



Talking about Economy, not Poverty

by Margy Waller
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*For much more about the evidence on changing narratives, see our website:
<http://www.mobilityagenda.org/reframingthepovertydebate>.*

The Nation magazine [recently praised](#) efforts by the [Congressional Progressive Caucus](#), led by Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D- CA), to introduce a plan to cut poverty. The detailed package of policy proposals, “The Anti-Poverty and Opportunity Initiative,” calls for:

... \$73 billion in FY 2009, increasing to \$129 billion in FY 2018, to fund a comprehensive strategy to cut poverty in half in a decade, including: expanding child care and increasing Head Start funding; making the Child Tax Credit fully refundable and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit for larger families; increasing funding for Food Stamps programs; increasing housing vouchers by 200,000 annually; lifting restrictions on TANF, Food Stamps, SSI and Medicaid for documented immigrant families; fully funding block grants to states with broad anti-poverty strategies and distributing targeted grants to states for families where a parent or child has a disability; increasing funding for Indian Health Services, education, housing and infrastructure, natural resources management, and other areas impacting Native American poverty; and reversing the 20 percent cut in child support enforcement.

The initiative incorporates many policy ideas community organizations and other stakeholders have been wishing that Congress and the administration would adopt – for many years now. Individual lists might differ a bit from Congresswoman Lee’s, but any Congressional staffer from a progressive office already has a list like this memorized.

So why aren’t these proposals the law of the land?

It’s probably because supporters have reached everyone persuadable by talking about the proposals as “anti-poverty” initiatives for forty years. And all that support still isn’t enough to overcome the opponents of legislation like this. While many people want to do something about poverty—it’s not a high priority for voters. In February, the Gallup Poll asked voters about “the most important

problem facing the country" and just 2 percent named poverty/hunger/homelessness.

That means friendly policymakers don't have the political space they need to take on opponents.

And continuing to use the poverty banner means it is unlikely that this plan will generate adequate support in the future. There are a few reasons for this:

- * The U.S. definition of poverty is out of date and flawed, allowing opponents to use it to limit policy solutions to a narrow very low-income group.

- * Public understanding of the causes of (irresponsible and immoral behavior) and remedies (responsible personal behavior) for poverty hinders adoption of the policy solutions we seek to address it.

- * Defining the problem as "poverty" opens the door to a losing scenario in the legislative debate.

In fact, when Senator Clinton announced her support for a plan to adopt a goal to cut child poverty in late February, the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation took the opening to criticize and offer their alternative:

Robert Rector, senior research fellow on welfare and family issues at the Heritage Foundation, says Clinton refuses to even acknowledge the two primary causes of child poverty -- out-of-wedlock births, and parents living on welfare instead of working. "What she wants to do is combat poverty by putting the responsibility on the U.S. taxpayer, who already spends about \$450 billion a year fighting poverty," says Rector, "while [at the same time] specifically avoiding the issue of changing the behaviors that are the cause of poverty."

See the problem?

The poverty debate provides a classic example of the imperative not to sacrifice our larger policy goals for the sake of an incremental or different advance, particularly when that advance actually undermines the shared agenda for the long term. By advancing a plan to set a target for cutting poverty, elected officials and candidates set up a problematic future, and one that threatens to undermine the policy goals.

Let's imagine the likely scenario to come. Whether or not a candidate who has promised to set a goal to cut poverty wins the White House, we can expect continued efforts by some advocacy groups and members of Congress to push for the goal and the policy to match.

The mainstream media will portray the likely legislative options as two competing proposals: one we like (a comprehensive approach to addressing inequality and

economic mobility) and one we don't (solve poverty with marriage and harder work).

Our opponents are able to push these concepts with success because they are consistent with a broad public understanding of the causes of poverty, and a widely held belief that government programs cannot really address the issue of poverty or inequality. We already lost this same fight in battles over welfare. Why would we want to engage in it again?

We don't need to re-fight that battle. We know that some people (democrats and low-income voters) are persuaded by a sympathy lens on the issue (the one that the word "poverty" calls up for many people in this country) to support a limited set of policies. Unfortunately, this language actually decreases support for progressive policies like a living wage.

Moreover, we also know that using an economic narrative moves these same voters *and* others (working-class, non college-educated men, older men, Republican voters, union households, and older voters without a college education) to support more of our policy goals.

So, if there is no true demand for a goal to cut poverty and it won't help add new support, it would be much smarter strategically to use an economic case to promote the same larger policy agenda without the damaging poverty headline. (You'll find much more information about the evidence on the impact of using different narratives for policy results on our website: <http://www.mobilityagenda.org/reframingthepovertydebate>.)

In fact, the Progressive Caucus members have proposals that would address poverty, social and economic mobility, and inequality that they've put under an economy title, the "Rebuild and Reinvest in America Initiative." They should focus on this legislation and incorporate the "anti-poverty" agenda into that legislation.

Everyone who wants anti-poverty policy to be high on the agenda after the upcoming election should stop talking about goals to cut poverty and instead talk about an economy that will work for everyone.

Changing the way we start the conversation with others about this issue doesn't mean we don't care about the poor anymore or that our policy goals have to change at all. It's just an acknowledgment that if we want to win, we have to change the narrative to one that works for us, and for more of the public too.

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