On Culture: Tips for Framing ‘Freedom’

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FRAMEWORKS Culture Change Project

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Friends and partners,

The idea of “freedom” is important to Americans—in fact, it consistently ranks as one of the most important values in our country. It’s also one of the most fiercely contested. We hear talk about the freedom to control our own bodies, the freedom to live as our true selves, the freedom to learn—while also hearing talk about freedom from government oversight, freedom from taxes, and freedom from public health mandates.

This month, I’m giving you a sneak peek at some of the Culture Change Project’s forthcoming research and sharing evidence-based strategies for using a freedom frame to make the case for systems

change.

SHOW ME THE BLOG POST

For the last two years, we've been studying how different values—like freedom—can be used to strengthen systemic thinking and build support for a more just world.

We've found that appealing to the value of freedom can be a powerful motivator for many kinds of change, but that it also carries a particular risk for backfiring and reinforcing individualistic understandings of the world, constraining our ability to help people see the need for systemic solutions to systemic problems.

Appealing to the value of freedom needs to be done carefully and intentionally to build support for structural change. Our research shows that we need to:

1. Be explicit about **who** poses a threat to core freedoms: Name categories rather than individual actors (talk about "corporations," for example, or "big tech") to avoid audiences focusing on their attitudes towards particular people. Explain how "the who" wields power in a way that threatens our freedom.
2. Offer a clear explanation of **how** freedoms are under threat: Show how institutional power is wielded, to what effect, and what we can do about it.

Our full research report, *Claiming Contested Values*, will be available this winter. In the meantime, check out the full blog post for more on our research into freedom, along with sample language that illustrates how to incorporate the framing strategies into communications.

In solidarity,



Clara Blustein Lindholm

SHARE YOUR INPUT: FUTURE BRIEFINGS ON PUBLIC THINKING

This year, we've been hosting a monthly briefing series, *Navigating Public Thinking about Democracy*, where we share findings and takeaways from our real-time research into how the American public is making sense of current events.

As we plan for the year ahead, we'd like to hear what's been most helpful to you and how we can adapt future briefings to better meet your needs. Please take this short survey to let us know what you'd like to see more and less of next year.

SHARE MY FEEDBACK

NEW FROM FRAMEWORKS

VIDEO SERIES: NARRATIVE KNOW-HOW

Narrative change is getting a lot of attention—but it's more than just a buzzword. Narrative change is a strategy for shifting culture, and we're unpacking it in our newest social media video series, *Narrative Know-How*. In this series, running through November, we're breaking down what narrative change strategy looks like, why it matters, and lessons from real-world narrative shift efforts. Follow us on Instagram or LinkedIn for new episodes!

SHOW ME THE SERIES

FRAMING DIAPER NEED AS A SYSTEMIC ISSUE

Public narratives about poverty tend to focus on individual blame, not systemic failure—particularly when it comes to diaper need. Across the country, families are struggling to meet their children's basic needs, including diapers, as the cost of living continues to climb. Our new research brief, produced in partnership with the National Diaper Bank

Network, highlights key cultural mindsets about diaper need, poverty, and economic justice, and framing strategies to boost public support for systemic solutions. In the toolkit, you can find ready-to-use messages, ideas to avoid and advance, and examples of using the strategy for different audiences.

TAKE ME TO THE RESEARCH BRIEF

SHOW ME THE TOOLKIT

UP NEXT!

CLAIMING CONTESTED VALUES: HOW FAIRNESS, FREEDOM AND STABILITY CAN HELP BUILD DEMAND FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE | JANUARY 2026

Amid growing efforts to undermine DEI and restrict civil society, this brief will explore how the contested values of fairness, freedom, and stability can help progressive organizations and movements build support for transformative, structural change. It takes a look at how to communicate these widely shared yet politically charged values in ways that strengthen systemic thinking and counter individualistic assumptions. By showing how these values shape cultural mindsets across issues, the research offers practical guidance for how to appeal to values more intentionally within broader framing strategies.

FRAMING THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI | COMING SOON

Despite the increasing prominence of artificial intelligence in public life and discourse, there remains a lack of understanding about how AI works and what it means for our lives. By examining the implicit assumptions that shape thinking about AI, we will share strategies for deepening understanding of AI technologies, the social implications of their use, and how they can be used on behalf of the public interest.

SPOTLIGHT ON CULTURE CHANGERS

WHY THE STRUGGLE FOR A THIRD RECONSTRUCTION REMAINS THE STRUGGLE FOR OUR TIMES | DR. PENIEL JOSEPH FOR NONPROFIT QUARTERLY

Dr. Peniel Joseph, Professor and Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, explains how the push for a *Third Reconstruction*, which is a renewed effort to build a multiracial democracy, reflects the need to confront today's backlash against racial justice and democratic rights. He highlights the growing movements working to advance a more inclusive future for the country.

THE BIG TENT IS WORKING | THE HORIZONS PROJECT

Julia Roig, Chief Network Weaver at the Horizons Project, explains that "big-tent" pro-democracy organizing works by bringing together key pillars —like businesses, unions, faith communities, and veterans—under a shared commitment to democratic norms. Using a "block, bridge, build" approach, different groups contribute in ways that fit their strengths, helping to support democracy and counter authoritarian threats.

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