



Casting (Sliced) Bread Upon the Waters:

The Since Sliced Bread Competition and the Concerns of Ordinary Americans

By **Amanda Levinson**, Director of Policy Programs, [Hope Street Group](#)

The past two decades have been a time of enormous change in our economy. Innovation in science, technology and the global marketplace have increased consumer choices and possibilities, the overall wealth of our country has risen to historic levels, and many have benefited greatly from rising incomes, stock market, and home values. Yet there is also a widespread sense of unease at the state of the American Dream: a nagging sense that ordinary workers are working harder to keep up with their bills, that health care costs are eating deeper into pay checks, that families are going deeper in debt, that people's jobs and incomes are not as secure as they used to be, and that our children will need to learn much more, work much harder, and perhaps even be luckier in order to enjoy a more affluent lifestyle than their parents. Consider the following statistics:

- Household income volatility—the yearly amount that a household's inflation-adjusted income varies—has more than doubled since the early 1970s.
- The number of people living in poverty in America has increased over the last four years, from 31.6 million and 11.3 percent in 2000 to 37 million and 12.7 percent in 2004.
- Nationwide, although 49% of preschool children with family incomes above \$75,000 attend preschool, just 25% of children with family incomes below \$30,000 attend.
- In 2001–02, an average of 13 million families spent 10 percent of family income on direct out-of-pocket health care expenses.

The vast majority of Americans still believes in the American Dream, and feels a responsibility to make that dream a reality for themselves and their families. At the same time, most Americans do not think that public policies, political leaders, or our government in general has kept pace with these changes to protect and deepen the dream of increasing prosperity and expanding opportunity for all. According to recent surveys, only 34% think the country is generally “on the right track.” And our Congress has an approval rating of a mere 27%—the lowest it's been since 1994. Nor are people more confident in business, the media, or other institutions to reflect their values and work for their interests.

It is in this context that the Since Sliced Bread competition was launched by the SEIU last fall. The explicit goal of Since Sliced Bread was to solicit ideas from ordinary Americans that would improve the lives of working people and strengthen our economy. What emerged from this contest was a national brainstorm of ideas in every conceivable category of public policy—from alternative energy, healthcare, immigration reform, and international trade to personal debt, jobs and the environment. The outpouring of ideas not only shatters the myth that Americans don't care about policy, but also shows that average Americans are thinking broadly and creatively about the issues that have a daily impact on their lives.

SEIU recently asked [Hope Street Group](#), a non-partisan, non-profit organization of young business professionals dedicated to promoting an Opportunity Economy- policies that expand economic opportunity in a high growth economy - to review the ideas coming out of Since Sliced Bread with an eye to revealing the common themes and concerns that Americans share. You can learn more about Hope Street Group and how Since Sliced Bread solutions reflect the principles of creating an opportunity economy at Hope Street Group's website (www.hopestreetgroup.org). We found many innovative and generous ideas on the Since Sliced Bread website that promote economic opportunity. We also found that Americans share remarkably similar concerns and values.

Transcending the Red State/Blue State Divide: A New Role for Government in Achieving the American Dream

“Since Sliced Bread” should dispel any doubts that Americans share concerns about the most pressing issues facing them in today's economy. The more than 22,000 ideas came from every congressional district in the nation—a veritable map that policymakers should read to get a sense of what's on the mind of ordinary Americans today.

The concerns raised on the Since Sliced Bread website went beyond the red state/blue state binary that many would have us believe determines the day-to-day lives of ordinary Americans. Thousands of people from South Dakota to New York, Arkansas to California, wrote in with trepidations and hopes that transcend this imaginary divide. By and large, Americans are concerned with creating jobs, fixing health care and education, finding alternative ways to become energy efficient, building homeownership, relieving personal debt and increasing assets, and securing retirement no matter where they live or who they vote for.

And yet, the surprising finding was in the number of Since Sliced Bread ideas that reflected both a skeptical attitude towards the government's ability to solve America's problems, while at the same time proposing the expansion or creation of new government programs to resolve these same issues. This apparent contradiction is understandable. Some of the ideas proposed that government take a direct hand in solving the problems identified, such as massive public works projects to boost employment. But far more of the ideas looked to government to provide incentives for businesses, to invest in people's skills, and to provide access to markets and opportunities. The vast majority of proposals showed Americans reaching for solutions that will empower and engage individuals, families, communities and

businesses supported by a government that is more innovative, productive, and responsive to the aspirations of ordinary people.

Since Sliced Bread's top prize winners offer excellent examples of proposals that retool government's role in the lives of ordinary citizens. **Peter Skidmore** won the contest's top prize with his idea to create locally-owned sustainable resource industries through funds generated by taxes on pollution, development and fossil fuels. By placing funds generated by taxation directly into the hands of entrepreneurs, Peter envisions a role for government that simultaneously supports new avenues of job growth and alternative energy technologies.

Contest runner-up **Filippo Menczer's** proposal to tie the minimum wage to the Cost of Living Index abolishes the government's role altogether in setting the minimum wage. Letting cost of living determine the minimum wage eliminates the need for the bitter political battle that drains the time our lawmakers could be spending on other issues.

Leslie Hester, the second contest runner-up, revamps the critical role government plays in funding public education. She proposes to equitably fund all public schools through redirecting local property taxes into a general state fund. Combined with her ideas to control tuition at public universities and increase teacher salaries, Leslie upgrades the important role government can play in improving the chance for every American to have access to affordable, quality education.

A similar revisioning of government's role in the lives of citizens can be seen in other topics addressed by contest participants:

- Round 1 finalist **Susan Almeida** proposes to support job and business creation by creating an agency that would allow small and medium-sized businesses to get capital from local funders (idea # 18218).
- **Martin Johnson**, who was a round 2 finalist, proposes establishing universal access to health care by creating digital records to reduce paperwork and start a gradual single-payer health care system for adults under 35 (idea # 412).
- **John F.** of Florida suggests creating more public health clinics staffed by recent medical school graduates who would work there in exchange for loan forgiveness (idea #9945).
- **Susan C.** in Florida's idea—to create individual pre-tax educational accounts for people to tap into in order to learn new skills and training throughout their lives--tackles the need for workers to learn new skills in our rapidly evolving economy (idea # 16062).

What is remarkable about these ideas is their shared conviction that government should be a catalyst for--rather than the sole proprietor of—programs and initiatives that expand economic self-sufficiency and growth.

Common Concerns, Shared Dreams: A Sampling of Themes Emerging from Since Sliced Bread

Since Sliced Bread provided a powerful interactive platform for Americans to debate and discuss what matters most in their lives. Underpinning the thousands of ideas submitted to the contest lies a deep, shared desire to achieve the American Dream—good-paying jobs, access to health care, education, homeownership, retirement, and a better life for our children and grandchildren. And although there was lively debate about the best ways to implement the ideas, from topic to topic, the articulation of what needs fixing was remarkably similar.

Creating more and better jobs: **Anonymous** in Maryland writes, “Today, small business is the engine that drives the American economy, creates majority of new jobs, and innovations” (idea # 18067). A big part of the American dream is starting a business, and many in the contest see new business creation as a way to help replenish jobs lost to outsourcing. But contest participants realize that small business owners need a boost to help get them off the ground, and so ideas abounded about how to support new businesses and encourage job creation.

Fixing Health care: On the topic of healthcare, **Kathern B.** from Tennessee writes, “My issue and problem is healthcare in America today. Whether it be in the workplace or private sector, it affects every person, business, owner and employee. Millions are without this necessity. America we can do better!” (idea #23106). With the rising costs of health care straining the average American’s pocketbook, thousands of Since Sliced Bread participants wrote in with their ideas to cut the costs of—and increase access to—health care.

Improving Education: **Diane F.** in Michigan writes, “Each generation should have a better quality of life than the one before it. Every American should have equal access to higher education. The cost of a college education has skyrocketed to the point where it is almost out of reach for the middle and lower classes” (idea # 22010). This is a sentiment shared by many participants. Americans are clearly concerned with the cost, accessibility and quality of education. The sense that our children—and adults—must be better prepared to compete in the global economy was also a recurring theme throughout the contest.

Increasing Sources of Alternative Energy: The concern about America’s dependence on foreign oil and the rising cost of energy was raised by thousands of contestants. As **Brad R.** in Florida writes, “In my opinion Energy is first and foremost the most important issue facing our Country today... Our Country use millions of barrels of oil everyday and we depend on other countries to supply it to us. We have the knowledge and means to develop alternative types of fuel that could power anything from automobile engines to power plants” (idea # 23044). Many people like Brad were optimistic that despite our energy troubles, America has the know-how and the resources to generate alternative sources of energy.

Increasing Homeownership: “The American dream is for everyone to have an equal opportunity to live in peace and get a home for their families,” writes **David G.** of Virginia (idea #22479). Many Since Sliced Bread participants see owning homes as an important leg-

up to the middle class, but worry that that dream is increasingly out of reach due to rising housing costs and the lack of assets. Creative solutions to helping more Americans become homeowners featured prominently in the contest ideas.

Ensuring Retirement for Everybody: Anonymous in California had this to say about the current state of retirement benefits in America: “retirement benefits for most working Americans are anything but secure. Additionally, a substantial portion of the workforce, especially the younger generations, expect and prefer to jump from job to job as their skill base increases; this trend will undoubtedly further stress pension funds at major corporations” (idea # 8707). With anxiety running high about the future of retirement benefits, many people offered up creative solutions on how to prepare for retirement.

Relieving personal debt and increasing assets: “What is the American Dream?” asks **Anita C.** of Florida. “Is it to live a good life and be happy. To get married and raise a family, to be able to live a life without an everyday struggle, or just to one day own a home. I believe it’s all the above. In order to save the US economy, we must first help and teach the people of the economy how to save” (idea # 23049). Spiraling personal debt, a lack of understanding of financial management, and an inability to save for the future were all on the minds of people who wrote into Since Sliced Bread. Without savings, the American Dream will remain out of reach for millions.

Public Policy by the People, for the People: The Since Sliced Bread Folksonomy

The thousands of submissions to Since Sliced Bread are nothing less than astonishing, upending the common wisdom that says ordinary Americans are apathetic when it comes to policy debate. On the contrary, these ideas are as much a gauge of what concerns ordinary Americans as they are a powerful illustration of the untapped potential for policy participation and debate that exists at the grassroots. You can visit Hope Street Group’s website (www.hopestreetgroup.org/sinceslicedbread.pdf) for a discussion of how ideas like those on Since Sliced Bread can expand economic opportunity and growth.

Today, the SEIU unveils another ambitious phase of Since Sliced Bread, asking the American public to sort and rank the thousands of ideas submitted to the contest. We hope you will join Since Sliced Bread in its second phase as a “folksonomy.” As the public looks at this dizzying range of ideas across many different topics, we should keep in mind that we now have a unique opportunity to participate in building a grassroots policy movement. Which ideas will have the greatest positive impact on working families? Which ideas will help us grow a strong economy for our children’s future? Public policy by the people, for the people is a tall order, but Americans are clearly ready to take center stage in the roles that will determine our future.

It’s now up to all of us to keep these ideas—and the American Dream—alive.