

The Art and Science of Framing an Issue



Authors



Contributing Editors

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"Ideas are a medium of exchange and a mode of influence even more powerful than money, votes and guns. ... Ideas are at the center of all political conflict."

—Deborah Stone, Policy Process Scholar, 2002

The Battle Over Ideas

Think back to when you were 10 years old, staring at your dinner plate, empty except for a pile of soggy-looking green vegetables. If you had a typical mother, she might've snapped something like: "Eat your cabbage! Children are starving in Africa!" If her line of reasoning was entirely unconvincing to your slightly self-centered 10-year-old brain, you weren't alone. In fact, maybe you even thought something ungrateful in response, like: "Well then box up this cabbage and mail it to them!"

Why? Because as a 10-year-old, you didn't value the fact that you went to bed with a full stomach and you couldn't relate to malnourished kids living on the other side of the world.

What you did value, however, was dessert. So when your mother instead snapped, "If you don't clean your plate right now you're not getting any ice cream," *that* created a compelling reason to scarf some cabbage. We hate to say it, but sometimes communicating to the public is like convincing someone to eat their vegetables. You want to talk about malnourishment, but nobody listens unless you talk about ice cream. Social advocates generally aren't communicating with 10-year-olds, but the concept of breaking an idea down into something that your audience cares about is still the same.

Ideas, and how they're expressed, are at the center of all political conflict. In political battles, each side puts forward different but equally plausible ideas of what's happening and what needs to happen. They try to present their ideas in a way that makes Americans care about them. They strategically pick the data, facts and information that best persuade people to see a situation their way.

Are we exploring for oil that's desperately needed to drive our economy and sustain our nation? Or are we destroying delicate ecological systems and natural lands that are a legacy to our grandchildren? These two different views of the same activity (drilling for oil) create two very different reactions.

Understanding How People Think

Imagine sitting on your living room sofa between a protest button-wearing human rights activist and a tight-collared, beeper-wearing social conservative, when a story airs on the nightly news about a family in crisis. A mix-up at the welfare office has left the family without the check they rely on for food. The civil rights activist shakes his head sadly. "That's what's wrong with this country. We just don't take care of our poor."

The social conservative loosens his collar in surprise. "We wouldn't have to take care of these people if they'd just work for a living like everyone else."

Same news story. Two totally different interpretations. How does this happen?

Whether you realize it or not, when you talk about an issue, people interpret whatever you say in the context of their existing worldviews. People aren't blank slates, and they won't ponder your carefully laid-out facts in a vacuum. Instead, they use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. They slot new information into larger mental constructs that they already know to be "true."

The way this works is simple. We all rely on a set of internalized beliefs and values or frameworks, to interpret and give meaning to unfolding events.



Two Typical Views On Marriage For Gay Couples

1. "Marriage for gay couples is an issue of fairness."

2. "Gay marriage will destroy the traditional family."

Internalized Thought Structures Affect How We Process Information

	Internalized thought structure	Reaction to newspaper story of a family on welfare	Reaction to newspaper story on higher incarceration rates for people of color
	America is a country where anyone can be successful if they work hard and are responsible.	If a family is on welfare, it's likely because the parents don't care to work.	People wouldn't be incarcerated if they obeyed the law.
	America is a country where many people fall through the cracks or are victims of the system.	If a family is on welfare, it's likely because some hardship befell them.	Systemic discrimination leads to higher incarceration for people of color.

These frameworks are hardwired into our brains through habit and experience; they shape the way we see the world. For example, if you're a pacifist, you won't be moved by the President's arguments that we can contain violence in Iraq by sending more troops. Instead, you'll fit his arguments into your existing worldview that violence begets more violence (or that violence is always wrong). But if you're Machiavelli and you believe it's better to be feared than loved, you might believe the President isn't sending *enough* troops.

We absorb new information by mentally fitting it into our existing belief systems. This allows us to process information quickly and get on with our lives. Note that we almost always fit the information into our belief systems, as opposed to changing our belief systems to fit the information. For example, a pacifist would likely think: "The President wants a troop surge, but I know violence begets more violence. Clearly, the President's strategy is bad." A pacifist would be very unlikely to think: "The President wants a troop surge. He has outlined a number of compelling reasons why that's a good strategy. Maybe pacifism is wrong."

Often we're unaware of our patterns of reasoning. None of us can see or hear the frameworks that determine our core values, underlying principles, and moral worldview. They're part of what cognitive scientists call the cognitive unconscious—structures in our brains that we can't consciously access, but that affect the way we reason.

If we're debating a point, we run into trouble when we don't take into account how differently people see the world. Most parents raise their children to believe in universal common sense. If that were true, no child would ever try to put a wet cat in a dryer. Common sense for each of us is determined by experience and knowledge acquired over time. Since we all have different backgrounds, we all have different notions of common sense. Advocates for LGBT equality and our opponents consistently mystify each other because neither group takes into account the subjectivity of common sense. Common sense for you might be another's poorly thought-out political ideology.

What Is Framing?

We make our biggest communications mistake when we only talk to our supporters and forget to talk to the people we need to move to our side. The art of framing is the art of defining an issue to get the broadest possible public support. We do this by tying frames as broadly as possible to people's existing belief systems and worldviews.

The way you frame an issue answers the question, "What is this *about*?" Your goal is to frame the issue so it's about something the majority of people agree with and care about. This normally means appealing to their deepest values. It also means your frames should rise above partisan politics, since partisan frames lose the support of half the American population—or more. You need to frame carefully and deliberately so you don't accidentally evoke worldviews or patterns of reasoning that shut down everything you have to say.

Pretend that the reason you're sitting on the sofa between a Birkenstock-wearing human rights activist and a tight-collared, beeper-wearing social conservative is to get them to vote yes on a proposed welfare reform policy. How you open the conversation will determine how the activist and conservative react. "This policy is about helping America's poor," will likely make the activist tap-dance but the conservative cross his arms and think, "Oh great, higher taxes and government handouts." Expect the opposite reaction if you open the conversation with "This policy is about reducing government subsidies to welfare families."

So how do you build a frame that takes opposing worldviews into account? You appeal to common values. Let's say you introduced the welfare reform policy as a "bi-partisan effort to get families off welfare and into meaningful work." This might not be perfect, but it's better. Both activists can agree that they'd like to see fewer families on welfare. One supports *meaningful* work, and the other supports work, period,



but at least there's common ground. Moreover, a *bi-partisan* policy immediately reassures both activists that their differing views will be taken into account. At a minimum, this way of framing the policy would leave each activist open to hearing more.

Political types spend a lot of time and money building frames that resonate with people's deeply held values and worldviews. Good frames will help people see the issue in new and compelling ways. For example, gun control may be about (1) *gun safety* (this country should care about reducing violence and gun deaths), or it may be about (2) *the right to bear arms* (this country is based on personal and constitutional freedoms). Progressives talk about gun safety because few people are inherently against safety. Conservatives invoke the Constitution because liberty is a fundamental American value. Anyone who talks about gun *regulation* rather than gun *safety* violates the rules of proper framing. After all, neither progressives nor conservatives light up at the idea of increased government regulation.

Note that effective frames tie to values and emotions, not facts. Sadly, facts *don't* speak for themselves. While facts are helpful, if they conflict with a person's worldview, that person usually discards the facts,

Hierarchy of Frames

1. **Deep frames** use big ideas, like freedom, justice, community, success, prevention, responsibility
2. **Issue-defining frames** work at the level of a problem or issue, like the environment or child care
3. **Surface messages** address issue subsets and policies, like rainforests or earned income tax credits



Anti-smog regulation or healthy families

not the worldview. This phenomenon explains why there was (and still is) widespread denial of global warming despite evidence to the contrary.

Levels of Framing

Suppose you manage several employees. One of them, Joe, shows up 22 minutes late to a critical meeting. You're annoyed. You value employee promptness and Joe knows this. However, Joe gives a good reason for being late. His elderly neighbor called with chest pains and Joe drove him to the hospital. Now, not only do you forgive Joe, but you commend him for being a great guy. Why the change of heart? Because while you believe in both promptness *and* life-saving heroism, heroism "trumps" your belief in being on time.

Ideas come in hierarchies. Some ideas or values "trump" others or hold more weight than others. To effectively frame your issue, appeal to people's most deeply held beliefs and values. If you're arguing at the level of "promptness" and your opponent starts talking about "life-saving heroism," you've just lost the debate.

There are three levels of communications used to define social and political issues:

- **Deep frames** connect with the core set of ideas and values people use to guide the rest of their thinking. Deep frames tap into "big ideas," (e.g., freedom, justice, community, success, responsibility). They connect to a moral worldview

or political philosophy that cuts across issues. When something resonates with you or makes perfect sense, it's engaging your deep frames.

- **Issue-defining frames** work at the level of a specific problem or issue. These frames define issues like the environment or child care. Because issue-defining frames are more narrowly defined than deep frames, they make it hard to talk about an issue in a broader values or "big ideas" context. For example, the nuclear freeze movement narrowly defined its issue as one of reducing nuclear arms production. This narrow framing made it difficult to morph into a broader "peace" movement once the issue of nuclear proliferation was somewhat under control.
- **Surface messages** are specific communications about events, policies or programs. They don't attempt to tie into values, but simply communicate the facts. Surface messages might explain the details of an earned income tax program or a carbon tax. They only resonate with the public when compatible deep frames are already in place (e.g., you likely won't care about the details of a carbon tax program if you don't already care about environmental stewardship).

In summary, to change how people think, we need to take into account their existing belief systems and connect with those beliefs. First, we use deep frames to increase public support for our issues. Once the public is engaged and supportive, they'll be more open to hearing about issues (issue-defining frames) and specific policies (surface messages). Note that we're attempting to plug into existing belief systems, *not* rewire them. Trying to dismantle one worldview and replace it with another is far more difficult than reframing the issue so it fits *within* someone's existing worldview.

What progressives talk about

Don't discriminate
Don't smoke
Recycle
Compost

What people value

I want a healthy family

I want my share of the good life

I want more time for me

I want to connect with community

TALKING ABOUT POLICY OR VALUES?

In the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan's stances on issues were at the far end of the political spectrum, well to the right of most Americans' positions. Yet somehow, voters who didn't agree with Reagan on the issues still wanted to vote for him. Why?

Reagan talked about values rather than issues. He realized that values mattered more to people than specific policy positions. Because Reagan talked about his values, connected with people, and appeared authentic, people felt they could trust him. Voters ultimately identified with Reagan, feeling that he was one of them. The lesson: Talking about the issues is less important than connecting with people's values.

Tying to Values

The most effective way to change how people think about an issue is to connect with their most deeply-held values. Don't talk about how the new anti-smog legislation will "reduce particulate matter." Talk about how the new anti-smog legislation will "keep families healthy." Particulate matter is a bunch of syllables that don't strike an emotional cord, but almost everyone cares about maintaining their family's health. If the issue becomes "healthy families" versus "more government regulation," you'll likely win. If it's "particulate matter" versus "more government regulation," all bets are off.

Words like "responsibility," "community," and "freedom" broadly appeal to all types of Americans. When we approach people as citizens or neighbors, we tap into powerful modes of how people think about themselves. Rather than ask people to identify with labels like "child advocate," approach them as parents. Many policies in the last decade passed not because they were great policies, but because they had strong links to certain social values.

Over the past 40 years, conservatives in particular have honed their ability to frame their ideas in ways that resonate with the public. In fact, many conservative concepts have become generally accepted ways to view the world. "Family values," "tax relief," and "compassionate conservatism" are a few examples. Progressives have become more aware of framing since the 2004 presidential election and the publication of George Lakoff's guide, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, but they still have substantial catching up to do.

The lack of established progressive frames admittedly makes your challenge more difficult, but certainly not impossible.

Why Should I Spend Resources on Framing?

American politics is no longer an exercise in presenting policies and issues. Cognitive science shows that people rarely vote in their own self-interest—they vote based on their identity and values. This explains why the poorest areas of America have, in recent years, consistently voted for conservative candidates with no anti-poverty agenda. People vote for the candidate (or the beneficiaries of a ballot initiative) with whom they identify. They vote for people who know how to talk about values, and the Right does this well. Note that this doesn't mean that progressives need to adopt the language of the Right, but it does mean that progressives need to start talking about more than policy and statistics, and reach voters in terms they care about. Political debate has become a stage for invoking ideas and values through keywords, metaphors, and strategic phrases. You win the debate by keeping it within frames that help advance your cause.

"Social change is inherently about people's hopes and dreams—their aspirations. We make a wasteful error in constructing programs around the narrow agendas of abstract policy—greenhouse gas abatement, education—and not around the real hopes of real people living real lives."

—Les Robinson, *Fenton Communications*

"The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames and the ability to effectively contest opposition frames lie at the heart of success. Most movements are associated with the development of an innovative master frame that will either constrain or inspire the movement's future development."

—Frameworks Institute, 2005

How Do I Frame My Issue?

Frankly, it's not easy to effectively frame an issue. Why? Because good framing starts from the perspective of the target audience—people whose mindset, values, and patterns of reasoning are often very different from your own.

Here's a brief step-by-step guide to framing.

Step 1. Understand the Mindset of Your Target Audience

Good framing means understanding how your target audience thinks. This in turn generally requires market research (for more information, see “**Target Audience**” and “**Market Research Overview**” in the **Communications Campaign Best Practices** resource document). While talking to your base helps maintain existing support, you probably want to *grow* the base, which means talking to people who don't agree with you. These people, by definition, don't think like you, and different messages move them. Therefore, before you can effectively frame your issue, you need to understand your target audience's mindset. What do they care about? How do opponents, the media, and the LGBT movement encourage them to see LGBT issues? What are the consequences of their existing beliefs around LGBT issues? How can you reframe the issue to encourage them to think differently? What are the *larger values* you should frame your issue around?

Don't make assumptions. Use market research to help you understand your target audience so you don't have to make assumptions about their values. Case in point: An ad agency was asked to create a campaign to reduce litter in Texas. Instead of assuming that everyone thinks littering is bad, the agency conducted focus groups with its target audience (15- to 24-year-old males—the primary culprits in the litter problem). The agency learned that these men weren't moved by talk of pristine wilderness, but they responded passionately to the notion of Texan pride. The agency launched the incredibly successful “Don't Mess with Texas” campaign. Similarly, the national “Truth” campaign significantly reduced teenage smoking by suggesting that big tobacco companies attempt to manipulate teens. *Not* smoking became an act of rebellion. This approach proved far more persuasive than prior campaigns which focused on the negative health impacts of smoking.

Message to win. The Right understands that its message doesn't have to be central to the issue as long as it's *central to the target audience*. By contrast, progressives often feel obligated to explain policy details and defend the “rightness” of their issue, even if this approach won't move public opinion. You have to ask yourself, is it more important to *talk about* the issue in a way that feels right, or to *actually advance support* for the issue?

For example, a local environmental group fighting an airport expansion decided that it wouldn't talk about the potential damages to the delicate ecosystem (which only the environmentalists cared about). Instead, it would focus on how noise pollution would disturb nearby neighborhoods. While the locals couldn't be rallied to protect spotted frogs, they could be rallied to be sure they slept well at night. As Jon Haber of Fleishman-Hillard said, “If the issue becomes birds versus jobs, you're dead.”

Step 2. Know When Your Current Frames Aren't Working

You can tell you don't have the right frame when the following happens: Your opponent uses two words (e.g., “special rights”) to answer a moderator's question, while you require five minutes to explain your position. If you're launching into long explanations to defend your side, you're not appealing to an established frame (i.e., you're not hooking into a fixed idea already out there). When the frames are there, the responses come readily—and succinctly.

Step 3. Know the Elements of a Frame

An effective frame includes the following:

- **Credible messengers.** People listen to knowledgeable and trustworthy messengers. While it's nice to have likable or familiar messengers, credibility is most important. We may all think Melissa Etheridge is swell, but few would trust her as a spokesperson for the Middle East. Conversely, people don't trust those who are too close to an issue because they're not seen as neutral. For example, the public deems dentists less objective than school nurses on the subject of oral hygiene for children. Why? Because dentists are seen as having something to gain financially. Likewise, organizational spokespeople and advocates may have limited credibility because the public sees them as far too partisan.

The public deems dentists less objective than school nurses on the subject of oral hygiene for children.



For this reason, unlikely messengers can be particularly effective in persuading an audience to reconsider an issue, such as when conservative senators speak out against Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

- **Attention-getting visuals.** Non-standard images capture attention. However, be careful, because while images can reinforce or draw attention to your frame, they can also damage it. For example, all white, all young or all affluent images of LGBT people reinforce the stereotype that LGBT people only come from certain "privileged" walks of life.

- **Friendly priming.** "Priming" changes how someone thinks about an issue by bringing up a train of thought that remains active when a second issue is brought up. For example, let's say you ask people if they agree that the shortage of Arabic linguists in the military poses a problem. Then you ask whether they support the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (which has led to the firing of over 50 gay Arabic linguists). This helps people connect the problem of a shortage of Arabic linguists with the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Or you ask people whether they believe that companies should have the right to fire employees for issues other than job performance. Then you ask about their support for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.
- **Numbers in context.** Facts alone aren't compelling. Unless numbers tell a story, they won't mean anything to your audience. Most people need cues. They can't judge the size or meaning of numbers unless they're related to something more familiar. Use analogies. For example, saying, "The smoke-stack of Cheap-Goods-4-You puts out the equivalent of one balloon of toxic pollution for every school-age child in town," is much more effective than talking about tons of particulate matter per year.
- **Show how things connect.** Draw clear and concrete connections between a problem and its cause. People are more engaged and supportive when they understand the causes of, and solutions to, a problem. They get "compassion fatigue" when they only hear about suffering (symptoms) or about the reasons they should care (worthiness). Don't just say that hostile school climates cause LGBT teens to skip school more often. Instead, draw all of the connections: "When schools don't have explicit safe-schools policies, gay youth get harassed and bullied more often. This makes them feel unsafe and creates higher absenteeism as they skip school in order to protect themselves."

Don't just say that the lack of marriage equality denies gay couples the legal protections of marriage. Instead, spell out the consequences: "When committed gay couples are unable to marry, they continue to be viewed as strangers under the law, and are denied spousal rights such as hospital visitation, spousal health care coverage, and pension benefits. This makes it

harder for gay and lesbian couples to take care of each other, and creates emotional and economic distress not faced by other families.”

Step 4. Speak to People’s Core Values

Drop the language of policy wonks. Remember that voters vote according to their identities and their values. These don’t always coincide with their self-interest.

Step 5. Avoid Using Opponents’ Frames, Even to Dispute Them

Never repeat the language of your opponents, even if you’re refuting them. Imagine a friend is over at your house for coffee, and she suddenly says that you shouldn’t worry, there’s no way her three-year-old son will smash your grandmother’s china with his plastic hammer. If you’d forgotten her son was in the room, you’ll remember now—and immediately start worrying about the china! Similarly, if a person says, “Don’t worry, marriage for gay couples won’t destroy the traditional family,” the target audience will start worrying about the destruction of the traditional family. Remember: the fear of most Americans around marriage is as real as that evoked by a three-year-old with a plastic hammer in a china shop.

Once you’ve conjured a powerful stereotype or worldview, you can’t suppress it again. Let’s say you initiated a conversation by saying, “Many people think gay men and lesbians are promiscuous, but in fact, that’s completely untrue.” Most people will immediately get stuck in stereotypes of LGBT people as promiscuous and may even envision gay sex (evoking the dreaded “ick” factor). They likely won’t hear any of the rest of your argument. The more you repeat a negative frame, the more you reinforce it. If you want to attack the stereotype of promiscuity, avoid the word altogether. Say, “There are countless gay couples in loving, committed relationships who want nothing more than a chance to be able to take care of and be responsible for each other.”

Finally, direct attacks on frames don’t work because you’re attacking entrenched beliefs (as opposed to trying to help people understand how they can see an issue differently). If you walk up to your local Southern Baptist pastor and declare, “Despite what you may believe, being gay isn’t a sin,” you may be right. However, in order for the pastor to *believe*

you’re right, he’d have to dismantle his *very* deeply held worldviews. What your statement does is directly attack his worldview that being gay is a sin. You’d probably have better luck trying to convince him to streak naked down Main Street.

While you shouldn’t repeat negative frames, you should make an effort to understand where your opponents are coming from. Know what you’re arguing against and why your opponents believe what they do.

A LESSON FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The Frameworks Institute recently proved that large segments of the public “tune out” or dismiss messages about the environment if they perceive the messages as too extreme or partisan. An environmental issue framed with the reminder that “the presidential administration is full of oil company executives,” or “Congress is in the pocket of the auto lobby,” did significantly worse in public opinion polls than the same issue framed neutrally to emphasize the need for long-term planning and incentives for innovation.

“The lesson is simple: On those issues where many people already see themselves as falling on one side or the other, when they get cues that the dialogue is about that divide, they stop thinking about the issue itself, and start thinking more generally—and usually less productively—in terms of their own political or factional identities. Even potential supporters may be turned off by overtly political discussions and made skeptical by melodramatic warnings.”

—The Frameworks Institute

Tip: Instead of repeating a negative frame, go straight to your core message. There’s no need to directly counter your opponents’ arguments, even in a live debate. Instead, stick to your message.

Example: If your opponent says marriage for gay couples will “destroy the traditional family,” don’t engage or repeat their frame. Simply say: “That’s nonsense. Marriage equality is about giving committed couples the legal protections they need to take care of each other.” (See “*Interviewing Like a Pro*” in the *Communications Campaign Best Practices* resource document.)

Ensure your frames appeal to equally compelling values and belief systems. Understand your opponents' mindset and the types of arguments they use so that you can stick to your core frame regardless of what they throw at you.

Step 6. Keep Your Tone Reasonable

Tones come in two categories: reasonable and strident. In order for people to change their opinion on an issue, they need to be open to new information. A reasonable tone keeps them open. When people feel attacked, they tend to retrench and defend their existing worldview. An overtly political or ideological ("strident") tone reminds people of their own hardened positions or political identities. It also reduces the credibility of the message, since it violates the requirement of having a disinterested messenger. Strongly worded tones may energize the base but they won't move other Americans.

Step 7. Avoid Partisan Cues

Suppose you receive the following mailing: "Hypocritical Democrats are using a new education bill to raise taxes." Before you can read on to discover what the mailing is about, your brain does two things. First, it identifies whether the message is from one of "us" or one of "them." Second, if you decide the mailing is from one of "them," your brain starts playing "defense." Once in defense mode, you're likely to head to the nearest paper shredder. If you do read further, it'll be with an eye to tear their arguments apart. Even if the mailing legitimately criticizes a poorly thought-out initiative, you won't be open to believing it. The partisan cue has damaged the credibility of the message.

Partisan language is any language that immediately makes it clear that a message is coming from progressives or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats, or any group that is engaged in an ideological conflict. "Feminists are ruining the traditional family" ranks up there alongside "Religious bigots are preventing this country from moving forward," or even, "The President has betrayed our trust." People see themselves as on

one side or another. Partisan communications will, by definition, turn off 50% of Americans. Generally speaking, you'll need to convince some of those people to see things your way.

If you want to persuade the general public, don't resort to language that feels good to "your side." Start with a deeply held American value that appeals to the *majority* of Americans. Criticize the plan, not the people. Go for the incompetence of the proposal, not its intent. Question a policy's efficacy and values, but don't question motive without good reason. Show how the policy violates fundamental values. Don't demonize. Demonstrate inconsistency or illogic, but not hypocrisy. Put all your communications to the test by assuming you know nothing about the issue. When you read the materials, can you pick up any partisan or political cues? If so, it's time to do some editing.

Step 8. Build a New Frame

Build your frame by describing what the issue is "about" in a way that ties to deep-seated American values and beliefs. For example, don't talk about marriage as a set of benefits. Mainstream America doesn't think of marriage as "about" benefits.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, MASTER FRAMER

Martin Luther King focused on core American values by blending familiar Christian themes with conventional democratic theory. King's theme of non-violence deeply reassured white Americans struggling with guilt on one hand, and phobic fear of African American anger and violence on the other. King's emphasis on Christian values and forgiveness promised redemptive and peaceful healing of the racial divide.

Before King's leadership, white Americans believed the Civil Rights Movement was something potentially destructive and violent, and therefore, something to be controlled. However, when white law enforcement turned fire hoses on peaceful civil rights demonstrators, many of them women and children, the public's view of the movement changed. The public felt they had to choose: did they want to side with brutal law enforcement or with those calling for justice?

King's master frame united the public and avoided "us vs. them" constructs, making it easier for increasing numbers of white Americans to side with those calling for justice. King brought diverse constituencies together around a common idea larger than any one group.

Instead, talk about how marriage gives committed couples the social and legal protections they need to take care of each other emotionally, financially, in sickness and in health. Explain how the lack of marriage makes it harder for gay couples to do this. It's easy to be against "redefining marriage." It's harder to be against giving committed couples the legal protections they need to "take care of each other."

Break down your big narrative of what the issue is "about" into bite-size phrases, ready for use on websites, in speeches, ads, letters, platforms, fund-raisers, and debates. Prepare to repeat (over and over) the words, phrases, and ideas that support your new frame.

Remember that successful frames are not built overnight. Conservatives build new frames by carefully rolling out messaging memos and strategies. They often even create new phrases to succinctly communicate their key ideas (e.g., "special rights"). To ensure everyone adopts the new language, they go so far as to create office "pizza funds" that conservative policy staff have to pay into every time they use the wrong terminology, such as saying "inheritance tax" instead of "death tax."

Step 9. Stick With Your Message

Don't allow opponents to bait you into getting off message. They bait you for precisely this reason—and they're good at it. Remember, the public needs repetition, repetition, and more repetition before it can internalize what you're saying. And because a united voice wields more power than a lone one, consider ways to work with allied organizations and political leaders so you're all talking from a shared set of frames and values.

It's also important to share your messages and communications strategy with allies and community members. Help them understand why messages proven to persuade moveable middle audiences usually don't resonate with LGBT people. And remember: Even if others use messages that research shows are counterproductive, don't let it distract you or derail your campaign. Stick with tested messages, share what you know, encourage others to stay on message—and then go forward with your campaign.

It's simple. If you define your issues and stick with messages and frames that resonate with Americans, you'll get majority support over time. If you simply play defense to the opposition's offense, and merely react while they define the issues, messages and frames, you'll lose. There's simply too much at stake to let that happen.

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