To: Interested Parties
From: The Groundwork Collaborative, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and UnidosUS Action Fund
Date: July 29, 2019
Re: Project Mosaic: Understanding the Economic Perspectives of Black Americans

Executive Summary

Existing public opinion research is limited in what it can tell us about the attitudes of Black and Latinx Americans when it comes to “kitchen table” economic issues, and most analyses focus on contrasting their experiences with those of white Americans. Consequently, there is little analysis that conveys the nuances of how these groups experience and perceive the economy.

Project Mosaic, a joint project of the Groundwork Collaborative, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and UnidosUS Action Fund is a research effort that seeks to better understand Black and Latinx adults’ personal economic experiences as well as the broader views on how the economy should function. We explore the economic challenges they face, their perspective on the role government plays in the economy, and the role racism (institutional and otherwise) plays in their economic outcomes.

This memo presents findings from this study as pertains to responses gathered from Black adults. Our results show that:

- Black adults perceive the economy through a people-centered lens and face serious personal economic challenges.
- While Black adults say individual drive is important for economic success, they also see an economy that’s rigged in favor of the wealthy and privileged.
- Black adults strongly believe that racism plays a role in the economy and that the government should do more to address it yet are less likely to cite racism as their most significant economic concern.
- Most believe there has been little improvement in the overall U.S. economy over the last two years, though they are slightly more optimistic about their own personal situation.
- Black adults want the federal government to take a more active role in improving the economy, though there remains a great deal of skepticism that politicians will actually change things for the greater good.

It is important to highlight that this brief merely scratches the surface of the vast and rich dataset that we obtained through Project Mosaic. We plan to continue to release findings in the coming months, and to engage with additional partners across the progressive community to ensure that Black Americans’ views are represented in important economic discussions.
Introduction

Black Americans have always been a driving force of American prosperity. Black Americans are key actors in our economy, as consumers and workers, and increasingly as a powerful political force driving electoral outcomes. Despite their contributions, Black Americans are rarely asked what their economic priorities are, and policy decisions are too often made without their needs in mind.

This study shows that Black Americans have quite strong—and at times pessimistic—views of the economy. They feel mixed about their own economic situation, and report facing a variety of personal economic challenges, affecting everything from retirement, education, to wages. Broadly speaking, most Black Americans perceive our national economy as benefiting the wealthy and privileged at the expense of everyone else. At the same time, racism is salient, but not necessarily the core challenge people report facing. Nonetheless, most see the country as still having challenges on race, and a majority agree that a fight for a fairer economy must include efforts to combat racism. It is not surprising given this backdrop that Blacks see an opportunity for an expanded federal government role across a variety of topics.

Methodology

Project Mosaic is a study commissioned by the Groundwork Collaborative, and completed in partnership with Topos Partnership, GBAO, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and UnidosUS Action Fund. We combined a multi-phase approach that included the following:

- An ethnography involving 185 total interviews, divided about evenly between Black and Latinx adults. This included 98 full interviews (i.e., 30-60 minutes), and 87 opportunistic encounters (i.e., 5-30 minutes). Most were in-person interviews conducted in locations chosen for demographic purposes; these were supplemented with phone interviews of respondents around country. Interviews were offered in English and Spanish.
- A “TalkBack” exercise involving 630 total interviews - divided about evenly between Black and Latinx adults. During Talkback sessions, individual subjects were presented with brief texts and then asked several open-ended questions. This exercise allows researchers to determine what respondents “hear” in the message (i.e., What is the main idea? Is it the idea we intended? What emotions does the idea provoke?).
- A national multimodal survey of 3,000 Latinx and Black American adults living in the U.S. – divided evenly between 1500 self-identified Latinx respondents and 1500 self-identified Black respondents. Interviews were conducted via live calls to 1,000 landlines and 1,000 cell phones, and an additional 1,000 online panel interviews. Interviews were offered in Spanish and English.

1 Interviews were conducted from February - March.
2 Black adults were interviewed primarily in Memphis, TN., Philadelphia, PA., Chicago, IL., Tampa, FL., and Orlando, FL.
3 Latinx adults were interviewed primarily in Tucson, AZ., Houston, TX., Chicago, IL., Tampa, FL., and Orlando, FL.
4 Interviews were completed March 31-April 6 (11 texts with 411 respondents), and June 21-June 25 (5 texts with 219 respondents).
5 Interviews were completed May 21-June 6.
How the Economy Works

Black Americans view the economy through a personal lens

In general, Black Americans understand the economy at the level of everyday lived experience, meaning issues of financial stability for themselves and their families, are generally top of mind over larger measures of the economy like GDP or the national unemployment rate. When evaluating “the economy,” the majority of Black adults (51%) consider both the money they earn—hours, wages, benefits, ability to save, the need to work multiple jobs—and the rising cost of living—such as food, education, housing, and healthcare.

Most Black adults see the economy as “rigged”

Black adults are extremely skeptical that the current economic system is fair or set up in a way that facilitates their success. By a 19-point margin, Black adults agree that, “the system is set up so the people who start out on top always end up on top,” as opposed to the idea that, “In our economy, if you work hard you can get ahead, no matter where you started.” Similarly, by a 35-point margin, Black adults agree that, “People still have to work too hard just to stay afloat. Meanwhile, those who already have certain privileges can get ahead more easily,” rather than an opposing statement, “For the most part, people can find a better job and get ahead if they are willing to work hard.”

Black women, and particularly younger Black women, are especially likely to view the economy as structurally unfair and set up to protect those who already have power and privilege. Whereas the statement, “The system is set up so the people who start out ahead always end up on top,” carries a 19-point advantage overall, that advantage grows to 26 points among Black women, and 33 points among younger Black women. It is also worth noting that Black adults...
with more education are also more likely to view the economy as rigged. Sixty-three percent (63%) of college graduates favor the viewpoint that those who start ahead stay ahead, compared to 51% of non-college graduates.

At base, Black adults have a complicated view of the American economy. They feel strongly about the terrain – that the system is not set up to work for everyone, and that for most people, working hard and playing by the rules is not enough to get ahead. But at the same time, they believe—for themselves as individuals especially—that they must focus primarily on navigating that terrain.

Black Americans’ Experience in the Economy

Black adults say the economy has not improved in the last two years

Black adults believe the economy has either gotten worse or remained stagnant over the last two years. About half (49%) say that the nation’s economy has gotten worse, outpacing the segment who believe things have gotten better (17%) by 32 points. The remaining 34% of respondents say that the economy has stayed the same.

Respondents are less likely to be pessimistic on the economy as the focal point of the questions move closer to home. For instance, one-third of respondents (36%) report feeling that economic conditions in their local community have gotten worse—13 points less than the percentage who feel that the nation’s overall economy has declined. When asked specifically about their personal financial situation, respondents are even less likely to articulate a pessimistic view; only 27% said they feel their own situation has worsened over the last two years.
Perceptions of President Trump’s effect on economic conditions for the Black community are similarly negative compared to perceptions of the overall economy. Just 11% say that economic conditions for the Black community have improved since Trump’s election, which is 6 points lower than the percentage who believe the American economy has gotten better in the last two years. Forty-nine percent say that Trump’s election has worsened the economic condition of Black Americans in general, mirroring the percentage who say the same about the overall economy.

**Black adults face significant “kitchen table” economic challenges**

The most prevailing economic challenges respondents raise are those related to personal financial security like saving for retirement, paying for education, and finding a job to keep up with the rising cost of living. Black respondents seek financial security and point to saving for retirement as a “big” (44%) or “somewhat” of a challenge (24%) in their lives (68% total challenge) while facing discrimination in the workplace is less challenging (17% big, 38% total).

Having the ability to save for retirement is acutely felt among lower middle class (52% big), and low-income (68% big) Black Americans. Additionally, low-income Black Americans cite “finding a job that pays enough to keep up with the cost of living” (57% big) and achieving financial aspirations (56% big) as economic challenges.

Higher education costs are a more pressing challenge for younger adults, with little difference by educational attainment. Over half (51%) of younger women and 41% of younger men say paying for college has been a big challenge for them, the top challenge for each group. Older Black Americans are more likely to say retirement is a top challenge, with education further down the list. Just as many college graduates (38%) as non-grads (37%) cite education costs as a big challenge.
Finding convenient affordable housing is not necessarily top-tier, but it’s a bigger challenge for Blacks living in urban areas (38% big) than for those living in rural areas (28%). Affordable housing also poses more of an obstacle to renters (43%) than to homeowners (21%).

**Black Americans agree racism persists, hold complicated views on how it affects them personally**

The ethnographic research affirms the notion that for Black people, issues of race and racism are always seen as part of their experience. A long history of exclusion in this country has produced a broadly shared cultural common sense among Black Americans that anti-Black racism pervades institutions and their daily lives. Our data shows that most black people are highly aware of how they are perceived in the workplace and in the broader dominant culture.

In forced-choice question about the pervasiveness of racism, Black Americans overwhelmingly agree that America’s issues with race are as much a part of the present as they were in the past. Over seven in ten (71%) agree that, “it’s harder for Black and brown people to overcome the obstacles put in the way” versus the statement that now “people are judged on their hard work and ability, not the color of their skin.” There is some variation by party affiliation with 74% of Democrats (regardless of intensity) and 64% of independents (without leaners) saying overcoming obstacles is harder for Black and brown people while just about half (52%) of Republicans with leaners agreed. College-educated women are most likely to say racism puts obstacles in the way (80%).

Still, Black adults are much more likely to cite factors other than race as most important when considering their own economic status. Asked to identify a single factor that has most contributed to their economic situation, Blacks most commonly point to “personal drive and persistence” (27%) and the way that they were raised by their family (26%).
Respondents list “experiences with racism and race-based discrimination” fourth on the list (15%), just behind the “availability of good jobs” near where they live (19%). It is of course challenging to ask respondents to cite a single, primary driver of their own socioeconomic situation. Yet, this self-report is nonetheless illustrative of this study’s ethnographic findings which show that Black Americans often default to considering interpersonal interactions when they consider racism, and thus tend to perceive that individuals should generally focus on navigating the economy as best they can.

That said, a clear majority of Black adults believe that combating racism is central to creating a better economy. By a 20-point margin, Black adults agree that it is necessary to, “fight against racism from our government, at work, and in our daily lives,” in order to create an economy that works for everyone (55% overall, 38% strongly). On the other hand, a third (35%) favor the point of view that economic fairness “doesn’t have to be a fight about racism.” College-educated Black women are particularly likely (66%) to say the two issues need to be connected.
Government’s Role in the Economy

**Government should do more to solve problems and strengthen the economy**

Respondents overwhelmingly say that government has a role to play in “solving problems,” meeting the needs of people, and improving the economy. The survey asked two different versions of a broad question on the role of the federal government—should it do more, or does it already do “too many things better left to businesses and individuals.” Among respondents the difference between these two frames is small, and the preference for increased federal government role is clear (76% vs. 17% for “solve”; 71% vs. 20% for “active”). Very few respondents agreed that the federal government “does too many things.”

Black Americans also want to see the federal government play a greater role in assisting with personal economic challenges. The role of the federal government can extend from the broad to the specific challenges Black Americans face. Across demographics, majorities want to see the federal government play a larger role in ensuring individuals have sufficient health care (69% a lot more, 87% total more) and covering the cost of college and vocational programs (66% a lot, 86% total). The differences between strong Democrats, weak Democrats, and independents on these measures are relatively minor, meanwhile just under half of Black Republicans (including leaners) think the federal government should “do a lot more” on challenges such as health care and education costs.

*Please tell me whether you think the federal government should do more or less than it does now to help people address this challenge in their own lives.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Gov’t should do a lot more</th>
<th>Total gov’t should do more</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having sufficient healthcare coverage</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covering the costs of college, higher education, [trade or vocational school], or other career or schooling opportunities</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a job that pays well enough to keep up with the cost of living</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding affordable housing in a neighborhood where my family and I feel safe</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing discrimination or disrespect from my boss/co-workers because of my race or ethnicity</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding quality, affordable childcare</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving enough for retirement</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a job or position matching my qualifications and skills</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving the economic dreams/goals I have had for myself</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the connections needed to succeed in my chosen line of work</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>63</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
But while Black Americans want government to do more, the ethnographic research makes clear that some are highly cynical that government can or will do more. Black people at times perceive a hostile political environment (both in tone and actual neglect by government), which overwhelsms and disempowers their faith in effectiveness or just action. Nevertheless, the survey results show that for most, an optimistic outlook – one saying our economic problems, “can only be fixed by coming together to fight for better, fairer, government policies” – overrides the more pessimistic view – “the government is so dysfunctional, it can’t be trusted to get anything done” – by 20+ points (56% to 34%). Still, this study suggests that actors in the political and policy spaces would benefit from placing greater emphasis on engendering trust with members of the Black community.

**Challenges do not always have exactly comparable demands for federal government involvement.**

Respondents’ top personal challenges are not necessarily their top areas for expanded federal government involvement. Saving for retirement—a top-tier challenge—falls into mid-tier in the list of roles for federal government involvement. Health care is mid-pack in personal challenges yet is considered the top area for expanded role.

![Graph showing challenges and government roles](image)

Turning to more personal dimensions, Black Americans feel government has a lesser role to play in areas of achieving personal economic goals or dreams, despite being a substantial personal challenge. And racism at work—a bottom-tier personal challenge—ranks higher in the list of what requires increased government involvement.
Messaging on the Economy

Zero-sum mental model leads many to miss the mark

Messaging is most effective when communicators successfully tap broadly shared mental models and inspire collective action. However, policy debates often fail to engage Black Americans in part because little account is given to the mental models Black Americans use to understand what the economy is and how it works. Policy debates generally fail to overcome the deep cynicism that comes from broken promises and a sense of neglect. The qualitative component of this study is especially helpful for understanding some of the issues that currently plague progressive policymakers and advocates seeking to engage Black Americans.

To encourage people to consider policy changes, progressive communicators often lead by litigating the issues of economic disparities, economic fairness and the negative influence of the wealthy and powerful. In this view, the economy is the net outcome of a contest of raw power between elites and regular people. This zero-sum outlook – that “I have less because others have more,” – is internalized and unquestioned, as is the view that the rich and powerful will fight changes and policies that would take from them to give to others. This frame also does little to lead people to think about economic growth.

This zero-sum frame is especially disempowering for Black Americans, who have reason to expect that things won’t change at a systems level because (1) greed and selfishness are constants, (2) the wealthy and powerful are unlikely to act against their own best interests, and (3) reminders of prevailing historic disenfranchisement remain all too visible and pervasive. Further complicating matters – and as mentioned before – the zero-sum assumption goes unquestioned: the size of the pie does not change; only the sizes of the pieces do. References to the rich are surely vivid and powerful, and they easily trigger people’s dissatisfactions about the status quo. But unless people also see legitimate room for their own empowerment and influence, references to the rich and powerful are unsatisfying. In other words, people can agree with the critique, but it doesn’t add to their thinking or change their behavior, if this frame precludes agency.

This is not to say it would be better to shy away from attacking the problem of elites hoarding the wealth. However, it is necessary to do so in a way that not only highlights the potential economic power of regular people, but also places the us-versus-them problem into a larger framework in which it is in everyone’s interest that Black Americans thrive economically.

People-centered models that invoke collective action are most promising

The ethnographic research finds indications of a promising economic mental model that may advantage progressive policies but would require further expansion and reinforcement. A “people-centered” way of thinking builds on the centrality of “people” in Black Americans’ thinking, but bridges to community and the larger economic system. Also, as opposed to the widely rejected “trickle down” view of the economy in which money flows from the rich to the
rest, a people-centered view of the economy recognizes that value and wealth is created by
everyday people and should flow through communities.

This people-centered economic mental model includes the understanding that access to well-
paying jobs and economic mobility can create a good economy rather than be a result of it.
Accordingly, such a model uplifts the idea that regular, working people are the key to a strong
 economy in several ways. First, spending money creates, sustains and grows an economy,
because businesses have enough customers to stay afloat and hire people, which leads to
more paychecks. Second, when people have money, they can save and invest in their future,
open businesses, and take various other steps that enable a community to thrive. And finally,
everyday workers in all fields are the ones who actually create the value the economy produces.
Thriving workers means a thriving economy. Therefore, this model drives home the idea that
each individual is affected by how the people around them – neighbors, friends, and family – are
doing economically.

Future success in political communications targeting Black Americans will depend on
communicators’ ability to improve how messages land on several keys:

- **Highlighting intentionality**: the economy is something that people create, construct,
  change and manage for various kinds of outcomes, not something one simply has to
  endure as best one can, like the weather.
- **Fore fronting people**: the economy should be constructed for the benefit of everyday
  people – and especially Black people – rather than for the benefit of corporations or the
  wealthy and powerful.
- **Giving people hope**: the economy can and will be changed for their benefit.
- **Supporting and vividly envision a picture of what a good economy actually is**: a better
  economy is not just imagined; there must also be clear steps to make it happen.
- **Encouraging personal agency**: people, as members of a democratic society, have an
  important role to play and a positive outcome is possible.

In an exercise exploring how well this viewpoint resonates, each of the statements performs
extremely well. For instance, 87% of respondents say that, “Everyday working people drive the
economy. It’s our labor, our production of goods and services, and our small businesses that
create wealth, jobs, and a vibrant economy. However, our economic policies all favor those at
the top. It’s time to change focus and have our policies build the economy by putting working
people first,” reflects their views at least somewhat, including 56% who say it reflects their views
either exactly or very closely.
This type of approach is key both to internalizing and communicating that prosperity starts with people and communities -- when everyday people have what they need to do well, the benefits ripple through communities and the overall economy. America’s prosperity has most often come at a price to Black workers whose labor has been exploited, and who have been prevented from fully sharing in the economic gains they’ve created. But Blacks recognize their own agency and policymakers and communicators should tap into that deeply-held agency to encourage collective action to drive systemic economic change.