



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Staying On Frame in Real Time

The vast majority of questions and comments that communicators hear from the public and policymakers can be predicted by the research-based “swamp” [\[LINK\]](#) of cultural models on that issue.

If you can predict, you can prepare.

A strategic framer prepares by anticipating the questions that will emerge from the swamp, considering the “traps” that are lurking in a possible response, and then, choosing a well-framed response with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue.

The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this tactical thought process in action. Using questions and issues raised by stakeholder groups and answers from real communications on the issues, these FAQs demonstrate strategically framed communications using “before and after” examples. The reframed models aren’t intended to simply script “the right answers” to questions you might be asked. Rather, this is a teaching tool, offering illustrations of how to talk more effectively about comprehensive immigration reform by applying research-based framing recommendations. While communicators are welcome to use the sample responses as written or to adapt them to suit your needs, we encourage you to use the analysis of “false start” and “reframed” answers to build your capacity to apply these principles fluidly throughout your communications practice.

QUESTION

Can't we just enforce the laws already in place to fix the immigration system?

ANSWER

THE FALSE START ANSWER

The laws we have in place right now aren't doing the job. For example, our organization recently worked with an undocumented immigrant named Maria, whose removal was being expedited because she had been previously deported by the border patrol without a judicial hearing over a decade ago. Therefore, she was subject to reinstatement of removal. Maria's husband, who is here legally, explained to me that he suffers from numerous ailments and Maria cares for him. If she were sent back to Mexico, he would lose his primary caregiver. Maria, who has been here for years, has a U.S. citizen child and a child with DACA, but she faces deportation and separation from her children.

The system is broken. The U.S. government has failed on immigration. Meanwhile, families have been torn apart as millions have been deported. Each year, businesses have to wait for a random lottery to determine whether they will be granted the privilege to pay an average of more than \$2,000 in filing fees just for the government to decide if they will be permitted to hire a foreign worker with specialized skills. This and other equally frustrating immigration obstacles force businesses to outsource their labor or set up offshore operations.

Maria is only one example of the damage our messed-up immigration system has wrought on our economy and our community. It is time for drastic changes to take place. Maria, her husband, their family, and millions of others like them need immediate relief.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Right now, our immigration system isn't meeting our country's needs, and it is time for us to take a commonsense approach to fixing the problem. For example, the process for obtaining and renewing visas is so cumbersome that many immigrants who have been here for years lose their legal status even though they have been working in the United States and contributing to our economy for a long time. They are then subject to deportation, which has unintended consequences: sending everyone without documentation back to their country of origin means that businesses lose workers, our economy loses entrepreneurs, communities lose valuable customers, and thousands of families are forcibly separated every year. This is impractical and it is actually working against our goals. We need a system that works for our economy and our communities.

Modernizing the system can help by making it simpler to obtain and renew a visa, by increasing the number of employment visas to match the number of jobs available (including those already held by people who have been here a long time), and by creating a viable pathway to citizenship for those who are already here, so that they can continue to contribute to our shared prosperity.

We will all benefit if we focus on taking reasonable steps toward solutions instead of adopting extreme measures that will not fix the problem. Comprehensive immigration reform will enable us to make sure that all people are treated with compassion and respect, no matter where they were born.

ANALYSIS

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Words like “failed,” “frustrating,” “messed-up” and “drastic” suggest a rhetorical tone that is likely to trigger an unproductive sense of fatalism.
- The government has to be the solution to immigration reform, so cueing up the public's belief in government's ineffectiveness is unlikely to increase support for reform.
- Research shows that telling an individual, episodic story can depress public support for collective solutions, as the public tends to focus on the details of an isolated case rather than the trend.
- This reply describes a problem but doesn't explain the solution or why and how it would work, which leaves the listener to fill in the gaps.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reply appeals to the Value *Pragmatism*, which primes the public to consider new policy solutions.
- Using a reasonable tone positions the communication as a message for “everyone,” rather than for only those who already agree with the point of view being expressed.
- Telling a thematic story—we are all hurt by a system that isn't meeting our needs—builds public will for change.
- Many Americans simply do not know why the immigration system doesn't work. This reframed answer explains how an outdated system is causing problems.
- Focusing on solutions instead of problems fosters a sense of efficacy, advancing the idea that we can fix the system.

QUESTION

If we legalize the 12 million undocumented people already in the United States, aren't we just inviting millions more to enter illegally?

ANSWER

THE FALSE START ANSWER

No, creating a fair pathway to citizenship for people who have been in the United States for many years will not open the floodgates to more undocumented workers. For example, programs like the DREAM Act, which have clear cut-off dates, offer no incentives for more illegal immigration, because in order to qualify for the DREAM Act, a student must have entered the United States before the age of 16 and have lived in the United States for at least five years before the date of enactment. In reality, economic conditions both here in the United States and back in immigrants' countries of origin have far more impact on illegal immigration than specific pieces of legislation do.

It is also a myth that the solutions being proposed include blanket amnesty for all undocumented workers. If they did, then we might expect to see an increase in illegal immigration. Instead, a reformed immigration system would decrease the incentive to travel here illegally by creating easier, simpler legal channels to come to the United States. It would also help those who are already here to earn citizenship by following the steps put in place for them, like paying fines, demonstrating English fluency, applying for entry, and waiting their turn at the end of the line.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

We need to spend our energy on building an immigration system that works and meets our country's needs. Our immigration laws were designed for earlier times, when our country's economic and workforce needs were different. Just like wind in the sails of a boat propels it forward, immigration moves our country ahead, through the contributions that immigrants make to our culture, our economy, and our communities. Right now, however, our system is poorly positioned to catch the full benefit of immigration. It is as though our sails are stuck in one position but the wind has shifted.

Today, for example, we need more employment visas than we did a century ago in order to meet our labor needs, but in 2013 alone, the entire annual supply of H1-B employment visas for high-skilled workers ran out in one week. The imbalance between supply and demand needs to be fixed. Comprehensive immigration reform can help us to better realize immigrants' potential to contribute to our progress.

One component of this reform is legalizing those who have already been here for years, adding to the wind in our sails. Creating a fair pathway to citizenship for these long-term residents will allow us to retain millions of workers who are contributing to our shared prosperity by paying taxes, spending their income on U.S. business owners' goods and services, and working in jobs that would otherwise remain unfilled. It is the only path that makes sense if we want to continue to move forward.

ANALYSIS

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- This response lacks a values frame, so the listener is left to decide what's at stake.
- Beware the myth/fact trap! Studies show that restating a myth before correcting it can lead the public to remember the misinformation as true.
- By using naked facts and describing instead of explaining, this answer misses an opportunity to shape the way the public perceives immigration.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Making the affirmative case without restating the opposing view improves the "stickiness" or memorability of your message.
- Using the technique of Social Math to frame statistics can make them more understandable, memorable, and compelling.
- Applying the Metaphor *Immigration Sail* helps to explain why immigration is a benefit to the United States and to trigger systems-level thinking about why reform is necessary.
- A final appeal to *Pragmatism* helps to avoid triggering polarizing thinking about "immigrants as them."

QUESTION

People who entered this country illegally broke the law. Why should we now give them legal status?

THE FALSE START ANSWER

We can't afford to have a large group of people in this country who will never have the opportunity to become citizens. The independent Social Security Actuary (SSA), nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and others have estimated that undocumented immigrants will pay more in both federal and state taxes once they can come out of the shadows and work legally, in part because legal status leads to a rise in income. According to CBO, the additional taxes paid by new and legalizing immigrants would offset the estimated cost of the 2013 Senate-passed immigration bill and could reduce the deficit by nearly \$850 billion over the next 20 years.

Instead of being a drain on the economy, providing an earned path to citizenship would allow currently undocumented workers to work above board. The Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy estimates that they would pay as much as \$2 billion per year in additional state and local taxes – beyond the \$11 billion in taxes these workers already pay each year.

Research shows that citizenship yields even greater economic benefits than legalization. A number of studies have identified a statistically significant relationship between naturalization and increased earnings, employment and purchasing power. For example, in March 2013, economists Robert Lynch of Washington University and Patrick Oakford of the Center for American Progress released a new study that identified significant income gains from citizenship beyond those attributable to legal status alone — and concluded that citizenship would boost unauthorized noncitizen immigrants' income by an additional 10 percent. That helps the US economy.

ANSWER

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

It is impractical to have a large group of people in this country who will never have the opportunity to become citizens, and it is equally impractical and ineffective to try to remove millions of people. We need to do what makes the most sense for America. Undocumented immigrants, just like those with documentation, contribute to our economy by being part of the labor force, paying taxes, and spending their earned income on goods and services from United States businesses. In fact, many of them have been here for years, contributing to our economy, staying on after their visas expired because our current system makes it so difficult to renew a visa. Research shows that with a pathway to legal status and citizenship, these immigrants will contribute even more.

This is a solution that makes good fiscal sense. For instance, the independent Social Security Actuary (SSA), nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and others have estimated that undocumented immigrants will pay more in both federal and state taxes once they can work legally, in part because legal status leads to a rise in income. According to CBO, the additional taxes paid by new and legalizing immigrants would offset the estimated cost of the 2013 Senate-passed immigration bill and could reduce the deficit by nearly \$850 billion over the next 20 years.

Studies also show that citizenship yields even greater economic benefits than legalization, demonstrating a strong relationship between naturalization and increased earnings, employment and purchasing power. All of those things contribute to our nation's overall productivity and economic strength.

ANALYSIS

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Without a tested value to direct the conversation, this fact-focused reply is less persuasive.
- Including economic arguments in support of immigration reform is a great move, but do not let a stream of data points substitute for clear explanatory chains between immigration and economic growth.
- *Pragmatism* is lurking in this reply (“we can’t afford”) but needs to be given room to breathe.
- This reply could be strengthened by shifting the focus from the individual benefits of naturalizing to how that naturalization helps the nation as a whole.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Since this question signals a “law and order” cultural model at work, which suggests a contentious communications context, this response relies on the Value *Pragmatism*, which helps the public to think productively about the facts that follow.
- In addition to using *Pragmatism*, explaining why other solutions will not work helps to illuminate the invisible process of immigration, creating a frame through which to consider legalization and naturalization.
- Avoiding negative phrases like “drain on the economy” in favor of a more positive tone helps to frame the exchange as an opportunity for civic problem-solving – rather than just more politics as usual. This strategy makes it easier to engage bystander publics in this issue.

QUESTION

Our economy is suffering and unemployment for U.S. citizens is still high, so how does comprehensive immigration reform help to fix these problems?

ANSWER

THE FALSE START ANSWER

During the 1990s, half of all new workers were foreign-born, filling gaps left by native-born workers in both the high- and low-skill ends of the spectrum. Immigrants fill jobs in key sectors, start their own businesses, and contribute to a thriving economy. The net benefit of immigration to the United States is nearly \$10 billion annually. As Alan Greenspan has pointed out, 70% of immigrants arrive in prime working age. That means we haven't spent a penny on their education, yet they are transplanted into our workforce and will contribute \$500 billion toward our social security system over the next 20 years.

Many are concerned that immigrants compete against Americans for jobs, but the most recent economic evidence suggests that, on average, immigrant workers increase American workers' opportunities and incomes. Economists do not tend to find that immigrants cause any sizeable decrease in wages and employment of U.S.-born citizens, and instead may raise wages and lower prices in the aggregate.

One reason for this effect is that immigrants and U.S.-born workers generally do not compete for the same jobs; instead, many immigrants complement the work of U.S. employees and increase their productivity. For example, low-skilled immigrant laborers allow U.S.-born farmers, contractors, and craftsmen to expand agricultural production or to build more homes—thereby expanding employment possibilities and incomes for U.S. workers. Another way in which immigrants help U.S. workers is that businesses adjust to new immigrants by opening stores, restaurants, or production facilities to take advantage of the added supply of workers; more workers translate into more business.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

That's a good question. Comprehensive immigration reform is a win-win: by taking commonsense steps that will aid our country's progress, we also have the opportunity to exercise the American ideals of compassion and respect for all people.

It may seem counterintuitive to help our economy by making it easier for more people to join our workforce when jobs seem scarce, but that is precisely what we need to do! One of the problems we are experiencing is a mismatch between our workforce capacity and employer demand. That hurts our economy because positions go unfilled and business suffers as a result.

Immigrants help to reduce this mismatch in part by filling gaps in the workforce left by native-born workers, but they help in other ways, too. For example, many immigrants start new businesses, which creates more jobs for both native-born and other immigrant workers and contributes to a thriving economy. They increase consumer demand for products and services, which boosts business growth and, consequently, the number of jobs available. They also add to our tax base—money that we use for infrastructure like roads, national security, and education. Immigration acts on our economy the way wind acts in a sail, driving it forward, but only if the sail is positioned to make the best use of the wind's energy.

The problem with our system now is that the sail and wind are out of sync: complicated laws and an overburdened, outdated system for processing visas keep us from realizing the full potential of the contributions that immigrants would make to our country if we had a modern system. Comprehensive immigration reform will allow us to shift course to meet our country's changing needs. It would provide a pathway to citizenship for both documented and undocumented immigrants who have been living and working in the United States for years, rebalance the available number of new visas to meet employer demand, and simplify the process for entering and staying in the country legally. Once the system is reformed, immigration will be an even greater help to our economy.

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- FrameWorks research on this issue showed that facts used without a priming value do not build support for immigration reform.
- Well-framed data and statistics can be helpful, but the numbers used here (“70%” don’t need “a penny for education”) imply that we should expect returns from immigration without any investment.
- The description of immigrants’ contributions is great, but how does that connect to immigration reform? The story needs to be finished.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- An appeal to *Moral Argument* at the start can direct the conversation towards positive “Immigrants as Us” thinking.
- At the same time, *Pragmatism* (“that’s what we need to do!”) primes the public to think about solutions.
- Using an Explanatory Chain illustrates how immigration and the economy work together and connects the solution to the problem.
- The tested Metaphor *Immigration Sail* is a “sticky,” or memorable, way of explaining why systemic structures need to be fixed in order to take full advantage of the economic and social benefits that immigration contributes to the United States.
- The detailed description of what a reformed system could do completes the story.

QUESTION

I agree that our immigration system is broken and we need to do something to fix it, but do you really think anything will ever get enacted in this political climate?

ANSWER

THE FALSE START ANSWER

Across the country, immigrants play an important role in American communities and businesses, but our broken immigration system breaks apart loving families and outsources intellectual talent. In the last few decades, Washington's partisan gridlock and refusal to engage in commonsense reform has created a broken system that doesn't reflect who we are as Americans: it is unfair, anti-worker, and xenophobic. And it is hurting our economy.

Many politicians on both sides of the aisle have indicated their desire to reform our nation's outdated immigration system. They understand that the longer we delay, the more our inaction will cost us, in American jobs, private-sector innovation, and our nation's security. Now is the time for Republicans and Democrats in the House to work together to fix our immigration system.

For years, our elected officials have feared the political ramifications of overhauling the immigration system. But polls show that voter opinions have shifted in greater support of developing a system that respects the rule of law, protects our border, and reflects our nation's diversity. What America desperately needs is a twenty-first-century legal immigration system that uses new technology to simplify and modernize the process of entering and staying here legally. The support these initiatives are receiving from a growing number of voters and elected leaders is encouraging. It shows we are reaching a national consensus that the costs associated with further delay are far too great and carry with them the potential to perpetuate a jobless recovery.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Despite our differences, Americans can agree that all people deserve to be treated with respect and compassion. Increasingly, voters are calling for commonsense reforms, because they see the negative impacts that our current system has on their own communities—in fact, a majority of Americans agree with you that we need to fix this system. Their call for feasible solutions is having a positive impact on our elected officials.

In fact, in 2013, the Senate passed a bipartisan comprehensive reform bill that would help our economy and respect the American people. Many politicians on both sides of the aisle have indicated their desire to reform our nation's outdated immigration system. They understand that immigration is like the wind in our country's sails. The labor, entrepreneurship, tax dollars, consumer spending, and diversity that immigrants bring with them help our nation's economy and social progress.

What America needs is a twenty-first-century legal immigration system that uses new technology to simplify and modernize the process of entering and staying here legally. These initiatives are increasingly seen by voters and elected leaders as both necessary and feasible.

As citizens, we have an important role to play in making sure that our leaders choose sensible solutions that keep us moving forward as a nation. We need to tell our local, state, and national legislators why we support comprehensive immigration reform. For example, our communities are stronger when families can stay together and do not have to wait decades for green cards to become available. We can foster local companies' business opportunities by meeting workforce demands and building a larger consumer base. Our neighborhoods benefit from the tax base, new economic development, and cultural diversity of our immigrant communities.

ANALYSIS

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Political rhetoric like “partisan gridlock” triggers the cultural default that “government is ineffective” and feeds a sense of fatalism.
- Calling for a twenty-first-century system is forward thinking, solutions based language, but it is undermined by crisis language about broken families and desperation.
- This reply emphasizes the problem instead of the solution.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reply opens with the *Moral Argument* frame element, but without the rhetorical tone of the false start answer.
- In this example, an appeal to *Pragmatism* helps move the discussion away from a sense of fatalism.
- A collective call to action makes the listener part of the solution.
- The solution is presented clearly: a modern system that simplifies the process.

QUESTION

Do U.S. employers really need to find labor from other countries? Shouldn't we just invest in our education system here?

ANSWER

THE FALSE START ANSWER

It is true that the American education system is broken and that not enough American citizens are able or willing to fill the kinds of jobs available in all sectors, but fixing our education system won't fix our immigration problem.

Employment is not a "zero-sum" game. The U.S. economy does not contain a fixed number of jobs for which immigrants and native-born workers compete. For instance, there are approximately eight million undocumented immigrants working in the United States. If those eight million workers were removed from the country, there would not be eight million job openings that perfectly meet the skills of unemployed Americans. Immigrant workers tend to possess different skills than do native-born workers. They complement one another and are not simply interchangeable.

In addition, removing eight million workers from the workforce would hurt our tax base, consumer spending, and the number of entrepreneurs who are creating jobs. Recent research shows that immigrants are twice as likely to start new businesses as native-born U.S. citizens, and one in ten workers is employed by an immigrant-owned business.

Even in times of high unemployment, most immigrant and native-born workers are not competing with each other. The two groups differ in terms of their typical occupations, where in the country they live, and their education levels. If they do work in the same occupation or industry—or even the same business—the native-born workers take the higher-paid jobs that require better English-language skills than many immigrant workers possess.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Ensuring our nation's economic wellbeing is an important goal that requires a range of simultaneous efforts on many fronts. We need to adopt sensible immigration reforms *and* invest in an updated education system. Both are key to our future prosperity as a nation.

Immigrants and native-born workers complement each other, and we need both groups' contributions for our economy to thrive. You're right: our education system needs to better prepare American citizens to meet our changing labor needs, but that isn't enough to meet employer demands. That's because the U.S. economy is always growing—it doesn't contain a fixed number of jobs for which immigrants and native-born workers compete. For instance, there are approximately eight million undocumented immigrants working in the United States. If those eight million workers were removed from the country, there would not be eight million job openings that perfectly meet the skills of unemployed Americans. Immigrant workers tend to possess different skills than do native-born workers. They complement one another and are not simply interchangeable.

What's more, we need the labor and resources immigrants provide in order to keep making progress. Think of it like wind in the sails of a ship. The sails need a constant supply of wind to move the ship forward. They need new wind in the form of labor power, special skills, entrepreneurship, taxes, cultural diversity, and new spending on domestic goods and services. Immigration keeps our country's ship moving forward and adds to our shared prosperity in a way that the native-born labor force alone cannot.

That is why we need to create a modern immigration system that simplifies the process for entering and staying in the country—so we can continue to progress as a nation.

ANALYSIS

FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Political rhetoric like "partisan gridlock" triggers the cultural default that "government is ineffective" and feeds a sense of fatalism.
- Calling for a twenty-first-century system is forward thinking, solutions based language, but it is undermined by crisis language about broken families and desperation.
- This reply emphasizes the problem instead of the solution.

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reply opens with the *Moral Argument* frame element, but without the rhetorical tone of the false start answer.
- In this example, an appeal to *Pragmatism* helps move the discussion away from a sense of fatalism.
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FALSE START ANALYSIS

- This answer begins with a crisis frame—everything is broken—that can lead the public to tune out because the problem is too big to fix.
- Watch out for communications traps that lead to defensive replies. This “false start” works too hard to counter the “Immigrants as Takers” cultural model and misses the chance to redirect the conversation productively.
- Using a *Moral Argument* here could help to trigger the helpful “Immigrants as Us” cultural model.
- The Black Box hasn’t been opened yet—what’s the connection among education, immigration, and the economy?

REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Emphasizing a practical approach—both/and, not either/or—appeals to the public will for commonsense policies.
- Instead of being drawn into a lengthy explanation to dispel the flawed premise that immigrants are “Takers” who steal jobs from American citizens, this reply pivots to the real issue: why and how immigration reform is necessary for economic growth.
- In this reply, the *Immigration Sail* Metaphor is paired with the *Prosperity Value* to tell a story in which immigrants and native-born workers are both necessary to our collective wellbeing.
- As with this answer’s closing call for change, strategic framers never miss an opportunity to explain the solution and how it works!