



Using Values to Influence Political Views: A Summary of the Literature and Opportunities for Grassroots Activists

Curated by the Values to Votes Project of Grassroots Iowa Network and Compiled by
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I. The Power of Values in Political Communication

Why Values Matter More Than Facts

Research across fields such as cognitive science, psychology, and political communication—particularly from organizations like the FrameWorks Institute, Community Catalyst, and scholars such as George Lakoff—emphasizes that people interpret the world primarily through **values and mental frames**, not objective facts.

- **Values as Cognitive Anchors:** Values like fairness, freedom, security, family and community are deep-seated and shape how people process information. When political messages align with these values, they are more likely to be accepted.
- **The Backfire Effect:** Presenting contradictory facts alone can entrench opposing views—a phenomenon shown in research on motivated reasoning. People tend to defend their existing beliefs when presented with conflicting data.
- **Framing Theory:** How an issue is framed—i.e., what values it is linked to—affects how people perceive it. For instance, framing health care as a right versus a commodity leads to very different responses, even from the same audience.
- **Constellation of Values.** Individuals have multiple values they hold dear and often have to weigh amongst them in what they do. Different people rank values differently, and it is important to reflect that in messaging. Partisan campaigns often select particular value statements and then use that to characterize why they and not their opponent deserves their vote, often with “gotcha” messages that foster distrust in politicians and the political system. Truly using a values framework to produce informed voting requires a more deliberative approach, often through dialogue with others one respects.

Implication: Start with values that are **widely shared** or **already salient** for the audience, and use these to **build the case** for specific policies or candidates. Take the time to place those values in what people want government to provide to support them before going to an immediate conclusion on how to act.

II. Stories and Narratives as Carriers of Values

The Role of Storytelling in Shaping Beliefs

Stories are powerful because they **evoke emotion**, establish context, and personalize abstract issues. But stories without a value-based frame or reference to how they relate to policies and actions can mislead or fall flat.

- **Narrative Transportation:** Research shows that when people are “transported” into a story, they are more likely to be persuaded by its message, particularly if the story aligns with their existing values.
- **Exemplars in Context:** Stories about individuals (e.g., someone harmed by lack of health care access) must be connected to **larger systemic causes** and **policy solutions**, or risk reinforcing individual blame.
- **Implications to action:** When the goal is to educate and influence people on how they will vote or act politically, translating the personal story into what government did or needs to do and how that issue is now playing out in the political world is important. Stories that simply show a heroic individual overcoming odds or that leave with the assumption that government roles are just there and not subject to voter action don’t provide guidance for voter action.

Best Practices

- Select stories that **embody the target value** (e.g., dignity, community).
- Contextualize personal stories in a **broader structural narrative**.
- Always connect the story to a **policy outcome or outcomes** that are framed through shared values.
- Take the time to reflect on what this means **related to government and voting and other actions**.

III. Dialogue, Listening, and Relationship-Building

Why Relationships and Listening Are Crucial

Influencing someone’s views is rarely about one-off persuasion; it often requires **dialogue** over time, especially on polarizing issues. **This is where grassroots engagement and advocacy is key. Grassroots advocates have the SUPERPOWER of being in the community and an ongoing resource for information, dialogue, and advice.**

- **Deep Canvassing:** Studies on voter persuasion (e.g., by the Leadership LAB or People's Action) show that **empathetic, values-based conversations**—where canvassers share and listen—can change views even on issues like transgender rights or immigration.
- **Social Identity and Trust:** People are more receptive to messages from those they trust and perceive as similar. Relationship-building helps break down perceived divides. **Grassroots leaders often have special connections with persuadable voters that they can reach because of their credibility with them.**

Effective Engagement Techniques:

- Be **prepared** in providing the context for engagement, including one's own values and how they relate to what government and policy can do.
- Ask **open-ended questions** to understand others' values.
- Reflect back what you hear to build **rapport**.
- Share your story through a **mutual values lens**.
- Avoid jargon or policy-first talk; connect **emotionally and personally**.
- Give time for reflection and **accept pushback while inviting further follow-up and communication**.

IV. Applying the Values Framework Across Contexts

Public Messaging: Letters, Social Media, Media Engagement

- Use **clear, values-forward language** in headlines and leads.
- Avoid “myth-busting” or repeating opposition frames, even to counter them.
- Embed calls to action within a **narrative arc** grounded in shared values.
- Provide policy background and information in ways that you believe your intended audience will view as useful and not propaganda.
- Speak in your voice and the way you feel comfortable, you do not need to provide a “hard sell” or “go negative” if that is not your own way of interacting. Remember, **the credibility of the messenger is as important as the message**, and **authenticity** is key.

Forums, Candidate Engagement, and Advocacy

- Set up events and forums in settings that are welcoming and

- Use hosts, presenters, and moderators who can provide background that are recognized as fair-minded and balanced, with real-world and community knowledge about the topics on the agenda, and not extreme partisans.
- Prepare brief stories that demonstrate **real-world impact** of policies and link to values.
- Encourage inclusive dialogue, especially with undecided or skeptical audiences.
- If candidates are part of the agenda, frame questions using **community values**, not just policy demands (e.g., “How will you ensure every child can thrive?” instead of “Will you support XYZ funding?”).

V. Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Pitfall 1: Leading with Policy or Partisan Language

- **Why it fails:** Activates defensive thinking or tribal identity.
- **Solution:** Lead with **values**, then explain how your policy position supports those values.

Pitfall 2: Overloading with Facts or Data

- **Why it fails:** Can overwhelm or bore audiences and fail to connect emotionally.
- **Solution:** Use **one or two compelling facts** within a values-based story.

Pitfall 3: Using Opponent’s Frames

- **Why it fails:** Reinforces the opposition’s narrative (e.g., saying “We’re not soft on crime” still reinforces “soft on crime” as the issue).
- **Solution:** Develop and **repeat your own frame** rooted in your values (e.g., “We believe in smart, community-first safety.”)

Pitfall 4: Ignoring Cultural or Contextual Differences

- **Why it fails:** Messages may miss the mark if they don’t resonate with the lived experience or identity of the audience.
- **Solution:** **Listen deeply**, tailor messages, and work through **trusted messengers** in communities.

Conclusion: Strategic, Empathetic Communication for Change

To influence political views effectively, messaging must **begin with shared values**, use **emotionally resonant stories**, and **cultivate relationships through dialogue and trust**. Avoid

common traps like fact-heavy arguments, reactive framing, and decontextualized anecdotes. Instead, center your communication strategy on the principle that people change their minds **not when they're told they're wrong, but when they feel heard, respected, and aligned through values. Recognizing that values do bring people together, but that they often need time and information to translate those values into political action and voting decisions.**

Annotated Bibliography

Here's a **brief annotated bibliography** of highly regarded resources—books, reports, and toolkits—for individuals and organizations that want to dive deeper into **values-based messaging, framing, and effective political persuasion strategies.**

1. FrameWorks Institute – www.frameworksinstitute.org

Key Resources:

- *“Framing Public Issues”* (Toolkit)
- *“Talking About Government”* and *“Framing Two-Generation Approaches”*
Annotation: The FrameWorks Institute is the leading authority on values-based framing. Their toolkits, research reports, and narrative strategies are grounded in cognitive and social science. They provide concrete guidance on how to frame complex issues—from child development to climate change—in ways that engage public support by activating shared values rather than partisan language or abstract policy terms.

2. Anat Shenker-Osorio – www.asocommunications.com

Recommended Resource:

- *Winning Words: How Messaging Shapes Our Politics* (Talks & Briefs)
Annotation: Shenker-Osorio is a communications strategist whose research is widely cited in progressive political messaging. Her work focuses on crafting emotionally resonant and motivational messages that avoid fear-based appeals and opposition-triggered frames. She emphasizes “we will” language and positive, collective narratives over crisis-driven talk.

3. George Lakoff – *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* (Chelsea Green, 2014)

Annotation: A classic in progressive communications theory, Lakoff explains how conservatives and liberals frame issues differently and why facts alone fail to persuade. He introduces the concepts of the “strict father” vs. “nurturant parent” models and how deeply embedded metaphors shape political identity. Highly accessible for non-specialists.

4. The Opportunity Agenda – www.opportunityagenda.org

Key Resources:

- *“The Power of Opportunity: Narrative Toolkit”*
- *“Vision, Values, Voice” Guide*

Annotation: This organization provides storytelling, framing, and values-based communications tools aimed at advancing equity, inclusion, and human rights. The toolkit helps advocates craft messages grounded in shared American values like fairness and dignity, and align them with policy advocacy.

5. Community Catalyst – www.communitycatalyst.org

Key Resources:

- *“Messaging for Health Justice” Toolkit*

Annotation: Especially relevant for health care advocates, Community Catalyst emphasizes values-first messaging and community voices in its materials. The group also integrates strategies for engaging diverse populations and overcoming resistance in polarized contexts.

6. Lisa Fithian – *Shut It Down: Stories from a Fierce, Loving Resistance* (Chelsea Green, 2019)

Annotation: While focused on movement organizing, this book offers valuable insights into how values like solidarity, courage, and justice can be communicated and embodied in both public narrative and activist strategy. Fithian’s storytelling approach offers a grounded counterpoint to purely strategic frameworks.

7. *How Change Happens* by Leslie Crutchfield (Wiley, 2018)

Annotation: Crutchfield’s work combines case studies and research on what has made large-scale social movements succeed. She emphasizes narrative and values, but also the importance of cross-sector collaboration and relationship-building—crucial for values-driven persuasion in electoral and advocacy contexts.

8. People’s Action – Deep Canvassing Resources

Key Resource:

- *“Deep Canvass Institute”* (Training & Research) – www.peoplesaction.org

Annotation: Based on studies showing that long, empathetic conversations rooted in shared values can move people on polarizing issues, deep canvassing has become one of the most evidence-backed strategies in persuasion. People’s Action and the Leadership LAB offer trainings, research, and how-to guides.

9. *The Political Brain* by Drew Westen (PublicAffairs, 2007)

Annotation: A foundational work in political psychology, Westen argues that emotion—not reason—drives political decision-making. He critiques sterile policy messaging and makes a case for emotionally powerful narratives that connect to voters' identities and moral values.

10. *Words That Work* by Frank Luntz (Hyperion, 2007)

Annotation: Though written from a conservative strategist's perspective, this book reveals how language shapes public opinion and how effective messaging uses values, metaphor, and simplicity. It's a valuable read for progressives seeking to understand how framing has been successfully used across the aisle.