



**GOOD**

# **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS & NARRATIVES OF POVERTY IN THE U.S.**

Executive Summary

November 2019

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# NARRATIVE

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A spoken or written account of connected events; one's often subconscious understanding of a topic. Narratives spread through culture, media, and conversation.

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# OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**False or incomplete narratives** about poverty in America, and those struggling in it, hold our society back from making meaningful progress towards justice and truly equal opportunity.

**Everyone has work to do**, even those who profess progressive narratives of poverty tend to harbor some myths, misconceptions, privileges or biases.

**Until these narratives are replaced** with healthier, more accurate alternatives, other policy, advocacy, programmatic and research efforts will fall short of their potential.

**A deep understanding** of poverty narratives, the groups of people who hold them, and how they can be shifted, is the first step to making meaningful progress.

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# KEY QUESTIONS INVESTIGATED IN THIS REPORT

**FIRST:** What are the dominant narratives of poverty in America?

**SECOND:** Who believes them, and why?

**THIRD:** What can be done to shift narratives?

**FOURTH:** How can we move this work forward?

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# 01 What are the dominant narratives of poverty in America?

# DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF POVERTY

Starting with statements from the academic literature, and using Factor Analysis to narrow, we identified 22 ideas that ladder up into 6 meta narratives of poverty.

01	CHARACTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor people are dishonest.</li><li>• Poor people are dirty.</li><li>• Poor people have low intelligence.</li><li>• Poor people are a drain on society.</li><li>• Poor people have no one to blame but themselves.</li><li>• People generally get what they deserve.</li></ul>
02	SYSTEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Racism makes discrimination against poor minorities worse.</li><li>• Poor people experience prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion at work.</li><li>• Poor people are the victim of discrimination.</li><li>• Poor people lack opportunities for training &amp; continuing education.</li><li>• Our government is insensitive to the plight of the poor.</li><li>• Poor people lack affordable housing options.</li><li>• People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.</li><li>• There just aren't enough good jobs for everyone.</li></ul>
03	GREED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.</li><li>• Welfare mothers (welfare queens) have babies to get more money.</li><li>• Poor people think they deserve to be supported.</li></ul>
04	MERITOCRACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.</li><li>• Everyone has an equal opportunity to get a good education.</li><li>• We live in a meritocracy. Anyone can attain the American Dream.</li></ul>
05	FATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Almost by definition, someone has to be poor.</li></ul>
06	CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is a persistent subculture of poverty in America.</li></ul>

# CHARACTER NARRATIVE

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

01

## CHARACTER

- Poor people are dishonest.
- Poor people are dirty.
- Poor people have low intelligence.
- Poor people are a drain on society.
- Poor people have no one to blame but themselves.
- People generally get what they deserve.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS



# SYSTEM NARRATIVE

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

## 02 SYSTEM

- Racism makes discrimination against poor minorities worse.
- Poor people experience prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion at work.
- Poor people are the victim of discrimination.
- Poor people lack opportunities for training & continuing education.
- Our government is insensitive to the plight of the poor.
- Poor people lack affordable housing options.
- People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
- There just aren't enough good jobs for everyone.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A word cloud featuring various terms related to poverty and social issues. The words are arranged in a vertical, somewhat circular pattern. The most prominent words are 'racism', 'education', 'opportunities', 'inequality', 'resources', 'housing', 'schools', 'economy', 'training', 'affordable', 'no-jobs', 'layoffs', 'overpriced', 'empathy', 'gentrified', and 'schools'. The words are in various colors including blue, orange, yellow, and grey, and are of different sizes, indicating their relative frequency or importance in the data.



# GREED NARRATIVE

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

03

## GREED

- There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.
- Welfare mothers (welfare queens) have babies to get more money.
- Poor people think they deserve to be supported.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

responsibility  
lazy  
handout  
entitled  
government

# MERITOCRACY NARRATIVE

04

## MERITOCRACY

- Everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
- Everyone has an equal opportunity to get a good education.
- We live in a meritocracy. Anyone can attain the American Dream.

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

opportunities  
success  
chances  
equality  
blue-collar  
education  
personal-choice

# FATE NARRATIVE

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

05

FATE

- Almost by definition, someone has to be poor.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A word cloud of terms associated with the Fate Narrative. The words are arranged in a vertical stack, with 'logic' at the top, followed by 'cycle', 'debt', 'always', 'abilities', and 'capitalism' at the bottom. To the right of these words are the words 'natural' and 'socialism' written vertically. The words are in various colors: orange, blue, grey, and yellow.

# CULTURE NARRATIVE

We asked people to express their views on poverty before we showed them any content, and the results line up remarkably well with the meta narratives identified in research.

06

## CULTURE

- There is a persistent subculture of poverty in America.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A word cloud featuring various terms related to poverty and social issues. The words are arranged in a cluster, with some oriented vertically and others horizontally. The colors used are orange, blue, black, and grey. The words include: victim, healthcare, welfare, choice, system, access, mentality, birth-control, wrong, and trickle-down.


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# 02 Who believes these narratives, and why?

# WHO BELIEVES THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Leveraging a large scale, Census-aligned representative sample of Americans, we used Cluster Analysis to identify 4 audience segments based on beliefs about poverty, society and each group's demographics.



A background image of a diverse crowd of people at a protest or rally. Many individuals have their fists raised in the air, a common symbol of solidarity and activism. The scene is slightly blurred, emphasizing the collective movement rather than individual faces.

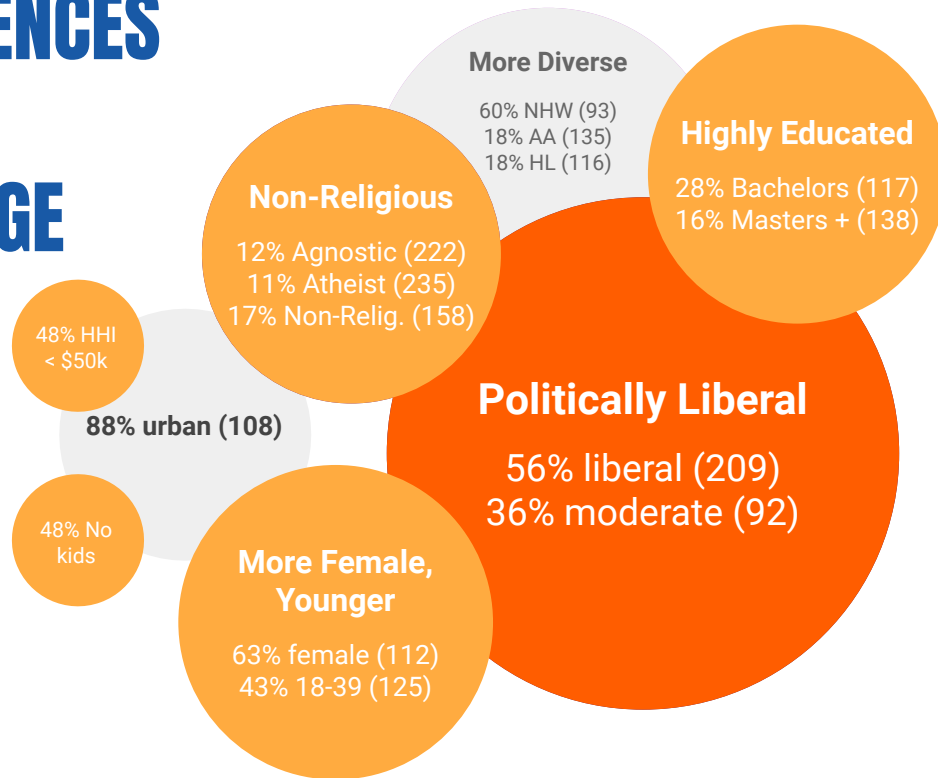
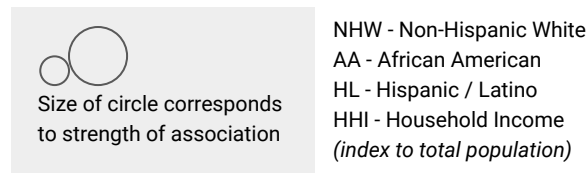
**Progressives reject what they see as the societal status quo. They believe systems must change to ensure a just world. And this goes for nearly every problem facing this country, not just poverty.**

**PROGRESSIVE MANIFESTO**

**Many have experienced poverty, and many are still struggling despite being highly educated. They seek truly equal opportunity.**

**Progressives are informed, motivated, and see themselves as the future.**

# KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES INCLUDE POLITICS, FAITH, EDUCATION, GENDER AND AGE

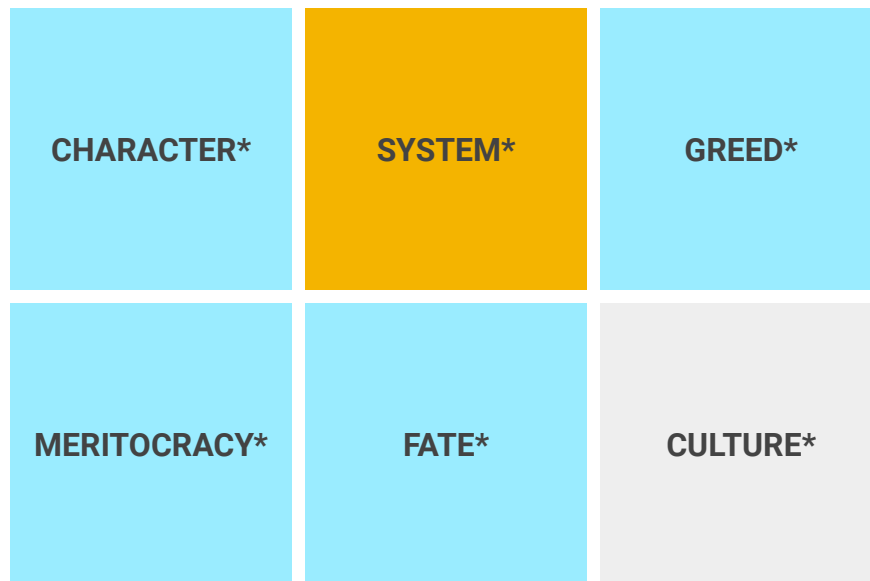
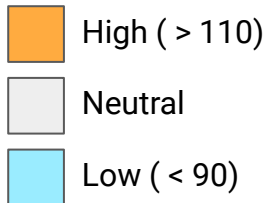




# PROGRESSIVES HOLD SYMPATHETIC VIEWS OF POVERTY

System narratives are most likely to activate the Progressives segment.

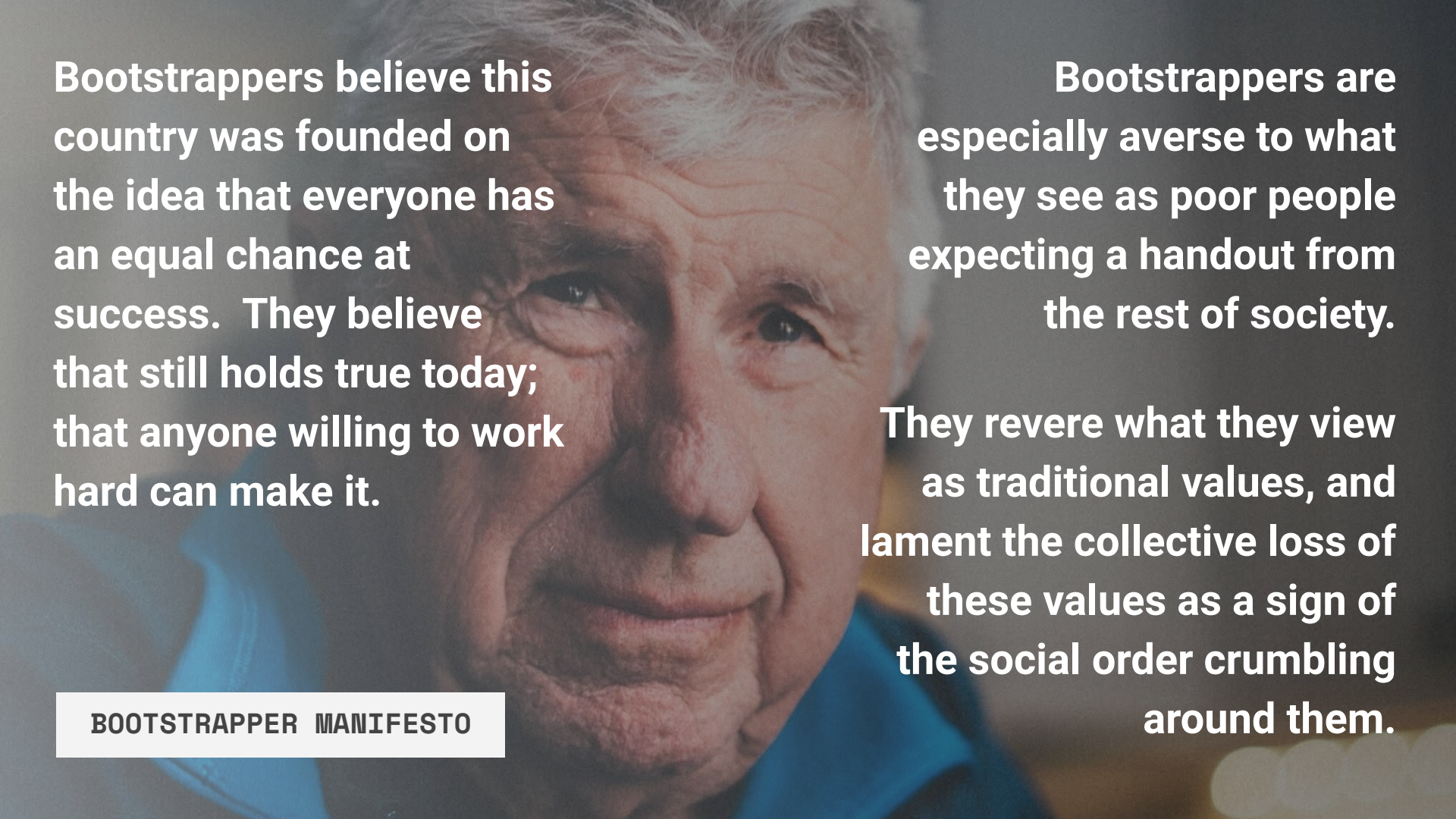
## Segment Index vs. Population



# PERSONAL HEROES

When prompted for pictures of their heroes, Progressives chose figures representing thoughtful advocates who stood against injustice and systematic oppression, or in some way represented a disenfranchised group with which they identify.





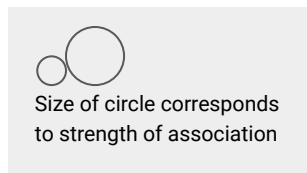
**Bootstrappers believe this country was founded on the idea that everyone has an equal chance at success. They believe that still holds true today; that anyone willing to work hard can make it.**

**BOOTSTRAPPER MANIFESTO**

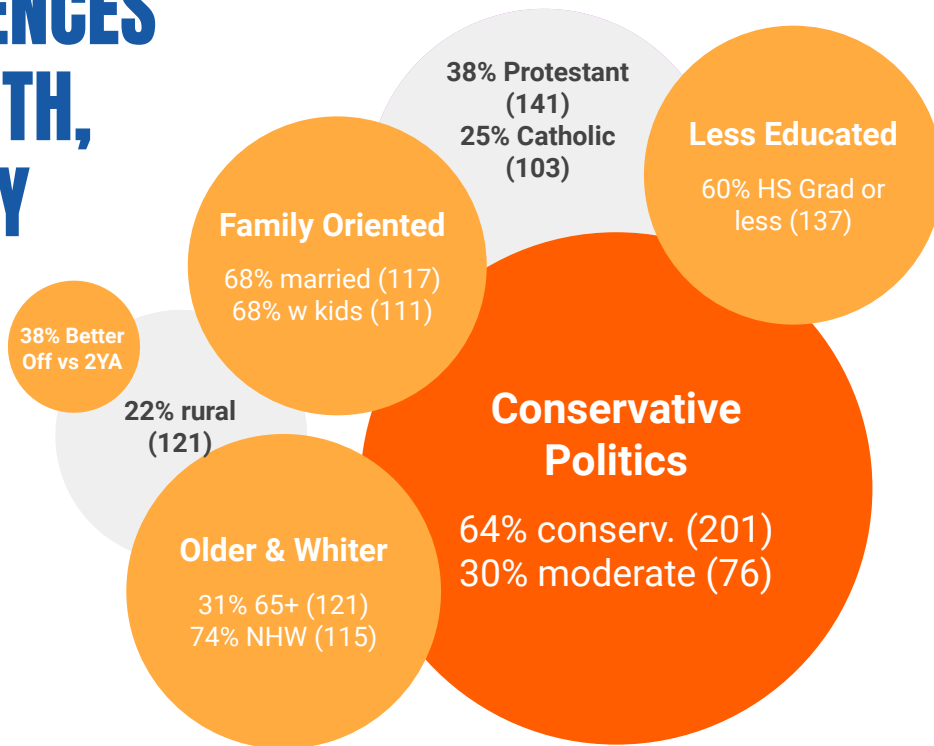
**Bootstrappers are especially averse to what they see as poor people expecting a handout from the rest of society.**

**They revere what they view as traditional values, and lament the collective loss of these values as a sign of the social order crumbling around them.**

# KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES INCLUDE POLITICS, AGE, FAITH, EDUCATION AND GEOGRAPHY



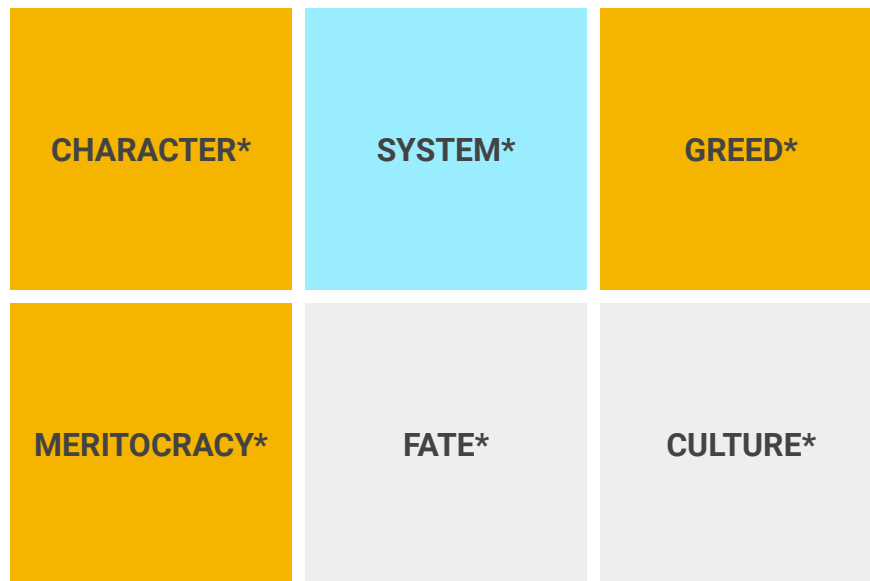
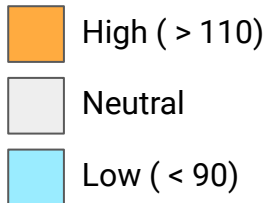
NHW - Non-Hispanic White  
HS - High School  
Vs 2YA - Versus 2 Years Ago  
(index to total population)



# BOOTSTRAPPERS HOLD MANY NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

Nudging Bootstrappers away from the Meritocracy narrative could be the key to forcing them to reconsider Character and Systems ideas.

## Segment Index vs. Population





# PERSONAL HEROES

When prompted for pictures of their heroes, Bootstrappers chose images that represent strong-man leadership, a “might makes right” mentality, or a nostalgia for something from the past.



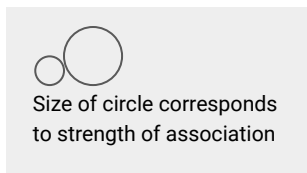
**Apathetics are aware of what they see as social and political turmoil these days, but they try to stay out of it as best they can. It's not that they don't want to help, the issues just seem too big to change.**

**APATHETICS MANIFESTO**

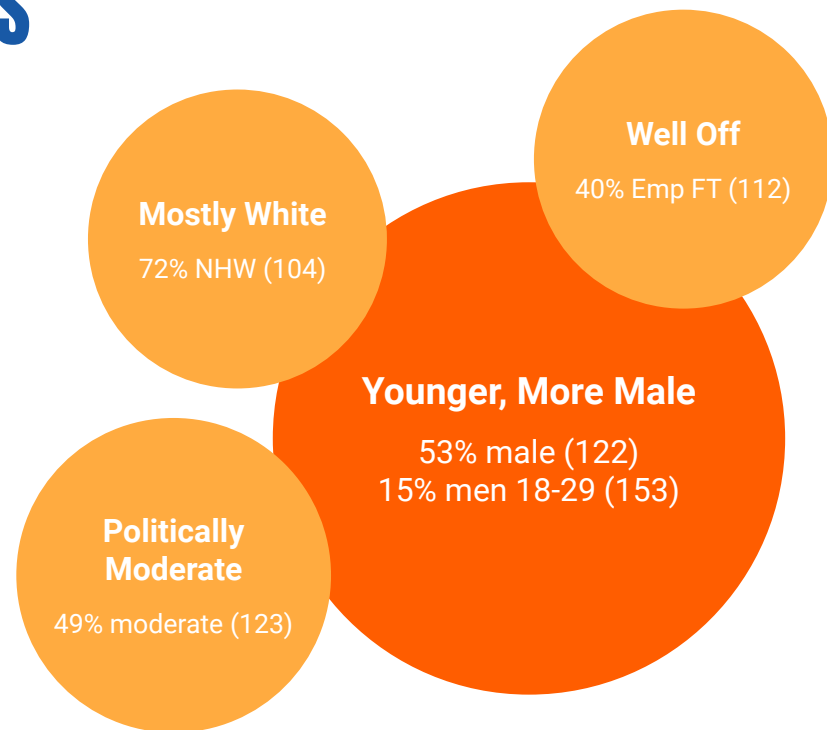
**They recognize that poverty is a huge problem. They would say they feel sorry for those struggling in poverty, and mean it. Apathetics just feel that they can't individually have an impact. But they have an open mind.**



# KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES INCLUDE POLITICS, AGE AND GENDER



NHW - Non-Hispanic White  
Emp FT - Employed Full Time  
(index to total population)

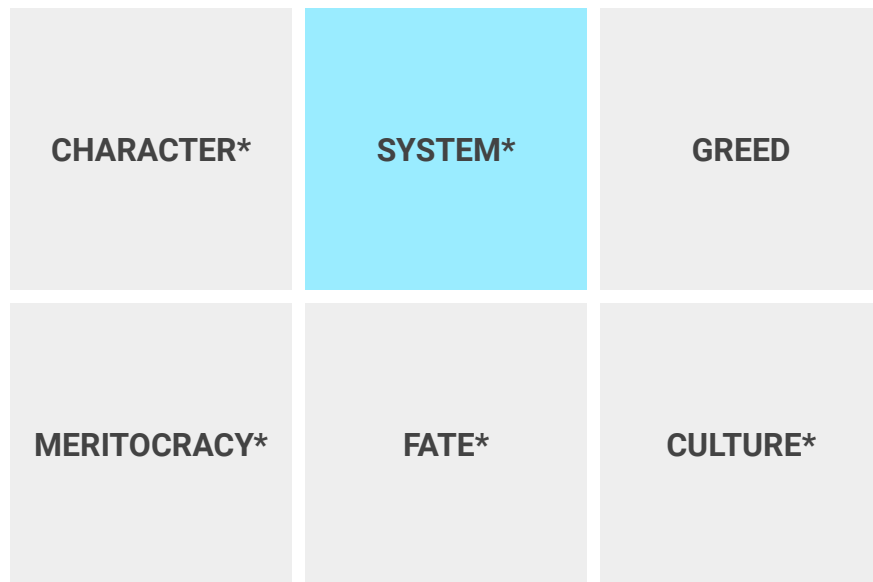
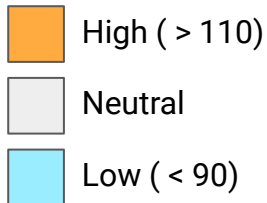




# SIMILARLY, THEY HOLD FEW STRONG OPINIONS ON POVERTY

Showing the impact of system bias could be a way to activate the Apathetics.

## Segment Index vs. Population



# PERSONAL HEROES

When prompted for pictures of their heroes, Apathetics chose images with strong cultural context. Even when choosing politicians, Apathetics chose politicians thought of as “cultural icons” in their day. Truly apathetic, one respondent chose the Grim Reaper with the message, “I don’t have heroes.”



**A large minority of Strivers are non-White.**

**A majority have personally experienced discrimination, and what they view as the injustice of the system.**

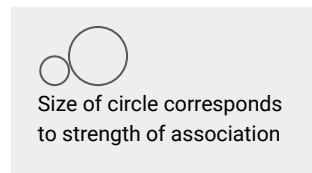
**But many Stivers would say, “We made it.”**

**They would point out how they respected convention, and “did it the right way.”**

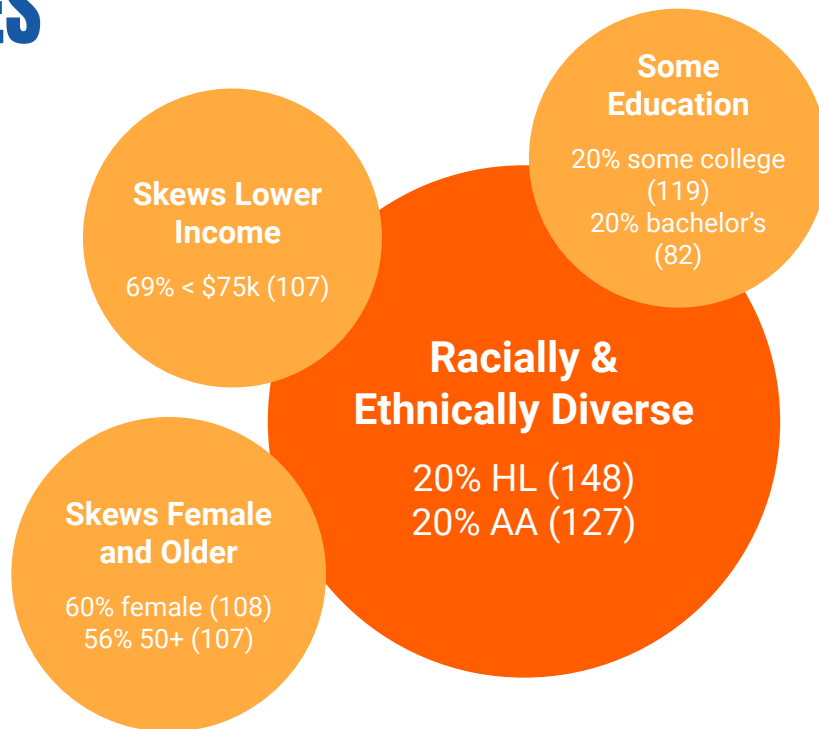
**Stivers believe it’s unfair when people try to cheat the system to get ahead.**

**STRIVER MANIFESTO**

# KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES INCLUDE RACE AND ETHNICITY



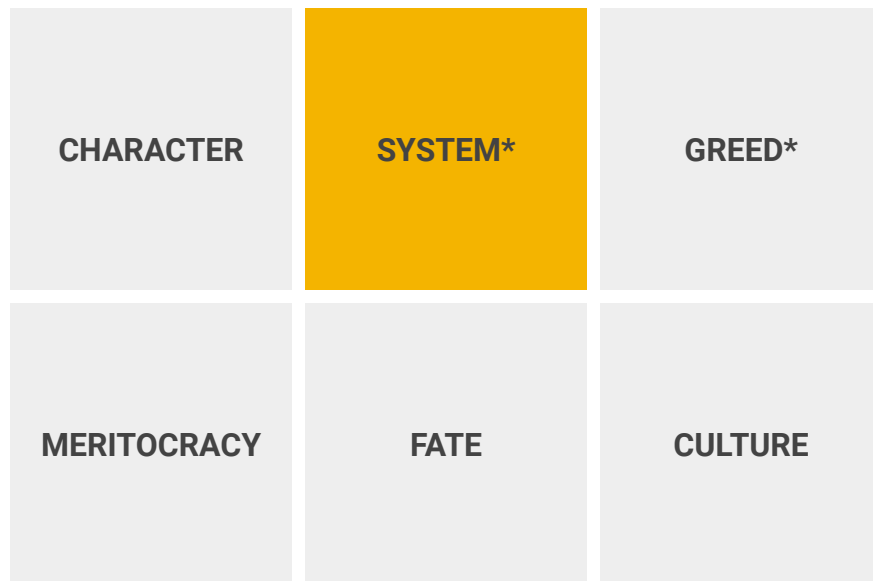
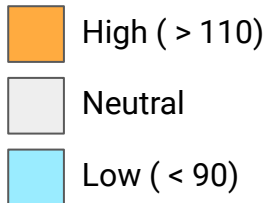
HL - Hispanic / Latino  
AA - African American  
(index to total population)



# STRIVERS' DOMINANT NARRATIVE IS OF SYSTEMIC IMPACT

Messages about systematic inequality could prove an effective appeal to Strivers.

## Segment Index vs. Population



# PERSONAL HEROES

When prompted for pictures of their heroes, Strivers chose images that represent overcoming systematic adversity or oppression, struggling through life with the help of a community, and hope for a brighter future.



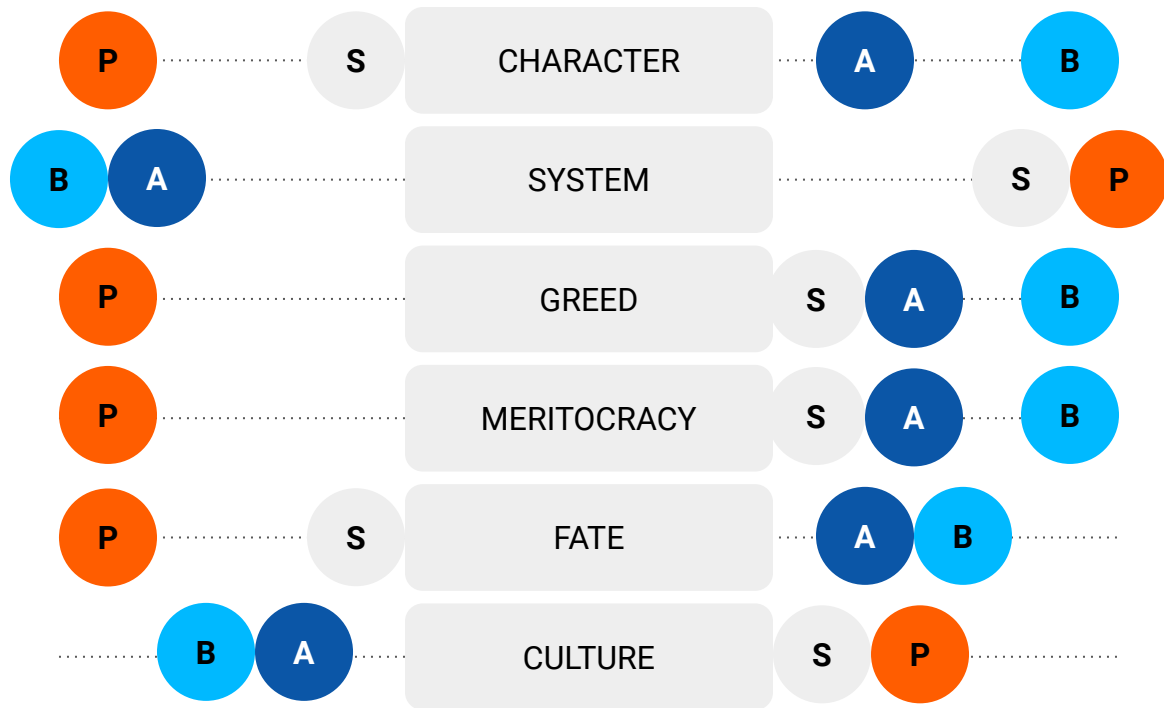


# WHO BELIEVES THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES

P - Progressives  
B - Bootstrappers  
A - Apathetics  
S - Strivers

LOW BELIEF  
( < 90 INDEX)

HIGH BELIEF  
( > 110 INDEX)



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# 03 What can be done to shift narratives?



# NARRATIVES RIPE FOR CHANGE

This research was interested in identifying the narratives of poverty most ripe for change among audiences most in need of shifting (e.g. excl Progressives). We combined all available sources of data to form this understanding.

## What We Know

About audiences, their psychology, and the reasons they hold certain beliefs about poverty.

## What We Learned

From quantitative data related to the strength of association each narrative has in the minds of the audience.

## What We Heard

From qualitative deep dives, comparing pre- and post-content exposure reactions from key segments.

**Meta-narratives of poverty most ripe for change, which can form the seed of a counter-narrative**

# NARRATIVES RIPE FOR CHANGE

Of the 6 meta narratives derived, these 3 seem to be the most ripe for change. And within them, the statements highlighted hint at a “way in” that can be leveraged in future communications research and testing.

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# 04 How can we move this work forward?

# RECOMMENDED READING

These are some of the indispensable resources on which this work was based. Many of these academics and social science researchers are continuing their work in new and interesting areas that can be supported in a variety of ways from the community.

- Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, Tagler (2001). [Attitudes Toward the Poor and Attributions for Poverty.](#)
- Smith, Stone (1989). [Beliefs about the Causes of Wealth and Poverty.](#)
- Feagin (1975). [Subordinating the Poor: Welfare and American Beliefs.](#)
- Kluegel, Smith (1986). [Beliefs about Inequality.](#)
- Yun, Weaver (2010). [Development and Validation of a Short Form of the Attitude Toward Poverty Scale.](#)
- Crumley (2013). [An Examination of the Attitudes, Attributions, and Beliefs Held Towards Poverty and Individuals Living in Poverty.](#)
- Bullock (2006). [Justifying Inequality.](#)
- Bullock, Williams, Limbert (2008). [Predicting Support for Welfare Policies.](#)
- Bullock (2006). [Attributions for Poverty: A Comparison of Middle-Class and Welfare Recipient Attitudes.](#)
- Bullock, Wyche, Williams (2002). [Media Images of the Poor.](#)
- Bennett, Raiz, Davis (2014). [Development and Validation of the Poverty Attributions Survey.](#)
- Sturm (2008). [The Impact Of Client Level Of Poverty On Counselor Attitudes And Attributions About The Client.](#)
- Hunt (1996). [The Individual, Society, or Both? A Comparison of Black, Latino, and White Beliefs about the Causes of Poverty.](#)
- Coryn (2002). [Antecedents of Attitudes Toward the Poor.](#)
- Sahar, Weiner (2006). [Conservatism and Perceptions of Poverty.](#)
- Wilson (1996). [Toward A Revised Framework For Examining Beliefs About The Causes Of Poverty.](#)
- Alston, Dean (1972). [Socioeconomic Factors Associated with Attitudes toward Welfare Recipients and the Causes of Poverty.](#)
- Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, Tripathi (1982). [Right-left political ideologies and attribution of the causes of poverty.](#)
- Bobbio, Cannova, Manganelli (2010). [Conservative Ideology, Economic Conservatism, and Causal Attributions for Poverty and Wealth.](#)

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTENT

As broader mobility from poverty initiatives progress, and as part of a network of practitioners seeking perception change, here are some lessons learned from the work on framing content.

## 01 Shifting Character Narratives

Use personal stories, especially those representing a surprising mix of circumstances, to illustrate that poverty can happen to anyone, despite hard work and a “good job.”

## 02 Shifting System Narratives

Use compelling data and experiences to illustrate the forces beyond anyone’s control that keep those struggling in poverty from moving up. Surprising statistics seem particularly effective at starting a conversation.

## 03 Shifting Meritocracy Narrative

Reinforce that the American Dream is a myth, or has changed significantly from its previous form. This Dream is a deeply held belief by many not struggling in poverty, and once shaken, can be the foundation for impactful insight and breakthroughs.

## 04 Content Truths Confirmed

Video is better than prose. It can’t be all negative - provide a solution to the problem. Confronting people about their bias can be really hard. Building empathy for an out-group softens negative perceptions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TARGETING

Regardless of medium, these lessons will be useful in connecting key audience segments to counter-narratives of poverty.

## 01 Progressives

Use personal stories of those struggling in poverty and systematic oppression to increase their prioritization of poverty among other social issues.

## 02 Bootstrappers

Challenge the Character narrative with personal stories of those struggling in poverty despite their best efforts. Challenge their Meritocracy narrative by convincing them the American Dream has shifted, or never was.

## 03 Apathetics

Target the Systems narrative by leading with facts (not necessarily data). Show that opportunity is not equal due to systematic injustice and circumstances beyond anyone's control. Show them the impact of their action.

## 04 Strivers

Decrease affinity for authoritarian mindsets by challenging System narratives through experiences hammering home the inequality of opportunity in America.

**THANK YOU!**

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