

# Voicing Our VALUES

A message guide for  
lawmakers and advocates



2016 SUPPLEMENT



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by Bernie Horn and Gloria Totten

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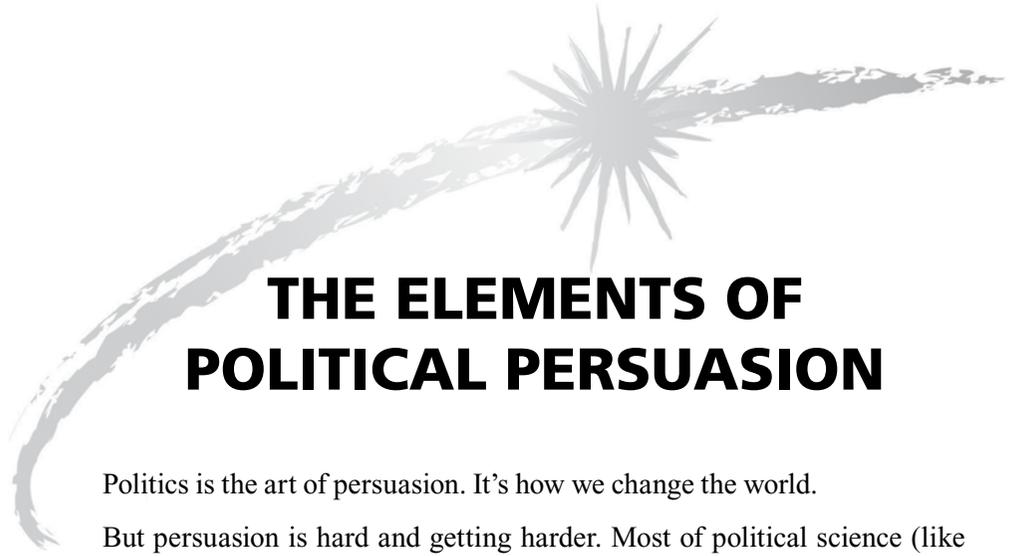
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# THE ELEMENTS OF POLITICAL PERSUASION

Politics is the art of persuasion. It's how we change the world.

But persuasion is hard and getting harder. Most of political science (like economics) is based on the assumption that people act rationally, that their political opinions and the way they vote are based on self-interest. Yet, that's unrealistic. People rely on emotion, ingrained beliefs and group identification to make political choices, far more than they employ objective facts or logic.

As a political advocate, you rarely succeed by changing people's beliefs. You win, instead, by using *beliefs already in their minds* to persuade them that you are on their side.

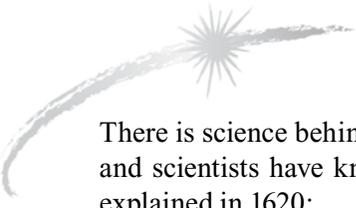
*Voicing Our Values* is also available online at [www.publicleadershipinstitute.org/message\\_guide](http://www.publicleadershipinstitute.org/message_guide). Go there to access the text on your computer, tablet or phone.

The *Voicing Our Values* handbook suggests specific language and arguments, based on opinion research, for a

wide variety of domestic issues—from economic fairness, taxes and budget deficits to civil rights, education and the environment. This is a more general discussion of the problems of political persuasion and how to overcome them.

## Overcoming Confirmation Bias

Everyone carries in their heads a long list of preexisting beliefs, stereotypes and biases. And we continue to cement our attachment to those beliefs by seeking out information that conforms to what we already think, while—inside our minds—ignoring or refuting information that disproves those beliefs. It is an unwitting selective use of evidence in which we *reinforce to ourselves* what we already believe.



There is science behind that stubbornness. It is called “confirmation bias” and scientists have known about it for centuries.\* As Sir Francis Bacon explained in 1620:

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion... draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate.

What is the cognitive science behind confirmation bias?

## **Emotion Versus Reason Inside the Brain**

People have two main memory systems: explicit and implicit. The explicit system stores memories of facts and events. Implicit memory includes unconscious processes like reflexes, and, especially important for our purposes, emotion.

There is a kind of gatekeeper in our brains called the reticular activating system (RAS) that assesses input and tells our minds whether to react with the logical explicit memory or with the reflexive and emotional implicit memory.

This gatekeeper plays a major role in political persuasion. Let us imagine you are discussing politics with a crotchety old uncle. And you say, “Voter fraud is virtually non-existent,” which is of course demonstrably true. The RAS in his brain, led by the amygdala, instantaneously assesses the emotional value of your words. The RAS determines that these words are emotionally charged, so it diverts thinking away from the rational part of the brain to the emotional part instead. Consequently, your uncle feels a strongly negative reaction.

The hippocampus coordinates a tremendous number of distinct memories; some memories agree with the idea that voter fraud is common and some do not. But because the amygdala decides your statement is negative and emotional, the hippocampus cherry-picks memories that solely reinforce the pre-existing belief. So in your uncle’s mind, it’s not only that he emotionally feels you are wrong, based on cherry-picked stored memories, he factually “knows” you are wrong.

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\* For a valuable detailed academic discussion, see Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon In Many Guises at <http://psy2.ucsd.edu/~mckenzie/nickersonConfirmationBias.pdf>

Everyone's brain works the same way. When we process information, we first assess it emotionally and then compare it to memories of past experiences and beliefs. This is not partisan, it is human. In order to survive, our ancestors needed a strong "fight or flight" reflex—the ability to react immediately without really thinking. We still do that.

Science writer Chris Mooney emphasized that point in "The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science:"

...our positive or negative feelings about people, things, and ideas arise much more rapidly than our conscious thoughts, in a matter of milliseconds—fast enough to detect with an EEG device, but long before we're aware of it. That shouldn't be surprising: Evolution required us to react very quickly to stimuli in our environment.

**We are arguing with ghosts from our listeners' pasts—and losing.**

As political activists, we wish that we could reason with people and have calm, cool, rational discussions about public policy. But instead, we tend to trigger in our listeners a negative emo-

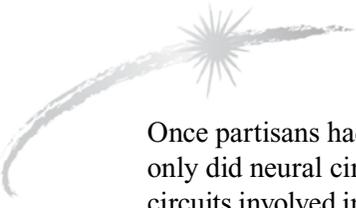
tional response, reminding them of memories that reinforce the negative emotion. We are arguing with ghosts from our listeners' pasts—and losing.

While everyone engages in some level of confirmation bias, it's easier to demonstrate this in political partisans.

## **The Brain Rewards Confirmation Bias**

Clinical psychologist Drew Westen of Emory University used a functional MRI machine to examine what was going on in the brains of partisans who supported either George Bush or John Kerry during the 2004 presidential contest. He gave test subjects a series of openly contradictory statements from each candidate. Based on confirmation bias, it was expected that each partisan would overlook the contradictions of his or her own candidate while protesting indignantly the contradictions of the other guy. And just as Westen (and Sir Francis Bacon) would have expected, the test subjects did that, precisely.

When Westen looked at the MRIs, the subjects had not engaged the rational parts of their brains. They had engaged their emotions instead. Furthermore, after relying on emotion to defend their candidate and attack their opponent, the brain's pleasure center released the neurotransmitter dopamine in the nucleus accumbens. As Westen explained in *The Political Brain*:



Once partisans had found a way to reason to false conclusions, not only did neural circuits involved in negative emotions turn off, but circuits involved in positive emotions turned on. The partisan brain didn't seem satisfied in just feeling better. It worked overtime to feel good, activating reward circuits that give partisans a jolt of positive reinforcement for their biased reasoning. These reward circuits overlap substantially with those activated when drug addicts get their "fix," giving new meaning to the term political junkie.

This means that when you attack preexisting beliefs, not only are your arguments rejected, but you are also helping to emotionally reward partisans for their stubbornness, deepening their attachment to false ideas.

## **Negative Triggers Block Reason**

One solution to this problem is to structure your argument and choose words that are less likely to trigger an instantaneous negative emotional response.

You might already have some awareness of emotional triggers or "hot buttons." For example, people who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have memories that are intensely painful to recall. Words, phrases, situations and even smells can trigger those memories and cause the PTSD patient to relive the agony.

On a much less intense scale, our brains respond to emotional triggers all the time. We react to all of our senses, comparing current input to our past experiences. Emotional triggers are words or other stimuli that make people subconsciously remember positive or negative situations in their pasts and actually relive, to some extent, positive or negative emotions from the past. The reaction within us is automatic, and again, instantaneous.

Negative triggers impact us more powerfully than positive triggers. This is called "negativity bias" and it's related to our ancestors' need to respond quickly to danger. If you consider political messages, you will notice that negative arguments tend to work better than positive ones. (There are candidates who benefit by activating negative emotions instead of reason.)

Because of confirmation bias and negative triggers, it is extremely difficult to change the minds of partisans. There are conservatives, for example, who are unpersuadable no matter how many scientists testify to the truth of global warming, no matter how much evidence shows that the

death penalty doesn't deter murder, no matter the incontestability that voter fraud at the polls is too rare to worry about.

In sum, to avoid confirmation bias and negative triggers, the most important thing to do in any political argument is to begin in agreement with your audience.

## **Begin any argument in agreement**

This is an old rule of persuasion. Dale Carnegie explained it 80 years ago:

In talking to people, don't begin by discussing the things on which you differ. Begin by emphasizing—and keep on emphasizing—the things on which you agree. Keep emphasizing, if possible, that you are both striving for the same end and that your only difference is one of method and not of purpose.

Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936)

**The goal is not to change people's minds, it is to show your listeners that they agree with you already.**

Whenever possible, figure out a point of agreement and then give your audience a bridge from their preconceptions to your solutions.

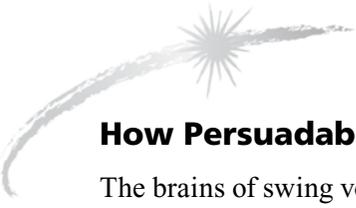
The goal is not to change people's minds, it is to show your listeners that they agree with you already. Express

empathy and demonstrate that you understand their problems and concerns. Voters quite reasonably conclude that you can't fix their problems if you can't understand them.

Never start by saying or implying "you're wrong." If you say that your audience will simply stop listening. You need to engage the part of their brains that will *reflect* on your argument, not *react* to it.

Rather, demonstrate that you are in some way part of the same group, or you're on the same side. It's not that people will adopt your political positions because they like you; it's that they will keep their minds open. Or as psychology professor Peter Ditto explained: "When people have their self-worth validated in some way, they tend to be more receptive to information that challenges their beliefs."

Never let your own emotions do the talking. When you are about to speak in anger, take a deep breath and shake it off. Voicing your emotions will make you feel good—you'll get a shot of dopamine in your brain—but it won't help you persuade.



## How Persuadable Voters Are Different

The brains of swing voters work the same as ours, of course. What makes them persuadable is that they're not trying so hard to "confirm" their right- or left-wing preconceptions. Persuadable voters don't lack political beliefs, biases and stereotypes. Instead, they carry in their minds both progressive and conservative ideas and they can be persuaded by either. In addition, because they don't hold onto those beliefs with the intensity of partisans, they don't feel as much emotional need to defend them.

That presents us with a golden opportunity for persuasion. But at the same time, we have real difficulty communicating with persuadable voters because they don't know what we, the activists, know about politics and policy.

**Americans are usually looking for someone who represents their group.**

We tend to pick our candidates based on the policies they trumpet. This is reasonable because the point of governance is to adopt and enforce a set of policies. Yet average nonpolitical citizens don't focus on a laundry list of

issues—they don't know enough to have one. In fact, they know extremely little about the facts of public issues, who in government is responsible, or the process of enacting and implementing legislation. (Walk door-to-door for a candidate or cause and you'll quickly learn this first hand.)

When average Americans are considering political candidates and causes, there is one overriding (but vague) question in their minds: "Who is on *my* side."

Political activists imagine that the best way to connect is through policies, and they certainly play a role. But there are more effective ways to reach nonpolitical voters: by making them feel that your candidate or cause is embraced by their identification group; by convincing them that you see the same problem they do; and by showing voters that you share their values. Let us discuss each in turn.

### Persuasion through Identification Groups

Very often, the most important factor in a voter's decision is the group with which s/he identifies. Americans are usually looking for someone who represents their group.

This is not a recent phenomenon. For most of American history, people in an ethnic group tended to vote for their own, and that wasn't irrational. In

the absence of knowledge about where candidates stood issue-by-issue, it was reasonable to assume a person, if elected, would represent and protect his own group.

Today, group identification is much more complex than Italian, Irish or Jewish voters supporting their own. It is often a combination of age, race, religion, geography and sexual orientation. Or a self-identified group can organize, as it has, around a sense of grievance against nonwhites.

When a perception is formed inside the group that members ought to support a particular candidate or cause, that perception can override everything else. Individuals adopt the candidate or cause, confirmation bias kicks in, and those people stop listening to facts or arguments to the contrary.

When a candidate or advocate communicates membership in a group, s/he is saying to them, “I’m on your side.” Sometimes this happens through what we call “dog whistle” politics. When right-wingers say President Obama wasn’t born in the United States or that he “is a Muslim,” the truth is irrelevant—it’s their way of shouting that the President is as far from being “one of us” as is possible. Such statements are the political equivalent of wearing gang colors.

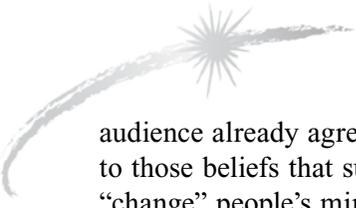
There are three ways to persuade through group identification. One is to be, in reality, one of them—young or evangelical, a teacher or a Cuban-American. Another way is to speak like that group—attacking Muslims or excoriating Wall Street. The third avenue is to obtain and publicize endorsements from individuals and groups that voters may perceive as opinion leaders—the NRA or the AFL-CIO, Pat Robertson or Elizabeth Warren.

## **Persuasion through Message Framing**

Progressives often expect too much from message framing. It’s not the secret sauce of politics. There are no magic words, although some words certainly work better than others.

Within the progressive movement it is rather common to misuse the word “framing.” Some confuse the idea of framing with simply making a political argument—for example, “Let’s reframe the minimum wage as a matter of fairness.” Others overstress its complexity, making framing into something that seems beyond the capability of lawmakers and grassroots activists.

Here’s what we mean by the term: Framing is the practice of using polling and focus group research to identify language and arguments that your



audience already agrees with so you can narrow your listeners' attention to those beliefs that support your side. Again, the point is not to try and "change" people's minds—which would almost certainly trigger a negative reaction and confirmation bias—it is to remind them of the information and beliefs in their minds that agree with us already.

Any issue is like a mural on the wall. Your interpretation of the overall picture, and your reaction to it, depends on where your attention is directed—what's in the frame, and what's outside. Focus on one part of the mural and you're reminded of one story or stereotype in your head; focus on another part and you may think differently.

**What defines partisans is their insistence on clinging tightly to their frames.**

When Ronald Reagan talked about "welfare queens," he was placing a frame around the very few people who defraud the social services system. Widen the frame and you'll see millions of Americans who need and deserve

help, as well as the social conditions that contribute to poverty. The picture is also different when the Reagan frame focuses on a black person—it frames welfare as being "about" race and cues up people's biases. (As you probably know, most social services beneficiaries are white.)

When George W. Bush fought to abolish the estate tax, he verbally painted the picture of a family with a modest income who owned a small farm passed down from generation to generation. But that is just a microscopic corner of the picture. Widen the frame and you'll see all the richest people in America, the real beneficiaries of the Bush legislation.

What defines partisans is their insistence on clinging tightly to their frames. Progressives look at poverty, crime, homelessness, or lack of health insurance and see societal problems requiring government solutions. Conservatives look at the same issues and see problems that individuals should solve for themselves. Progressives look at payday lending, high-interest mortgages, or deregulated monopolies and see a scam. Conservatives look at them and see free enterprise.

What defines persuadable voters is their willingness to see both the progressive and conservative pictures and accept either one. This is true whether they're deciding on a candidate or an issue. That's why it's so important for us to master the skill of framing.

*Voicing Our Values* offers message frames for dozens of issues. For example, it explains why we should identify "Wall Street" as the villain in our

financial system, and avoid saying “welfare” when we defend social services. It describes the need to explain “there are no standardized children” when talking about public education, and avoid any arguments that suggest progressive policies would hurt “small businesses.”

Using well-crafted language to explain an issue to persuadable voters isn’t cynical and it isn’t a gimmick. Yes, when the right-wing says *compassionate conservative*, that is Orwellian manipulation, because it’s the opposite of the truth. But our goal is to use words and ideas that persuadable voters appreciate in order to accurately describe our policy solutions. Like a tree falling in the forest, if we speak truth but our audience refuses to listen, does our truth make a sound?

So let’s frame. Let’s direct attention to the part of the picture that most effectively bolsters our arguments. Let’s offer Americans a new way to look at the world, a way that’s not blurred by right-wing stereotypes.

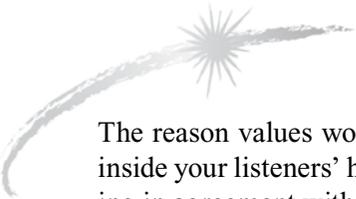
## Persuasion through Progressive Values

When we talk about “values,” we mean one of two things.

Average Americans think of “values” as generally accepted rules that tell us which actions or outcomes are appropriate. They reflect a community’s sense of right and wrong, or what “ought” to be. When we say “values-based leadership,” we mean people who lead based on a firm understanding of their own principles.

In a more technical sense, “values” are words with meanings (even whole stories) built into them. Words like trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous and kind are values that describe personal behavior. They not only describe a behavior, they implicitly say that the behavior is good. Words like freedom, opportunity, security, liberty, equality and safety are values that can be used to describe public policies, and they also suggest these attributes are a good thing.



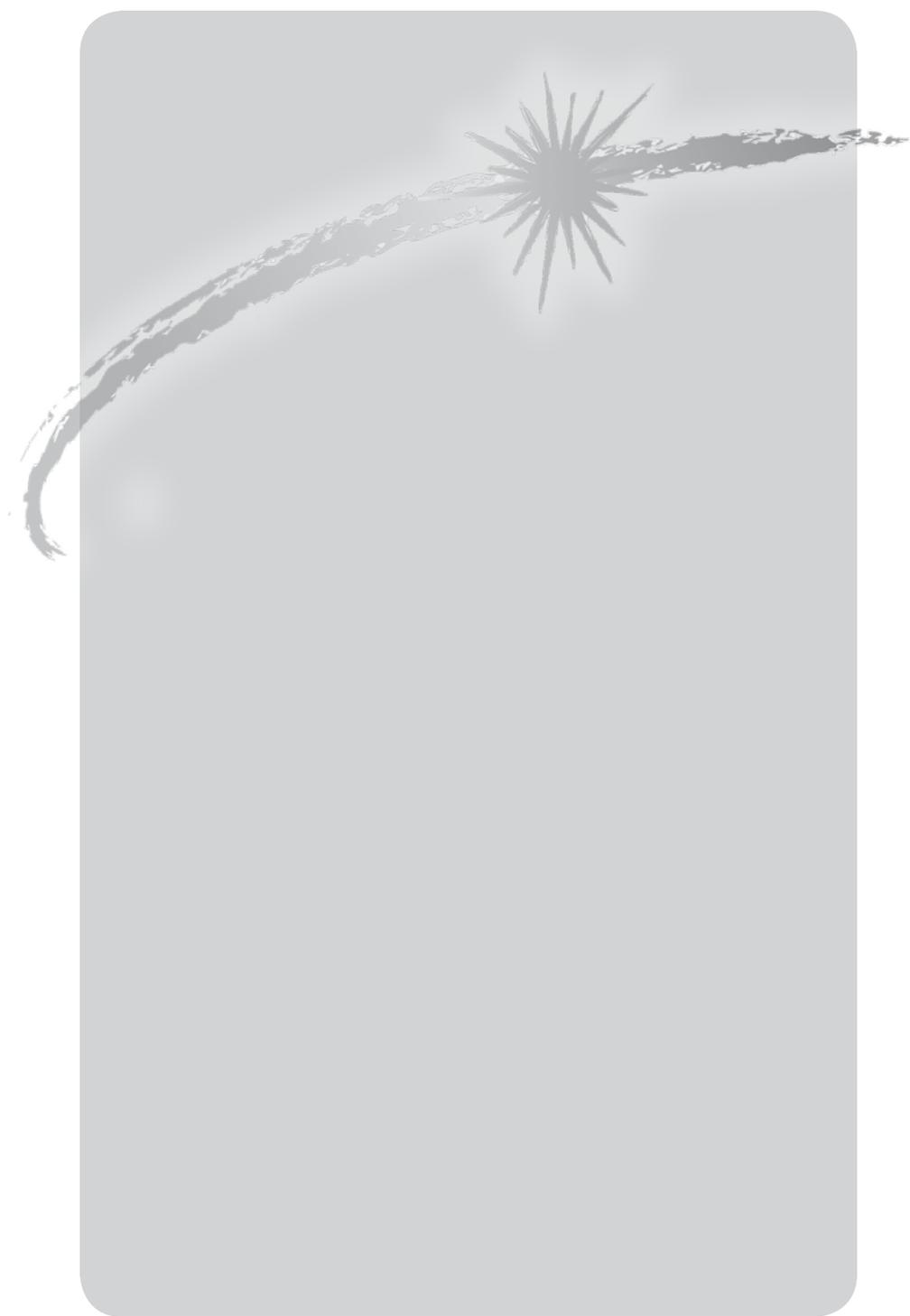


The reason values work for persuasion is that you're using ideas already inside your listeners' heads. On a different level, you are starting and staying in agreement with your audience. Values show that, whatever the specific policy, your overall goals coincide with theirs and for many Americans that's all that really matters. We won't belabor the point here, because *Voicing Our Values* provides a great deal of information about how to use progressive values.

\* \* \* \* \*

In sum, to persuade you need to understand your audience's preconceptions and where you share common ground with them. Don't say something that will trigger negative emotional reactions and confirmation bias. Instead, start from a point of agreement and provide voters with a bridge from their preconception to your solution. Show that your policies are consistent with values that they already hold dear. Remind them, over and over again, that you are on their side.

Finally, keep in mind that in politics we are always trying to get people to *do something*: to vote, to volunteer, to contribute. If they vote for our ballot measure or send the letter we want sent to their legislator, it doesn't actually matter if the facts in their heads are different from the facts in ours. The goal in politics is not to change people's beliefs about facts (which is nearly impossible), it is to get people to *take action on our behalf*. That's usually accomplished by getting them to understand that we're on their team, we picture an issue the way they do, we share their values.

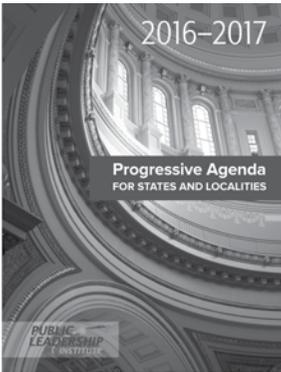




# ABOUT THE PUBLIC LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

The Public Leadership Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy and leadership center organized to explore and raise public awareness about key public policy issues of equity and justice and to develop public leaders who will improve the economic and social conditions of all Americans.

## PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES



Public Leadership Institute (PLI) creates and disseminates research, talking points and model legislation on a wide range of state and local issues related to economic opportunity, civil rights, education, healthcare, the environment and reproductive freedom. Our best known policy tool is the *Progressive Agenda for States and Localities*, a menu of specific policy ideas and model legislation. Legislators in more than 40 states and council members in more than 50 cities have handed 5,000 copies of

the *Progressive Agenda* to their colleagues. PLI also publishes *A Playbook for Abortion Rights* and reports on recent legislation with our *Progress in the States and Localities* and the *Repro Rights Report*. All of our policy resources are accessible through the PLI website.

## NATIONWIDE NETWORK



The Public Leadership Institute hosts the largest network of progressive lawmakers in the nation, with more than 13,000 legislators, council members, commissioners and supervisors, as well as thousands of state-level activists. We communicate with our network every other Thursday through the *PLI Bulletin*, an emailed newsletter that provides hyperlinks directing lawmakers and advocates to the most timely policy news, legislative models, reports, arguments and polls. We also organize networking events, workshops,

webinars and conferences, both formal and informal. Whenever appropriate, we link members of our network to policy organizations that can provide special expertise on particular issues.

## VOICING OUR VALUES MESSAGE TRAINING



The Public Leadership Institute conducts a program of message and communications training for policy leaders called *Voicing Our Values*. The cornerstone of the program is the annual publication of a message book, also titled *Voicing Our Values*, which includes practical messaging on many specific issue areas (e.g. budget and taxes, education, environment). We have distributed more than 2,500 copies of the book in paperback, it's available on Amazon.com, and it can also be downloaded from our website in PDF format. In addition, we offer bi-weekly message webinars

led by policy and communications specialists, and when invited, we present in-state message framing workshops for both elected officials and policy advocates.

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING



The Public Leadership Institute conducts policy, communications, media and coalition-building webinars, conferences, trainings, and workshops for policymakers and grassroots leaders. When invited, PLI staff and allied experts present leadership training workshops at meetings across the nation. We hold dozens of training

webinars and workshops each year, and in 2016, we will begin a values-based fellowship program to provide several dozen lawmakers with an in-depth leadership training experience.

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**Gloria Totten** is the founder and President of the Public Leadership Institute. She also founded Progressive Majority and the Progressive Majority Action Fund. For more than 20 years, Gloria has directed nonprofit organizations and led grassroots organizing campaigns on the federal, state and local levels.

Gloria led Progressive Majority from 2001-2015, served as Political Director for NARAL from 1996-2001 and as Executive Director for Maryland NARAL from 1993-1996. In her home state of Minnesota, Gloria worked as the Education Director for Pro-Choice Resources, President and Lobbyist for the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Media Chair for It's Time Minnesota!. Gloria serves as chair of the board of directors for Brave New Films and as a board member for the New American Leaders Initiative. She is an Advisory Committee Member for the Drum Major Institute Scholars Program, Political Parity, Progress Now, Wellstone Action and the Women's Information Network.



## CURRENT AFFAIRS

Right wing groups spend millions of dollars on message framing and then send poll-tested advice to their candidates, interest groups and activists who persistently repeat that language, e.g., activist judges, class warfare, death panels, death tax, job creators, job killer, nanny state, personal injury lawyer, tax relief, union boss and values voter.

Progressive message framing advice is rarely that specific. Until now!

*Voicing Our Values* offers research-based language that addresses a wide range of domestic issues—from economic fairness, taxes and budget deficits to health care, education and the environment. And it doesn't shy away from hot-button issues like reproductive rights, marriage equality, immigrants' rights, gun violence and voter suppression. Throughout the book, suggested language is highlighted inside boxes to demonstrate what progressives should and should not say.

Although it addresses nationwide issues, *Voicing Our Values* is written to be of special value to state and local lawmakers, advocates and grassroots activists.

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