

Messaging on Immigration and Executive Actions



Having made anti-immigrant rhetoric a centerpiece of his Presidency, Trump has put into motion multiple proposals to terrorize people living here, separate families and keep newcomers from joining our communities. With new Executive Orders, due process violations and hate crimes coming at us daily, it can be challenging to know how to respond.

Understanding that advocates are under greater duress than ever, we offer the following advice. This is intended for public facing messaging: communication for a broad public such as press releases, op-eds, talking points and social media blasts. Other critical communication concerns – like keeping affected communities informed – require an entirely different approach. Similarly, this is not a document about strategies to pursue or avoid, nor does it cover tactics.

Current Messaging Pitfalls

1. Giving Trump and his detestable views airtime

Given the frequency, mendacity and scope of new executive actions, it's not surprising that advocates are in reactive mode. This applies not just to legal and organizing strategies, but also extends to messaging.

As such, we see a tendency to repeat Trump's claims:

For him, **immigrants are criminals**, because for him, **Latinos are criminals**.

The Trump administration is seeking to categorize even the smallest traffic violations and other minor crimes to inflate the number of **immigrants with an alleged criminal background** and to give a reason to their executive orders.

[X] has always characterized undocumented **immigrants as hardened criminals...**

They are saying that their focus is on **bad actors...**

While it may seem necessary to lead with and repeat the content of the Executive Orders and the hateful slander spoken, it isn't. Not only is this unintentionally reinforcing the very ideas we seek to dispel, it robs us of precious airtime to say what we actually want.

Right now, media attention is on immigration and immigrants. While this is, of course, for terrible reasons, it still offers us an opportunity to inject our true, courageous, values-based messaging. But that's only possible if we refuse to engage in the debate on our opponent's terms.

2. Frequent negation of damaging claims

Negation is another habit closely related to repeating your opposition's claims. Phrases like "immigrants are **not** 'criminal aliens'" and "being undocumented is **not** a crime" unwittingly reinforce the false claims they refute. So too does the ever-popular "**no** human is **illegal**."

As much as we wish otherwise, negating a claim actually brings it top of mind. People latch onto the most tangible element of a sentence – usually the noun. In contrast, words like "don't" and "not" are intangible.

In fact, decades of research demonstrate that attempts to refute false information can actually strengthen people's belief in the claims. Testing shows that people remember the assertion and forget that it's a lie.

People accept arguments that reinforce what they already believe and reject those that don't. This is known as "confirmation bias." And, in fact, there can be a "backfire effect," where people become more convinced of their position if it's challenged

People are more likely to believe refutations if they are presented unemotionally, such as in graphs. Experiments in different domains reveal that factual presentation is even more effective when accompanied by "affirmation" that has people recall an experience that made them feel good about themselves. (Note that this is in a one-on-one conversation, not broadcast messaging, setting.)

3. Bringing danger and threat top of mind

In particular, the tendency to talk about how these new policies make us *unsafe* or *less safe* call to mind the very concerns that leave persuadable audiences unsure about the right course of action.

Reporting on various strains of research, the Washington Post's David Ignatius concludes, "Trump's campaign pushes buttons that social scientists understand. When the GOP nominee paints a dark picture of a violent, frightening America, he triggers the 'fight or flight' response that's hardwired in our brains. For the body politic, it can produce a kind of panic attack." Framing the immigration issue in terms of safety does not help our cause.

Instead of focusing on safety and security, danger and threat, we can root our description of the problem in terms of violating our core beliefs and values. Consider this example, "this program has been found by federal courts to

systematically violate people’s civil rights by promoting racial profiling. The courts have found the program violates people’s constitutional right to due process, freedom from unlawful detention, and equal protection under the law.”

However, it’s important to note that even this is *problem focused*. In fact, previous research on messaging about immigration, formerly incarcerated people and people seeking asylum all demonstrate a similar pattern. Namely, messages that engage our base and persuade swing voters lead with shared values, not articulations of our problems. We turn now to offer messaging that accomplishes this.

Better Messaging Options

The following short narratives are all rooted in empirically tested approaches.¹ Admittedly, this testing occurred in a different political moment and toward the aim of engendering support for comprehensive immigration reform. Nevertheless, based upon those findings and more recent testing on related issues,² we offer these options for reframing this debate on our terms.

Each of these follows a known best practices ordering: lead with shared values, introduce problem with clear causation and end on a solution and call to action.

Nation of Values

America is a nation of values, founded on an ideal that all are created equal. Any order that violates every person’s right to due process and equal treatment violates our Constitution and cannot stand. Everyone means everyone, no exceptions. This is why we must [call to action.]

People Move

People move to make life better for themselves and their families. Immigrant Americans moved here for the promise of freedom and opportunity. Any order that violates a person’s right to remain in and contribute to our communities damages the freedom we cherish. That’s why we’re [solution/call to action.]

We Belong Together

Most of us believe that family comes first. But today, certain lawmakers want to forcibly separate mothers from children, husbands from wives, and sisters from brothers. Anything that tears apart our families threatens our nation. In opposing this new executive order, we affirm our belief that having “family values” means valuing families by keeping them together and honoring the contributions

¹ Online dial testing on immigration for America’s Voice by Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications, led by Ryan Clayton in 2011.

² Online dial testing on asylum and refugees in Australia for Asylum Seeker Resource Centre by Commonality and ASO Communications in 2015. Language analysis and cognitive elicitation interviews on perceptions of present and formerly incarcerated people for Center for Community Change in 2014.

immigrant Americans make to our country and communities. That’s why American families are [solution/call to action.]

Golden Rule

Most of us strive to treat others the way we want to be treated. If any one of us had to uproot our lives and our families to create a better future, we would want others – even complete strangers – to show us understanding and respect. Treating others they way we wish to be treated applies in good times and bad. We must ensure the right of every person in America to live free from danger. So today we will [solution/call to action.]

United We Stand

Our strength is grounded in our ability to work together. From those who cook the food that we eat to those who invent businesses, new immigrants realize the value of working hard and doing your part. But today, politicians seek to divide us from each other by targeting certain people based on what they look like or where they come from. America works best when we all do our part and work together as one nation, indivisible and we will reject every order that attempts to divide us. This means [solution/call to action.]

While these different narrative approaches can be selected depending upon organizational brand and particular occasion, they work particularly well in lieu of specific existing approaches. We recommend each respective narrative above to replace the following common message frames:

Original	Reframe
Safety/fear/threat	Nation of Values/Everyone Means Everyone
Negation	People Move
Target real criminals, waste of resources, inefficient	We Belong Together
Criminal law vs. civil law/immigration status	Golden Rule
Differences from Obama policies, Trump-specific	United We Stand