

THE POLITICS OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY: WILL GROWING POVERTY AFFECT ELECTION 2012?

On January 17, *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity* hosted a half-day forum, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which brought together a bi-partisan group of political strategists, pollsters and journalists to debate the impact of rising poverty on campaign strategy and media coverage during the 2012 elections. **Patrick McCarthy**, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, provided opening remarks asserting that during a time of “bitter partisan bickering” the forum demonstrates that there are still “important people on both sides of the aisle, on all sides of the ideological spectrum, people who care deeply about promoting economic mobility and opportunity and about improving the conditions of our nation's poor families.”

Prominent pollster **Jim McLaughlin** presented key findings from [*Poverty, the Media and Election 2012: What Do Voters Think?*](#), a *Spotlight* public opinion poll conducted by McLaughlin & Associates. McLaughlin discussed how growing income inequality and poverty are having a significant impact on the perceptions of voters. Among the key findings:

- An overwhelming number of voters (**88 percent**) said a candidate’s position on protecting equal opportunity for all children no matter their race or ethnicity was an important factor in deciding who to support for president.
- When asked, “How important is a candidate’s position on poverty when deciding your vote for president?” a commanding majority (**88 percent**) said it was important. Nearly half (**45 percent**) of likely voters said the issue was “very important.”
- Nearly half (**49 percent**) of all voters disagreed when asked if they had “heard enough from the presidential candidates about reducing poverty in America.”
- **Half** of all voters say the media has not spent an adequate amount of time during the presidential campaign covering the issue of reducing poverty in America.
- A candidate’s positions on poverty were significantly more important to non-white than white voters. Just **39 percent of white voters** said those positions were “very important” compared with **67 percent of non-whites**, including 76 percent of African Americans and 57 percent of Hispanics.

The first panel, moderated by **John Harris**, editor-in-chief of POLITICO, explored how deepening concerns about income inequality could push the issue to the front burner of political debate during the 2012 campaign. Here is a sampling of panelist comments:

“This is the biggest wave that's come along in a long time, this notion of economic inequality, this notion of the economy not working for the people who work hard. It's (about the) disappearing middle class and disappearing American dream.”

□ **Celinda Lake**, president, Lake Research Partners

“They (politicians) are behind where the voters are. The voters understand these are extraordinary times. They understand that we need real, bold solutions to help us solve our problems. And (the politicians) are not necessarily giving them to us right now.”

□ **Jim McLaughlin**, president and partner, McLaughlin & Associates

"I think that there are two basic principles that the parties agree on. And implementation may vary but the two basic principles are one, a growing economy creating jobs will do a lot to resolve a lot of the poverty problems. Two, there needs to be some safety net in place to catch people so that they can then position themselves, pivot, turn around and be able to sort of enter again."

□ **Dave Winston**, president, The Winston Group

The Occupy Wall Street movement "has succeeded where politicians have failed....The conversation has shifted dramatically."

□ **Neera Tanden**, president, Center for American Progress

Transitioning into the second panel, **Maureen Bunyan**, the forum emcee and anchor at ABC 7 News in Washington, D.C. noted that "when opportunity does not exist, that's going to be the end of the America Dream." Moderated by **Clarence Page**, syndicated columnist with the *Chicago Tribune*, this panel examined the media's role in elevating issues around poverty and income equality during the election and beyond. A sampling of panelists comments are below:

"My biggest frustration is that it's very difficult in the current media climate for many news organizations to devote the time and attention (to covering poverty) in a very serious way. Maybe when we get to the general campaign.... there might be a little bit more in depth coverage of poverty."

□ **Pam Fessler**, correspondent, poverty and philanthropy, National Public Radio

"Politicians have a habit always of talking about the middle class at election time because that's where votes are. I don't particularly blame them for that but in being obsessed with the middle class they often leave out the poor."

□ **E.J. Dionne Jr.**, op-ed columnist, *The Washington Post*

"In think in many ways, the type of debate that we have about extremes of inequality at the very top and tax policy as it relates to the rich is largely disconnected from the concerns of the poor and their daily struggles."

□ **Michael Gerson**, op-ed columnist, *The Washington Post*

"We don't have coverage of poverty in this country. If there is a story about poor people in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, that's the exception that proves the rule. We do not cover poverty. We do not cover the poor."

□ **Bob Herbert**, former op-ed Columnist, *The New York Times* and distinguished senior fellow, Dēmos

The forum concluded with a message from **Sterling Speirn**, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, who commented on the results of the *Spotlight* poll: "When we have nearly nine out of ten people in agreement, we have an issue that cuts across party lines, racial groups and income levels." Speirn issued a call to action to engage in the 2012 election and ensure that each candidate articulates a detailed position on poverty and opportunity.

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Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity: The Source for News, Ideas and Action is a non-partisan initiative that brings together diverse perspectives from the political, policy, advocacy and foundation communities to find genuine solutions to the economic hardship confronting millions of Americans. Through the ongoing exchange of ideas, research and data, *Spotlight* seeks to inform the policy debate about reducing poverty and increasing opportunity in the United States. Visit www.SpotlightonPoverty.org and [sign-up](#) for our weekly newsletter.