

A Common Framework of Themes and Ideas

Talking About Global Climate Change

Prepared for the Climate Message Project

This draft guidance is meant to be a resource for advocates of strong, coherent U.S. policies to address the impacts, and prevent further consequences, of global climate change. It is based on conversations at the July 25th Climate Message Project Meeting, and Scanning the Climate Change Terrain, A Meta-analysis of Public Opinion Research, along with findings from qualitative research, both produced by the Topos Partnership for the Climate Message Project. Additionally, the guidance incorporates recommendations from USITW's multi-issue communicator's guide U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues With Americans (www.usintheworld.org), and conversations and consultations with advocates, activists and policy experts in the climate change field.

This guidance is meant to be used as an outline for further conversation and to be flushed out with the communications working group of the Climate Message Project so that it may be developed into a full messaging guide to be used by advocates, activists and policy professionals.

What is a “common framework”?

A Frame is a “central organizing idea...for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue.” Gamson/Modigliani

A framework constitutes a series of consistent big themes and ideas that we want our audiences to take away from our communications – the ideas we hope will “stick” and begin to inform people’s thinking from that point on. These themes and ideas can be thought of as the uprights and verticals that constitute a common framework on which we can build a wide variety of messages, in a wide range of voices.

Before you Begin: Defining Climate Change

From research, we understand that helping Americans understand an issue as a key to engaging their support. We also know that there is a lack of understanding of how climate change works and therefore there is a lack of understanding of how proposed remedies address the problem.

An introduction to climate change should therefore be incorporated into all communications about the issue. Be sure to keep the following in mind:

- Make a clear connection between climate change and fossil fuels.
- Expand the description of climate change beyond weather – discuss it in terms of a break in the system and the need for responsible management.

Building your Messages: Themes to Convey

COST OF ACTION VS. INACTION (choice between two futures):

We are at a crossroads today – we can choose to make smart, cost-effective investments now or spend much more later coping with climate disasters.

Remember that focusing only on the severity of climate change will not necessarily move people to take action to solve it; in fact, it can make the problem seem too big and overwhelming to do anything of real consequence. Additionally, only using positive messages can seem unrealistic. Research shows, that the most effective messages present both the positive and the negative – a choice. Paint a picture of two different futures, the costs associated with being proactive in addressing climate change and those associated with being reactive. But try to move the conversation beyond dollars. Try to reinforce the fact that humans, animals, and plants are all part of an interdependent ecosystem, and what affects one affects all. Remember that people think that global climate change will most likely impact plants and animals and view human beings as somewhat above or outside of the environment - not as part of this interdependent ecosystem.

COLLECTIVE ACTION/SOLUTIONS (where there's a will, there's a way):

Together we can work past the challenges of climate change and make our country stronger in the process.

Talk about the need for collective action – from individuals, business and government – to work together to solve this issue. Give positive examples of what collective action has done in the past. Showcase what we as human beings have accomplished over the past 100 years going from the telegraph to the internet, from riding horseback to space craft. Let people know in that 100 years of technological advancement our ways of producing energy have remained the same, but let them know that this is not because we don't have the knowledge to change (by default, Americans assume renewable energy will become more available when the technology is ready, and if it is not widely available, this must be because scientists have not yet perfected the technology.) Remember that Americans are excited about innovation and incentives and even are generally supportive of government regulation. But also remember not to use guilt – Americans are feeling economically strapped and are sensitive to additional costs – particularly when they feel that many of the proposed solutions like carbon and gas taxes are schemes for the government to make more money rather than solving the problem. And remember if alternatives like mass transit or renewable sources of energy are not

readily available, then people are left needing fossil –based fuels. Empower people by including references to ways in which collective action and public demand can influence energy options so that they will have more choices in the near future.

POSITIVE OPPORTUNITY (U.S. leadership and innovation):

The United States has historically led the world in scientific and technological innovation; we have the ability and know-how to do it again and to confront climate change head-on.

Advocacy that’s empowering generally gets better results than advocacy that relies on guilt or negativity. Americans’ can-do spirit has been shaken, so communicate that solutions are available (including by offering examples of success). Appeal to American competitiveness – the climate is changing, other countries are adjusting and investing in new energy sources and technology – without suggesting that economic progress in other countries takes something away from us (i.e., don’t make it a zero-sum game). Talk about the fact that we can be at the forefront of this global transition or we can be left behind, which will have hugely negative consequences on our long-term economic future. Inspire without being grandiose; give people reasons to believe that your bold proposals are also achievable and feasible. Offer yardsticks people can use to judge the effectiveness of what you propose and to hold leaders accountable for results. Make the point that we already have some of the policy tools and best-practice models we need to make progress; it’s a question of using them.

A VITAL ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT:

States like California and Colorado are leading the way in private and public partnerships needed to address climate change. Our federal government can do the same. From the New Deal to the Apollo Mission—our government has adjusted to meet the challenges of the day.

Tell a positive story about what government can do (locally, statewide and nationally) and about the new public structures we need to create – in the U.S. and internationally – if we’re to address global climate change. If you only criticize past policy failures, you may reinforce a cynicism about government that actually undermines support for the multifaceted, sustained, and inevitably costly measures we have to undertake. Remember that the public is ready for the government to take a lead in addressing climate change and wants it to take an active role in regulating industry to help prevent further effects of climate change – in fact in focus groups; people often say “that is what the government is *supposed* to do”.

Remind people that in order to address climate change, government, international institutions, industries and individuals will all need to do their part to make a real difference. And since global warming is an issue that will affect all of us – and severely needs U.S. leadership -- we need strong, effective public structures (policies, programs, etc.) here at home – like subsidies and investments in renewables, retraining programs, stricter industry regulations, commitment to mass transit and other infrastructure – to help us respond together, as a society, to challenges that none of us can handle alone. Our government isn't perfect; but as citizens, we have a shared responsibility to maintain and help build the public structures that ensure our quality of life.