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The “Self-Survivors”

In-depth interviews reveal resolute self-reliance as underemployment increases

In recent months, macro-economic indicators have revealed some small signs of improvement. Nonetheless, these interviews offer a sharp reminder that the recession is not over. Voters continue to describe the immediate challenges of current economic conditions and voice their deep concerns about the country’s economic future. To understand the intensity of the economic impact of this recession two and a half years after the initial crash, Democracy Corps conducted a set of 30 in-depth interviews with individuals in some of the most adversely affected groups, all of whom make less than \$60,000 a year. These interviews were primarily conducted among white non-college educated voters, Latinos, and young people under the age of 30. These interviews reveal the depth of this economic downturn and the impact on middle and working class Americans.¹

Over the last two and a half years of the recession, these Americans have devised personal strategies to get by. They have re-adjusted expectations for personal financial success, and re-oriented their lives to suit the times. They prepared themselves to weather any bump in prices, from gas to groceries—the precarious balance of household budgets can easily be offset by a bump in prices at the pump or a setback at work.

While Americans have been facing these difficulties since the recession hit, these interviews offer new distinctions in Americans’ approaches to the economy. Last year, we noticed marked differences between white non-college educated voters and members of the new progressive base. These distinctions have eroded somewhat, with the vast majority of our respondents surveying similar sets of opportunities and articulating a recession-wide new American worldview. Last year, respondents talked about the temporary strategies they employed to get through difficult times. Many were unemployed and waiting to return to the kind of jobs they had lost while making it by as best they could. This year, those temporary solutions have become more permanent as underemployment is both pervasive and, for many, permanent. These conditions con-

¹ The in-depth interviews were conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps from March-April, 2011.



tribute to the most striking difference between the 2010 responses and the interviews we conducted this year—the onset of individualism—which is voiced as both stoic self-reliance and atomistic independence. Last year, our respondents opened up about the collective support they received in tough times—from community organizations, churches, kin networks, and even government aid. This year, however, respondents were more individualistic and self-reliant—vocally so—about the ways in which they get by on their own in a dog-eat-dog world. For many this requires a creative cobbler of part-time jobs which do not offer benefits, but which do offer much-needed income. One participant called herself a “self-survivor”—something that is necessary to get by. They continue to articulate concerns about greed and the culture of debt—as they did so passionately in 2010—but the tone has changed. These concerns about greed and debt are framed largely in reference to their “every-man-for-himself” perspective on the way things work.

They are also more intensely focused on reform—they do not trust either party to do the right thing and are unwilling to put faith in corporate America again. Even when informed that the bailouts (financial and auto industries) had been paid back, many remained skeptical about the corporate greed and excess that necessitated the bailouts in the first place. Neither political party has stepped up in a way that has restored trust in government. This anti-institutionalism comes across in the way they view the government in general and the two parties in particular. As one participant said, “I don’t know who to believe anymore.”

We found fewer sharp conditional and environmental differences between the groups (white non-college, young, and Latino groups) as individuals across the groups have muddled through on combinations of part-time and temporary work. Many voiced cautious optimism but also struggled to see how things were going to get better. This may, in part, be attributed to the outlook for opportunity in the coming years. There is a widespread consensus that education and training will be their key to the future. However, while many of last year’s respondents—even those in the white non-college group—were in the process of pursuing education and professional training, very few of this year’s respondents (except those under the age of 35) were able to simultaneously pursue education and work.

This is a dangerous stew for both political parties. No politician, political party, or corporation seems to be making things better, especially for the suffering middle class that now feels more poor than middle and more crashed than anything else.

“A little bit left over after we pay the bills”

Economic indicators

In their own lives and communities, Americans do not see, feel, trust, or experience macro-economic indicators like the stock market, the government’s employment figures, the consumer price index, or even consumer confidence measures. Instead, their hope and concern comes from the visible, local, and experiential indicators that they see every day. These give daily context to life in the recession.



Many still talk about home foreclosures as an accurate barometer:

“When I start to see the real estate market swing back to normal, you know. When people are shopping more for luxury goods again, you know, when I’m not reading about people with all this debt on the news who can’t pay off loans and are defaulting on their mortgages.” –Young woman

But many more focus on retail sales as the most instructive indicator. The differences in economic outlook this year have had a clear impact on the economic indicators these voters watch to tell them whether the economy is improving. While similar portions of participants cited “jobs” as a major indicator, this year, the character of the job market has impacted the other indicators to which they turn to tell them things are better. For example, last year, only a couple of respondents indicated that they watch people’s spending habits and sense that things are better when they see people out shopping. This year, by contrast, one in four respondents pointed to people spending more money as an indicator that the economy was improving.

A majority believes that middle and working class purchasing power will provide the path out of the recession. Therefore, when consumers are confident enough and stable enough to begin making small- and medium-sized purchases again, the economy will begin to recover in a real and permanent way.

“You know, every once in a while you hear things about companies recovering and people spending but I don’t really see it.” –White non-college man

“Well we know that it’s bad when homes are being foreclosed, but at the same time to me the indicator that’s really telling people or telling us that things are really, really seriously bad is when retail places are closing down, retail space is not renting, businesses are not able to maintain their rent. To me that’s serious indication.” –Latino woman

“We’re managing to have a little bit of money left over after we pay the bills and what not so that to me is an indicator that our situation is getting better, because now, before, we basically had like maybe \$10 left over after we paid bills and now we’re getting to the point where we have more than \$100 left over.” –White non-college woman

“Well the housing numbers, the employment numbers, but more the consumer spending for people who are comfortable going out and actually buying things for want instead of need. When people actually start upgrading with their houses – I mean the housing market has just been atrocious lately ... but it’s basically just spending, you know, people being comfortable again that 1) they’re not going to lose their job or have the threat of being laid off, because I guess that is one of the biggest things right now that people are just worried, they don’t know that they’re going to have a job tomorrow. I know many people...are just a little concerned right now and once that dissipates then that will definitely help out things, but once again it’s a matter of whether people feel comfortable spending and those numbers do go down, the unemployment numbers, the housing market; things like that.” –White non-college man



“When the economy is bad and people aren’t working they’re not able to spend. People are not able to hold on to their health insurance and they’re not able to go to the doctor or stuff like that or get their medication, they’re skimping on medicine and it’s affected everybody in the retail.” –Latino woman

“I think the economy is probably staying the same or getting a little bit worse because everything is going so much higher to buy things and everything. I notice when I go to the store now that I purchase food that my wife and me, you know, the shopping used to be like \$200 and now it’s like \$240, the food shopping, and we’re buying the same exact things almost. I would say that the economy is getting a little bit worse.” –White non-college man

“All I want is to have a job”

Employment, unemployment, and underemployment

While foreclosures and prices continue to plague these voters, the most common problem they articulated was tied to jobs. The problems of unemployment, underemployment, and lack of opportunities to advance in the workplace concerned nearly every respondent—either they had personally struggled with one of these or a member of their household had been hit by layoffs and reduced wages at work.

Both last year and this, many of our participants discussed the experience of job loss. Many more made tough decisions to take lower-paid, lower-status, or more temporary jobs than they had held prior to the crash. Many others who managed to keep their jobs struggled with reduced wages or hours at work. Last year, the impact of job loss was described using the vocabulary of shock: “everything went downhill,” “everything went to shit,” and “it was crazy.” By contrast, the recessionary jobs environment—particularly the pervasive experience of underemployment—had become normative by the time we conducted interviews in 2011. This new set of respondents feels lucky to have jobs—any jobs—and express a kind of willful pride in their ability to make things work despite dramatically changed circumstances. Indeed, while a larger percentage of this year’s respondents cited reduced hours, wages, or benefits at work, a larger percentage also cited work in response to the question, “what did you have going for you?”

Even as employment figures grow, underemployment remains pervasive. For many, the kind of here-and-there temporary jobs they took to get by helped them through a tough time. For many others, part-time and lower-paying out-of-field work has become a more permanent strategy to make ends meet. Americans have become more cautious in this economy—as the good-paying jobs that they lost either do not return, or become out of reach due to competition—more and more they accept lower-paying jobs with fewer benefits. Hourly minimum wage jobs are real—even for those with college degrees. And when health care, tuition, and transportation costs rise, many formerly middle income people find themselves working to be poor.



The lasting impact of the economic downturn has made these respondents particularly focused on a strong work ethic to maintain their current employment situation, while maintaining a tight budget to make ends meet and in some instances, have some money left over for savings or small luxuries. Among both white non-college and the new progressive base, simply having a job was the most common response for what they had going for them by far.

“As for me, work has slowed down, I’ve gone to ‘as needed’. I’m part-time but I’ve gone to ‘as needed’ status as well... well I was at a point working more, making a consistent living...but currently I’ve regressed.” –Latino woman

“Work is scarce and as far as my hours, they’ve been cut, so I don’t see any change within the near future. I’ve been, of course, keeping up with tabs on that and there’s nothing new.” –Latino woman

“Got a personal assistant type position 15 minutes away and getting paid cash every week. And I’m still looking for something more permanent.” –White non-college woman

“I’m still okay, but kind of by the skin of my teeth. You know, there is just not a lot of work and some days I’m working only part time...Now it’s like $\frac{3}{4}$ of a job and sometimes only a part-time job. So I supplement my income by doing odd jobs ...anything I can do to make an extra buck.” –Latino woman

“Some older and seasoned workers who know their stuff, know their job, they’re competing with younger college students just fresh out of school and the young college students will take less money because they’re young and they can afford to take less money whereas some older Americans can’t really afford it.” –Latino woman

“Well I’m still looking for work and I do work part-time, like I said, I take side jobs and things like that, but it’s not the full time work I’ve been doing all my life where I just got laid off from, so I just take what I can get, but as far as are things getting better? No, because I am still looking for full-time work again.” –White non-college man

“You have to adjust in order to make a living and take care of your family so you do what it takes. That’s the situation I’m in again. I was in a job making really good money in sales and things were fine, living well and being able to do what I want to do and buy what I want to buy and then I got laid off and now it’s back down to take whatever jobs you can find out of the paper or on Craigslist or whatever.” –White non-college man

“All I want to do is have a job.” –Young woman

***“Just trying to keep afloat”*****Individual strategies for life in the Great Recession**

As a result of the continued jobs draught and the dramatic employment downsizing that Americans have done, weathering the recession remains a daily challenge—and it is hard. However, even as they acknowledge the difficulties, they are reluctant to claim that they give in or ask for help. The question, “what has been your personal approach?” elicits values statements. These personal statements are assertive—perhaps to contrast the way they live against the culture of debt and greed that many believe caused the recession, and that many feel continues to plague political and corporate institutions. To be sure, many report that they are “treading water” or “struggling to pay the bills.” However, these personal approaches are framed by work ethic, values, and heroic sacrifice. Young people foregoing school and sacrificing independence to live at home with parents, older workers cutting back on both luxuries and necessities—all of these personal approaches are articulated in individualist tones and framed as a set of personal values that we did not find three years ago.

“Well I will be very conservative in my spending. I have money put away that I’ve saved over the years when I was doing well... so yeah, you’ve got to live within your means and obviously continue the job search and to go back to try to find something along the lines of what I do. But just not live outside of my means basically and just continue to do what I’ve always done. Just work hard and make it happen.” –White non-college male

“So we’re getting by and doing the best that we can with the circumstances but you can only do so much. You can’t really take vacations and go to places and do certain things that you normally would be able to do if you’re at work and making a certain amount of money. Right now everything is kind of restricted because when you’re limited on funds you can only do so much, so to make things better, you know, the first step obviously is getting back to work and getting back to some kind of normality. That would be the first step as far as anything, then everything else kind of falls back in to place, but other than that it’s getting by and making the best of it.” –White non-college male

“Well I am kind of just barely treading water. Trying to get the bills paid, just treading water, just trying to keep afloat.” –Latino woman

“You never know what’s going to happen and I have definitely become a lot wiser in my spending and on what I spend my money on and what not and I mean I can’t even tell you the last time it was that I actually went clothes shopping. I basically spend my money on the important things and the necessities and the wants are just put on to the back burner and that’s how it’s going to be until I get to a point where I’m comfortable in what I have as far as money put aside and what not then at that point I can stay buying the wants and not have to worry about ‘okay, if I buy this now am I going to have enough money to pay my rent in two weeks?’” –White non-college woman

“Well I mean I’m just going to have to do the best that I can and try to get, do the best that I can as far as my work, getting as much work as possible, trying to save more mon-



ey when and where I can. Just having to in order to save, it's really going to have to do without, do without some things in order to save money.” –Latino woman

“I cut down the spending. We don’t go out as much as we used to...and I’m trying to, you know, buy like a large bundle of stuff instead of just buying one thing at a time, I go to Costco more and maybe buying stuff that you could use for a long time. Just watch whatever you're doing, don't go out to too many restaurants, unless, you know, once in a while, don't just like three or four times.” –White non-college man

“Well just it’s made me watch a couple more things as far as really food or any extras...I just have to watch my budget actually and keep an eye on sales and all that stuff really.” –White non-college man

“I’m a self-survivor”

The onset of individualism

In last year’s economy project, about 20 percent of respondents were or had received some kind of public social assistance—in the form of food stamps, housing aid, and unemployment assistance. Many more mentioned that they were getting help from community groups and faith-based organizations. We wrote, “Many have had to look to external forces to mitigate economic hardship...It is clear that they needed to turn to someone or something in order to get through these economic times and put themselves in a better position.” Indeed, 85 percent of those we interviewed last year reported receiving some kind of assistance. Last year we reported that the differences between respondents were less about *whether* they received help, but *where* they turned to find it. White non-college working class voters and young people were more likely to call on extended kin networks and community groups—particularly churches, while unmarried women and nonwhite voters were more likely to qualify for public assistance.

By stark contrast, the vast majority of this year’s respondents did not cite any outside support—from family, friends, community organizations, or public assistance. Most answered “no one” or “myself” to the question, “Who or what has stepped up to make things better?” As a percentage, twice as many respondents said “no one” or “myself” this year compared to last. A few mentioned family or friends—who had stepped up to provide temporary housing or networking to find a job—but many only provided this answer when pressed to provide a response or as a means of highlighting their own resourcefulness—they learned about temporary work opportunities through friends or relocated with the help of friends. The majority of those citing a source of support were those under the age of 35 who relied on parents to provide temporary housing or support for educational advancement.

Interviews this year revealed a much stronger sense of individualism and self-reliance that is best described as “stoic resolution.” To be sure, some of the expressed self-reliance is a product of displacement—whether economic, geographic, or interpersonal—but it does not result in the dis-



affection and alienation that came across so strongly last year when we found the interviews rife with “alienation, anger, and blame.”

An equal number say that the government was on their side as indicate that it is not, with those saying it was not more intense in their response.

“I don't know if anybody helped me... Like I said, I don't need help, I like to survive myself.” –White non-college man

“I don't know if there's anything out there that's on my side, you know, to be honest, I don't really believe anybody's on my side I just think it's just, I mean I think the only person is my family and me, that's the only people, and my friends. Everybody else is more or less trying to make a living and trying to pay for their own needs.” –White non-college man

“Nobody helped me out. I'm a self-survivor; I do things on my own... Everybody else is more or less out for themselves.” –Young woman

“It's all up to the individual person, there is no collective mind of people, there is no actual whole organization that— it's just up to the individual person, it takes every individual person for us to come up and pull out of this and that's our problem.” –Latino man

“I think it's just up to everyone to be able to make things better for themselves... I like to pretty much think that it's all up to me to be able to make things better for myself other than other people trying to put things out there for me to help myself.” – Latino woman

“Personally, I have always done what it takes to make a living, whether I work two or three jobs.” –White non-college man

“I'm pretty industrious and you know, I resorted to creative ways to do that, so odd jobs and things like that.” –Young woman

“The answer to that question is nobody. I'm the only one helping myself here.” –Young woman

“I used to be middle class...”

The Crashing Middle

Like last year, many respondents have a difficult time identifying themselves as middle class. As one year ago, many of our respondents report that they “used to be” middle class, but feel more like working class now. However, while last year respondents seemed to define middle class as the ability to go out to dinner and save for a vacation, middle class has been downsized. Only one respondent mentioned “vacation” while most defined middle class in more modest terms—balancing their checkbooks, having enough money to feed their families.



The middle class feels smashed—they believe they are in it alone. They feel that they are being taxed like they are rich but living like they are poor. They have been left behind by an economy that has divided the country into the wealthy and the poor. These middle income Americans are too wealthy for aid—government aid and scholarships—and too employed for unemployment insurance. Despite this, declining work opportunities and rising gas prices force them to live as though they are poor. As one young woman noted, her path to success is complicated by the hard choices of this recession. She is simultaneously told that debt is bad and education is good. Nonetheless, when you are middle class, *“You can’t get financial aid unless your family makes under \$60,000 a year. Well my family makes more than that but if school is \$55,000 a year then it’s not enough... families like mine don’t get any aid and they suffer and if you want to fund your child’s education then you need to eat dog food all year so you can do that.”*

As a result, many people’s definitions of “middle class” have changed. Those who believe that they are still middle class have downsized the definition—they offer startling new descriptions of what it means to be middle class—“making it,” “breathing,” and “paying bills.”

“Well that’s the ultimate goal is to be middle class... But you have to really work for your money and nothing really comes easy, it seems like everything is tough.” –White non-college man

“Not struggling but not doing too good.” –Young man

“I don’t get money for free... people like me still have to work hard for our money.” –Young woman

“I consider myself the lucky class. I’ve got a healthy family, I’m breathing.” –Young man

“My job is pretty secure and I’m able to make just enough to put food on the table and pay the bills.” –Young man

“My family makes enough money to not be poor, but not so much money that ... everything is fine.” –Young woman

“I deal with on paycheck to paycheck definitely but with everything going on I may be middle class.” –Latino woman

Many who said they “used to feel like” they were “middle class” now describe themselves as people who “really have to work hard...working class...work hard for what I have.”

“I used to be middle class and now I’m working class. I don’t have any disposable income at all, everything that I have I pretty much – it’s in one hand and out of the other and before it seemed like I would be able to go out and go out to nice places and pay my bills and still have some money left. I mean I used to be a huge shopper but my shopping days are over. I don’t even go to the mall anymore. It’s sad (laughter) I don’t even want



to go in to the mall because I know if I buy something then I'm going to pay for it one way or another, where something is not going to get paid, I'm going to put myself behind, so I really literally have to stop shopping” –Latino woman

“Right now I'm working class. I used to be middle class.” –Young woman

These voters also draw broader—and remarkably sophisticated—conclusions about what a declining middle class means for the rest of the American economy. In their view, the middle class defines American and it is impossible to have a thriving America without a thriving middle class.

“Well I mean that's what made America America, is the middle class. You've got the rich and you've got the poor and there's a really huge gap. So you've got to be somewhere in the middle or, the middle class basically is the backbone of America, without middle class there is no class and you'll either have super rich and then you'll have super poor and really all the economy in the America can't function like that.” –White non-college man

“It's the middle class that kind of makes the country, you know, the world go round, but a lot of the middle class with the way that the economy has done over the last couple of years have now found themselves no longer in the middle class, but actually in the lower class.” –White non-college woman

“The middle class, they're the ones who are really taking a hit right now just because of all the cost and the insurances and things like that that keep rising and making it more difficult.” –White non-college man

“The American dream just means not having to worry day-to-day”

New American Dreams for a new American economy

Despite hardships, Americans refuse to give up on the American Dream. To be sure, their definitions of the American Dream have been downsized. Nonetheless, they are nearly unanimous that an America without the Dream—for opportunity and a better future—is not worth imagining. It would be, too depressing, un-American.

Some do still define the American dream as home ownership and the ability to provide more for the next generation.

“The American dream is a house... the children would have a good education, the family would have a nice home to live in that wouldn't be costing them every cent that they make and that they would be able to eat well and healthy and you know, just have a nice comfortable life.” –Latino woman

“Well to provide a good home, to provide a good home, to provide their kids with a college education and give them opportunity to either get a really good job or have a business or to be successful.” –Young woman



But many more define the American Dream as the ability to put food on the table, pay the bills, and maybe—eventually—go out to a restaurant.

“Well the American dream just means providing for your family and not having to worry day-to-day, knowing that things are not going to be bad obviously, just being enough to provide for your family, enough to get a vacation and, you know, have a car and just, you don't have to work to, you know, like eighty hours a week or sixty hours a week, just work but at the same time enjoy life.” –White non-college man

“The American dream to me would be being able to live a comfortable life and provide for yourself and your family, and not have to worry really about 'where are we going to get our next whatever' that kind of thing. It doesn't necessarily mean having to have really extravagant luxuries or anything like that but being able to provide, to have a roof over your head, at this point in time that's the American dream.” –Latino woman

“The American dream is to take care of your family, the people around you and...to earn a decent living.” –Young woman

“I think that for most people it's having a family you can provide for and being reasonably comfortable. Not exorbitant but not too concerned with survival. You know, just 'comfortable' seems to be the operative word in our society.” –Young woman

“What it means to me is having a job, and that job being stable and not worrying whether or not you're going to get a pink slip in a week or a month and you know, having the freedom and the money to do what you want to do, whether it be to take your kids to a movie or buy a new car or go on a vacation or whatever. That to me is what the American dream is, is having enough money to move comfortably, you know, but obviously not living outside of your means but being able to live comfortably to be able to do the things you want to do with your family or with your significant other, you know.” –White non-college woman

“I mean I used to own my own business and I had what I thought was the American dream a while back... if people lose sight of that and think that there's no possibility of that then yeah it's going to become very mundane and very unhappy people.” –White non-college man

However downsized the Dream might be, it continues to serve an important purpose. While many showed concerns about the direction of the economy, outsourcing, and America's place in the world and whether we can compete in a global economy, they refuse to imagine an America without an American Dream, which would be “depressing” and “unimaginable.”



“I don’t know who to believe anymore”

Loss of faith in political and corporate institutions

While most hold on to the American Dream, and believe that they are doing their part to make ends meet, their individualistic outlook is driven, in part, by their lack of faith in institutions. They have little faith in the underlying economy and government and little faith in the country’s corporate and political leaders and little faith in friends and neighbors to be responsible.

This results in widespread blame and anger: they blame their neighbors and friends who spent more than they could afford; the government, banks, and large companies that became mired in debt. Overall, if they had to choose one word to describe economic behavior over the last decade, it would be “greed.”

A lot of this blame and in many cases, anger, is aimed squarely at the rich, CEOs, big business, and the greed that many believe infects our economic system. This is further enhanced by blame for the state of the economy with nearly one-third of all respondents saying that banking was directly responsible for where we are and almost half saying banks and/or big business.

Government has emerged as uniquely illegitimate—as the nexus of money and power that spends excessively and without good will. The tax system disadvantages the middle class and loopholes are rigged for lobbyists and most privileged. Bailouts encouraged irresponsible corporate behavior and trapped the country. Spending on wars and bailouts and creating debt without limits or benefits to the middle class have all caused people to lose faith in institutions.

“The way that the rules are starting to play out, it’s going to be every man for himself really, because I don’t think that people have much confidence anymore in the powers that be, the people who run this country, the people are losing faith every day in our system as a whole. Yeah, I see it as an ‘I can’t rely on everyone else, I’ve got to take care of myself’ mindset. That’s what it looks to me that it’s becoming more of.” –White non-college man

“But once again as far as the government is concerned we have so many problems there that it just seems like we’re supposed to have a government for as a whole for our country and nowadays it just seems like it’s more and more the government fighting within itself. They’re the ones who run this country and make the machine run, you know, they oil the machine. If they can’t get along and they keep fighting the way that they do and have these issues then it seems like it’s going to get worse and worse. So yeah, the outlook right now for the next 10 years, the way it is right now it doesn’t look good. In my opinion.” –White non-college man

“I think they have to be accountable...Making Government accountable and making it work for regular citizens.” –White non-college man

“I don’t think they’re considering most people on the street. I think the people they’re concerned with most are the rich people, the people who, corporations that pretty much



dominate most of the country and I think they're concerned more with their problems than with most of our problems.” –Young man

“I don't know who to believe anymore as far as whether it's Republican or Democrat, because I think that it's so far out of control... you've really got to be on the inside to know the truth.” –White non-college man

“Just spend more money, stimulate the economy, spend more money; because how many stimulus packages have we had since the \$700 billion or something one originally was supposed to create all kinds of new jobs and they're saying if you look at the numbers it hasn't really created the jobs that was anticipated, so I disagree with that spending saying where are the jobs.” –White non-college man

“Once again accountability, it just kind of goes back to that, the government needs to be held accountable for what's going on and it goes back to the spending once again. Where the spending is happening. You know, it mentioned spending to help the middle class but the excessive spending things that they just don't need to do, and programs – I think that's the most important thing.” –White non-college man

When it comes to the specific policies of the auto bailout and TARP, nearly half of the respondents believe that it was a bad policy effort, believing that it was incumbent on the government to help the regular person and the middle class before helping large corporations. Despite an informed question about the TARP funding being nearly fully paid back, well more than half suggested that they did not feel their judgment was impacted by learning that information, often because the principle of providing taxpayer dollars to big corporations (with mentions of golden parachutes/executive compensation) was simply unacceptable.

“It's just like one of those things unfortunately. I guess there was no other options, you could just let all the banks fail and have no banks or you give them the money, so it wasn't, there was no option. It was a bad idea to pay them but at the same time, was there any other options? I don't know...there was no guarantee they'd paid it back, we were just I guess fortunate that it was paid back. They really had no collateral or anything, they just were given money basically, but we just got fortunate it was and it got worked out. The average person can't just simply get money and pay it back, I'm sure people would pay back their loans also.” –White non-college man

Anti-government sentiment, however, does not result in faith in the private sector or free market either.

“Yes, we've got to change the way the economy works, we can't let the big businesses benefit more than the working class people and we should provide more income for them and for the lower classes and stimulate education and small businesses to let the entrepreneurs and free enterprise benefit more and look at all those restrictive policies and prevent them from benefiting anything.” –Young man



“I mean it's sad to say it but big business is always going to be a winner and the little people are most of the time always going to be the loser in some form of fashion. That's the way it's been for years and unfortunately it's the way it's going to be because unfortunately money talks and big businesses have always got their hand in somebody's pocket and they have the money to spend to get things done, whereas us little people barely make ends meet and therefore don't have the excess cash to put in somebody's pocket and say ‘Hey, this needs to get done, can you do it for me?’ it ain't going to happen!” – White non-college woman

In part, this is driven by a business and political climate that, many believe, has outsourced our freedom (in debt) and future (in jobs and economic growth). There is a lack of corporate accountability and corporate patriotism. Both the politicians—who are ineffectual at stopping it—and the business leaders—who are driven by greed—have sacrificed the American people to an economy that works only for those at the top.

“As long as we start to make our country more useful, you know, I feel like we don't use our country. We use China, we use all these other countries to bring everything in it, It's like we're getting lazy and we're not using what we could use, what we have here.” – White non-college man

“We don't really ship anything out, we don't really make anything. I mean it's bad that we don't do that. We receive everything from overseas and that's the only thing that's bad there. We don't really make anything anymore. Everything is overseas.” –White non-college man

“People losing jobs, you know, more of the work going overseas.” –White non-college man

“We're exporting jobs out, there are so many jobs that are outside of the United States now because other countries ...China and India and those places will do things for so much less and lots of times... and a lot of the work is being sent out because it's cheaper.” –White non-college man

“Well I think we need to focus on American made and American products because that's really not the focus anymore. When NAFTA came into play a lot of American products kind of tanked and a lot of business went to other countries, industrial businesses went to other countries, factories, all that kind of stuff, went to other countries, that took jobs away, that made products be made somewhere else.” –Latino woman

“Everything in the United States is made in China and we're shipping all of our jobs overseas, I mean even our customer service jobs have all gone to India. So yeah, I mean we need more work here in the States and we need more manufacturing here in the States and it's all going overseas so it can be part of the solution but right now it's definitely part of the problem.” –White non-college man



“The work all being shipped out to other countries overseas.... That's a huge problem but it's hard to compete there because China works for \$8 a day and you've got people here who don't even work of \$8 an hour so that's why we're shipping a lot of our jobs over there and I don't know how we're going to be able to fix that. We've got a lot of people that just don't want to make that kind of money here but people in China and India, they're more than happy to do that, so yeah, it's a huge problem.” –White non-college man

“It seems to me that you're outsourcing more positions than you're creating, which is a problem with our population and what are all the blue collar level people to do here? You're leaving a lot of people very frustrated... On the individual level I think that everyone should be able to have a job and make money and provide for their families.” –Young woman

“It's bound to get better” America on the edge of optimism

While many of these respondents are cynical, a significant portion expresses cautious optimism for the future. For many, the American Dream drives an undying, albeit wary, faith in the future—they believe that there is bound to be more opportunity ahead than instability. A full two-thirds of the respondents indicated as such.

“Well I hope there'll be more opportunity ahead to be successful but it all depends, but I think there's a very good chance things might improve. We'll see, it's like, I can't really predict the future but at the same time it seemed like things might improve so we'll see. Right now things need to be improved a lot, this has been, it hasn't improved as fast it should have. The unemployment rate has gone down a little bit and I think the more people working the better it shade it is of the economy.” –White non-college man

“I'm hoping it's getting better and I can see a few ways in which I think it is getting better but to what extent that's wishful thinking? I don't know. You know, the general public mood seems to be a lot better but to what extent things are actually better versus maybe the same? You know, I'm not so certain.” –Young woman

“I think it's bound to get better, I mean one can only flail for so long, you either die or you get back up and keep going.” –Young woman

While these responses do not offer overwhelming confidence, the country requires the perpetuation of hope and faith in the future. It is not clear, at this point, that either party has the ability to rise above voters' deeply embedded skepticism to offer up a perspective and a plan that will solve the country's most pressing social and economic problems. Nonetheless, these voters require it.