



Real Solutions, American Values

A Winning Narrative on Immigration

This memo offers communications advice on building support for commonsense immigration reform and other policies that integrate immigrants into U.S. society. It is rooted in both experience and recent research conducted by The Opportunity Agenda and others. Additional tools and materials, as well as the chance to offer feedback, are available at www.OpportunityAgenda.org.

An Effective Immigration Narrative

A “Core Narrative” is a set of broad themes and values that help to connect with persuadable audiences and build support for change. Anti-immigrant spokespeople have a clear narrative with two main elements: *law and order* and *the overwhelming of scarce resources*. Over the past year, pro-immigration advocates and communications experts have developed a pro-immigrant narrative designed to move hearts, minds, and policy.

The Pro-Immigration Narrative has three main elements: (1) Workable Solutions; (2) Upholding Our Nation’s Values; and (3) Moving Forward Together. Each element can be expressed in different ways and with different, but related, messages and arguments:

1.) Workable Solutions. Americans are hungry for solutions when it comes to immigration, and they understand that punitive, anti-immigrant approaches are not realistic or workable. We can win by showing ourselves to be voices of solutions and can-do pragmatism. Messages without solutions are easily dismissed.

We need to fix our broken immigration system, so people can get legal, contribute, and participate fully in American economy and society.

We’re not going to round up and deport 12 million undocumented men, women, and children, so let’s focus on realistic solutions like creating a way for people to get legal and cracking down on employers that exploit or underpay their workers.

Building border walls and raiding people’s homes and workplaces are just not realistic solutions. We need real solutions that will work to fix our broken system.

2.) Upholding Our Nation’s Values. The most prominent positive values behind the core narrative are fairness and accountability. Many progressive audiences also see freedom from exploitation as important. And many native-born Latinos and African Americans view equality as important, when it comes to how immigrants from different countries are treated.

We need a system that protects all workers from exploitation and depressed wages and allows us to all rise together.



Harsh policies that force people into the shadows are not consistent with our values. Some anti-immigrant forces want to ban undocumented immigrant families from renting apartments or sending their kids to school. These kinds of policies are unworkable and are not consistent with our values. We need to fix our system so that immigrants who came here to work, pay taxes, and learn English can become legal and contribute fully.

Due process and fair treatment in the justice system are basic human rights, and respecting them is a crucial part of who we are as a nation. There is a lot of evidence that immigrants – both documented and undocumented – are being denied due process in this country. If anyone is denied that basic human right, we are all at risk.

3.) Moving Forward Together. These messages tap most Americans' views that immigrants work hard and are already contributing to the economy in some ways.

We need everyone's contribution to get us out of the mess we're in. To really fix the economy, we need to fix our immigration system to move towards eliminating the underground economy it perpetuates. By legalizing the undocumented workforce, we will bring these workers out of the shadows and put more workers and employers on our tax rolls.

We need policies that allow everyone who lives here to work and participate in our society.

The Narrative as a Message

Our research found that the core narrative itself can also be incorporated into messages. The following message was persuasive and popular across audiences. This message should be immediately followed by specific reform ideas.

When it comes to immigration, we need workable solutions that uphold our nation's values, and move us forward together. We need to fix our system so that individuals who contribute and participate can live in the United States legally. That means creating a system where undocumented immigrants can register, get legal, learn English and contribute fully.

Urgency: The Core Narrative and Immigration Reform Now.

The time is right to press for immigration reform now, and fixing any part of the problem is viewed as progress. One message that did well in our research was:

Elected leaders have been talking about fixing our broken immigration system for over 20 years. It's time they did something to actually fix it now, even if their first steps are not perfect. They should get started now working toward a way to get undocumented immigrants legalized, paying taxes, contributing fully, and on their way to becoming American citizens. Even if the changes Congress and the President adopt now don't completely solve the problem right away, it will be a good step in the right direction, and that's what we need.



Other research has found the following message to be effective:

Commonsense immigration reform will ensure fairness and accountability in the labor market. It will create a level playing field for workers and employers, lift wages for low-wage workers, punish unscrupulous employers who undercut their honest competitors, and increase tax compliance and revenues.

Facts That Matter

Americans are largely uninformed about the facts on immigration. While not all facts help to change minds, three facts are important to repeat, and to connect to our core narrative messages:

- Under our current system, **it's almost impossible for many undocumented immigrants who have lived and worked here for years to become legal because there's no process for them to do so**—that includes children brought to the U.S. illegally at a very young age and who grow up here but have no way to become legal citizens.

Fixing our broken immigration system has to include creating a way for undocumented people to get legal, pay taxes, and participate fully in society.

- There are **12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States**. It's not realistic or humane to try to round up and deport them.

We need practical solutions, including creating a way for the undocumented immigrants who are here to get legal, learn English, contribute and participate fully.

- The **waiting lists for English language classes in some states are as long as three years**.

The vast majority of immigrants want to learn English and become a full part of American society, but often lack a way to do so.

The Core Narrative and Specific Audiences.

The Narrative works well with all of the groups we've tested. But our research identified some differences in how it should be adapted for different audiences. For example:

- Progressive whites largely rejected the idea of punishing undocumented immigrants for coming here illegally, requiring fines, or imposing waiting periods on social services, once people are on a path to becoming legal. This group also tended to shy away from combative or confrontational language from either side.
- African Americans and Latinos were more likely than others to consider anti-immigrant commentators to be racially motivated. They are also more likely than other groups to be concerned about job losses and depressed wages due to immigration.
- African Americans were receptive to the idea that corporate greed and the desire for cheap labor are to blame for the broken immigration system—though this message does



not move them toward support for reform. They rejected as patronizing any message that singled out African Americans as different or separate from other Americans in their interests, and messages emphasizing the common interests of Blacks and immigrants also fell flat.

- Members of all of these groups questioned whether it is realistic to require people to have a current job in order to become legal.

Applying the Message

In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message in a variety of settings, we recommend structuring opening messages in terms of **Value, Problem, Solution, Action**. Leading with this structure can make it easier to transition into more complex or difficult messages.

Value:

When it comes to immigration, we need real solutions that uphold our nation's values, and move us forward together. We need a system that's fair and effective for everyone.

Problem:

But our current immigration system is badly broken. There is no way for undocumented immigrants to get legal, including people who were here as young children. And unscrupulous employers can prey on workers and pay low wages.

Solution:

We need practical solutions to fix our broken immigration system, so people can get legal, pay taxes, and participate fully in American society.

Action:

The time is now for the President and Congress to pass commonsense immigration reform. It will help our economy, help all workers, and it's the right thing to do.

The Opportunity Agenda is a communications, research, and advocacy organization dedicated to building the national will to expand opportunity in America. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to www.OpportunityAgenda.org. The Opportunity Agenda is a project of the Tides Center.