

## To Our Health: Protecting Medicaid and Children's Health

Drew Westen, Ph.D., February 2011

*Research Conducted for First Focus Campaign for Children*

With state and federal deficits running at record highs, trillions in federal cuts due to begin in January of 2013, and efforts to roll back health care reform highly popular among some sectors of the American electorate, the fate of programs designed to serve poor, working, and middle class Americans is uncertain. Politicians on both sides of the aisle have openly contemplated cuts in the most popular social insurance programs, Social Security and Medicare, raising questions about the viability of other programs that protect children, seniors, and people with disabilities.



The aim of this project was to develop emotionally compelling, values-based messages on two programs that provide health care to children, families, and vulnerable adults. The first is Medicaid, which is both under siege in its current form and slated to undergo expansion under the new health care act as the mechanism for insuring working people who nonetheless cannot afford insurance. The second is the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), administered through the states, which has, since being signed into law in January 2009, provided high quality health care to millions of American children. A central focus of this research was on how to maintain children's health insurance as a distinct program designed specifically for the needs of children, particularly as health insurance exchanges are slated to come online in 2014 but face uncertainties in the current political and economic environment.



The challenge is that state budget deficits and the ideology of "austerity" that has captured the imagination of elected officials on both sides of the Atlantic will render two programs that protect the middle class and people who are vulnerable potential targets for substantial budget cuts, namely Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Medicaid and Children's Health are both more easily targeted than other programs such as Medicare and Social Security because they have less powerful constituencies behind them. Medicaid is also readily attacked by opponents with coded racial messages.

The purpose of this project was to identify ways of talking with voters at two levels:

- **Narratives** that connect with ordinary citizens and raise both their concerns and their hope that something can be done to make things better
- Brief, evocative statements or **talking points** that capture the essence of those narratives, which not only persuade but "stick" in the minds of people who hear them

*Want to move people on Protecting Medicaid?* Here are some talking points that beat the toughest opposition talking point the other side is using by wide margins, indicated after each talking point in parentheses:

#### **Talking Points on Protecting Medicaid**

- If politicians want to cut somebody's health care, let them start with their own. (+76)
- If our leaders want to make sure Medicare and Medicaid are financially sound, there's one way to do it: put Americans back to work, so more people are paying their premiums again, and let millionaires and big corporations pay their fair share of taxes, so we stop bankrupting the middle class. (+71)
- Whether you're white, black, or brown, there's nothing more painful than having a sick child and not being able to take them to the doctor because you can't afford it. It's time we helped those parents get back to work, not take away health insurance for their kids. (+70)
- Medicaid covers long-term care for our aging parents and grandparents, and politicians have no right to shred the contract this country made with our seniors after a lifetime of work. (+69)
- If we're going to cut, we should start with programs that don't work, not the ones that protect ordinary Americans like Medicare and Medicaid. (+68)
- 15 million Americans are out of work right now, and they'd like nothing more than to be contributors to Medicaid again rather than recipients of it—and they could be, if politicians would start making jobs a priority instead of a talking point. (+67)
- We shouldn't be balancing the budget on the back of people who are poor, have lost their jobs, or need nursing home care. Congress should instead stand up to the special interests and let big corporations and the wealthy step up to the plate. (+67)
- Numbers in parentheses refer to the % of voters who rated the progressive message higher than the opposition message.

*Want to move people on Protecting Children's Health?* Try these:

#### **Talking Points on Protecting Children's Health**

- People who work for a living ought to be able to take their kids to the doctor when they're sick. (+65)
- The health of our children should be more important than the bottom line of health insurance companies. (+60)
- With all the nation-building we've done abroad, it's time we did some nation building here at home, starting with protecting the health of our children. (+59)
- You don't gamble with our children's health. (+57)
- Investing in our children's health is investing in America. When we help children develop and thrive, we are paving the way for our country's next generation of workers and leaders. (+57)
- Children's health insurance couldn't be more important today with so many people unemployed, losing their health insurance, or working longer hours for less money. (+56)
- If we want the 21st century to be the next American century, we have to invest in it, starting with investing in our children's health. (+55)
- I believe in a family doctor for every family and a pediatrician for every child. (+54)

- If our kids aren't healthy, they aren't going to learn, and we aren't going to stay the world's leader in innovation. (+54)
- Health insurance for children of working parents needs to remain like it is now, a standalone program like Medicare, not something for politicians to put on the chopping block every time there's an economic downturn. (+53)
- Numbers in parentheses refer to the % of voters who rated the progressive message higher than the opposition message.

**Our aim** was to identify language and imagery that advocates, elected officials, and commentators can use and *know in advance* will resonate with the average American—because we've tested them against the toughest language the opposition is already using or could throw at them. The language we tested is the **language of the kitchen table**—the kinds of words everyday people actually use.

What did we learn? In broadest strokes, here are the most important points:

#### The Take-Home Message

- Attacks on Medicaid and Children's Health do not resonate with the public, who fiercely oppose them, particularly when hearing persuasive, values-focused messaging
- With effective messaging, budget-cutting arguments from the other side are easily beaten by over 40-point margins with 60-second narratives and by 50-75 points with single-sentence "talking points" designed to "stick"
- Calling attention to who actually receives Medicaid (children, seniors, and people with disabilities) is essential to protecting it
- Populist messages that focus on the people and institutions who caused so many people to lose their jobs and need help are highly effective
- Juxtaposing tax cuts for the rich and big corporations with cuts to children, seniors, and people with disabilities is highly effective
- Addressing racially coded messages directly is effective at defusing them
- Concrete, evocative language about real people is essential in drawing the contrast between an abstraction (the deficit) and real lives
- Voters are furious at politicians for what they see as cutting special deals for campaign contributors at the expense of poor, working, and middle class families

It is important to distinguish this research, which is **message testing**, from **public opinion polling**. Our goal was not to see where the public *is*. Our goal was to see where the public *could be* if we simply talk with them about our values in clear, evocative language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Polling is essentially putting your finger up in the air and asking which way the winds of public opinion are blowing. It has many legitimate uses, but it should never be used to decide whether to pursue a campaign (whether for an issue or candidate) or how to speak with the public, for two reasons. First, polls are typically written in the rarified language of pollsters (e.g., "Congress is considering a bill that would x. Proponents say y. Opponents say z. Do so strongly agree? Agree? Disagree? Or strongly disagree?"). This language bears no resemblance to the way debates play out in public, and it can be extremely

## Methods and Demographics

We tested messages, talking points, and best-practice words and phrases with a national sample of 1068 voters, selected to reflect the demographics of the voting population using online dial-tests and quantitative polling, from July 15, 2011 to July 18, 2011.

The structure of the test was as follows. After initial demographic questions, participants were told they were about to hear the positions of some public officials on issues that concern the country.

- Each respondent first heard an audio of an opposition narrative followed by a series of progressive narratives (presented in random order). In this and all other sections of the survey, we made sure that the opposition messages were as effective as possible by using the actual language of opponents, so we could learn how our messages would fare in the context of the most compelling (even if disingenuous) arguments from the other side.
- Respondents then read a set of single-sentence “talking points” designed to capture the essence of the narratives (again presented in random order), after hearing a strong opposition message.



For all narratives, we used “dial testing” to measure voters’ second-by-second evaluations of the messages. Respondents listened to each message, and as they listened, they moved a slider on their computer screen with in one direction if they found what they were hearing convincing or emotionally compelling and in the opposite direction if they did not like or believe

what they were hearing. After listening to each message, they then rated how compelling they found it, using a 0-100 metric widely used in polling. The combination of standard survey methodology—voters rating a series of statements as to how convincing they found them—and dial-testing those messages allowed us to learn not only *which* messages Americans found most convincing relative to a tough opposition message but also the words, phrases, values, and examples *within* each message made them more or less likely to find it compelling.



For the brief statements or “talking points,” respondents rated each one on the same 0-100 metric, after first hearing and rating an opposition metric straight from the mouths of conservative opponents.

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misleading. When conservatives wanted to eliminate the estate tax, they never laid out their best six arguments against it. They called it a *death tax*, which was far more evocative and effective, suggesting that proponents of the estate tax want to tax people for *dying*. Second, conservatives spend billions of dollars branding themselves, progressives (“tax and spend liberals”), and virtually every issue that matters to them, and they have been doing it for years. What that means is that on issue after issue, public opinion polling suggests that the public is far more conservative than it is, because it is comparing a *well branded* conservative message against an unbranded message, a poorly branded message, or no message at all.

The demographics of the sample matched closely the demographics of the voting population, which allowed us to examine, where the sample size was large enough, how different language resonated with different groups. As in most of the research we have conducted on a range of issues, messages that appealed most to persuadable or “swing” voters also appealed to “base” voters on this issue, largely because our best messages spoke to values that cut across the political spectrum.

Although we did not expect to persuade voters on the far right, who are unlikely to hear a progressive message no matter how compelling, our definition of “swing” voters was influenced by our repeated finding that more voters are persuadable on most issues than is widely assumed. The key is simply to speak to them in clear, genuine, values-based language. Thus, we did not concern ourselves with self-identified *strong Republicans* (about 20% of the voting population). Roughly the same percentage self-identify as *strong Democrats* and need little persuading—although we made sure that our messages were motivating to them. But we were particularly interested in that large swath of the voting population, from self-identified weak or moderate Republicans to weak or moderate Democrats, who turn out to be persuadable if you simply engage them on their values and interests.

## Demographics

Party Identification	Strong GOP	Strong Dem	Swing		
	19%	22%	59%		
Gender	Male	Female			
	44%	56%			
Ever been or had a loved one on Medicaid	No	Yes			
	44%	56%			
Ethnicity	White	African American	Hispanic	Other	
	75%	11%	9%	5%	
Party Affiliation (GOP, Ind, Dem)	Republican	Independent	Democrat		
	31%	36%	34%		
Region	Northeast	Midwest	South	Mountains	Pacific
	18%	24%	36%	7%	14%

## Messages that Move Voters on Protecting Medicaid

In general, **effective narratives** have a particular structure:

- **Connect**, using an aspirational, value-laden statement; a compelling metaphor, or an acknowledgement of voters’ ambivalence.
- **Raise concerns**, describing the problem in a way that is *concrete, visual, and evocative*.
- **End with a hopeful solution**, a return to the central metaphor, or a resolution to voters’ ambivalence.

Narratives with this structure allow messengers to connect with a wide audience (usually with an aspirational statement shared across the political spectrum), make clear the messenger's values, and elicit the emotions that persuade the persuadable and motivate action. A strong aspirational statement is usually the best place to start because it accomplishes all of these goals. Starting a message with an attack is generally less successful because listeners are likely to associate the messenger with negative feelings before hearing what he or she has to say. Overloading a message with facts, figures, and 12-point plans is equally unpersuasive to most voters. They want to know "where your heart is" and to get the "gist" of the solution you are offering, but they tend to assume that an authoritative messenger with whom they agree on core values has more expertise than they do to work out the fine print.

We tested our messages against as strong an opposition message as we could design, taken straight from the best language of the opposition, because that is the language we have to beat. This language should sound very familiar:

#### **The Opposition Narrative on Protecting Medicaid**

In the midst of a budget crisis, you don't expand programs like Medicaid, you cut them. Medicaid is nothing but a program for transferring income from people who work for a living to people who don't. We have millions of Americans who hard for their paycheck and can't afford to buy health insurance for their own family. Yet they're expected to foot the bill for people on welfare who are too lazy to work and too lazy to cook, eating so much fast food that the rest of us end up paying for treatment of their obesity-related disorders? Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour has described people who pull up at the pharmacy window in a BMW and say they can't afford their Medicaid co-payment. And there's an entire industry set up to coach seniors on how to transfer their assets to their relatives so they can qualify for Medicaid. Governors of both political parties were clear when Congress was debating the \$2.6 trillion health care law that they couldn't afford a massive expansion in Medicaid, which would divert funding from other necessary areas like education and law enforcement and handcuff governors to an inflexible program, but Washington didn't listen. Medicaid needs to cost less, not more.

This message has strong emotional resonance, particularly with voters anywhere from the right through slightly left of center. This message was highly polarizing by partisan affiliation, with self-identified strong Republicans finding it very compelling, strong Democrats strongly repellent, and swing voters in the center. Among its strongest components were its attack on "Obamacare" at the end and its coded racial language from Haley Barbour (the modern equivalent of "Cadillac-driving welfare loafers"). In general, however, respondents were resistant to this message despite its strong attempts at identifying targets for populist anger. Other than strong GOPs, only young people (age 18-24) found this message persuasive, rating it fully 10 points higher than people 55 and older, although by age 25, the message was not resonating with any age group, and even the younger voters found multiple progressive messages far more compelling.

**The good news is that our best messages<sup>2</sup> beat the opposition message by strong double digits with registered voters, swing voters, and voters in every region of the country.** As can be seen from the

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<sup>2</sup> The messages reported here are actually amended versions of the messages we tested, which have been revised based on the dial-testing. They are likely to be more effective than the numbers suggest, as we have deleted or revised language that "brought the dials down" and refined language based on the data to increase effectiveness.

table below, the opposition message did well, with a mean rating of 52.4 on a scale of 0 to 100. However, our best messages did substantially better. In head-to-head comparisons (the far right-hand column), respondents gave higher ratings to our messages than to the opposition message by wide margins.

### How Our Top Narratives Fared Against the Opposition

	Mean Rating	Percent preferring progressive	Percent preferring opposition	Margin
Opposition	52.4	-	-	-
Americans Support Medicaid	77.6	71	22	+49
Cut What Doesn't Work	78	69	24	+45
Problem Solving	76.8	69	24	+45
Last Place to Turn	74.9	69	24	+45
Insurance	77.8	67	23	+44
Americans Have Spoken	76	68	26	+42
They Are Us	75.6	67	25	+42
Drain on Our Resources	77.9	67	27	+40
Expand Medicaid	76.2	66	26	+40

Within the margin of error, practically all of our top messages performed equally well. Advocates should speak authentically—using messages that resonate with *them*—and never use messages that conflict with their values. Fortunately, the strong performance of all nine messages we tested allows advocates to pick and choose the messages that best fit their voice. Below we present the messages in order of their effectiveness and briefly describe why they work, particularly for persuadable voters in the center.

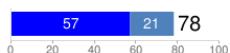
#### Americans Support Medicaid

As Americans, we support Medicaid for a lot of reasons. Half of us have a very personal reason to support it, having gotten coverage for our kids during tough times, received or had someone we care about receive long-term care for a disability, or seen Medicaid provide nursing home support for our ailing parents or grandparents. And many of us understand that we or our loved ones will someday need that kind of care. But a lot of us also see this as a moral issue, that you don't just throw children, seniors, or people with disabilities out on the street. And people who've worked hard their whole lives and paid into the system shouldn't suddenly have to choose between food on the table and health care because some CEO outsourced their job or some Wall Street banker gambled it away. We talk about a "safety net" like it's an abstraction, but it's no abstraction to the 15 million Americans who are out of work right now, who'd like nothing more than to be contributors to Medicaid again rather than recipients of it—and who would be, if politicians would start making jobs a priority instead of a talking point.

Message Rating 0-100



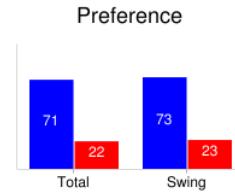
The data in the figures to the left and below provide four measures of how well this message performed. The first, the percent who found it compelling (rating it 60 or above on a 0-100 scale), is an extraordinary 78. Of those, 57% rated it 80-100, which



is a measure of **emotional intensity** that translates to strong motivation to support it. (A message with over 40% emotional intensity is a strong message.)

The second graph shows how the message fared against the opposition message, with both the general electorate and swing voters (including here voters who self-identify as weak or moderate Republicans, Independents, and weak or moderate Democrats—roughly 60% of the population). As the figure shows, this message wins by extraordinary margins with both the general electorate and persuadable voters, as do several of our messages.

**Why is this message effective?** This was a “homerun” message from left to right, with swing voters moving the dials up from start to finish and ending with a 78 out of 100, and preferring this message to the opposition message by a 50-point margin. Even strong GOPs (the roughly 20% of the population on the far right) dialed up to near 70 on this message, and preferred it by over 20 points to the opposition message. For swing voters, virtually every word was resonant, beginning with the personal connections in the first part of the message; moving to the emphasis on morality and values in the second, and concluding with populist themes and job creation in the third.

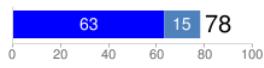


### Cut What Doesn't Work

If we're going to cut, we should start with programs that don't work, not the ones that protect ordinary Americans like Medicare and Medicaid. Most seniors will tell you Medicare is a Godsend for people like them on a fixed income, and 85% of Americans who've turned to Medicaid at some point in their lives have good things to say about it, because it helped their families through a tough time, or provided 'round the clock nursing home to a parent or grandparent with Alzheimer's, or provided home health care to a friend or loved one who was disabled. The last thing we should be cutting is health care to our children, seniors, and people with disabilities. You want to cut something? Start with tax breaks for oil companies, who are bankrupting the rest of us at the gas pump with their record profits. If that doesn't close the budget gap, try cutting tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires, who don't need the \$120 billion handout Congress just gave them. Start there, and let us know how that works out.

Message Rating 0-100

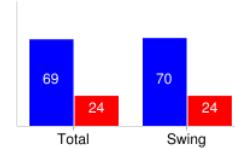
■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



As can be seen from the graphs, this was another strong narrative. The dials shot up on the initial sentence, making clear not only that they want to preserve Medicare and Medicaid, but that they are open to a narrative about effective vs. ineffective government programs and initiatives if someone would just articulate one. Voters across the political spectrum

found this message compelling, with swing voters ending the dial-testing near a rating of 80. Even the dial-ratings of strong GOPs steadily rose throughout the message.

Preference

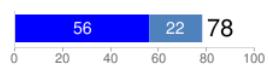
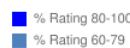


### Problem Solving

Politicians need to stop pointing fingers and start solving our problems, beginning with putting Americans back to work. At a time of record unemployment, when people are falling out of the middle class in record numbers, you don't start cutting holes in the safety net our grandparents

built. There's a reason Medicaid rolls are swelling: because over 15 million Americans are out of work, and most people get their insurance through their employers. Are there people on Medicaid who should take better care of themselves? Sure. And there are a few of us who aren't on Medicaid who could shed a few pounds ourselves. But let's lay the blame where it belongs: on the irresponsibility of the Wall Street bankers who gambled our jobs away and the politicians who let them do it. Whether you're white, black, or brown, there's nothing more painful than having a sick child and not being able to take them to the doctor because you can't afford it. It's time we helped those parents get back to work, not take away their health insurance.

Message Rating 0-100



Once again, this was a "homerun" narrative. The dials shot up immediately across the political spectrum at the beginning of this message and stayed high throughout. The explicit reference to race at the end drove the dials up as well. This was one of the few messages which males rated as highly as females, likely because of the problem-solving theme. Remarkably, self-identified strong Republicans and swing voters

converged in their responses to this message, sending the dials up quickly with the opening statement, staying high throughout, and closing even higher, near 80 on the dial-testing. This was the highest-rated message by strong GOPs, scoring fully 10 points higher than the opposition message. It was also one of the two highest-rated messages by Southerners, who responded to populist themes.

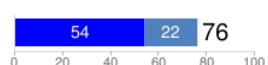
Preference



### Last Place to Turn

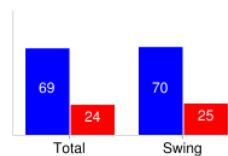
Medicaid is the last resort for most Americans when they need health care, whether they're poor or middle class, old or young, white, black, or brown. It's the place millions of Americans with disabilities and children from low-income families turn for their care. It's the place millions of our seniors turn when they need long-term care that Medicare doesn't cover, and it takes care of two-thirds of all people in nursing homes in America. And it's the place where working and middle class Americans turn when they've lost their job or run through all their savings to pay for an illness. That's what happened to Jennifer, whose daughter was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor when she was 15 months old. Jennifer had to quit her job to take care of her baby through months of chemotherapy and hospitalizations. Her family could no longer afford health insurance, but we, as Americans, pitched in through Medicaid, and today she has a beautiful, healthy four year old girl. Jennifer's story makes me proud to be an American. Her daughter is alive because we were there.

Message Rating 0-100



This message effectively linked the fate of middle class Americans with low-income and disadvantaged children and families, by making clear that Medicaid is the last resort not only for children who are chronically poor but also for people who lose their jobs or seniors whose Medicare doesn't cover nursing home and other long-term care. It also spoke joined the interests of people across colors. The message moved people of all political persuasions up in the dials from start to finish. The personal story was highly effective, and the message made the unusual turn of linking saving the life of a child through a

Preference



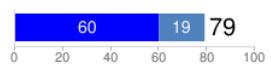
government program with pride in country, patriotism, and the sense of what neighbors do for one another.

### Insurance

As a taxpayer, it burns me up when politicians talk about Medicare and Medicaid like they're handouts. They're insurance programs we pay for with our taxes, and the reason you buy insurance is because someday you may need it. We've been paying those premiums for years, and now that millions of us are out of work or growing older, politicians want to tear up our claims. You don't cut funding to firefighters when brushfires are burning up millions of acres of land. You don't cut the Army Corps of Engineers when rivers are flooding a third of the country. You don't cut unemployment payments when millions of people are out of work. And you don't cut health insurance programs that cover a third of America's children and all of America's seniors when the economy is in its worst shape in 75 years. If our leaders want to make sure Medicare and Medicaid are financially sound, there's one way to do it: put Americans back to work, so more people are paying their premiums again, and let millionaires and big businesses pay their fair share of taxes, so we stop bankrupting the middle class.

#### Message Rating 0-100

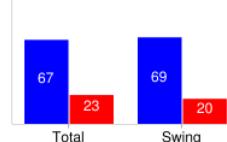
█ % Rating 80-100  
█ % Rating 60-79



The idea that Medicare and Medicaid are insurance programs, not handouts, was highly resonant with voters, particularly swing voters, as was the attack on politicians who would cut funding just as its needed.

Preference

Interestingly, this was one of the strongest messages with self-identified strong Republicans, who dial-testing ratings and final ratings of the message were almost identical with swing voters. This was also one of the two strongest messages with Southerners.



### Americans Have Spoken

Americans have spoken clearly about Medicare and Medicaid: About 80 percent of us are against cutting benefits to kids, seniors, and Americans with disabilities—or to the doctors, nurses, and hospitals who care for them. And that's across party lines. Why? Because cutting another half a trillion dollars from Medicare when the baby boomers are retiring, and cutting three-quarters of a trillion from Medicaid when record numbers of Americans are out of work, just isn't right, and it affects all of us, regardless of our politics. So why aren't politicians listening? Why are they cutting taxes to big corporations that outsource American jobs and to the richest Americans, who are cutting themselves larger and larger pieces of the American pie? Because too many politicians are paying too much attention to their campaign contributors and not enough to either their conscience or their constituents. It's time to tell our elected officials that they need to answer to us, or we'll let them see firsthand what an unemployment line looks like.

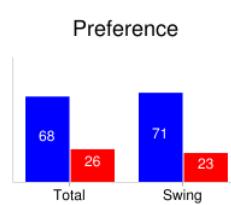
This was a powerful message with even strong GOPs, which rose from start to finish, by enunciating clearly both that, and why, Americans are against cutting Medicare and Medicaid. The only thing that hurt this message was that it was slightly fact-heavy, which took away some of its immediate emotional appeal, although it

#### Message Rating 0-100

█ % Rating 80-100  
█ % Rating 60-79



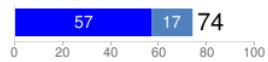
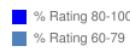
received very high ratings and beat the opposition message by nearly 50 points with swing voters. Across the board, voters responded to the concluding statements about how politicians aren't listening to their constituents about Medicaid and Medicare because they are "owned and operated" by their campaign contributors.



### They Are Us

In this country, we don't kick people when they're down. The time to cut a program that provides basic health insurance to 60 million Americans—including millions of our kids—isn't after Wall Street bankers just threw eight million people out of work, costing them their health insurance along with their jobs. People who get their health care through Medicaid look a lot like America, because they are America. Over half are white, and about one in four are either black or Latino. Most have the kind of health problems we all get as we get older—like high blood pressure and heart disease. And millions more are seniors—our parents and grandparents—who rely on it for nursing home care that Medicare doesn't cover. So if we're going to cut the deficit, I'd start by cutting tax breaks to oil companies, millionaires who pay lower tax rates than their secretaries, and the Wall Street speculators who put so many people on Medicaid by costing them their jobs and their private health insurance.

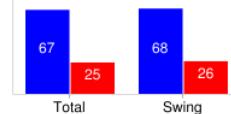
Message Rating 0-100



This message struck a strikingly resonant chord with voters with its explicitly race-conscious message, emphasizing that the face of Medicaid is the face of America. Its strongly populist themes and emphasis on turning anger where it belongs—on the Wall Street speculators who threw people out of work, not the people who consequently need to use Medicaid—was highly resonant with voters. Young people, for whom

issues of race are much less salient, had a particularly positive reaction to this message, as did swing voters. Not surprisingly, strong GOPs resonated the least with it, although even their dials ended above 60 on a message that is quite explicit about race.

Preference

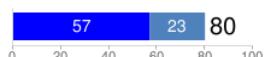


### Drain on Our Resources

There's nothing more important than your health. Right now, tens of millions of Americans wake up each morning praying that their families won't get sick, because they don't have insurance. For millions more, Medicare and Medicaid are the only things that stand between them and losing their health and losing their home. With so many families stretched to the limit and so many people out of work, Medicaid now insures the health of 1/3 of our children – and provides prenatal care for their mothers, like check-ups and vitamins, so those kids start out with a healthy body and a healthy chance at success. That's not just an investment in their future but in ours. But Medicaid doesn't just cover kids. It covers 8 million people with disabilities, and many of them are leading productive lives because of the services it provides. It covers nearly 10 million seniors who need long-term care, whether in nursing homes or in their own homes, where they can live out their lives in dignity. In this country, we don't children, disabled people, or our aging parents or grandparents a "drain on our resources." If politicians want to cut somebody's health care, let them start with their own.

## Message Rating 0-100

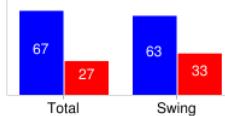
■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



Although this message didn't capture the hearts and minds of swing voters as strongly as some of the others, the dials went up slowly but steadily for them, as for all other voters, from start to finish, beginning with the statement about the importance of our health, and shooting up with the statement that if politicians want to cut someone's health care, they should start with their own. This is the

only message men rated even higher than women, largely because of the populist themes, the emphasis on lost jobs (which older males are feeling acutely), and the strong language about politicians getting some "hands-on" empathy with loss of their health care. For many of the same reasons it appealed to strong GOPs, although this message also ended with a remarkable dial-rating of 90 for strong Democrats.

## Preference

**Expand Medicaid**

In a country as wealthy as ours, with the best medical care in the world if you can afford it, we should be letting more people buy into Medicare and Medicaid if they don't have private insurance, not threatening the health care of our children, seniors, and people who are out of work. Medicaid provides long-term care to millions of seniors, helps Americans with disabilities live independently, and enables millions of children to see a doctor. People who rely on Medicaid for their health insurance have nowhere else to turn, whether because they lost their job in the recession, need nursing home care, or come from parts of town where poverty steals the hope, health, and dreams of so many American children. And many middle class people get their insurance through Medicaid when they fall ill with diseases like breast cancer or heart disease because they lose their health insurance or run through whatever savings they have. So I have some advice for politicians who want to cut Medicare and Medicaid: give up your own government insurance coverage and let us know whether you still consider health insurance for seniors, children, and people with disabilities a luxury.

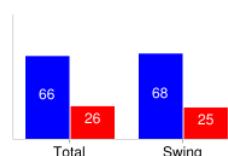
## Message Rating 0-100

■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



Voters across the political spectrum gave this message high marks from the start, with the idea that we should be expanding the number of people who can buy into Medicare and Medicaid, not throwing them off. It successfully wove together the stories, needs, and interests of people from all walks of life, suffering with diseases like cancer and heart disease, which often cause them to lose their health coverage. Like other messages, this one made clear that Americans strongly believe that if politicians want to cut someone's health care because it's too expensive, they need to start with their own.

## Preference

**"Talking Points" that "Stick" on Protecting Medicaid**

The narratives above can be used as "elevator pitches" or in speeches. They should also be used to shape the broader public narrative on protecting Medicaid, by expanding and integrating them with more information or stories of specific people, who put a human face on the issue. The messages have also been designed to guide development of multimedia messages (e.g., television ads, viral videos, newspaper ads).

Often, however, advocates need a proxy for a broader narrative that is short, to the point, and, in the language of marketing, “sticky”—that is, likely to be remembered and to “stick.” Conservatives are masters of “talking points,” from Ronald Reagan’s “government is the problem, not the solution,” to health care reform as a “government takeover of health care.” Both of these talking points built on a broader narrative in a way that reinforced the narrative and is highly memorable.

We tested several one-line talking points against the best talking points used by the other side. Several beat the opposition language by wide margins with both the general public and swing voters. We report on the top talking points here, although we are only scratching the surface; several others beat the opposition talking point by 50 points (and are available by request):

### If You Only Have Six Seconds...

	Mean	%80-100	Margin
Medicaid is nothing but a program for transferring income from people who work to people who don't, and in the midst of a budget crisis, you don't expand it, you cut it.	33.3	10	--
If politicians want to cut somebody's health care, let them start with their own.	83.9	71	+76
If our leaders want to make sure Medicare and Medicaid are financially sound, there's one way to do it: put Americans back to work, so more people are paying their premiums again, and let millionaires and big corporations pay their fair share of taxes, so we stop bankrupting the middle class.	82.8	66	+71
Whether you're white, black, or brown, there's nothing more painful than having a sick child and not being able to take them to the doctor because you can't afford it. It's time we helped those parents get back to work, not take away health insurance for their kids.	81.5	65	+70
Medicaid covers long-term care for our aging parents and grandparents, and politicians have no right to shred the contract this country made with our seniors after a lifetime of work.	80.4	60	+69
Medicaid pays for immunizations for kids, cancer screening and treatment for adults, and special assistance for our seniors and people with handicaps. If that's what we want to cut, it's time we rethink our priorities.	78.8	60	+69
If we're going to cut, we should start with programs that don't work, not the ones that protect ordinary Americans like Medicare and Medicaid.	81	64	+68
Medicaid covers nearly 10 million seniors who need long-term care, whether in nursing homes or in their own homes, where they can live out their lives in dignity.	78.4	58	+68
I have some advice for politicians who want to cut Medicare and Medicaid: give up your own government insurance coverage and let us know whether you still consider health insurance for seniors, children, and people with disabilities a luxury.	82.4	67	+67
Medicaid provides long-term care to millions of seniors, covers important services that help Americans with disabilities live independently, and enables millions of children to see a doctor.	80.5	59	+67

Fifteen million Americans are out of work, and they'd like nothing more than to be contributors to Medicaid again rather than recipients of it—and they could be, if politicians would start making jobs a priority instead of a talking point.	79.9	61	+67
We shouldn't be balancing the budget on the back of people who are poor, have lost their jobs, or need nursing home care. Congress should instead stand up to the special interests and let big corporations and the wealthy step up to the plate.	78.8	63	+67
Medicaid is the place millions of Americans with disabilities, children from low-income homes, seniors who need long-term care, turn for their care, and it's where working and middle class Americans turn when they've lost their job or run through all their savings to pay for an illness.	76.2	55	+67
The last thing we should be cutting is health care for our children, seniors, and people with disabilities.	79.8	63	+66
You don't just throw children, seniors, and people with disabilities out on the street. This is a moral issue, not a political one.	78.1	60	+65
Medicaid is the place millions of Americans with disabilities, children from low-income homes, and seniors who need long-term care, turn for their care, and it's where working and middle class Americans turn when they've lost their job or run through all their savings to pay for an illness.	76.2	55	+67
The last thing we should be cutting is health care for our children, seniors, and people with disabilities.	79.8	63	+66
The majority of people on Medicaid are children, seniors, and people with disabilities, whose health care shouldn't be cut to make room for tax breaks for millionaires and big corporations.	79.1	63	+66
The majority of people on Medicaid are children, seniors, and people with disabilities, whose health care shouldn't be cut to make room for tax breaks for millionaires and big corporations.	78.9	60	+66
Kicking seniors out of their nursing homes, ending vaccinations to children, and ending cancer screenings for people who are poor or out of work is not the path to fiscal responsibility.	77.8	63	+66
People who've worked hard their whole lives and paid into the system shouldn't suddenly have to choose between food on the table and health care for their families because some CEO outsourced their job or some Wall Street banker gambled it away.	79.8	63	+64
As a taxpayer, it burns me up when politicians talk about Medicare and Medicaid like they're handouts. They're insurance programs we pay for with our taxes, and the reason you buy insurance is because someday you may need it.	77.1	60	+64
With so many families stretched to the limit and so many people out of work, Medicaid now insures a third of our children and provides prenatal care for their mothers, so those kids start out life with a healthy brain, a healthy body, and a healthy chance at success.	75.5	53	+64
You don't cut funding to firefighters when brushfires are burning up millions of acres of land, you don't cut unemployment payments when millions of people are out of work, and you don't cut health insurance programs like Medicare and	77.9	57	+63

Medicaid that cover a third of America's children and all of our seniors when the economy is in its worst shape in 75 years.			
Before we start cutting health care for children, seniors, and people with disabilities, let's cut the \$120 billion in tax giveaways Congress just handed millionaires and billionaires.	81	67	+62
In tough times, we should be devoting our resources to the needy, not the greedy.	79.3	62	+62
Cutting another half a trillion dollars from Medicare when the baby boomers are retiring and three-quarters of a trillion from Medicaid at a time when record numbers of Americans are out of work is immoral. It's not a question of left and right, it's a question of right and wrong.	78.4	59	+62
All Americans—rich and poor, young and old, white and black—deserve the opportunity to live a happy, healthy life, and Medicaid catches people who would otherwise fall through the cracks of our health care system, whether they're children, seniors, or people who are disabled.	78.9	60	+61
There's a reason Medicaid rolls are swelling: because most people get their insurance through their employers, and we've got over 15 million Americans out of work with no hope for the future.	73.6	49	+61
The measure of a great nation isn't how well it treats those at the top but how it treats those whose fortunes are down. With record unemployment and a shrinking middle class, we should be catching people when they fall, not cutting holes in our safety net.	78	58	+61
In a country as wealthy as ours, with the best medical care in the world if you can afford it, we should be letting more people buy into Medicare and Medicaid if they don't have private insurance, not threatening the health care of our children, seniors, and people who are out of work.	75.8	52	+61
When our fellow citizens have been stricken with cancer or heart disease, we've pitched in through Medicaid, and we should be proud as Americans that today there are millions of beautiful children and productive adults who are alive because we worked together to protect them.	75.6	53	+61
Medicare and Medicaid are insurance programs we pay for with our taxes. We've been paying those premiums for years, and now that millions of us are out of work or growing older, politicians want to tear up our claims.	74.3	54	+61

### Messages that Move Voters on Protecting Children's Health

We next tested a set of narratives on protecting children's health. Once again, we tested our messages against the strongest opposition message we could find or design, taken straight from the language of the opposition:

#### The Opposition Narrative on Protecting Children's Health

These are tough times, and they call for tough measures. Spending is out of control, and we have to rein it in. A government insurance program for children has already cost the taxpayers forty billion dollars and will cost another thirty billion more in the coming years. Expanding this

program will increase taxes and create an unfunded federal mandate that our already strained state budgets just cannot afford. The needs of children are important, and this country has always taken care of those needs, but 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 every time someone identifies a problem. The main effect of government interventions is only to exacerbate the problems we face, because if there's one thing you can count on government for, it's 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. Given the country's economic crisis and the growing federal budget deficit, American taxpayers simply can't afford any more.

This message has strong emotional resonance, particularly with voters anywhere from the right through slightly left of center. This message fared well with self-identified strong GOPs but poorly with all other voters. Swing voters dialed up every time they heard a well-branded negative statement about government but dialed down every time they heard the specifics, suggesting both that these platitudes are wearing thin and that, when applied to children, voters are spontaneously concerned about cuts.

**The good news is that our best messages beat the opposition message by strong double digits with registered voters, swing voters, and voters in every region of the country.** As can be seen from the table below, the opposition message did well, with a mean rating of 49.7 on a scale of 0 to 100. However, our best messages did substantially better. In head-to-head comparisons (the far right-hand column), respondents gave higher ratings to our messages than to the opposition message by wide margins.

### How Our Narratives Fared Against the Opposition

	Mean Rating	Percent preferring progressive	Percent preferring opposition	Margin
Opposition	49.7	-	-	-
You Don't Gamble	76.5	70	22	+48
Pediatrician for Every Child	74.3	68	24	+44
Work for a Living	75.8	67	25	+42
Bottom Line	74.3	67	26	+41

Below are our top narratives, the data supporting them, and a brief description of what worked and did not work:

#### You Don't Gamble

The health of our children is more important than the bottom line of health insurance companies. A little more than two years ago, before the debate over health care reform, Congress passed a law, supported by majorities of both parties, guaranteeing health care to millions of American children. It had the support of 85% of Americans, although it wasn't so popular with health insurance companies, who saw it as threatening their profits. Today that

law is providing insurance to kids of working parents who earn less than about \$45,000 a year and can't afford \$10,000 premiums, let alone all the co-pays and deductibles. And it's been one of the most successful and innovative programs for moving people from welfare to work, because it allows parents to work without losing Medicaid for their kids. But now Members of Congress are threatening the care of 7 million children, saying we can't afford it—while taking large campaign contributions from health insurance companies. It's time we put the needs of America's families above the needs of politicians and special interests.

Message Rating 0-100

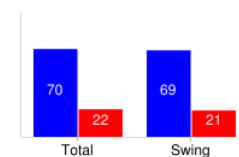
■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



The data in the graphs show the strength of this message, both on its own and in contrast to the opposition message. The percent who found it compelling (rating it 60 or above) is 80%. Of those, 56% rated it 80-100 (high emotional intensity).

The second graph shows how the message fared against the opposition message. As the figure shows, this message wins by wide margins with both the general electorate and persuadable voters. This message struck a responsive chord across the political spectrum and with virtually every demographic group, ending with dial-ratings in the 70s to high 80s from the far right to the furthest left. It "took off" from the start, with its first sentence, weaving together values with information about the program, but always staying at the level of the common vernacular. Themes of investment and American leadership were very powerful in driving people's response to the second half of the message. Throughout, the metaphor of gambling or "rolling the dice" with our children's health was strongly motivating.

Preference

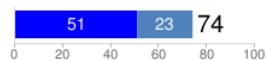


### Pediatrician for Every Child

I believe in a family doctor for every family and a pediatrician for every child. We're still a long way from affordable health care for every adult, but we've made remarkable progress at insuring our nation's kids. Over the last decade, when the number of Americans without insurance has skyrocketed to more than 50 million, we've actually cut the rate of uninsured kids by half. How have we done it? By acting like Americans: setting our sights on something that seemed impossible, and making it happen. With bipartisan support, two years ago Congress passed a children's health insurance program that has done for kids what Medicare did for seniors, creating a program that works, designed for their unique developmental needs. In two short years, it's taken care of millions of children of working parents who can't afford insurance, giving them their vaccinations and setting their broken arms. But now politicians are trying to balance the budget on the backs of these kids. With all the nation building we've done abroad, it's time we did some nation building here at home, starting with protecting the health of our children.

## Message Rating 0-100

■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



As can be seen from the graphs, this was another strong narrative. This message did well with partisans of all stripes, starting with its opening statement, which shot the dials up across partisan lines. The same was true of its final line about nation-building, which led to a sharp upward spike in the dials. In the interim was a slow rise, as even strong GOPs ended at a dial-rating of 70. As can be seen from the graph, differences based on partisanship were minimal. The only thing that drove this message down was some apparent ambivalence about the fact that children had insurance at long last but their parents and other adults do not.

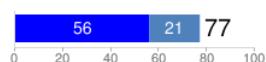
## Preference

**Work for a Living**

People who work for a living ought to be able to take their kids to the doctor when they're sick. After years of trying, a bipartisan majority in Congress finally agreed with that basic value, creating a program that's been as effective for kids of working parents as Medicare is for seniors—and at substantially lower cost than private insurance. The children's health insurance program takes care of kids whose parents can't afford health insurance despite working full time, often at two or three jobs. And just like Medicare was designed to meet the needs of seniors, this law was designed with kids in mind. There's a reason we have pediatricians, because kids aren't just little adults. They have distinct needs, which require care from professionals who understand the needs of growing children. That's why health insurance for children of working parents needs to remain like it is now, a standalone program like Medicare for seniors, not something for politicians to put on the chopping block every time there's an economic downturn. It's time we made kids a national priority the same way good parents make them a family priority.

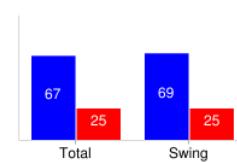
## Message Rating 0-100

■ % Rating 80-100  
■ % Rating 60-79



This message, with its theme of hard work and earning benefits, was the strongest message with Latino-Americans. It showed greater variation by partisanship, with strong Democrats and strong Republicans (the 20% on the left and right) 20 points apart in their final dial ratings, although even the strong GOPs ended up near an extraordinarily high rating near 70. The dials shot up with the initial values statement and then steadily rose throughout for all groups. The dials took a spike upward at the mention of cost-efficiency of the program relative to private insurance, suggesting again that voters are discriminating efficient, cost-effective programs from those they consider wasteful. The values statement at the end also strongly resonated with voters.

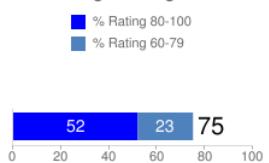
## Preference

**Bottom Line**

The health of our children is more important than the bottom line of health insurance companies. A little more than two years ago, before the debate over health care reform,

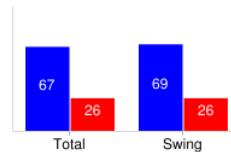
Congress passed and the President signed a law supported by majorities of both parties guaranteeing health care to millions of American children. The law had the support of 85% of Americans, although it wasn't so popular with health insurance companies, who saw it as threatening their profits. But today that law is providing insurance to kids of working parents who earn less than about \$45,000 a year and can't afford \$10,000 premiums, let alone all the co-pays and deductibles. And it's been one of the most successful and innovative programs for moving people from welfare to work, because it allows parents to work without losing Medicaid coverage for their kids. But now Members of Congress are threatening major cuts to the program and to the care of 7 million children, saying we can't afford it—while taking large campaign contributions from health insurance companies. It's time we put the needs of America's families above the needs of politicians and special interests.

#### Message Rating 0-100



As can be seen from the graphs, this was another strong narrative. This message, with its strong populist themes, strongly resonated with voters across the spectrum, including strong GOPs, although it was more polarizing than the other children's health messages. Voters responded to both its strong values statements and its references to corporate profits and how they should be subordinated to the good of working families and children.

#### Preference



## "Talking Points" that "Stick" on Protecting Children's Health

Just as in the first section of the survey, we tested a series of one-line talking points against the most powerful talking points used by the opposition. Multiple brief, evocative statements beat the opposition by wide margins with both the general public and swing voters:

### If You Only Have Six Seconds...

	Mean	%80-100	Margin
Spending is out of control, and we have to rein it in, and that means making tough choices, whether it's Social Security or children's health insurance.	40.4	15	--
People who work for a living ought to be able to take their kids to the doctor when they're sick.	83.5	66	+65
The health of our children should be more important than the bottom line of health insurance companies.	83.1	66	+60
With all the nation-building we've done abroad, it's time we did some nation building here at home, starting with protecting the health of our children.	80.8	63	+59
It's time we put the needs of America's families above the needs of politicians and special interests, by protecting health insurance for children of working parents.	79.9	60	+59
You don't gamble with our children's health.	81.9	64	+57

Investing in our children's health is investing in America. When we help children develop and thrive, we are paving the way for our country's next generation of workers and leaders.	79.1	59	+57
Children's health insurance couldn't be more important today with so many people unemployed, losing their health insurance, or working longer hours for less money.	77.8	57	+56
If we want the 21st century to be the next American century, we have to invest in it, starting with investing in our children's health.	77.4	56	+55
I believe in a family doctor for every family and a pediatrician for every child.	78.1	55	+54
If our kids aren't healthy, they aren't going to learn, and we aren't going to stay the world's leader in innovation.	77.8	55	+54
Health insurance for children of working parents needs to remain like it is now, a standalone program like Medicare, not something for politicians to put on the chopping block every time there's an economic downturn.	76.6	56	+53
Over the last decade, when the number of Americans without insurance has skyrocketed to more than 50 million, we've cut the rate of uninsured kids by half, by acting like Americans: setting our sites on something that seemed impossible, and making it happen.	72.3	47	+52
It's time we made kids a national priority the same way good parents make them a family priority. And there's no more important priority for kids than their health.	78.2	56	+51
With bipartisan support, two years ago Congress passed a children's health insurance program that has done for kids what Medicare did for seniors, creating a program that works, designed for their unique developmental needs.	74.5	50	+50

## Conclusions

The research led to the following general conclusions:

### **Moving Forward on Protecting Medicaid and Children's Health**

- Americans strongly oppose cuts to Medicaid, and they strongly oppose cuts to Children's Health Insurance
- The more they hear about what these programs do, and the stronger the references to their values, the greater their opposition to cuts
- Linking Medicaid to Medicare is effective in strengthening the connection to a highly popular program, particularly with both providing care to seniors, although Medicaid is highly popular on its own
- The focus of both political parties on deficit cutting rather than job creation, and on cutting programs that help people who are poor, "down on their luck" (a concept many working and middle class people understand all too well), or getting on in their years is grossly out of sync with public sentiments

- Narratives on preserving Medicaid beat opposition messages by 30-50 points, and multiple “talking points” on preserving Medicaid win by up to 76 points over opposition talking points
- Narratives on Children’s Health win by upwards of 40 points, and talking points, by 50-65 points.
- Americans are not uniformly anti-government. They oppose programs they believe are wasteful or misplaced, not those that fit their values, interests, or both.

*For further information, contact Drew Westen, Ph.D., at [info@westenstrategies.com](mailto:info@westenstrategies.com). More extensive PowerPoint slides summarizing the findings are available from First Focus Campaign for Children, <http://www.ffcampaignforchildren.org/>.*

