

Voicing Our **VALUES**

A message guide for
policymakers and advocates

POCKET GUIDE



What's this booklet about?

Politics is the art of persuasion. But persuasion is getting harder as facts are rationalized away and lies become ubiquitous. How can we get Americans to understand what's in their self-interest, much less what's best for our nation?

This little booklet offers a taste of the answer which is provided more fully in our book, *Voicing Our Values: A message guide for policymakers and advocates*.

The entire book is available on our website, www.publicleadershipinstitute.org, as text or as a free PDF download. It's also sold on Amazon.

Throughout *Voicing Our Values*, we suggest specific language that illustrates how you can apply our advice. As long as you understand the reasoning, we encourage you to adapt the sample narratives to your own voice.

Message framing is not a silver bullet. But it's a tool which we believe progressives could and should use more effectively.

How to persuade...

Facts and logical arguments, by themselves, are not persuasive. You need to understand your listeners' most likely biases and beliefs, and follow three basic rules:

- (1) Begin in agreement.** You cannot win an argument by convincing listeners that they are wrong. Make it clear that they are right; that you agree with them about problems and goals. Only then can you provide a persuasive bridge from their preconceptions to your policy solutions.
- (2) Use progressive values.** In politics, values are ideals that describe the kind of society we are trying to build. When you use broadly-shared values, you stay in agreement with your audience. Such values include: freedom, privacy, opportunity, justice, fair share, level playing field, security, safety, and quality of life.
- (3) Show listeners how they benefit.** The progressive base may be persuaded by appeals to the common good. But most Americans want to know how a policy affects them, their families, and their friends. So, tell people how they benefit either directly or indirectly; demonstrate that you are on their side.

Civil Rights & Liberties



► Values:

Freedom, liberty, fundamental fairness, basic rights, privacy, justice, equal opportunity, stopping discrimination and government intrusion

► Tip about immigrants' rights:

Americans are quite negative about immigrants when they are perceived as *criminals*. That explains the right wing's distortions and lies. So, remind your audience that, overwhelmingly, immigrants work hard and play by the rules. In that frame of mind, Americans accept that unauthorized residents play a valuable role and should have a process to become citizens.

► SAMPLE NARRATIVE:

America is a nation of values, founded on the idea that every one of us has the right to freedom, justice and fair treatment under the Constitution. The millions of immigrants who have lived in our country for years, who work hard and play by the rules—they make our economy stronger, which benefits all of us. That's why [explain your policy solution]...

Consumer Protection



► Values:

Justice, equal justice, civil justice, equal opportunity, fairness, fair rules, fair markets, level playing field, security, safety, protection

► Tip about civil justice:

Americans believe that everyone in the U.S. economy ought to be compelled to play by the same fair rules, but nevertheless, that the rich and powerful get special treatment. So, attack policies that “rig the system” to benefit the wealthy. That works for just about all categories of consumer protection. Incidentally, don’t say “tort reform.” It’s not a reform, it’s a shift in wealth.

► SAMPLE NARRATIVE:

Our courts must deliver justice to all. We cannot deny people just and fair compensation for real injuries, especially when they’re taking on rich and powerful corporations. We need a level playing field. This right-wing proposal would rig the system to shift the cost of injuries from a corporation that’s at fault to the victim who is innocent. Our goal is to protect you and your families, neighbors and friends.

Education



► **Values:**

Opportunity, equal opportunity, fairness, level playing field, fair share, opportunity for each and every child

► **Tip about K-12 public schools:**

Focus on your listeners' own children and local schools rather than education in the abstract. Push back on standardization by pointing out what parents know—that every child is different and requires individualized attention. And change the narrative based on standardized test scores to one based on how well schools provide every student the opportunity to learn and excel.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

Public schools serving our families and our communities must provide each and every child the opportunity to reach their fullest potential in life. There are no standardized children; every child has different strengths and weaknesses. That's why we need to offer a complete curriculum provided by professional teachers who have the training to give the individualized attention that every child needs.

Environment & Smart Growth



► **Values:**

Security, safety, health, protection, responsibility, quality of life

► **Tip about quality of life issues:**

Americans are more worried about the environment than ever before, and overwhelmingly, they believe in climate change. Nevertheless, most people are focused on how environmental issues affect them directly. So, personalize your language. Talk about the air “we” breathe, the water “we” drink, and the health and safety of “our” children.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

We’ve got to protect our community’s health and safety, and our quality of life. We understand that includes keeping our rivers and streams clean. The [Big Bend Project] would eliminate a great deal of our pollution problem. This is the time for our city to take the responsibility to preserve the quality of life here, not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.

Government Performance



► Values:

Opportunity, equal opportunity, justice, fairness, fair share, fair rules, level playing field

► Tip about government enforcement:

While Americans don't like government in the abstract, they very much like what it does. So, focus on tangible benefits of government: providing health care, environmental safety, education, infrastructure, and much more. In fact, polls show that Americans want *stronger* enforcement of rules and regulations to make the rich and powerful follow the same fair rules as everyone else.

► SAMPLE NARRATIVE:

We need to ensure that everyone plays by the same fair set of rules. But today, the system is often rigged to favor the wealthy and powerful over ordinary Americans. Whether it's stopping prescription drug companies from overcharging patients, prohibiting hidden credit card fees, or eliminating tax dodges for special interests—we need stronger enforcement to ensure that you and I are treated fairly.

Health



► **Values:**

Health, health security, safety, protection, quality of life

► **Tip about expanded health coverage:**

Persuadable Americans are focused on getting decent healthcare coverage at a fair price. To them, the issue is not about ideology or helping the poor. It's about how a given healthcare policy affects them personally. So, even when your proposal directly benefits low-income residents, emphasize how it indirectly benefits middle-class families who are already insured.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

For decades, our healthcare system has been overpriced and unfair. Our goal must be to get you—and everyone else—the health care you need, when you need it, at a price you can afford. One crucial step is to minimize uncompensated care. That's when uninsured people get healthcare in the most expensive way, at hospital emergency rooms, and then that cost is added onto our insurance premiums. Getting them covered saves you money.

Public Safety



► **Values:**

Security, safety, protection, justice

► **Tip about criminal justice:**

Progressives usually want to open a discussion about criminal justice with the ideas of fairness and equal opportunity. But that's the wrong direction. Americans want to know how your policies will *protect* them. So, focus on explaining how your progressive measures will prevent crime, reduce recidivism, and improve the quality of life for everyone.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

The most fundamental job of government is to protect you from crime, to make all law-abiding people safer. That means more than punishment. It means diverting nonviolent and young offenders from future crimes. It means changing police procedures that lead authorities toward the wrong suspects. And it means using the best technology to protect the innocent while identifying the guilty. These policies make you, your family, and your community safer.

Reproductive Rights



► **Values:**

Freedom, liberty, privacy, dignity, respect, personal responsibility

► **Tip about abortion rights:**

More than 2/3rds of Americans want to keep abortion legal. But most are also willing to support a wide variety of restrictions based on negative stereotypes about people who seek abortion care. So, personalize the issue to break through the stereotypes, tell a story if you can, and emphasize that politicians have no business in this very personal and private decision.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

We cannot know all the personal and medical circumstances behind someone's decision to have an abortion. Every person's situation is different. [Tell a story, if possible.] So, we should respect that this decision is hers to make, with her family and in accordance with her faith. And once someone has made this very personal and private decision, politicians should not interfere.

Social Services



► **Values:**

Security, safety, protection, quality of life, responsibility

► **Tip about social programs:**

Many Americans hold negative stereotypes about those who benefit from social programs. So, describe beneficiaries as deserving. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities implicitly deserve assistance. But when beneficiaries are able-bodied adults, emphasize that they work hard and play by the rules.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

Our country is the richest nation on earth; we are the shining “city on a hill.” That means we have the responsibility to protect people in need, including children, the elderly, the disabled, and those who suffer from natural disaster or crime. But also, it means we need laws and programs that support every American who works hard and plays by the rules. This strengthens our economy and our society. It builds a better community for all of us.

Taxation



► Values:

Fairness, fair share, justice, equal opportunity, level playing field

► Tip about tax reform:

Two-thirds of Americans believe that upper-income people and large corporations pay too little in taxes. But the desire to tax the rich is heavily influenced by partisanship. While 4/5ths of Democrats and 2/3rds of Independents would increase taxes on the wealthy, only 1/3rd of Republicans agree. Virtually everyone believes our tax system is unfair one way or another, so focus on tax fairness.

► SAMPLE NARRATIVE:

Our tax system is unfair. The share of taxes paid by working families has increased while rich people and huge corporations have been given tax breaks and loopholes. That's wrong—everyone should pay their fair share. We need to change the rules to create a tax system that works for all of us, not just the wealthy few. One step is [describe your specific proposal]...

Voting & Elections



► Values:

Freedom, liberty, fundamental rights, basic rights, democracy

► Tip about voter fraud:

As you know, the right-wing position is based on lies. Impersonation of someone else in order to vote, which is the only type of “fraud” that might be addressed by current voter suppression tactics, virtually never happens. And yet, nearly 70 percent of Trump voters believe it does. It’s a very difficult topic. Your best strategy is to appeal to values that conservatives hold dear: freedom and patriotism.

► SAMPLE NARRATIVE:

In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. And because we are the leading democracy in the world, our election system must be free, fair and accessible for every qualified voter. As we protect election integrity, we cannot infringe on freedom. When the government puts up barriers, it creates long lines for everyone, increases taxpayer costs, and denies the vote to senior citizens and military veterans. Let’s stick to efficient and effective ways to keep our elections honest.

Wages & Benefits



► **Values:**

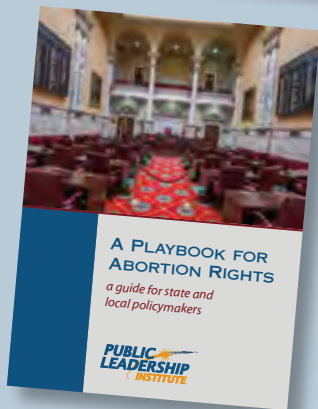
Opportunity, equal opportunity, fairness, fair share, justice, level playing field

► **Tip about wages and benefits:**

Progressives often focus on creating jobs. But in today's economy, Americans are more interested in better wages and benefits. About 70 percent want a substantial increase in the minimum wage, 80 percent favor paid leave for parents to take care of young children, and 85 percent support paid sick time for workers who are ill.

► **SAMPLE NARRATIVE:**

For too many Americans, wages and benefits haven't kept up with the real cost of living. And because it is middle class and working families who drive our economy forward, the lack of fair wages and benefits impacts everyone. So, we must rewrite some economic rules to get workers and their families a fair share by [specific legislation]. This policy helps build an economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy few.



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