

# Understanding Mindsets about Government Can Help Us Advocate for Children

**Few frames have had a swifter, more serious impact than the positioning of “parents’ rights” as a principle that should govern public education and public policy regarding children.**

Since groups like Moms for Liberty and the Alliance Defending Freedom began to organize to “stand up for parents’ rights” in 2021, the impact has been remarkable. Political wins range from a coordinated rise in book bans to lawsuits against school districts for not requiring staff to disclose children’s chosen names and pronouns. Although Moms for Liberty and other groups aren’t making headlines in the way they were before, their argument at its core—that the government is out to undermine parents and actively harm children and families—is alive and well, and is already figuring prominently in the 2024 election.

Recent findings from FrameWorks’ Culture Change Project help shed light on the reasons *why* the parents’ rights movement has gained so much ground in recent years, how its underlying logic is likely to play out in 2024, and importantly, what strategies advocates can use to create more productive understandings of the role of government in improving the health and wellbeing of children in the United States.

Three distinct but interrelated cultural mindsets about government are getting in the way of policy support for issues related to children and families. Being aware of these mindsets is the first step to designing an effective communications strategy that can combat parents’ rights rhetoric.



FRAMEWORKS  
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1. **Personalism:** People narrowly equate government to individual elected officials who are often characterized as bad and powerful people with nefarious intentions. When this mindset is active, it becomes easy for people to think government action is intended to control and harm children. Subsequent discussions about public policy or governmental responsibility can be rejected or spark active opposition. In an election year, when the country will be hyper-focused on individual candidates, this mindset will be difficult to navigate.
2. **Government as Them:** When thinking with this mindset, government is understood as a separate body that stands in opposition to what people want and need. It's easy to sow fear and distrust when government is painted as a monolith capable of promulgating its own agenda. This mindset can disrupt public conversations about policy action. Some campaigns are already relying on the argument that the government does not care about ordinary people, which further distances government from the people.
3. **Personal Liberties:** This mindset centers on the idea that government's primary function is to protect individual rights, which are narrowly understood as personal liberties. Because government is assumed to exist to infringe on individual freedoms, when this mindset is active people reason that there is a need to set strict limits on government action and power. Rather than believing that government has a role and responsibility to children and families, people can reason that we need to take action to stop government infringement and restriction.

## Strategies for Moving Forward

To navigate these mindsets and ensure that our government *does* live up to its promise of supporting children and families, advocates can use these proven framing strategies to talk about the role of government as we get closer to the election (and after).

1. **Avoid the temptation to fight rights with rights.** It might be tempting to reclaim rights-based language from the parents' rights movement by countering with language about the importance of *children's* rights. This strategy, however, is likely to backfire. People associate rights with liberties, such as freedom of speech or religion. When thinking about children, people tend to reason that these rights do not pertain to children and then reject any other information that follows.

2. **Replace abstract discussions of “the government” with concrete connections between children’s wellbeing and our policy decisions.** Abstract discussion of the government’s role tends to create skepticism and worry that the government is actively trying to displace parents’ and families’ roles. Instead of murky talk about “the government,” be specific and concrete about policy needs. This helps people move beyond the idea of the government as the opponent of families. It is not enough, however, to just name policies that benefit children and families. An effective framing strategy will explain *how* policies directly impact children’s wellbeing. For example, talk about how designing and resourcing a robust public transportation system helps kids get to the enriching activities that support their wellbeing.
3. **Give parents and other caregivers a clear role in bringing about policy change.** Talk about policies that ensure children’s wellbeing as *responding to* and *resulting from* parents’ and families’ needs and demands. Framing parents as actors we must listen to can help inoculate against the tendency to think the government is actively working to undermine parents.

Arguments coming from the parents’ rights movement fuel division. As long as government is pitted against parents in our political discourse, children will suffer. In an election year when children’s advocates will be fighting for *more* public resources and government support, we can use these framing strategies to start new conversations about what the role of government should be in the lives of children and families and increase a sense of public responsibility for children’s wellbeing.