The Opportunity Agenda

Building the National Will to Expand Opportunity in America

Talking About Unaccompanied Refugee Children Fleeing Harm

When entering or starting conversations about unaccompanied children coming to the United States to flee harmful situations, it's important to keep a few of key communications principles in mind. We've put together this brief messaging guidance based on both communications research and experience talking about more general immigration issues. Additionally, we have drawn on the expertise of a wide array of partners and experts in the field.[1]

UPDATE: July Research

In July, several groups completed research examining public views on this issue. The following advice has been updated to reflect these findings, as noted below. Differences in audience and methodology account for some differences in findings and recommendations. This memo is largely geared toward progressive-leaning audiences, and we have used the research to guide our thinking accordingly. We have noted differences and made recommendations based on audience and larger strategy considerations.

- The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) completed a survey with voters. See the full study here: http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/07/july-2014-unaccompanied-minors.[2]
- Belden Rusonello Strategists (BRS) completed a series of focus groups with moderate to liberal non-Hispanic voters.[3]
- Hattaway Communications (Hattaway) developed a messaging document based on the BRS research.[4]
- Lake Research Partners (LRP) conducted focus groups with non-Hispanic swing voters.[5]

Audience

Thinking strategically, we need to identify and target key audiences. Two important audiences in this case are those who are with us but aren't sure how to talk about the issue, and sympathetic but uniformed progressive audiences who need to know how and why they should support the solutions we are suggesting.

To deliver a consistent, well-framed message to these audiences, we recommend organizing communications with a **Value, Problem, Solution, and Action** structure.

Values

Communications research shows that audiences are more receptive to unfamiliar arguments when they are framed by shared values. If we present only a litany of facts and rhetoric that conflict, or appear to conflict, with an audience's core values, they will often disregard the facts. What's more, many audiences are less familiar with the details of controversies and policies than we are, which means we can quickly lose them. It is therefore important to connect arguments to universal values that we all care about.

- Leading with values like **community, caring, compassion, and the American "can-do" spirit—or pragmatism—** is critical in these conversations. Sympathetic audiences need to be primed to feel proud of our country's capacity for compassion and care for children. We need to inspire in them hope for these children's futures, and assure them that this problem has a solution that will uphold our values and do right for the children affected.
- **UPDATE: All of the new research underscores compassion as a leading value.**
    - Hattaway suggests making sure that this value is used to elicit both sympathy and empathy by asking people how they would want their own children to be treated in a similar situation. Most Americans believe that children are coming here because their families are trying to keep them safe (PRRI).
    - Stress a special commitment (which people see as coming from within) vs. responsibility or obligation (which people see as being forced on them) to these children (LRP).
- Remind audiences that this story is **largely about children**. Recent turns in the conversation have moved away from this focus toward descriptions of a "surge" in undocumented immigrants in general. However, unaccompanied children require a special level of care and resources; we need to keep those solutions front and center during this media moment.
- **Tone matters**. We want to inspire compassion, caring, and the notion that we have it in our power to help these children in a way that aligns with our values. Angry and alarmist tones are more likely to inspire fear and anger, which lead to feelings about protecting oneself and one's family, not thinking outwardly.
- **UPDATE: Describing the children and their families.**
    - Both LRP and BRS recommend referring to those fleeing simply as "children" as that seemed to elicit the most sympathetic response.
    - It's helpful to tell audiences that a sizeable number of these children go to live with their families here. (BRS tested 80%, LRP used 60%, both numbers made audiences feel better about the situation. In addition, Most Americans (71%) believe the children should be released to a relative's care while their cases are being decided (PRRI).

- Most voters see the children as refugees agree that they should be treated as such and allowed to stay in the U.S. (69%, PRRI).
- This belief holds across religious affiliations and across party lines, although Republicans are the most divided. Younger Americans (18-29) agree that the children be treated as refugees, while older Americans (65+) are divided about whether they should be treated as refugees or deported immediately (PRRI).
- Hattaway suggests describing families as a haven from danger, rather than talking in the more sterile terms of "family reunification."
- LRP found negative connotations to the word "teenager," particularly among white men expressed worry that teenagers would fall into gang violence here in the U.S. LRP recommends focusing on our need to protect children instead.

Problem

Frame problems as threats to our shared values. This is the place to highlight stories and statistics that are likely to resonate with our target audiences. Where possible, include the cause of the problem, as well as who is responsible for fixing it.

- While there are many problems in this story—broken and outdated immigration laws, problematic trade policies, violence and poverty in Central America to name just a few—it's important to center on one or two per message. Overwhelming audiences with problems is unlikely to motivate them to work for or support solutions, but instead runs the risk of causing them to feel frustrated and tempted to ignore the entire conversation.
- **UPDATE: Talking about why children come here.**
  - Most Americans believe that children are coming here because their families are trying to keep them safe. A minority believe that these families are trying to take advantage of loopholes in our immigration laws (PRRI).
  - Remind people that these children are running to the border for safety, not trying to sneak across it (LRP).
  - We can leverage the belief that parents are trying to protect their children by emphasizing the notion of caring, compassion, and family. Ask audiences what they would do if their children faced harm. We should emphasize the universal nature of compassion and care for children.
- **UPDATE: Audiences are more divided about the root causes of the situation.**
  - Most believe that the children are coming here due to violence (45%) or to pursue better economic and education opportunities (34%). A slight majority believe that letting the children stay here will encourage others to come and ignore our immigration laws (PRRI).
  - These findings suggest that we are better off focusing on how we should treat

the children, which seems to bring people to a more humanitarian solution, and less on explaining the overall root causes or descriptions of process.

- Most importantly, we need to avoid complexity and make it clear that this problem is solvable (Hattaway).

- One of the central problems in this discourse is the fact that as a country we are letting our worst instincts overwhelm our values of compassion and fairness. We know we have a special obligation to children and to human rights, one that our flawed laws are ignoring and violating. We need to realign our priorities and make sure we're doing the right thing.

- Avoid painting a picture of crisis. While the current situation can accurately be described as a humanitarian crisis, doing so risks inspiring fear and worry in even sympathetic audiences. We need people to be in a compassionate frame of mind and to recognize the responsibility we have toward unaccompanied children. We don't want them in a closed-off mindset that associates these children only with crisis and violence. We suggest language such as "children fleeing harm" rather than "violence," for instance.

- **UPDATE: Regarding the word "crisis."**
  - Most Americans do not view the current situation as a crisis (62%, PRRI).
  - We suggest the term "serious situation," which reflects over 40 percent of Americans' understanding of the situation. A smaller group, around 20 percent, see the situation as a minor problem (PRRI).
  - Focus groups were comfortable with the word "crisis," but did not use it themselves (BRS). They do see the border as out of control, though, and a crisis frame will underscore those feelings of helplessness and fear. We need to use terms that indicate that we know how to address this situation quickly and fairly.
  - NOTE: LRP recommends using the crisis frame for swing voters as it seems to produce a sense of urgency with them. We suggest you are careful about knowing exactly who you are talking to and why if you choose to use this frame for the reasons described above.

- Tell your story, not the opposition's. It can be tempting to refute all of the incorrect information that the opposition presents as facts and we often do this in the form of "mythbusting." However, research reveals that doing so risks only strengthening those arguments because in order to refute the information, we usually end up repeating it. A better approach is to state the truth affirmatively without giving more airtime to incorrect or misleading information.

Solutions

Pivot quickly to solutions. Positive solutions leave people with choices, ideas, and motivation. Assign responsibility—who can enact this solution?

- Balance background stories and causes with solutions. Of course we should fill in some of the blanks and talk about why these children are moving to safer environments. But focusing too much on the violence and crisis will not lead sympathetic audiences to the state of mind we need them to be in to support the solutions we want.
- Narrow solutions. It's important to include examples of solutions that are both credible and doable. But we should also be careful not to overwhelm our audiences. The goal is to get them in the right frame of mind, not to educate them completely on all aspects of the situation. We need public support for the policies that will make this right, and we need to inspire people quickly to be on the right side of the debate.
- **UPDATE: Addressing the situation.**
    - A majority of Americans believe that the children should be provided care until it can be determined whether or not they should stay in the country (PRRI).
    - Audiences responded favorably to the term "orderly process" to describe how we should work with these child refugees (PRRI).
    - However, Hattaway suggests focusing on how we treat the children over the processes we use to address their situation (substance over process). Avoid terms like "due process," which can make the children sound like criminals on trial, and instead focus on the need for the children to have an opportunity to tell their story before they are returned to harm's way (BRS). Then focus on how we should be treating children in the meantime.
    - That said, both LRP and BRS found that audiences needed to hear about a fair and orderly process to assuage their worries that the U.S. simply cannot handle this number of children. LRP suggests using the word "fast" as well.
    - We need to talk in calm terms about 1) How we should treat children and 2) children having an opportunity to tell their story and 3) a fair and orderly process to determine who should stay here.

- **UPDATE: Comprehensive Immigration Reform.**
    - Be careful when talking about comprehensive immigration reform. This is a humanitarian situation that requires different solutions than those relating to our immigration system.
    - Hattaway recommends staying away from the immigration reform frame, while LRP found that swing voters appreciated reform as a solution. The main takeaway is that we must assure audiences that there is a fair solution that aligns

with our values.

Action

Assign an action. What can a specific target audience do? Try to give them something concrete that they can even picture themselves doing: making a phone call, sending an email. How else can they show support for these children?

Messaging Examples from Recent Discourse: NEW

It bears remembering they're children and they're alone. I think we are the kind of country, and the kind of Commonwealth, who can step up.

-Governor Deval Patrick, Massachusetts

I keep wondering if those families were thinking about the great kindness that Americans are known for. Despite all that America may have done wrong, this is still a country that the world looks to for compassion and rescue. I wonder if those parents thought American hearts would be touched so deeply that there would be a great outcry when their children's stories were heard.

-Christine Wicker, *Dallas Morning News*

This situation demands we act in accordance with our best values of compassion, and humanity. Nebraskans are good people and good neighbors who value peace and protection for vulnerable children who have fled terrible violence. Lashing out against these children violates our integrity as a nation and as people of faith: '… show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.' (Zechariah 7:9-10.).

The solution does not lie in punishing the children. We must welcome our brothers and sisters seeking safety and ensure they receive the proper screening, protection, and legal counsel that our laws demand as well as the peaceful protections commanded by our faith.

-Nebraska Faith Leaders Statement, Nebraska Appleseed

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[1] In drafting this document, we have drawn from and are grateful for the advice and example of America's Voice, the Center for American Progress, the National Immigration Forum, the Southern Border Communities Coalition, and ASO Communications.

[2] Public Opinion Research Institute (July 2014) *July Religion and Politics Tracking Survey*. http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/07/july-2014-unaccompanied-minors/

[3] Belden Rsuonnelo Strategists, LLC. (August 2014) *Findings from focus group regarding unaccompanied children from Central America*

[4] Hattaway Communications. (August 2014) *Message Landscape: Child Refugees*
[5] Lake Research Partners. (August 2014) *Unaccompanied immigrant children focus group research*