

Engaging the Public Productively: Strategies to Advance the Conversation about Comprehensive Immigration Reform

As every school child in the United States knows, we have a tradition of celebrating our nation's immigrant past. Celebrating its immigrant future, however, is another matter. As the American Immigration Council has noted, "study after study has shown that commonsense immigration reform will strengthen the economy, spur innovation, reduce the deficit and increase U.S. trade and exports." Policy makers across the spectrum are joining experts and advocates in asserting that comprehensive immigration reform is necessary to make the system more functional and flexible. Their shared recognition of the need to repair our current system offers proponents of comprehensive immigration reform a critical opportunity right now to move the field forward. Strong public support is crucial to making progress on this important issue, but the general public lacks a basic understanding of the problem and what's at stake in solving it. Educating and engaging the public must be an essential component of the field's communications strategy.

That makes the need for meaningful, productive public conversations about immigration reform pressing—and more difficult. Strategic Frame Analysis™, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that immigration reform advocates are beginning to build public understanding and support. Strategic framing provides organizations with proven communications techniques, so they can build a national discourse about comprehensive immigration reform that overcomes contentious and partisan debates to focus on adopting and implementing meaningful solutions. Communicators trained in this approach learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for members of the public—how to start, what to emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make an understanding of comprehensive immigration reform issues as "sticky," or memorable, as possible. The FrameWorks Institute's materials on immigration are based on research supported through a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

From this quantitative and qualitative research, the FrameWorks Institute distilled a set of important concepts and messages that immigration reform leaders and experts believe are critical to move into the public square; charted the landscape of public thinking and media narratives that communicators should consider in crafting messages; and used quantitative and qualitative research methods to empirically identify the most reliable, consistent, and powerful ways of reframing the conversation on immigration reform. A brief overview of some of the resulting framing recommendations and tools are included in this article. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and involved

extensive testing throughout the United States; researchers analyzed more than 200 advocacy communications documents, surveyed more than 13,300 registered voters, interviewed 19 leading immigration scholars, and conducted qualitative research with over 130 members of the public.

If You Can Predict, You Can Prepare

The first step to becoming a strategic framer is to recognize that the public will bring a strong set of assumptions to bear on information about immigration reform. These assumptions have implications for how the public interprets reform policy options. Put another way: these perceptions have the power to limit the public's support for measures to improve the system's flexibility and functionality and to offer a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the United States. It is imperative therefore that communicators know the public's default patterns of thinking about immigration as they begin to engage their fellow citizens on the topic of comprehensive immigration reform. Communicators need to be especially attentive to certain dominant cultural models when they want to talk about changing policies and regulations:

Black Box of Immigration Reform

A critical point to bear in mind is that, although many Americans are familiar with the term "immigration reform," the majority are unfamiliar with how our immigration system works. The system's basic operational functions and features are a "Black Box" of invisible processes. This makes conversations about why the system does not work, how we can improve it, and why it is important that we fix it difficult for the public to understand. Without a better understanding of the fundamental workings of the system, the public has little basis with which to think about what reforms to the system would do and what the outcomes might be.

Immigrants as Them vs. Immigrants as Us

Two powerful but contradictory default patterns of thinking shape Americans' views about immigration. The "Immigrants as Them" cultural model is a deeply ingrained way of thinking about immigrants as the "alien other." This polarizing model leads to unproductive and inaccurate ways of thinking about immigrants as invading law-breakers who pose threats to Americans in multiple ways. It limits the public's ability to think about ways of addressing this issue to punitive notions of stricter laws and stronger borders. Simultaneously, although less pronounced, Americans also have access to the "Immigrants as Us" cultural model. This model calls up reasoning that immigrants are "people like us," a sense of collective identity ("we are all immigrants"), and the perception that diversity is an asset rather than a threat. It triggers productive thinking about immigration as a positive contribution to American society and helps the public understand the need for systemic reform. Because the public toggles between these two competing narratives, it is important for communicators to use cues that avoid triggering "them" thinking, and to make consistent use of language that cues up the "Us" model.

Fatalism

A deep sense of fatalism is prevalent in the public's thinking about immigration and what can be done to reform the system. Americans hold a strong sense that immigration is out of control and beyond repair. The public has the sense that a “surge” of immigrants is flooding our borders and that little can be done to change this state of affairs, which impedes the belief that feasible solutions exist. Feelings of resignation or despair about the unfairness of the system and the existence of rampant political corruption compound this hopelessness and depress support for policy changes. To build public support for reform, it is critical to avoid calling up this cultural model. Communicators should avoid the temptation of critiquing the system in harsh terms.

Changing the Conversation

One takeaway from the preceding overview of dominant patterns of thinking is that communicators should review their own communications in light of their likely cognitive effects. For instance, highlighting an individual's story about arriving in the United States in pursuit of a better job than he could find at home would only reinforce some of the public's unproductive default patterns of thinking. When the public is reasoning from these highly familiar, chronically accessible mental shortcuts, the appropriate solutions to systemic problems are difficult to grasp. However, that doesn't mean that advocates for change should give up on engaging the public—in fact, FrameWorks believes quite the opposite. When advocates have an intentional, evidence-based strategy for shaping public discourse and guiding conversations with the public, communicators can circumnavigate these top-of-mind cultural models and move toward recessive beliefs that are “in there somewhere” but need to be pulled out through strategic framing.

Below we outline a handful of key framing techniques that will help communicators engage with the public about comprehensive immigration reform.

Practical Tools for Effective Communications about Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Strategic Frame Analysis™ points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that help the public to understand why immigration is good for our country, why the system we have now isn't working, how updating the system will solve the problem, and what role the public can play in effecting sensible reform.

Escaping the “Invisible Process” Trap: Building Public Awareness of Systems and Solutions by Explaining How They Work

Explaining how systems work is a vital part of effectively framing social issues. When communicators describe a problem and its solution but neglect to connect the dots in between, the public is left to wonder why the issue matters, or to fill in those “cognitive holes” for themselves, often with limited or fragmented information gleaned from haphazard media coverage. FrameWorks research revealed that, in general, Americans'

understanding of comprehensive immigration reform is limited to thinking in contradictory ways about immigrants as a group that either threatens or contributes to American society. Immigration as a *system* that is vital to our nation's sustainable economic growth and social progress is not a regular feature of public discourse about reform.

However, not all framing solutions are created equal. When appealing to the public as citizens with a stake in a consequential issue, it is important to emphasize the civic or community-wide relevance of actions that may not at first seem related. For instance, communications should explain how comprehensive immigration reform can contribute to local businesses' and communities' economic wellbeing.

Currently, the public lacks examples of why our current immigration system contributes to the numbers of undocumented people in the country. The public does not generally appreciate that creating a pathway to citizenship for people who have been in the United States for a long time may be more practical and economically viable than trying to send everyone back to their countries of origin. Also missing are stories that demonstrate how immigrants complement our domestic workforce, build new businesses, and create jobs. The messages conveyed by most organizations that support comprehensive immigration reform do not clearly connect their efforts to potential the positive public consequences. Communicators can have a strong impact on public thinking by rewriting the story of immigration reform to highlight both the collective benefits of reform and the importance of citizen engagement in supporting policy makers' efforts to repair the system so that it operates better.

Using Values to Establish What's at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what is desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Opening communications with a value can orient people's thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, the use of a *Moral Argument*, when used to begin a conversation about supporting comprehensive immigration reform, showed a strong ability to cue up productive patterns of thinking. These values descriptions capture the essence of the idea; they are not intended to be used verbatim.

Moral Argument

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.

The *Moral Argument* taps into Americans' deeply embedded sense of compassion for all people. It is especially productive in building support for such policy proposals as a clear pathway to citizenship, visa reform, and improving government services for immigrants and their families. The American public's sense of moral obligation to fellow human beings consistently transcends legal status and breaches the "Us vs. Them" divide that often characterizes public debate about immigration reform. It is important to note, however,

that this tested value works best when used as an appeal to respect and honor immigrants' humanity *rather than their rights*. Framing research shows clearly that if the goal is to garner support for comprehensive reform, humanitarian language is a more effective strategy than explicit appeals to rights.

Although the *Moral Argument* demonstrated a strong ability to move public support when used as the lead in communications, the research also showed that it is important to respond tactically to "law and order" arguments by anti-reform advocates. In these cases, rather than sticking to the humanitarian frame, it is better to appeal to another tested value, *Pragmatism*.

Pragmatism

We need to take a commonsense approach to immigration, carefully considering all of the possible solutions and choosing the best ones. It would be impractical and extreme to send all of the people in the United States who are undocumented back to their country of origin.

When communicators are faced with a contentious response to a message supporting immigration reform, pivoting to *Pragmatism* can successfully neutralize or undermine opposing, anti-reform messages.

Whether used to establish a strong lead position or to redirect a conversation in real time, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a crisis or making other hyper-emotional appeals. Because the values *Moral Argument* and *Pragmatism* have been rigorously tested for their effects on public policy support, communicators can have confidence that these frames are the most reliable and powerful ways to make the case.

Telling a Complete Story to Build Public Comprehension

Narratives are powerful framing tools because of the deep and durable ways in which they organize information and events and make information cognitively "sticky." Structuring information as narrative helps people remember, retrieve and interpret information when they make decisions and when they communicate with others.

Another piece of the FrameWorks' research agenda delved into the particulars of the stories advocates are telling, and the effects of possible alternatives. FrameWorks research revealed an interesting contradiction between advocates' current framing strategies and empirical evidence about what worked to build public support for comprehensive reform. An analysis of advocacy messaging revealed that organizations advocating for pathways to citizenship tend to steer clear of economic arguments that support their position. Meanwhile, research and message testing of public perceptions showed that highlighting a *Prosperity* value as a benefit of immigration reform significantly boosted public support for policies that were directly linked to economic growth, such as employment-based visa reform. This suggests that avoiding an economic prosperity argument might be misguided

– especially if the goal is a comprehensive reform package that addresses multiple aspects of the system.

Prosperity

America’s prosperity can only grow if we channel everyone’s skills and energy. Immigrants who come to the United States bring talent and potential and contribute to our national well-being. Immigration reform is vital to our country’s prosperity, both now and in the future.

While a relatively simple appeal to *Prosperity* built public support for policies where the connection between the reform and the economic benefit were readily apparent, this incomplete narrative did not have strong effects on support for legalization initiatives. Further communications experiments demonstrated that to make these invisible connections visible to the public, it was necessary to shape and advance a complete narrative. That narrative should fill in at least four “plot points” in the story of how this issue works — specifically, why immigration reform matters, how the system works, what can keep it from working, and what can be done to improve our approach and outcomes. Telling a complete story anchored in the *Prosperity* Value was a highly effective strategy in making the case for the full suite of policies associated with comprehensive reform, including legalization initiatives.

This finding illustrates at least two key framing insights. One, the public need not remain “stuck” in their existing understandings – though they do need some help from effective communications to expand their thinking. Two, deciding on the most powerful narrative doesn’t have to be guesswork. There is evidence available to guide decision making. The findings of the various elements of the research reveal a vetted, actionable strategy. First, whether or not an advocate’s primary interest is in the economic benefits of a more sensible approach to immigration, framing the benefits of reform with *Prosperity* is an effective way of making the case. Second, it is essential to tell a complete story that invites the public into expert understandings of abstract, complex connections in an accessible way.

Using an Explanatory Metaphor to Explain the Problem

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of our immigration system: the American public simply doesn't understand how it works or why it needs to be updated. When left to fill in the gaps in their understanding, the public applies reasoning based on dominant cultural narratives that fill in an “Us vs. Them” characterization of immigrants (for instance, the often-repeated assertion that our national borders are leaky, which allows “others” to invade our space and take jobs from Americans). Teaching the basics about immigration—why immigration is economically necessary and beneficial to our country, how the basic mechanisms of our current immigration system work, and why improving those mechanisms will be good for the nation—is therefore a critical step that should be built into every communication. This step should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as poetic devices, but FrameWorks' research shows that they can also be uniquely powerful devices for thinking. An explanatory metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. They are particularly useful when a topic is one that suffers from a lack of public understanding—such as the need for comprehensive immigration reform. Among the explanatory metaphors FrameWorks tested for communicating about the importance of immigration reform to our national wellbeing, *Immigration Sail* was the most consistent and reliable in expanding public understanding of why we need to improve our immigration system:

Immigration Sail:

Immigration is wind in our country's sails—it is the labor, skills, and ideas that move our country forward. But right now our sails are poorly positioned—and our policies are letting valuable wind power go to waste. We need to fix the policies and laws that make up our sails so that all the available power can fill our sails and move our country forward.

In just a few sentences, this metaphor can develop an audience's grasp of the importance of comprehensive immigration reform. In extensive testing – both quantitative and qualitative - the idea of wind propelling a boat helped the public to understand immigration as a powerful force that our nation relies on for its economic and social progress. It moved Americans away from thinking about immigrants as a drain on our resources. The stickiness of the metaphor and the associations it readily generates allows immigration reform advocates to pack more (and more powerful) explanation into their conversations with the public.

Reframing Comprehensive Immigration Reform Can Move The Agenda Forward

As advocates for immigration reform continue to press for changes to the system, it is important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There is solid evidence that some ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease public engagement—for instance, making a rights-based argument instead of appealing to the public's humanitarianism. Instead, complete narratives about immigration build people's understanding of why immigration is necessary and beneficial, familiarize them with how the system works, explain the problems that keep it from working well, and introduce them to well-matched solutions, so that the public understands what is necessary to address problems in the system.

These framing strategies can advance the public's understanding of and support for comprehensive immigration reform. As efforts to change and expand public discourse on reform, increasing the number of communicators in the field who can apply these frames with fluency will contribute to a more robust conversation about these issues. The pro-reform field can build support for its comprehensive agenda with messages that demonstrate how specific elements of immigration reform contribute to the broader, common goal of creating a system that benefits everyone.