: Key findings

- We can win strongly on messages with strong themes of disadvantage if we think carefully about how to defuse prejudice, both conscious and especially unconscious
- Messages about childhood poverty are more resonant if they are tied to working and middle class concerns, creating a sense of “us” rather than “them”
- We can win by very strong margins on surprising issues, such as high school dropout rates that strongly evoke racial stereotypes, if we message with those stereotypes in mind, and win high marks with strongly conservative voters
- One final principle of effective messaging: [Courage](#)

# Strategic Messaging

Speaking of children

## Making children a national priority



*Research conducted for First Focus by  
Westen Strategies*

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# Strategic Messaging

Taglines

## Appendix: Demographic differences

# Key subgroups

1<sup>st</sup> tier messages

Margin = prefers pro-child message

	MEN	WOMEN	Kids in Home	No Kids	Strong Dem	Strong GOP	Swing Voters	
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Margin
Opposition message	60.8	54.7	55.1	58.8	39.5	76.9	58.9	
Back to basics	75.2	83.6	81.1	78.9	88.2	76.6	77.5	+29
American leadership	69.2	80.0	79.3	72.8	79.2	67.4	75.0	+34
American Dream	70.9	76.6	75.2	73.2	80.7	75.5	71.3	+24
Greatest generation	73.6	79.1	77.5	76.1	82.7	74.8	74.9	+22
Invest in our children	73.1	81.5	77.2	77.5	85.8	70.9	76.5	+21

# Key subgroups

## Segmentation by demographics

- **Partisan differences:**
  - Swing voters mirror the general electorate
  - Messages vary from those that show strong partisan differences to those that appeal across the spectrum
- **Gender and parent/non-parent differences:**
  - Men and women show similar profiles, although women are consistently more pro-child
  - Parents provide considerably higher ratings on some messages, but many are convincing irrespective of parenting status
  - Grandparental status has no effect on response to messages
- **Age differences are relatively small**
  - Seniors are sensitive to messages suggesting they get special preference
- **Regional differences are largely nonexistent**
  - Where differences exist, Southerners tend to be most kid-friendly, whereas Westerners tend to be least kid-friendly