

# Acting On Our Values is Good Economics



**A Narrative Paradigm Shift to a People-First Economy**

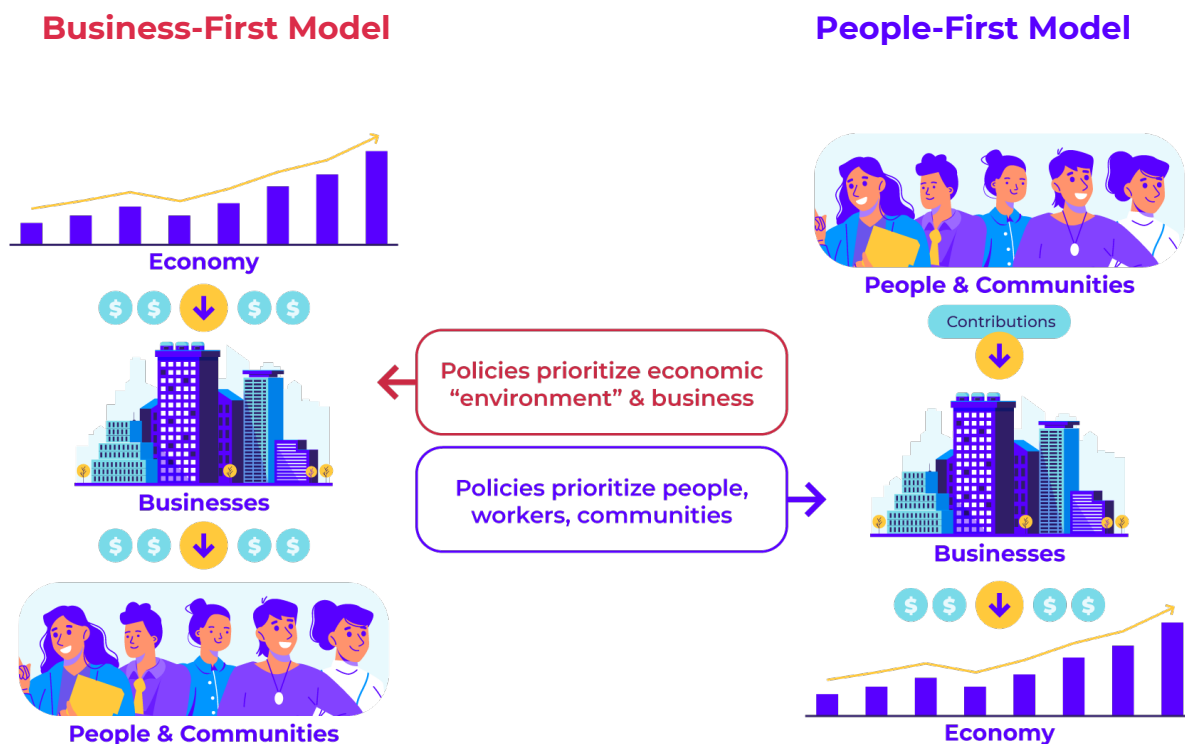


At the heart of our story about the economy is this simple truth:

***When people are doing well, good economic and social effects follow.  
Prosperity springs from the people; it doesn't trickle down from business.***

It's a truth that is easy to understand and to accept, yet we are constantly bombarded by messages that tell us otherwise—that people's interests and business' interests are at odds. That we need to be prepared to tighten our belts and not complain when times are hard because only when businesses are profitable can money flow to workers. When people default to this understanding, progressive economic policies can sound impractical or even that they do more harm than good.

That's why, as progressive communicators, we need to consistently, vividly and explicitly talk about people's well-being as the cause and wellspring of a good economy—not the result or side effect of business success or Darwinist competition. Flipping this script allows us to not only justify our agenda, but to organize it into a coherent narrative that makes sense to people and gives them a framework for thinking about and taking action for progressive economic solutions:





- **A people-first economy:**

People drive our economy forward—our contributions, our skills, our work (paid and unpaid), and our spending. Therefore, people’s prosperity and well-being have to come first.

- **An inclusive economy:**

Our economy serves us better when ALL people are doing well. The more people—and the more kinds of people—involved and engaged in innovation, economic activity, and wealth creation, the better and stronger our economic well-being is. Equity and inclusion are economic tailwinds.

- **An intentional economy + people power:**

Letting the wealthy rig the system for their own benefit isn’t just unfair, it’s bad economics. We the people can insist on economic decisions that improve our well-being and our ability to contribute to our communities and our economy as a whole. We can create, design, and change our economy AND we have the power to do so.

Together, these ideas present a powerful alternative vision that can compete at a deep level to build and support the case for progressive economic policies over the long haul. Topos Partnership has conducted extensive multi-method research on the ways Americans think and communicate about our economy, across geographies and demographics. These efforts have enabled us to create strategies to advance models of the economy that both stay true to our values AND effectively compete with the current default models that hold us back.



## The Deep Dive: Why do these ideas work and how can we move them forward?

### ● A people-first economy:

People drive our economy forward—our contributions, our skills, our work (paid and unpaid), and our spending. Therefore, people's prosperity and well-being have to come first.

**Why this works:** Research shows that Americans want people to come before profits, but they don't feel they can insist on it. They may have a good moral argument, but a weak economic argument. An economic case justifying why people must come first gives people confidence to demand priority rather than worry that progressive economic policies are fiscally irresponsible. In communities of color, this "people-centered" way of thinking resonates as it builds on the existing strengths of people and community, and bridges this idea to the larger economic system and our economic well-being.

### Consider:

- **Anchoring the vision in people's priorities—making life more manageable.** The current economic mood craves stability and security, and people respond positively to the idea that there are things we can and should do (through government) to make life more manageable. When people are secure and prosperous, when people have breathing room to care for themselves and their families, businesses benefit from customers with money to spend and employees who have stability in their lives, and we all benefit.
- **Building on the idea of "contribution."** As opposed to terms like "work," "productivity," and so on, the idea of "contribution" recognizes both paid and unpaid activities, and connects our individual actions to the collective good. We can make the case that people making contributions (through paid and unpaid work) leads to thriving communities, businesses, and a good economy. And because of our contributions, we deserve recompense and a decent slice of the pie—an economic and a moral argument.



## ● **An inclusive economy:**

Our economy does better when ALL people are doing well. The more people—and the more kinds of people—involved and engaged in innovation, economic activity, and wealth creation, the better and stronger our economy is. Equity and inclusion are not just the right and just indicators of a moral economy, they are also economic tailwinds.

**Why this works:** Racism is largely still seen as a challenge for individuals to overcome and, for many people, it remains a non sequitur when it comes to thinking about the economy. Adding an economic argument to our moral anti-racist case is a powerful rationale for treating racism (and sexism, ableism, etc.) as a collective responsibility.

### **Consider:**

- **Incorporating a full potential frame.** The idea that we should be tapping into the vast reservoir of human potential resonates with people, especially in communities of color. An economy in which everyone can contribute to their full potential—and isn't blocked from contributing—allows us to incorporate gender and race (and disability, age, etc.) from an asset, rather than deficit, perspective.


## ● **An intentional economy + people power:**

Letting the wealthy rig the system for their own benefit isn't just unfair, it's bad economics. We the people can insist on economic decisions that improve our well-being and our ability to contribute to our communities and our economy as a whole. We can create, design, and change our economy AND we have the power to do so.

**Why this works:** Most people think of the economy as something outside of their own control—something one simply has to endure, like the weather. To the extent the economy is managed, it is managed by elites, for elites. A model that combines “intentionality” with a clearer sense of the public's power can make a people-first economy seem both relevant and possible.

### **Consider:**

- **Showing how we shape our economy.** Through metaphors, we can SHOW people how we actively intervene in our economy. **The “money flow” metaphor, for example**—a good economy depends on money flowing throughout families and



communities, and our everyday policy choices dictate those flows—clarifies how our choices create different economic outcomes. **Success Stories** of everyday people coming together to demand/win change can be a compelling and concrete way to illustrate how we create and manage our economy for our benefit AND that we have the power to insist on positive choices.

- **Making the role of government—and our agency in the process—more vivid and real.** Reminding people of the existence of **guardrails in the form of laws and regulations** offers a clear mechanism for what our government does to shape our economy and puts people into a practical problem-solving mode. People also respond enthusiastically to the idea that **“public money”** (i.e. tax revenues) should be used for things people and communities need, and that this creates stability, health and the other pre-requisites for a dynamic economy and broad-based prosperity. Reminding people what taxes are for builds public will for proactive revenue efforts: We’ll have more public money to put into what communities need when we make those at the top contribute their share.

### Villainy over Villains

The current public anger at economic villains (greedy elites who don’t pay what they should in taxes, cut wages/jobs/opportunities, neglect our communities, etc.) is palpable and powerful, but we gain more ground when we direct that anger toward the actions we can change, not just the actors. By centering our case on **what they do**, not only who they are, we can clarify how our economy should and could work.

- **Be specific about harms.** There is an expectation of corporate self-interest, even greed. Be clear about how and when this profit orientation goes too far and causes harm.
- **Be specific about bad actions.** Bad actions are not necessarily greed, but the ability to, for example, drive down our wages.
- **Connect the dots** between bad actions, harms, and what we can and should do about it. For example, corporate consolidation (their action), inflation (the harms), and the policy decisions that determine whether we have healthy competition or virtual monopolies (our actions).

*Topos Partnership’s work on economic narratives is the result of multi-year partnerships and collaborations with the steadfast advocates, organizers, grantmakers, and stakeholders in this space. With particular gratitude to Groundwork Collaborative, The Hub Project, the collaborators and funders of the five progressive states project, and the collaborators and funders of the Winning Jobs Narratives project.*