



Framing Immigration Reform: A FrameWorks
Message Memo

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
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Preface

This Message Memo reports on work conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and others on how Americans think about immigration in America.

It is a widely accepted tenet that America is a country of immigrants. As Theodore Roosevelt stated in 1907, “If the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us he shall be treated with an exact equality with everyone else.” Nonetheless, the country has struggled with determining the rules of inclusion. Whether it was the massive influx of Eastern and Southern European immigrants at the turn of the 20th century or the more recent waves from Asia and Latin America in the 1980s, American politicians, policymakers and the public at-large have debated who should be admitted.

At base, this discussion is about the notion of “friends and strangers,” an idea that has no doubt been heightened since 9/11.ⁱ Just as previous FrameWorks research has shown that America looks out at the world and sees itself among friends or enemies, so have social scientists applied this view to Americans’ perception of “the enemy within” or, as Robert Reich has termed it, “the mob at the gates,” which can tear apart the republic at any moment through excesses of dissent or permissiveness. Our friends are people who share our basic beliefs, norms and rules. They talk like us and act like us. They are extended certain privileges and courtesies. We give them the benefit of the doubt and forgive their foibles. Strangers are dangerous. They don’t share our fundamental values. We are unsure of their intentions and have trouble understanding their language and behavior. And since we don’t trust them, we develop rules and customs to prevent them from harming us. In this most human of ways, then, the current immigration debate is very much about who we consider our friends.ⁱⁱ

In recent times, this distinction has played out in very real terms. Whether it was the passage of Proposition 187 in California in the 1980s or the current passage of SB1070 in Arizona, America has struggled with defining friendship. For example, the run-up to Proposition 187 in California was typified by the now well-known TV ad with the haunting tag line “they just keep coming.” The implication, of course, was that unwanted strangers were crossing our borders and we had every reason to be fearful. Likewise, the recent Arizona law was given impetus by a series of violent incidents in Arizona tied to the increasingly volatile drug war in Mexico. Again, “stranger danger” was the motivating factor for the legislature and governor.

During the presidential campaign of 2008, both major party candidates pledged to reform immigration. As it turned out, though, the rapidly declining economy and the war in Iraq put the issue on the back burner. With the government bailout of the financial markets and the passage of health care reform, attention has returned to the question of immigration.

Advocates on both the left and the right are now actively trying to influence the scope and nature of immigration reform. What is less well known is how strategic communications can be employed to frame the policy debate in ways that make a progressive policy agenda more

accessible to the public. In response, the California Endowment has supported a set of research and learning activities that provide leverage on the patterns of public thinking about immigration. The goal is to better understand the terrain that the foundation and its grantees enter as they advance policy and program reforms.

The FrameWorks Institute was tasked with employing its multi-method, iterative approach to communications, known as Strategic Frame Analysis™, which recognizes that each new push for public understanding and acceptance of an issue happens against a backdrop of long-term media coverage, of perceptions formed over time, and of scripts we have learned since childhood to help us make sense of our world. Strategic Frame Analysis™ is grounded in and draws on methods from the cognitive and social sciences, including anthropology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, sociology, political science and communications theory. For more on this communications approach, see our eWorkshop: “Changing the Public Conversation on Social Problems: A Beginner’s Guide to Strategic Frame Analysis™”
<http://sfa.frameworksinstitute.org/>.

Specifically, FrameWorks investigated the following overarching questions about immigration:

- How does the public think about immigration?
- What is the public appetite for reform of the immigration system?
- What is the current public discourse on immigration reform?
- How does this discourse influence and constrain the public choices that are made about immigration?
- How can immigration be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates the need for more public responsibility, and for alternative policy choices?

The ultimate goal of this work was to identify the direction of a more engaging and productive conversation about immigration that is open to, and supportive of, meaningful reform. We would be remiss if we did not observe that empirical framing research on immigration is scant and shallow. There is much conjecture among advocates and advisors, but very little in the way of serious reframing experimentation and documentation. We offer these observations and recommendations based on our best reading of our own and others’ work, but we do so with profound humility and with the strong recommendation that this topic is too important to be left to this level of speculation.

Research Base

This Message Memo relies on a variety of sources. Many are from the FrameWorks Institute’s portfolio; others are from public opinion polls, advocacy groups and published research reports. This body of work is utilized to paint a portrait of American thinking on the issue of immigration. Where appropriate, we make reference to work that is specific to immigration. In other instances, we draw inferences from work on related issues such as race/ethnicity, health care, government and education. We attribute credit by citing the resources that form the basis of our analysis.

Our preference is for a full body of FrameWorks research on immigration. In the absence of such work, we rely on the broader FrameWorks research portfolio to infer, interpret and conjecture about the potential implications for thinking about immigration.

In addition to summarizing and synthesizing that body of work, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more detailed and prescriptive interpretation to inform the work of policy advocates. It should be understood that these recommendations may be further refined by subsequent research and analysis.

This Message Memo is organized as follows:

- We first provide a description of the **Mental Landscape**, which maps the patterns of thinking that are chronically accessible to people, as well as those more recessive aspects of the landscape that are harder for people to visualize;
- We then offer framing recommendations in the form of **Redirections**ⁱⁱⁱ that incorporate frame elements to change the course of public thinking;
- We conclude by identifying **Traps in Public Thinking** that must be avoided if reframing is to succeed.

I. The Mental Landscape: Patterns of Public Thinking about Immigration and Immigration Reform

There are many cognitive routes people could take in attempting to think about immigration in the United States and to contemplate prospective reforms aimed at different levels of the system or at different goals for the society. The following are those that proved “chronically accessible” to research informants; like familiar features of the landscape, these patterns of thinking seem both natural and entirely logical to people. With predictable regularity, the same patterns or habits of thinking tend to exist “top of mind.” We summarize below those we consider to be the most important for communicators to appreciate as they attempt to redirect the conversation.

1. Post-911, the dominant values are Protection and Prevention.

The national conversation about how to keep America safe from “foreign” intruders became the impetus for stricter border controls, stricter enforcement of immigrant employment policies, and the creation of new federal and state institutions — notably the cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which today oversees most immigration issues. As part of an attempt to enforce immigration laws and to reflect a “get tough” stance, the federal government initiated a series of large-scale worksite raids, increased the difficulty of pursuing legalization, and introduced new policies that some argue have eroded due process in favor of expediency in adjudicating cases involving immigrants.

These two values have become a central part of the mantra for a punitive approach to immigration. Frank Luntz, one of the noted architects of conservative communications, has

instructed conservative advocates to be vigilant in communicating these values in any public discussion of immigration reform.

*Reform must start with the prevention of further illegal immigration, and that prevention starts at the border. While a majority of Americans believe it is the economic consequences of illegal immigration that is doing the most damage, it's the **"principle of prevention"** that the public sees as the most important solution. "If we stop the inflow of illegal immigrants, we can start to address the problems created by illegal immigrants already here. But if we fail to prevent new illegal immigrants from entering the country, no reform measure will be truly effective." Immigration reform needs to be about protecting the generations of Americans who came here the right way. For most Americans, protection is as much about economic security as it is about homeland security — so say it and personalize it. "This is about overcrowding of YOUR schools, emergency room chaos in YOUR hospitals, the increase in YOUR taxes, and the crime in YOUR communities."*^{iv} (emphasis in the original)

It is not surprising that this type of messaging has been able to garner public support in various parts of the country. A passing familiarity with the discourse in Arizona over SB1070 easily picks up this type of language. It is about securing our borders from dangerous intruders seeking to do us harm. In this way, it dovetails nicely with broader national security concerns about the "war on terror." For instance, one national poll found that 80 percent of people surveyed thought that fixing the immigration system "will make us more secure from terrorists."^v

In sum, the evocation of Protection and Prevention as values frames does not advance a progressive discussion of immigration reform. This is an important distinction from FrameWorks' conclusions about disparities among groups. While Prevention served to elevate support for public policies to close gaps between groups, in the Immigration debate it serves to circle the wagons around the majority community and to emphasize assessments of "otherness." Contrary to what we have found in our more general work on racial disparities, prevention in the immigration context is more likely to conjure up securing borders rather than getting ahead of potential inequalities.

2. The immigration issue defaults to thinking about "illegal" immigration.

The illegal immigration frame cues up the core American value of respect for the rule of law. As linguist George Lakoff argues:

"Illegal," used as an adjective in "illegal immigrants" and "illegal aliens," or simply as a noun in "illegals" defines the immigrants as criminals, as if they were inherently bad people. ... In conservative doctrine, those who break laws must be punished — or all law and order will break down. Failure to punish is immoral."^{vi}

The right has effectively used the illegal frame to generate opposition to many of the reforms typically on the progressive policy agenda. Frank Luntz makes the case this way:

“Respect for the Rule of Law is a core fundamental American principle. A nation that either cannot or will not enforce its laws – including immigration law – is inviting abuse of all its laws. Today, our immigration policy rewards those who break our laws and punishes those who abide by them. When illegal immigrants get access to our education and health care systems, taking away services from hardworking American taxpayers, the very people who pay for it, it’s time to stop rewarding those who disrespect our laws. You need to elevate the severe impact of illegal immigration in order to demonstrate the importance of dealing with this issue NOW.”

The point to be made here is that the illegal frame cues up two highly charged ways of thinking. The first is that the central causal agent of the narrative — the illegal immigrant — is in violation of core American values. As the FrameWorks research on race suggests, this line of reasoning works against progressive public policy because it leads people to the conclusion that societal benefits should not be extended to those who are unwilling to adhere to the basic values of the society, such as the rule of law.^{vii}

The second and related piece of this narrative is that illegal immigrants are not deserving of their fair share of the American pie. One of the dominant frames discovered in the FrameWorks research on race is that white Americans have the sense that many minorities (and by extension “illegal” immigrants) violate the central American value of individual responsibility, or what we have termed “self-makingness.” Summarizing this view is the following statement from the Race Message Memo:

The Self-Making Person narrative is the notion that one’s success or failure in life is individually constructed. In other words, a person’s ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on those persons themselves — their character, their effort, etc. This is not surprising, given that individualism and personal responsibility are core tenets of the American belief system. For some time now, social science research has shown that whites have developed “racial resentment” toward minorities in the post-civil rights era. This resentment stems from the fact that minorities (and blacks in particular) are perceived to violate the value of individualism as represented in the Self Making Person model.^{viii}

Inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to exhibit appropriate values. When equally compelling alternative explanations are not available for people to use in their thinking about race, unconscious beliefs about personal responsibility become extremely difficult to dislodge. So, because “illegal” immigrants have failed to live up to the core American belief in the rule of law, they are perceived to have violated the fundamental American value of individual responsibility.

2a. Cognitive Toggling: Americans both admire and fear immigrants.

Recent public opinion data reveal that Americans toggle back and forth in the views of immigrants, and particularly those from Latin America. For instance, Greenberg, et al. (2010) report that over two-thirds of their sample believe that immigrants from south of the border

“work very hard” and “have strong family values.” On the other hand, about one-third also said that immigrants from Latin American countries “significantly increase the crime rate” and “often end up on welfare.” Likewise, the American public has a duality of views about illegal immigrants. On the one hand, they are seen as a drag on the economy. For instance, recent polls have shown that somewhere between 50 and 70 percent of Americans believe that illegal immigrants shirk paying taxes, while at the same time using taxpayer services.^{ix} On the other, they are perceived to contribute to several parts of the American economy. Judith Gans, Director of the University of Arizona’s Immigration Program at the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, argues that, “[N]on-citizens are filling some real gaps in the workforce. This is a complementary workforce, not a replacement workforce. We have a larger workforce so the economic pie is bigger.”^x Nonetheless, advocates have to be wary of pushing the economic argument because it quickly evokes “zero-sum” thinking, in which the pie is not perceived to be expanding and inter-group competition becomes a real threat. The quote below from our work on education drives home this point:

“For example, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* included an article about the reliance on teachers from Jamaica to fulfill benchmarks for teachers of color in certain communities around Atlanta. Beginning with the story of Leonie Palmer, an award-winning teacher with 25 years of classroom experience whose contract with the school district was not renewed, the reporter explained:

But as Palmer stared at the ceiling that April weekend, she couldn’t foresee the turmoil ahead. There would be federal lawsuits, accusations of racism and more tears. The controversy would reach the highest level of state government, snaring Gov. Sonny Perdue’s office in settlement negotiations and just this month, prompting legislative efforts to change Georgia law. The episode would challenge a school system struggling to recruit minority teachers in compliance with a federal desegregation order. And it would lay bare feelings about race and immigration in a community, that just two years earlier, had put on an international face as the host of the G-8 summit (Feagans, B., March 25, 2007. Foreign teachers test policy: An arcane law dredged up to get rid of teachers from abroad, Georgia’s alien statute may be taken off the books, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, p. 1A).^{xi}

In this case, what started as a simple story about the economic and social value of immigrants quickly took a turn to a narrative that was all about inter-group competition fueled by immigration. Again, it reminds advocates to be careful when starting the immigration conversation from an economic benefits point of view.

3. People overwhelmingly believe the immigration system is broken.

Americans of every stripe and location find it easy to agree that the immigration system is a failure. For instance, recent polling on the issue of immigration has consistently found that more than eight out of every 10 Americans believe the system should be reformed.^{xii} The notion of a broken system finds parallel in the FrameWorks research on education reform. FrameWorks

researchers observed: “While one might expect this to lend support to broad educational reforms, instead this type of thinking does little to help people see solutions to educational problems ... Note as well that this crisis thinking is generally sketchy and tends to quickly exhaust the informants’ sense of the issue.”^{xiii} We expect that this is the same dynamic when it comes to immigration. Given the large number of reforms put on the table by advocates, from legalization to employment verification to learning English, the advocacy movement becomes splintered into a cacophony of voices. This makes it difficult for the average American to envision what a rational, comprehensive system would look like. Consider the following exchanges from the FrameWorks research on education.

I think the “root causes” are so vast that there’s no way you are going to fix them at any level that’s going to resolve problems that we’re dealing with today. You can look at the root problems of “family life.” You can look at the root problems of “social life.” You can look at the root problems of “community.” You can look at the root problems of “mental illness.” Whatever the case may be, you can become so caught up in those “root problems” and trying on how to fix those that you forget the “idea” — the “big picture.”
Independent Man, age 48
On the Street Interviews, unpublished transcript

Oh, like yeah. I mean, I think it’s obvious that needs to be done, but again, you know, “technically,” how is that going to be done. I think we’ve only scratched the surface, and that’s been okay for a while, and I mean, it’s obvious that that would be the place to go. It’s just, how do you do that? I don’t know if that’s realistic in our society ... you’re not gonna fix the problem.

Liberal Woman, 38
On the Street Interviews, unpublished transcript^{xiv}

In lieu of a more thoughtful communications strategy, the end result is likely to be a split in the constituency for reform, at best. At worst, the idea of intractability, of an endemic problem for which there is no reasonable solution, is cued up by this crisis framing. As the two below quotes from our work on racial disparities show, people can quickly get overwhelmed, fatigued and just plain cynical when the issue is presented as a national crisis:

I was actually having a talk about my mom, about past events where they brought programs to schools, and she told me that there wasn’t really any changes. They brought these, so called “programs” to the schools, and they paid the teachers more, but the programs in the schools didn’t really change. It was just teachers were getting paid more, and they made it seem like these programs were helping students out, but they weren’t really doing anything.

Los Angeles, Latino Youth

It’s always gonna be like this. Like he said, it’s been here since the beginning of time.
Los Angeles, Latino Adult^{xv}

In sum, the fact that Americans believe the system is in crisis does not necessarily drive them to solutions. More is needed to get them to see how the system might be comprehensively “reformed” in ways that do not simply constitute crime or economic triage.

4. When the goal of immigration reform is described as related to fundamental American values such as Prosperity and Fairness between Places, support for a progressive immigration reform agenda among whites is increased significantly. When described in racial group terms, on the other hand, support for progressive reform is dampened.

To give advocates more guidance with which to structure their communications about various immigration reform proposals, we conducted a series of experimental surveys to test various approaches. This research, supported by the California Endowment, incorporates findings from two experimental surveys where respondents were exposed to differing value treatments and then asked about their preferences with respect to immigration policy.^{xvi} More specifically, we set out to understand the effects of two kinds of value frames: (1) frames that specifically implicate racial and ethnic discrimination, structural racism or inequality in explaining why society ought to enact policy reforms; and (2) frames with no racial overtones at all. The race-based frames are quite common to advocacy communications — they stress disparities and argue for fairness across groups.^{xvii} We also tested a set of “race-neutral” values frames such as opportunity, fairness across places, ingenuity and prosperity.^{xviii} The basic findings are:

- Framing the conversation about immigration with a race-specific value (or one that reminds the public that the issue is in part about race/ethnicity) is not an effective way to frame the issue for the purposes of building broader public support among whites.
- Opportunity for All depresses immigration policy support among whites.^{xix}
- Both Fairness between Places and Prosperity elevate white public support for immigration policies.

What this means is that two common advocacy tropes — talking about the impact of immigration policies on minority group status and talking about the opportunity structure — may actually do more harm than good. The opportunity finding is a bit surprising, but not if one considers that the illegal frame is likely to trump support for providing “criminals” with access to the American Dream. Put another way, while white Americans think most people in the society should have access to opportunity, they are not willing to distribute it to people who have violated the society’s norms. The legal frame “trumps” opportunity. It suggests a kind of disjunctive irony — in order to garner support for race-based policies, advocates need to begin the conversation by invoking broader core American values. Being literal about racism in the public dialogue about race is not the most effective way to build public will for progressive race policy reforms among whites. Moreover, this does not mean one can never talk about race; quite the contrary, rather, what it does mean is that one must be mindful of the order in which the public conversation is structured.

5. The values of Fairness between Groups and Opportunity for All have a positive

impact on African Americans and Latinos.

In a study funded by the California Endowment, FrameWorks investigated frame effects on African-Americans and Latinos in California.^{xx} African-Americans start out with particularly negative views about immigration. For instance, the Opportunity Agenda found that blacks believed immigrants were straining the social service system and winning the competition for jobs. In our study we found that blacks had among the most negative attitudes about immigration. More than any other group — at least in California — African-Americans believed that immigration was too easy and that the U.S. should decrease the number of immigrants. When exposed to values-based reframes, however, blacks' attitudes toward immigration softened dramatically. The values of fairness between groups and opportunity for all resonated deeply with blacks in California. On average, fairness was more potent than opportunity. In all, exposure to these frames reduced negative sentiments by an average of about 12 percentage points. This is quite a pronounced effect, given the minimal exposure to the experimental treatment.

Not surprisingly, Latinos in our study were the most positive about immigration. Nonetheless, exposure to values-based frames also had noticeable effects on their attitudes about immigration. While the impact was a bit less robust than it was with African-Americans, exposure to the values-based frames did tend to decrease negative attitudes about immigration. For instance, and in contrast to blacks, Latinos were most influenced by exposure to the opportunity frame. This was especially true when it came to questions like competition over jobs and corroding American culture.

As we show below, there are broad American values that have the capacity to redirect the public conversation about immigration. Starting the conversation at this level changes the frame to one that is more conducive to having a conversation about progressive reforms.

II. Redirections

In this section, we provide specific recommendations for redirecting public thinking toward more productive conversations about education and education reform, conversations that are in closer alignment to expert understanding. These reframing strategies are drawn directly from the situation analysis above and designed to counter or redirect public thinking. They draw upon an approach to framing analysis and reframing recommendations that is attentive to various frame elements and their respective power in overcoming unproductive patterns of thinking. These include: (1) Values that orient public thinking to what's at stake, and (2) explanatory metaphors called Simplifying Models that concretize and simplify the fundamental mechanisms that underlie a particular process or issue. These and other critical frame elements are explained in a series of FrameWorks webinars available at <http://frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html>.

DO:

- Start with the Value of Prosperity when talking to white Americans. For example:

When we think about our country's future, it is important to develop all human resources in order to achieve a prosperous society. It is important to promote programs that work and improve services that keep our society moving forward. This means that we must work together to create a reasonable process that allows unregistered immigrants to meet eligibility criteria for authorized status. This will result in greater prosperity and insure that we fully live up to our core values.

What's important to include in this frame:

1. This is about our country's future prosperity.
2. Sustaining our growth is about bringing all human resources to the table.
3. It makes sense to develop a reasonable plan now for the world of tomorrow.

What's important to leave out of this frame:

1. This is about fairness for certain groups.
2. This is about extending special privileges to some groups.
3. This is about individuals taking advantage of opportunities that already exist.

- Use the value of Fairness between Places when speaking to white audiences. For example:

It is important that we recognize that programs and services are not equally distributed across all communities in our country. Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. When some communities are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like legal status and labor exploitation. We need to level the playing field so that every community has access to programs and services that allow them to become fully contributing members of our society.

What's important to include in this frame:

1. This is a problem with the distribution of resources, not with bad people.
2. There are consequences that are unfair as a result of this maldistribution.
3. It can be resolved without taking away from some to give to others.

What's important to leave out of this frame:

1. This is about competition for individual or group success.

2. Some people are willfully disadvantaging others.
3. That some people are more deserving than others.
4. That some people do not want to fully join the society

- Use the value of opportunity for all when talking to Latino audiences. For example:

There are many barriers to opportunity (e.g., declining school budgets, restrictive lending practices and a scarcity of health professionals) for people just arriving to this country. The American Dream, however, has always relied on creating an environment where everyone has an opportunity to achieve. We need to devote more attention to ensuring that every community — including immigrant communities — provides an opportunity to succeed for all its residents, resulting in a better quality of life and future prosperity for the nation as a whole.

What's important to include in this frame:

1. This is an issue of opportunity.
2. This is about the future prosperity of the whole nation.
3. This is about community.

What's important to leave out of this frame:

1. This is about competition with other groups.
2. This is about government.
3. That this is about your immigrant group only.

- Use Fairness between Groups when talking to African American audiences. For instance:

Some people believe that problems in immigrant communities are the result of discriminatory practices that continue to unfairly target recent newcomers to America. Whether overtly or more subtly, immigrants are treated differently when it comes to such things as being treated fairly at work, applying for a college loan, and being able to see a qualified doctor. We need to renew our commitment to a just society by devoting more resources to policies that recognize and address fairness in our society.

What's important to include in this frame:

1. This is an issue of social justice.
2. This is about something they recognize: discrimination.
3. This is about making it easier for everyone to be treated fairly by the system.

What’s important to leave out of this frame:

1. Any zero-sum reasoning.
 2. Anything about language and English only.
 3. This is about illegal immigrants.
- What is missing from the discussion of immigration is a simplifying model that breaks down some of the complex and “hard to think” elements of the reform movement. FrameWorks’ research on health care reform is instructive here. In that work we introduced the “Infrastructure We Never Built” model to help people understand the incomplete and ad hoc nature of health insurance policy. Since the goal here is to get people to see immigration as a system, we recommend adapting this metaphor. Use the Infrastructure simplifying model to help people imagine a complete immigration system that would work in a coordinated and accountable fashion. Use the model to put forward the need for coordination among the parts of the whole — this sets the stage for many kinds of transformational reforms. Here is an example:

In the last 50 years, the United States has built a series of modern networks that are essential to our economy and our quality of life — our power grid, phone systems, water systems, interstate highways and the Internet. But with immigration we’re stuck in the 19th century, because we never built a modern immigration infrastructure. Instead, we still have systems and procedures based on the old world, not on the new world of global interconnectedness. We have the equivalent of scattered wells, individual generators and county roads, but no immigration infrastructure we can rely on; no system for making sure that people who enter this country have a sensible way to achieve citizenship.

What’s important to include in this frame:

1. Complex systems can be built, being concrete and specific as to what a modern system looks like.
2. What makes a system function efficiently — the need for thoughtful planning, coordination among key players, and measures of accountability.
3. The challenge that every system faces in the form of changing contexts.
4. The step-by-step, gradual process by which effective infrastructures are built. Taking shortcuts and using sub-par tools is a recipe for failure.

DON'T:

- Don't ... evoke the Crisis Frame or talk about how widely and deeply broken the immigration system is; you invite despair and disengagement, and depress agency.
- Be careful when you talk about Opportunity. It is a double-edged sword. It has the capacity to evoke friends and strangers, and zero-sum thinking.
- Don't ... talk about immigration as a legal issue.
- Don't ... talk about securing borders or preventing problems.
- Don't ... begin your communication by focusing on “good” immigrants. This will likely evoke the Cosby effect.^{xxi} That is, you run the risk of reminding everyone about the global — and negative — stereotype they have about “illegal” immigrants. In other words, seeing people who have entered the country the “right way,” or undocumented people who work hard, only serves to remind people that they believe many immigrants (especially from Latin America) are here illegally, do not pay sufficient taxes, and drain the social service system.
- Don't ... leave people to connect the dots between what they want, how to get there, and what impact it would have on society; they can't do this by themselves.

III. Traps in Public Thinking

In this section, we list those aspects of the commonly available cultural models about immigration and immigration reform that, while appearing to offer advantages, in fact trap thinking into unproductive routes and ruts. Traps are features of the mental landscape that are enticing to communicators because they appear to offer some ways around the dominant models. But, like quicksand, traps need to be understood, anticipated and circumvented if real reframing is to take place. While somewhat redundant with the above analysis, we offer this as a checklist against which communicators can evaluate their communications to make sure that they have not opportunistically seized upon a frame that is “easy to think” but does not serve to move thinking in the direction of the communicator’s ultimate goal. While all reframes take advantage of some way of thinking already in mind, the tendency to seize upon these particularly obvious and well-traveled routes can prove derailing when the models you choose to activate in the public’s mind are not carefully vetted.

a. The Crisis Trap.

Advocates sometimes presume they must make their issue “big” in order to elicit an appropriately serious response from the public. By evoking crisis, you may play to a familiar and widely accepted condemnation of the American immigration system. FrameWorks’ research

shows that, once crisis is evoked, people are no more likely to engage in reform, think they can have an impact or embrace changes that are transformational. There is no new information being communicated by this frame, so it leaves people without the cognitive clues they need to solve the problem. Moreover, it is likely to result in “crisis fatigue,” a kind of mental weariness that arises from exposure to the daily news drumbeat of financial crises, international crises, etc. Instead, talk about the importance of Prosperity and the need to develop sustainable and innovative systems to meet the global challenges that lie ahead.

b. The Race Trap.

Advocates fear that a public dialogue that focuses on immigrants (documented and undocumented) would once again make them targets of populist backlashes, such as California’s Proposition 187, which bars undocumented immigrants from basic social services. Yet even a cursory eavesdrop into the public debate of immigration policy in the U.S. today conveys the sense that race and ethnicity live and are prominent features of that conversation — even when they are not directly addressed by advocates. Arguing immigration within a race frame is to be avoided if the issue is to resist negative associations that come from race-based thinking. Here are examples of falling inadvertently into the trap.

Rep. Melvin Watt, D-N.C., summed it up this way:

Immigration law and immigration policy [reflects] the confusions and dishonesty and racial attitudes and class attitudes we have in this country in other domestic areas, and I have found that same kind of irrational class-based, race-based kind of thinking existing in our immigration policies.^{xxii}

Janet Murgía, President and CEO of the National Council of La Raza, makes the following case:

We are calling for the government to create jobs for Latinos, but the policies enacted so far have not done enough to help these workers. As unemployment continues to rise, a crisis of confidence is brewing in our communities. Lawmakers must show us that they are listening to Latino workers and have a targeted plan to create jobs in the hardest-hit communities.

As Manuel and Simon report in their experimental study of race, framing effects, and immigration, “*Framing the conversation about immigration with a race-specific value (or one that reminds the public that the issue is in part about race/ethnicity) is not an effective way to frame the issue for the purposes of building broader public support*”^{xxiii}. Talking about disparities between groups quickly cues up a whole host of negative entanglements associated with race.^{xxiv}

c. The Government Trap.

The word “government” poses an obstacle to productive thinking. The word “government” is so freighted with pejorative baggage that it should be used with caution and is best used only after other terms that establish its public mission. Without this redirection, government is universally greeted with derision. Deep-seated ridicule, learned and conditioned over time, remains a major impediment to engaging citizens in a discussion about government as us, and government as problem-solver^{xxv}. This is particularly germane to immigration because many Americans believe the federal government has failed to secure the country’s borders. Moreover, this walks into one of the fundamental cleavages in American society — the tension over the roles of the national versus the state government. As recent events in Arizona (as well as agitation in other states) show, people will turn to the state governments to solve the immigration “problem.” This results in a rather ad hoc and patchwork approach to public policy and challenges reform attempts at comprehensive planning.

To aid in public thinking about government, FrameWorks has developed the simplifying model of Public Structures^{xxvi} to overcome default patterns of thinking such as inefficiency, sole associations with elected officials, and lack of private sector-like accountability. The goal of the model is to get people to think about government in terms of a set foundational or basic elements that make the American Way possible. Here is an example of the model:

Economists now agree that what has made America so successful is the effectiveness of our Public Structures. The Public Structures Americans have created — such as laws, highways, health agencies, and schools and colleges — are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. Without them, it would be difficult or impossible to get lots of important jobs done. Our Public Structures are strengthened when all Americans can utilize and contribute to them. Leaving some people out only weakens Public Structures.

About the Institute

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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Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Gilliam Jr., F.D. (2010). *Framing Immigration Reform: A FrameWorks Message Memo*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

ⁱ A FrameWorks Message Memo on post-911 America is forthcoming.

ⁱⁱ See, Goodin, R.E. (1988). What is so special about our fellow countrymen? *Ethics*, 98(4), 663-686.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on framing and reframing, see FrameWorks Institute. (2001). *A five minute refresher course in framing*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, located at www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/five_minute_refresher_eZine.pdf. For more on the elements of a frame that we use in our reframing recommendations, see our series of webinars at www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars.html.

^{iv} Luntz, F. (2006). *Respect for the law and economic fairness: Illegal immigration prevention*. Arlington, VA. Luntz, Maslansky Strategic Research.

^v National Immigration Forum. (2005) *A national survey of voter attitudes on immigration*. Washington D.C.: National Immigration Forum.

^{vi} Lakoff, G. (2006) *The framing of immigration*, Buzzflash.com.

^{vii} Gilliam Jr., F.D. (2008). *Effects of explicitness in the framing of race*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{viii} Bales, S.N. (2008). *Talking about disparities: The effect of frame choices on support for race-based policies: A FrameWorks Institute Message Brief*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{ix} Benenson Strategy Group. (2009). *Recent polling on immigration reform*. [Washington, D.C.? OR New York, N.Y.?] Benenson Strategy Group

^x Gans, J. *An economic perspective on immigration — both legal and illegal — and the prospects for reform*. www.analysisonline.org.

^{xi} O’Neil, M. (2009). “*My race is my community:*” *Peer discourse sessions on racial disparities*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xii} Survey conducted jointly by American Viewpoint and Greenburg Quinlan Rosner, April 2010.

^{xiii} FrameWorks Institute. (2009). *A viewer’s guide to simplifying models research: On-the-street interviews with ordinary Americans*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xiv} Bales, S.N. (2010). *Framing education reform: A FrameWorks Message Memo*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xv} O’Neil, M. (2009). “*My Race is My Community:*” *Peer discourse sessions on racial disparities*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xvi} Manual, T. & Simon, A.F. (2010). *Valuing immigration: How frame elements contribute to effective communications*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xvii} Here is the wording for these two treatments:

Fairness Across Groups: Lately there has been a lot of talk about fairness between different groups in our country. Some people believe that some groups are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. This is because programs and services are not fairly distributed among all groups in our society. When some groups are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like poor health and education. According to this view, we need to make sure that all groups in our country have equal access to quality health and education programs and services. Have you heard of this

explanation of why we should allocate societal assets more fairly among groups?

Disparities: Lately there has been a lot of talk about disparities in our country. Some people believe that discrimination continues to create differences in the quality of health and education programs and services available to people. This puts some groups at greater risk for problems than others. For this reason, it is important to reduce disparities by promoting programs and improving services available to those groups. According to this view, we should eliminate differences in the quality of services people can get because it harms their quality of life. Have you heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to address disparities?

^{xviii} Here is the wording for the race-neutral treatments:

Ingenuity: Lately there has been a lot of talk about the need to use more innovation in our country. Some people believe that society is not applying enough American ingenuity to promoting programs and improving services that benefit communities. We can make progress toward solving health and education problems if programs are evaluated and the effective ones are continued. For this reason, innovation should be a priority. According to this view, smart states have significantly made conditions better in some communities by finding innovative ways to improve and promote health and education programs. Have you have heard of this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to inventing better solutions?

Fairness Between Places: Lately there has been a lot of talk about fairness among different parts of our country. Some people believe that certain communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. This is because programs and services are not fairly distributed across all communities. When some communities are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like poor health and education. According to this view, we need to level the playing field so that every community has access to quality health and education programs and services. Have you heard of this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets more fairly among communities?

Opportunity: Lately there has been a lot of talk about opportunity for all in our country. Some people believe that too many people still face barriers to good health and education. Our country's ability to achieve is undermined when not enough people have access to the things that help you succeed in life. For this reason, we need to ensure that everyone has access to the programs and services that strengthen opportunity in our country. According to this view, promoting programs and improving services that enhance opportunity will result in a better quality of life for the whole nation. Have you heard of this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to improve opportunity for all?

Prosperity: Lately there has been a lot of talk about prosperity in our country. Some people believe that we should do more to address problems that undermine prosperity, like poor health and education. When we support overall community well-being, it increases the chances that our society will thrive. For this reason, it is important to promote programs and improve services that keep our society moving forward. According to this view, developing human and community resources is vital to our ability to achieve a prosperous society. Have you heard of this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to create greater prosperity?

^{xix} See also, Gilliam Jr., F.D. (2008). *Effects of explicitness in the framing of race*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. This study also included an analysis of the opportunity frame as it impacted Californians' views on immigration. The relevant finding here is that exposure to the opportunity frame lead to whites' hardening attitudes on such questions as whether or not immigration had a "negative effect," and "whether it corrodes American values."

^{xx} Gilliam Jr., F.D. (2008). *Effects of explicitness in the framing of race*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxi} Gilliam Jr., F.D. (2006). *Vivid examples: What they mean and why you should be careful using them*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxii} Watt, M.L. (1999). Present and future of immigration reform. *In defense of the alien*, 21. New York, N.Y.: Center for Migration Studies.

^{xxiii} Manual, T. & Simon, A.F. (2010). *Valuing immigration: How frame elements contribute to effective communications*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. See also, O’Neil, M. (2009). *Invisible structures of opportunity: How media depictions of race trivialize issues of diversity and disparity*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxiv} Gilliam Jr., F. & Manuel, T. (2009). *The illogic of literalness: Narrative lessons in the presentation of race policies*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute; Gilliam Jr., F. (2008). *Effects of explicitness in the framing of race*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxv} Bales, S.N. (2006). *How to talk about government: A FrameWorks Message Brief*. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xxvi} Aubrun, A., Grady, J. & Brown, A. (2005). “Public structures” as a simplifying model for government. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.