Don’t Stay on Message
What 8,000 Respondents Say about Using Strategic Framing to Move the Public Discourse on Immigration

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT
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I. Introduction

In recent months, immigration policy has climbed to the top of the national political agenda. In spite of spirited opposition, the Senate passed S. 744 in late June. The bill is now stalled in the House, where it is receiving intermittent bursts of public attention. It is easy to see the rancor and vitriol that characterize the public discourse surrounding the issue of immigration. However, it is harder to see the subtle patterns in issue presentation that underlie this debate. Behind some politicians’ incendiary messages and the media’s focus on extreme views lies what Gamson (1992) calls a “framing contest” — a collision of narratives driven by opposing sides of the immigration debate. This intense and highly polarized debate drives out reasoned argument, prevents public deliberation and narrows the public discourse around immigration. Most importantly, the ongoing contestation of frames keeps ordinary Americans from forming a coherent narrative about immigration.

The challenge for those who support comprehensive immigration reform is apparent: They need to find a way to enter this discursive chaos with a message that orients people toward a singular, coherent narrative about this important issue. They must be able to then use this narrative to defend against rhetorical challenges, and to frame a conversation that enhances public understanding and support for sensible policies. This report presents the findings from an experimental survey that assesses the ability of frames, which are rhetorical devices used to intentionally or unintentionally organize the meaning in messages, to perform these tasks.

The research presented here forms part of a larger project, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; its U.S. Immigration Policy Initiative supports efforts to reform current systems so that they better address the economic, fiscal, and social implications of immigration. As a part of this effort, the MacArthur Foundation is supporting research by the FrameWorks Institute to investigate what policymakers, the media, and the public currently think about immigration, and to develop an evidence-based underpinning for future communication. This research will help Americans reconsider their existing attitudes and assumptions about immigration, and take into account evidence about the contributions and challenges posed by immigrants in the United States. The goal of the Foundation in supporting this work is to inform and reframe the discourse, such that the national debates over immigration result in the adoption of policies that are beneficial to all Americans, whether immigrants or native born.

The project relies on Strategic Frame Analysis™ (SFA), the approach that the FrameWorks Institute has pioneered to analyze public thinking and evaluate the capacity of frames to enhance public conversations and influence the direction and intensity of public support for social issues. The scientific literature on public communication has unequivocally demonstrated that the way an issue is framed for the public — that is, the way that information is presented — strongly influences public understanding and decision-making. Further, these frames form the foundation for political action, which often guides the formulation of specific policies that are enacted through legislation. In sum, the SFA
approach builds on state-of-the-art scientific theory to offer evidence-based insight into how immigration reform messages can rebut challenges and inform public discourse.

Relying upon this approach, we know that, absent a value at the top of a narrative, people struggle to see the point of engaging with an issue and are left to their own devices when it comes to understanding why an issue matters. Used in this way, values serve as fundamental organizing principles that people use to evaluate social issues and reach decisions. Not only does an effective value have to be memorable, easily communicable, and able to help people reach productive understandings and decisions, it also has to stand up to competition from opposing messages.

At any given time, most socio-political issues are dormant; they have settled into a fixed discursive pattern that reflects a singular dominant narrative. The attention paid to immigration, and the ensuing framing contest, ensure that there is no dominant narrative with respect to this issue; instead, we observe a two-sided discourse, with many messages supporting comprehensive reform and others pushing against such reforms. Put simply, supporters of comprehensive immigration reform face a framing contest to establish a dominant narrative that will govern public opinion and subsequent political action. Recognizing that the conversation around immigration reform is fluid, dynamic and oppositional, this study introduces a novel method to discover how to deploy the best value-based frames to productively shape the public conversation on immigration.

To design the best communication strategy for this contest, it is vital to model the messaging environment. Specifically, the values that immigration reform supporters can use to build a narrative leading to responsible political action must be assessed in isolation to see how well they perform as initial messages, or in a less competitive messaging environment, as well as when they appear at the same time as competing, oppositional messages (that seek to turn people away from immigration reform). This calls for a sophisticated experimental design that accurately simulates the communicative environment and produces precise estimates of frame effects, as they operate on their own and in the context of opposing messages.

FrameWorks researchers designed a large-scale experimental survey (involving 8,000 respondents, statistically matched to represent the population of adult American registered voters, as described in the next section) to weigh the effects of values in creating support for comprehensive immigration reform at two critical discursive points. The first set of tests determines the impact of values-based frames in a single-message environment; that is, when the value is used to lead off a conversation and is not countered by an opposing argument or frame. The second set of tests determines how well these value frames fare when confronted with a counter message from those who oppose comprehensive immigration reform. Combining the results from these two sets of tests allows us to map out a complete communication strategy, identifying the best messages for those who support comprehensive immigration reform to use in multiple situations:

• First, what is the best way for supporters of comprehensive reform to enter the immigration conversation?
• Next, what should immigration reform supporters say when challenged by oppositional messaging in order to continue productive conversation?

• Finally, what is the most productive overall narrative for those seeking to increase public support for comprehensive immigration reform?
II. About the Experiment

The experimental survey was conducted between May 3 and May 13, 2013. Participants were taken from a double opt-in Internet panel. The study includes 8,004 registered U.S. voters, weighted on the basis of age, gender, education level and party identification to statistically match all registered voters in the United States. Specifically: 44 percent of the respondents were male; the mean age was 46; the median education level was some college; 71 percent were white, 15 percent were black. Finally, the respondents’ partisanship roughly matched population norms with: Strong Democrats at 21.5 percent, Weak Democrats at 12.4 percent, Independent Democrats at 16.1, Independents at 16.8 percent, Independent Republicans at 10.8 percent, Weak Republicans at 8.5 percent, and, Strong Republicans at 13.9 percent. The respondents were randomly assigned to conditions as outlined below.

This survey experiment is designed to be sensitive to the current climate and the contested state of extant discourse. The key feature of this design is its testing of messages in competition. Thus, besides testing messages in isolation, respondents are randomly assigned to conditions where they see pairs of messages: a value paired with a counter message. The experiment also features a control group, where a randomly composed group of respondents receive no message.

After reading one of the candidate messages or receiving no message, all respondents answer the same set of questions that are designed to chart respondents’ attitudes toward immigrants and support for relevant policies. The analysis then compares the effects across conditions to determine which values advance support for immigration reform, both by themselves as well as in the presence of competing messages. Thus, the design replicates the political battleground into which the values will be thrust, and shows which pattern of values will be most likely to succeed for those seeking comprehensive immigration reform in the current political context.

More precisely, the design features one control group, seven conditions where respondents receive an uncontested message — four values and three counter messages — and 12 competitive conditions that pair values with counter messages.

**Candidate Values**

The values used in this study come from several sources. FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews with a diverse group of experts (both those who supported and others who opposed comprehensive immigration reform and a wide range of immigration-related policies). Researchers also analyzed several national media sources as well as the Congressional Record, looking carefully at the values mentioned in these sources. Taken together, this review found four values that were either present in extant conversations, likely to produce productive alignments of respondents’ attitudes with expert recommendations, or both.
The presentations of these values, like the counter messages, were created with a parallel structure, so respondents saw virtually identical paragraphs save for a few key phrases that embodied the value message. This structure allows for a rigorous test of the message content — making sure that any differences observed in the effect of the messages are due to the specific value, counter message or combination, rather than some other unintended difference between the messages. The candidate messages were presented as excerpts from newspaper editorials, a practice that social scientists use to increase ecological validity, or the appearance of realistic messages. Ecological validity leads to more authentic responses. These steps, along with random assignment and experimental control, allow us to confidently make causal statements linking the values content to effects in the outcome measures.

The four values in line with attempts to increase support for comprehensive immigration reform (whose exact wording appears in Appendix A) are:

**Prosperity**

This value emphasizes the economic gains that accrue to the country from immigration by “harnessing skills and energy,” making use of immigrants’ “talent and drive,” including the invention of “new technologies.” Not only does this value reflect a widely used economic argument, a version of this treatment succeeded in a previous FrameWorks study on immigration.\(^5\)

**Pragmatism**

This value revolves around taking a “common sense” approach to immigration. It advises that we “carefully consider all of the possibilities,” specifically stating “it wouldn’t make sense to send all the people that are in the country without documentation back to their country of origin.” It concludes by arguing against “extreme and impractical” measures. In past FrameWorks research, *Pragmatism* has engendered a spirit of compromise and practicality that supplies an antidote to partisanship and gridlock.\(^6\)

**Opportunity for All**

This value appeals to the sense that America is the land of opportunity and that everyone should have a chance to be part of “the American Dream.” This language of opportunity appears in many extant appeals, encapsulating the traditionalist, almost patriotic, thinking behind the movement to welcome immigrants to our shores.

**Moral Argument**

This value is premised on the idea that “we need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings, entitled to the same basic rights and respect.” This value features prominently in immigration advocacy materials.
Counter Messages

The counter messages stem from the same sources as the candidate values and follow the same protocol in their use.

The three counter messages (whose exact wording appears in Appendix A) are:

Rule of Law

This counter message offered by opponents of comprehensive immigration reform begins by stressing that “our nation was founded on the rule of law,” and moves on to assert the unfairness of rewarding lawbreakers, advising that they “should pay heavy fines and be required to return to their original country before becoming legal.”

Economic Insecurity

This message starts with the state of the economy, and points out “we cannot let immigrants take jobs away from Americans who are trying to earn a living and support a family.” It advises that we “enforce an ‘Americans First’ policy.” Only after these steps can we let in immigrants, it asserts.

Security

This message is predicated on the threat represented by an uncontrolled border. It emphasizes the importance of taking “steps to strengthen our borders, making them secure and protecting Americans from immigrants who may pose a danger.” The message also mentions deporting “suspected criminals who are already here, before they can commit more crimes.”

Outcome Measures

The questions presented to respondents after exposure to a message, or to no message in the case of the control group, form the outcome measures used to assess the effectiveness of the values and counter messages. Our questions were developed and refined from lists proposed by the experts interviewed by FrameWorks, and in consultation with project partners. This process was supported by an intense analysis of the Congressional Record and selected national media outlets.

All questions were written to conform to standard social science survey practice; for example, they use straightforward, non-leading language with a clear evaluation object. For the purposes of analysis, the questions were grouped into five categories; taken together, these five groups of questions, which are referred to as batteries — or scales — cover salient dimensions of the immigration issue domain.7
The five scales used to assess the effectiveness of the messages are as follows:

**Path to Citizenship**

The questions in this battery chart respondents’ opinions on one of the central issues of the immigration debate. For example, the item “We should allow the children of parents who entered our country illegally to become citizens” was taken from congressional debate.

In this scale, higher values indicate an increased willingness to allow immigrants to become full citizens.

**Border Security**

The five items in this battery tap respondents’ attitudes toward fortifying the border to prevent illegal entry, and toward more stringent enforcement of laws aimed at preventing illegal employment. A typical item runs “We should reduce the amount of time and money we are putting into building fences, hiring more border patrol agents and other aspects of our current approach to border security.” These and other questions are written so that higher scores are associated with more reform leaning and less punitive attitudes toward border protection and enforcement.

**Visa System**

Questions in this battery address problems in the visa system. One question, “We need make changes to the immigration system that allow temporary workers to more easily gain permanent status,” prompts respondents to articulate their attitudes toward guest workers. Here, higher numbers are associated with support for comprehensive reforms to the current visa system.

**Economic Competitiveness**

Questions about the effect of immigration on the economy compose another issue area. An example of a question from this battery is “Our country needs to admit more immigrants with skills and talent in order to remain competitive with other countries.” Agreement with this statement implies that the respondent viewed immigrants’ contributions as a net benefit to society. Higher scores on this scale are associated with more favorable attitudes toward the idea that immigrants have a positive impact on the economy.

**Government Services**

The final scale consists of questions designed to gauge the willingness of respondents to provide services to immigrants. For example, respondents were asked whether they agreed that “Immigrants should be allowed to participate in the Affordable Care Act, the U.S.’s new health care plan.” Higher numbers on this scale indicate more support for extending government services to immigrants.
III. Results

Below, we use three organizing research questions to present the experimental findings.

Research Question No. 1

What is the best way for immigration reform supporters to enter the conversation (i.e., what are the independent effects of values and counter messages on attitudes and support for policy?)

Figure 1 presents results where respondents saw one value or one reform opponent message.

![Figure 1 - Isolated Message Effects](image)

Looking across the four values, the Moral Argument value significantly increases support on four of the five outcome measures. For example, support for reforming the Visa System rises by 6 percentage points (an effect that is statistically significant at the 0.01 level). The Prosperity frame is the second most effective message in raising support for reform policies. As one might expect, the Prosperity value’s effect is greatest when it comes to moving people to see immigration as a benefit to the economy.
The surprise in Figure 1 is that the *Rule of Law* message actually produces a 3.6 percentage point increase in people’s attitudes toward easing border security. That is, the value increases people’s support for loosening border security and enforcement, and for making immigration regulations less punitive. This finding violated our expectations. However, looking further into this effect we begin to see an explanation, as the finding is concentrated among Democrats. One hypothesis is what can be thought of as a pushback effect — that Democrats react so strongly to the regressive and punitive “rule of law” message that their support for favorable stances on the issue increases.

The most potent isolated message for those who oppose comprehensive reform is *Economic Insecurity*. For example, on the *Government Services* scale, the *Economic Insecurity* message causes a 2 percent decrease in respondents’ willingness to provide government services to immigrants.

The upshot of this analysis is that when those who support comprehensive immigration reform are in non-competitive message environments, or are in a position to deliver their message first, before counter messages can be disseminated, they can best advance their cause by using the *Moral Argument* value frame.

**Research Question No. 2**

What should immigration reform supporters say when challenged by oppositional messaging in order to continue productive conversation?

This research question is premised on the reality that the message environment facing those seeking comprehensive immigration reform is dynamic and evolving. As such, this section presents the results assessing the effect of *competition* between messages — in other words, what is the net effect when various messages compete for people’s attention? In the most probable scenario, immigration reform supporters pick a value to use as a lead, then opponents of comprehensive reform counter with one of their messages and, finally, reform supporters get the chance to respond to the counter. In this way, the joint messaging creates a conversation of alternating responses. Examining the result of this type of conversation provides an opportunity to empirically map the best communication strategy in terms of advancing support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Figure 2 presents charts for each of the five outcome dimensions. The first bar in each chart represents the best lead value, the second indicates the most effective counter, and the third bar indicates the best response to the counter message. In short, each row represents a choice in the back-and-forth framing competition.
These results show that, on all five dimensions of the immigration issue, the Rule of Law message is the most effective way for reform opponents to counter reform supporter values. Put another way, when a Rule of Law message counters Moral Argument or Prosperity, it will have the greatest effect in decreasing support for comprehensive immigration reform. This means that, while it performs well in isolation, the Moral Argument is particularly vulnerable to a Rule of Law counter. In the case of reforms to the Visa System, support turns from an advantageous 6 percentage point gain from the Moral Argument, to a 7.4 percentage point loss when the Moral Argument is countered with a Rule of Law message — an enormous swing of 13.4 percent.

Figure 2 goes on to present the best message to use as a follow-up to the Rule of Law counter message. The bars at the bottom of each sub chart represent the effect of the best combination immigration reform supporters can hope for with the Rule of Law; in other words, this chart shows reform supporters the best response to use when confronted with a Rule of Law counter. Straightforwardly, immigration reform supporters should respond to Rule of Law counter messages by evoking the value of Pragmatism. Across the five dimensions depicted in Figure 2, Pragmatism is able to nullify the damaging effect stemming from the Rule of Law counter.
The lesson from this counter message analysis is that the sequence of messages matters. While the *Moral Argument* is by far the most effective value when it is in the lead position, its effect is severely compromised by the *Rule of Law* message. Meanwhile, *Pragmatism* is not a highly effective lead value, but is the most potent antidote to the *Rule of Law* message. In short, the effect of a given value frame depends critically on where it is used in the conversation. Further, and this is potentially the most important implication of these findings — *in a competitive message environment, that is, one in which immigration reform supporters are challenged by counter messages, “staying on message” and failing to pivot from the Moral Argument value frame to Pragmatism is a potentially devastating mistake.*

**Research Question No. 3**

What is the most productive overall narrative for those seeking comprehensive immigration reform?

Taken together, the results highlight the imperative for reform supporters to be highly sensitive to context when communicating about immigration issues; the best choice of value frames in a given situation depends upon the nature of the message environment, the counter message offered by people who oppose comprehensive reform, and the dimension of the immigration issue under consideration. Stepping back and looking at the results on the whole leads us to a critical conclusion: Those seeking comprehensive immigration reform must listen carefully to the other side of the conversation in order to send the right message at the right time.

Collating the experimental findings across all the conditions in the analysis, and all the dimensions of the immigration issue studied as outcome measures, leads to a complete communications strategy. This strategy details the best value frame to use at each stage in the conversation for each dimension of the issue, given what counter message appears. Figure 3 presents this strategy graphically as a decision tree.
Following the decision tree in this figure allows immigration reform supporters to select the best value frame to use in each situation, taking counter messaging into account.

Figure 3 charts the immigration conversation. At the left we see the conversation beginning — when those who support immigration reform “have the floor.” Here, the tree recounts the lessons learned from the analysis of the isolated message conditions, namely, lead with the Moral Argument value unless the issue at hand is focused on economics (in which case use the value of Prosperity).

As we move to the right in the figure, the conversation continues as the opposition makes its communicative move. While immigration reform supporters might look at the counter messaging with trepidation, these counter messages supply an opportunity for supporters to productively reframe the conversation. In the tree, the counter messages are shown in three colors: red, brown and purple, corresponding to Rule of Law, Security and Economic Insecurity, respectively. The final response to the counter messages depends on the dimension in question. For example, a Rule of Law counter message in a discussion of the
Visa System calls for pivoting to the Opportunity for All value frame in response. However, notice how many of the arrows ultimately point to Pragmatism, indicating the general effectiveness of this value as a response to messages opposing comprehensive reform. That is, when in doubt about the policies at play in the conversation, the Pragmatism value is the most versatile option.

Ultimately, the goal of enhancing discourse and crystallizing the public’s views on immigration is to build support for public policy reform. This goal dictates the final step in building an effective narrative — moving from the value frame response into a discussion of policy. This step is crucial to establishing a complete narrative. Thus, a close re-examination of the decision tree in Figure 3 suggests three coherent narrative tracks that those supporting immigration reform can establish as dominating narratives in a chaotic, competitive message environment. Each track dovetails with particular reforming policies. The three tracks are presented in Figure 4.

### Figure 4 - Three Coherent and Persuasive Immigration Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Security</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lead Value Frame</td>
<td>Moral Argument</td>
<td>Prosperity</td>
<td>Any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely Counter Message</td>
<td>Rule of Law</td>
<td>Economic Insecurity</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pivoting Value Response</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
<td>Opportunity for All</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Policies</td>
<td>Path to Citizenship</td>
<td>Economic Competitiveness</td>
<td>Border Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visa System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main track — the one capturing the largest part of the decision tree, not to mention the one that covers the most polices — is a storyline that begins with the Moral Argument value, allows people who oppose comprehensive immigration reform to come back with Rule of Law messages, then pivots to the Pragmatism value and concludes by discussing Path to Citizenship, Visa System and Government Services policies.

An important secondary track establishes a template to follow in immigration discussions referencing the economy. This narrative begins with the Prosperity value, allows for an Economic Insecurity counter message, then pivots to the Opportunity For All value and concludes by discussing policies related to the economy, especially economic competitiveness.

A final track covers security, especially at narrative paths leading to a discussion of the border. In these narratives, immigration reform supporters can lead with any value or simply do nothing and wait for counter messages based around security. As Figure 3 suggests, responding to this challenge with the value of Pragmatism is the best thing
immigration reform supporters can do regardless of issue area, which then should be directed into a conclusion that features discussion of *Border Security* policies.

**Can Partisans be Engaged by Frames?**

We would be remiss if we failed to include some discussions of partisan differences in reactions to the value frames and counter messages observed in the analysis.

The decision trees for each partisan group — Republicans, Democrats and Independents — appear in Appendix B. They follow the same format as the tree presented in Figure 3. Importantly, further analysis that segmented the respondents into partisan groups highlighted the fact that audiences of each party can be substantially moved away from their starting positions by frames and frame combinations.

The volatility of opinion across partisan cohorts is underscored by this analysis. Republicans exposed to the combination of a *Moral Argument* value frame and an *Economic Insecurity* counter message actually *increase* their support for comprehensive reform by as much as 12.3 percent (in the case of *Government Services*). Another combination that produces the same significant movement is the combination of the *Moral Argument* value frame and the *Security* counter message among Independents, which causes a decrease in support for comprehensive reform by as much as 11.4 percent (in the case of *Path to Citizenship*). These results are highly statistically significant and underscore the volatility of opinion shifts in response to frames.
IV. Recommendations and Conclusions

Looking at the empirical evidence collected from 8,000 respondents yields the following strategic recommendations for those seeking comprehensive immigration reform.

1. Lead with Moral Argument in most cases, and Prosperity when concentrating on immigration’s economic impact.

   The empirical evidence shows that comprehensive immigration reform supporters should build their initial messages around two value frames:

   Moral Argument when promoting a Path to Citizenship, when arguing for changes to the Visa System, when proposing expanding Government Services for immigrants, and when advocating for less punitive approaches to Border Security and enforcement. Here, we recommend following the outline of the value: Talk about reuniting families, allowing children to go to college and, above all, treating everyone with respect and decency.

   If the subject is immigration’s relationship to the economy, initial messaging should center on the Prosperity value, pointing out the need to harness each individual’s skills and energy to build a better life for all, and highlighting immigrants’ contributions in terms of taxes and economic growth.

2. Stick to the initial value frame in less competitive message environments, and move to discussion of specific policies.

   If, after deploying the Moral Argument or Prosperity value frames, immigration reform supporters do not face an oppositional message, they do not need to pivot to a new value frame and should move on to discuss specific policies. With the Moral Argument, reform supporters could trace the steps immigrants could go through to become full citizens, and explain proposals for changing the way visas are awarded, in order to reunite families and contest the wisdom of wasting money on border security and punishing otherwise innocent, hard-working people.

3. Don’t stay “on message” when confronted with oppositional messaging.

   Failing to pivot to a new value in response to counter messages can result in sizable decreases in support. This means that immigration reform supporters need to listen carefully for counter messages and respond appropriately to the situation, using Figure 3’s decision tree. Typically, reform supporters will be faced with a situation where they move first and are followed by an oppositional message. The key is for immigration reform supporters to respond to these counter messages by pivoting to a new value frame.
We cannot overstate the importance of this recommendation. In the worst case, consider a conversation about expanding the visa system. Immigration reform supporters could, and should, begin with Moral Argument, for example talking about human dignity and the need to reunite families. This communication will probably lead to a Rule of Law counter, which could potentially declare that many immigrants are illegal and, therefore criminals — not only evoking negative stereotypes but demanding that no one should be rewarded for breaking the law. Reform supporters, according to the experiment, would then see a 6 percentage point gain turn into a 7.4 percent loss — a net disaster of a 13.4 percent decrease in support for their perspectives. However, those supporting comprehensive reform can effectively respond by pivoting to another value frame, usually Pragmatism, where they can fruitfully discuss the impossibility of mass deportation or the ineffectiveness of punitive measures, for example. These appraisals of the immigration situation should be supported by appeals to common sense and problem-solving. Critically, this pivot eviscerates the effectiveness of the counter message.

Finally, to repeat an important point, the findings suggest strongly that the correct sequencing of value frames is critical. As Figure 2 shows, sticking to the Moral Argument value frame can produce a devastating loss.

4. Those seeking comprehensive immigration reform must complete a coherent and persuasive message by elaborating on specific public policies that support reform.

It is critical to guide audiences toward messages that support reform. At the same time, moving toward discussion of reform policies at the end of an immigration conversation completes the narrative in the audience’s mind, making it coherent and, therefore, memorable and persuasive. In short: Do not leave the audience to come to their own conclusions on solutions — provide solutions as the conclusion of the narrative.

Figure 4 outlines the three stories to tell — stories that incorporate oppositional messaging and unfold point by point, from beginning to middle to end. These simple, coherent stories form powerful narratives that ultimately guide the audience to more productive thinking about immigration reform.

To repeat the main threads immigration conversations can follow:

The central narrative that immigration reform supporters should develop in their messaging begins with the Moral Argument value frame, featuring discussions of respect and dignity as outlined above. It anticipates a Rule of Law counter message, where immigrants are labeled as criminals. The narrative then flips this counter message by pivoting to discuss the impracticality of deportation. Finally, the narrative segues to policies, concluding with a discussion of a reasonable pathway to full citizenship and other broadly acceptable policies.
An important second narrative focuses on the economy. This story starts with the *Prosperity* value frame, discussing immigrants’ material contributions. It then anticipates an *Economic Insecurity* counter message, which is likely to highlight the immigrant threat to certain jobs. It moves to incorporate this counter by pivoting and reminding the audience that we are a “nation of immigrants” that believes in “*Opportunity for All*.” Finally, the narrative comes full circle by discussing policies that will harness immigrant skills and energy, grow the economy, and make everyone better off — old and new citizens alike.

A final narrative concentrates on the issue of *Security*. In this narrative, the lead value isn’t as important; the critical point is that immigration reform supporters must respond to counter messages centering on *Security* — such as “open borders lead to criminal activity” by pivoting to the value of *Pragmatism*, for example “no border can be a hundred percent secure.” After this value pivot reframes the conversation, reform supporters can conclude with successful discussion of *Border Security* and other enforcement policies — “we do not need to waste money on border fences that will not work.”

We conclude by highlighting the optimism that emerges from this study. Immigration reform supporters can enhance the conversation, bringing in rational discussion that will, in turn, engender support for sensible reform. Of course, they must be sensitive to ongoing conversations, entering with the right value frame, listening carefully to the opposing messages and responding by pivoting to a second value that has the potential to redirect the opposing message into a productive conversation about particular policies. The result is a more deliberate assessment by voters of the desirability of those policies that immigration experts believe constitute meaningful reform.

This empirical study of 8,000 respondents identifies a powerful strategy that identifies potent communication tools for the circumstances that those seeking comprehensive immigration reform will face. The findings suggest that the conventional wisdom of “staying on message” may actually be counterproductive for immigration reform supporters. Instead, reform supporters should work toward shaping the conversation toward a coherent narrative that responds to opposing messaging and concludes the narrative with the policy agenda that will result in reasonable reform.
Appendix A: Instrument Design

Stimuli

Inserted in all but control condition: “The following passage (or passages) was (were) taken from an editorial (editorials) that appeared in a major newspaper (major newspapers) on the subject of immigration. Please read it (them) carefully and answer the questions that follow.”

Control condition: “Please think about immigration during the following 15-second countdown and then answer the questions that follow.” Followed by 15-second countdown.

Note: Messages formatted to resemble newspaper articles

Candidate Values

Prosperity

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to think about what we can do to create a prosperous country. America’s prosperity comes from harnessing each individual’s skills and energy to grow our country. When immigrants come to the U.S., they bring talent and potential. Foreign-born inventors pioneer new technologies, generating high-paying jobs, and other skilled professionals and workers are critical to our national well-being. We need immigrants in order for our country to continue to grow and to thrive. Immigration reform is vital to our country’s prosperity, both now and in the future, and this should be the goal of immigration reform.

Pragmatism

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need a commonsense, practical approach. Solutions should come from carefully considering all possible ideas and then moving forward with the ones that have the best chance of improving our country. Right now, it wouldn’t make sense to send all the people that are in the country without documentation back to their country of origin — this would be impractical, and wouldn’t reform the situation. We need to focus on taking reasonable steps toward solutions rather than adopting extreme and impractical measures that can never actually work. Taking a practical approach to solving problems should be the goal of immigration reform.

Opportunity for All

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to ensure that newcomers to America have every opportunity to succeed. This will result in a better quality of life, and future opportunities for the nation as a whole. When people face barriers to opportunity, it prevents them from realizing a better life and diminishes the
contributions they can make to the society. The American Dream has always relied on creating a society where everyone has an opportunity to achieve; we need to receive immigrants today in this same spirit. Giving everyone an opportunity to succeed and contribute should be the goal of immigration reform.

Moral Argument

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings. No matter where we were born, we are all people and are all entitled to the same basic rights and respect. We need to treat everyone decently. For example, our country should not separate immigrant parents from their children and should not put up barriers to college for immigrant students who have good grades. We are all people with the same basic human needs and rights. Treating all people with compassion should be the goal of immigration reform.

Counter Messages

Rule of Law

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize that our nation was founded on the rule of law. We cannot let people who break the law escape the consequences of their actions; that would be unfair to those of us who obey the law. This means that we should make it much harder for people who enter the country illegally to become citizens. Lawbreakers should pay heavy fines and be required to return to their original country before becoming legal. Businesses who break the law by hiring undocumented workers should also be punished and face heavy fines. The only way to have a fair and just country is to make sure everyone obeys the law.

Taking Jobs Away

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize that too many Americans are out of work. We cannot let immigrants take jobs away from Americans who are trying to earn a living and support a family. This means we should enforce an “Americans First” policy designed to save the limited number of jobs that we have in the U.S. for those of us who are actually U.S. citizens. Only after companies have tried as hard as possible to hire U.S. citizens should they be able to hire immigrants. We also need to have laws that keep immigrants from coming into our country during times when jobs are especially scarce. The only way to have a fair and prosperous country is to make sure Americans get first priority for jobs.

Security

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize the need to keep Americans safe and secure. Letting people cross our borders whenever they want, without any control, threatens our lives and property. This means we should take steps to strengthen our borders, making them secure and protecting Americans from immigrants
who may pose a danger. Only after the border is secure, should we consider allowing additional legal immigration into our country. This also means that we need to deport suspected criminals who are already here, before they can commit more crimes. The only way to have a safe and secure country is to make sure defending America’s borders is our top priority.

**Outcome Measures**

Inserted in all: “The following are a number of statements about immigration. Please indicate whether you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly with the following statements:"

*Note: Question order randomized for each respondent.*

**A. Relationship Between Immigration and the Economy**

1. We need to create an immigration system that is able to respond quickly and flexibly to the changing labor needs of our country.

2. Every business should be required to use systems like eVerify to investigate a person’s immigration status before hiring them. *(Reverse coded to account for question direction.)*

3. North America should move towards a labor system in which workers can more freely move across borders to where they are needed.

4. Our country needs to admit more immigrants with skills and talent in order to remain competitive with other countries.

5. Immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care. *(Reverse coded to account for question direction.)*

**B. Amnesty/Legalization/Pathways to Citizenship**

1. We need to provide a way for those who are already in the United States without documentation to legalize their status.

2. Immigrants should not have to wait for the border to be secured before becoming United States citizens.

3. We should increase funding to the immigration service so people who entered the country legally do not have to wait too long before becoming citizens.

4. We should allow the children of parents who entered our country illegally to become citizens.
5. Before becoming citizens, immigrants who have entered the country illegally should be forced to pay fines of at least $2,000 as well as the back taxes that they owe. (Reverse coded to account for question direction.)

C. Visa System

1. We need to improve the family reunification system so that family members do not have to wait for long periods of time before getting visas.

2. We need to make changes to the immigration system that allow temporary workers to more easily gain permanent status.

3. Immigration reform should give temporary visas to immigration workers and ensure that they have the same basic rights as other American workers.

4. We need to ensure that people who fear persecution in their home countries are able to remain in the United States.

5. We should make it easier for people who enter the country legally on an authorized visa to extend their stay when needed.

D. Border Security

1. We need to make sure immigrants who are arrested by immigration officials are treated humanely.

2. We should reduce the amount of time and money we are putting into building fences, hiring more border patrol agents, and other aspects of our current approach to border security.

3. We need to focus on making life harder for immigrants who have entered the country illegally. (Reverse coded to account for question direction.)

4. We should not let the state of border security decide whether or not immigrants can become citizens.

5. Any person entering the country illegally should be immediately deported regardless of their circumstances. (Reverse coded to account for question direction.)

E. Government Services

1. We need to provide more funding to programs that teach immigrants the English language.
2. Immigrants should be allowed to participate in the Affordable Care Act, the U.S.’s new health care plan

3. So long as immigrants pay taxes, they should be able to receive all the government services, like Medicare, that they are entitled to.

4. We need to make sure that children of immigrants receive the same tuition support opportunities open to U.S. citizens.

5. We should make sure that immigrant workers and U.S. citizens who perform the same work receive the same pay.
Appendix B: Decision Trees for Partisan Audiences

Decision Tree: Republicans

When immigration reform supporters “have the floor” to themselves, it is possible to increase support by invoking Prosperity, Pragmatism or a Moral Argument with a Republican audience depending on the issue dimension.

When the message environment becomes contested, immigration reform supporters must pivot to a new line of values-based messages determined by 1. the counter message from immigration reform opponents & 2. the issue dimension.
Don't Stay on Message: Using Strategic Framing to Move the Public Discourse on Immigration

**Decision Tree: Independents**

When immigration reform supporters “have the floor” to themselves, it is possible to increase support by invoking a *Moral Argument* when communicating with an Independent audience.

When the message environment becomes contested, immigration reform supporters must pivot to a new line of values-based messages determined by 1. the counter message from immigration reform opponents & 2. the issue dimension.
**Decision Tree: Democrats**

When immigration reform supporters “have the floor” to themselves, it is possible to increase support by invoking Pragmatism or Prosperity when communicating with a Democratic audience.

When the message environment becomes contested, immigration reform supporters must pivot to a new line of values-based messages determined by 1. the counter message from immigration reform opponents & 2. the issue dimension.
About FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Endnotes


3 For details see www.surveysampling.com.

4 The presentation order of the two messages in the competitive conditions are rotated to eliminate any benefit from going first or second.


7 Note that this grouping means that the exact wording of the questions, while important, is not critical to determining the messages’ effects because the questions in each battery were averaged into a single value (weighted according to Principle Component Analysis). In statistical terms, this single value represents respondents’ underlying attitude on that battery’s topic.