



To: Progressive Allies
Fr: Richard Kirsch
Re: Colorado Economic Narrative: Model for State Narrative Work
Dt: 6/13/18

Summary: This winter I worked with a coalition of labor, community, policy and communication organizations in Colorado to develop a shared Colorado Economic Story, with versions that could be used in the organizations' issue work. *The work went very well and can be a model for how state partners can quickly and at low cost develop and learn to use a powerful, shared narrative.*

The charge: The organizations asked me to work with them on a shared story about the economy to challenge the dominant narrative in Colorado politics about business as the job creators, austerity budgets and low-taxes. The groups were less concerned with what polls well now than with how we communicate our own ideas about the economy so that we can change the dominant narrative over time. In addition, they wanted a story that motivated their base as well as making sense to a majority of voters in Colorado.

They also wanted to be able to use the story in their ongoing issue work, so that as each group communicated on an issue they would be telling the same underlying story about the Colorado economy.

How we put together the narrative:

1. Over six weeks, I did one-hour phone interviews with leaders (staff and member) from 19 organizations and one local progressive elected official. The interviews are structured to elicit a story: their aspirational vision for the Colorado economy; the problems we face now and who's responsible; what we can do to move towards our aspiration and who are our heroes.
2. I drafted a narrative based principally on the interviews but also informed by: work I've done for years on economic narrative; my familiarity with national public opinion research; and, the most recent polling done for a multi-year Colorado narrative project.
3. Leaders from the groups spent a day workshopping the draft narrative, highlighting what worked, what didn't and suggesting new language.
4. The workshop refined the original 2,700 word draft to a 700 word version, which we tweaked a bit more.
5. I developed issue versions of the narrative, in which the core narrative is applied to priority issues of the groups: taxes and investment; minimum wage; overtime; paid family leave; paid sick leave; education; supporting unions; housing costs; immigration; predatory lending.

Training and using the Colorado Economic Story: I spent three days in Denver training organizations (individually and in groups) on:

- a. Narrative as a powerful tool for social change;
- b. The core ideas behind the economic narrative;
- c. Particular issue versions.

The trainings culminate in an exercise where participants use the narrative to write and then present a short speech. The power of the trainings is that 1) people integrate their own words and experience into a powerful, values-based story; 2) people hear themselves telling the same

story and begin to appreciate the vital importance of repetition and an echo chamber. The Executive Director of one group, who had been a top Colorado legislative staff person, commented after his staff practiced the version they had just written: “That’s a better speech than any I’ve heard from an elected official in Colorado.”

In the next two weeks after the training, groups reported how they had begun to use it:

- The Colorado Education Association extensively used the education version to drive their demonstrations for increased education funding.
- The AFL-CIO rewrote legislative testimony on a key bill to incorporate the narrative.
- The Progress Now affiliate said it became the basis of the rap by their organizers.
- Several policy groups said they were incorporating into their work.

In addition, the Colorado SiX affiliate, working with several other groups, launched a [website](#) that [featured](#) much of the narrative. And SEIU used it extensively in their [working people’s platform](#).

I expect to continue to work with the Colorado coalition to help them incorporate the narrative in their work; train other groups; refine the narrative; and develop further issue versions.

Polling shows support for some key concepts: While the groups did not base the narrative on polling or have a plan to poll on it, SEIU did test some of the narrative in a poll it conducted in June.

The survey found that key ideas tested very well against core conservative ideas about business, government and the economy. In tests of overall aspirations, of how to drive the economy and of the role of government in the economy, the messages from the Colorado economic story prevailed among general election voters, usually by wide margins and won handily among Democratic primary voters and drop-off voters.

Model for other states: For all the interest in state narratives, there have been few actual state narrative projects, in part because they have been seen as costly and time consuming. The Colorado model shows that a powerful, narrative can be developed in a short time: we spent 4 months from beginning to the training. And at a very reasonable cost: a portion of my time and travel.

Moreover, the resultant narrative has the following key features which are not always present in other projects:

- It is a specific state version of core progressive beliefs, designed to shift the dominant narrative over time. As such, it’s an enduring, foundational document, not one limited by current events. At the same time, it can be easily refined and updated.
- It is powerful with the progressive base while moving the middle towards understanding progressive worldview.
- It is a short document, designed to be easily incorporated into a variety of communications. It’s not limited by canned, tested messages that are hard to incorporate into daily work.
- The specific issue versions – and the ability to create others – allows it be readily used in communications.

➤ ***And because of these features, it really can be a shared narrative about progressive core beliefs that is repeated over and over. Which is how we make change.***