

# *Community Values Communication Toolkit*

## *Section A: Framing and Messaging Community Values*

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## Our Shared History of Community Values

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### *And the Dominant Conservative Narrative*

#### Community Values are American Values

Our country has long understood and honored the idea of Community Values. We've always embraced the idea of different people uniting to accomplish a common goal and to move our society forward together. That story is embodied in our national motto of *E Pluribus Unum*—"From Many, One." We've embraced it in our efforts to meet common challenges like World War II, the Great Depression, childhood diseases, the denial of civil rights, even the race to the moon. In embracing Community Values, our culture rejects selfishly pursuing individual interests at the expense of others. Popular rejection of the greedy businessperson or corporation, the corrupt politician and even the litterbug show that our country deeply values community and collective responsibility.

But Americans have also long valued the ideal of the rugged individual and the "up-by-the-bootstraps" narrative. In this story the lone striver conquers daunting challenges (the frontier, business competition, the athletic world), apparently with no help from anyone. Though this narrative is never fully accurate, it carries a lot of weight in our society. Over the last three decades, the political pendulum has swung to the extreme end of this individualism spectrum, abandoning our shared interests and robbing our country of the ability to achieve great things.

#### Framing, Values, and the Conservative Movement

That extreme swing is due in large part to decades-long, concerted and well-funded efforts by conservative think tanks, foundations, and politicians to turn public will against Community Values. Those efforts couple public outreach with radical changes in policy, dismantling and defunding shared systems that make our society work. These systems range from labor protections, to environmental laws, to civil rights provisions, to social safety net programs, and even bankruptcy protection.

This conservative strategy also fostered hostility toward those struggling for equal opportunity—people of color, women, immigrants, gays and lesbians, and poor people. Individualism, in this context, has meant ignoring and refusing to recognize that barriers to opportunity still exist. It then demonized those of us who would tear down those barriers.

This conservative drumbeat of messages was carried out through books like Thomas Sowell's "The Declining Significance of Race," commentary by "public intellectuals" like Dinesh D'Souza, writing and research by think tanks like the Federalist Society and American Enterprise Institute, advocacy by groups like the Center for Equal Opportunity and the Center for Individual Rights, and rhetoric and policies by conservative leaders in government, like Reagan, now-Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Attorney General Edwin Meese, California Governor Pete Wilson, and California Regent Ward Connerly.

In each case, conservatives reached out strategically to American audiences through an aggressive media strategy that included talk radio, print, television, and later blogs, as well as a grassroots organizing strategy that mobilized activists and spokespeople for their cause. Each of these efforts, and many others, fit within the extreme individualism frame that is at the heart of the conservative worldview and policy agenda.

## Moving Forward

This is a crucial time to change that trend; to reignite our society's commitment to Community Values, and to move away from extreme "you're on your own" policies. Presidential elections are one of the few times the media, political and even dinner table conversations turn to our national values, and then explore the leadership and policies needed to achieve them.

We are, together, in a strong position to tell a new story to a growing audience. As a community of organizers, advocates, faith leaders, scholars, and community activists, we collectively possess deep knowledge, experience and networks. And, at a time when voters believe strongly that politicians are placing their political party before the interests of the country, we represent independent and authentic voices in the debate. Concerted and consistent communications from our network, rooted in shared values and positive solutions, can be new and noteworthy in ways that command interest and enthusiasm.

## Community Values Phrase Basket

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*We're All in it Together – So Let's Say the Same Things!*

Below we've provided the drumbeat terms that we plan to track and measure the use of, to see how Community Values language is faring in the political debate. We've also included some terms to use to define the opposition.

It may feel awkward at first to weave the terms into your communications. But if you think about how others have used familiar terms such as "family values" or "tax relief," you may start to get the idea of what it looks like when a term infiltrates the popular vocabulary.

### Drumbeat Phrases – to be tracked in media and discourse:

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#### **Community Values Phrases**

- Community Values
- Policies/Politics of Connection

#### **Labels for the Values We're Opposing**

- "You're on your own"  
(mentality, approach, ideology)
- "Go it alone"  
(mentality, approach, ideology)
- Policies/Politics of Isolation

### Also suggested depending on audience:

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#### **Community Values Phrases**

- (We're all) In it together
- Stronger together
- Sharing the ladder of opportunity
- On the same team
- Looking out for each other
- Standing together
- Rising together
- Shared or Linked Fate
- The Common Good

#### **Labels for the Values We're Opposing**

- Community neglect
- Everyone for themselves
- Pull yourself up by your bootstraps
- Pulling up the ladder behind you
- If you're playing to win, you have to play on your own
- Standing alone
- Leaving people behind
- Self-Centered Values

## General Talking Points

- This is really about **Community Values**. Are we going to acknowledge that **we're all in this together**, and that we need to **look out for each other**? Or are we going to tell everyone to **go it alone**?
- What's missing here are **Community Values**. Telling people that [issue] is their individual problem is not only unworkable, it's contrary to our nation's long-held belief that we're **stronger together**, and that we **look out for each other** and work for **the common good**.
- What we need are more **policies of connection** that recognize our reliance on each other, and how much more we thrive when we **stand together**. Simply telling people that they're **on their own** is not an American option.
- Look, we're all **on the same team** here. This country thrives when we draw on our **Community Values** to solve our problems. There are those who say that we each need to figure it out **on our own**, but that **go it alone mentality** is obviously unworkable and not an option in today's interconnected world.
- I'm tired of the myth that we should all just **pull ourselves up by our bootstraps**, buck up, and get on with it. When it comes to health care, to our public school system, to the future of social security, I don't want **politics of isolation** to drive public policy. **We're in this together, and we'll rise together**.
- We all know instinctively that we're **stronger together**. And history shows that when we work together to solve our problems, placing the **well-being of the community** as a top priority, we all move forward. When we **leave people behind**, we all suffer. I'm for a country that embraces such **Community Values** again, let's leave the "**go it alone**" **mentality** behind.
- We have to recognize that we live in an interconnected world. Our actions have consequences beyond ourselves. Our **fates are linked**. Insisting on an old-fashioned **go it alone mentality** is not only unworkable, it's just wrong.

## Building a Message

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Where possible, our messages should: emphasize the values at risk; state the problem; explain the solution; and call for action.

- Value at Stake
  - Why should your audience care?
- Problem
  - Documentation when possible
- Solution
  - Avoid issue fatigue – offer a positive solution
- Action
  - What can your audience concretely do? The more specific, the better.

### Example:

- Our shared Community Values mean that we come together to solve our problems. We look out for each other and understand that leaving anyone behind is not an option.
- But we're falling short of that ideal—millions of Americans can't live on the wages they are paid for full-time work. By refusing to address this situation in a meaningful and realistic way, we're failing these workers and members of our community.
- We need to ensure that anyone who is working full time can support their family.
- Tell your Member of Congress to support a real and living wage. It's about workers, families and supporting Community Values.

## Messaging Questions

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Some useful questions to consider when building a message include:

### Who are the heroes and villains of this story?

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We need to be conscious of the images and stories that the characters of our narratives invoke and the moral implications of their roles within the frame. Consider the common conservative frame of “tax relief.” There's a lot packed into those two words. If people need “relief” from something, it is an affliction. If taxes are an affliction, they are never good and those who relieve us of them are heroes. Those who propose further affliction are villains. Working within this frame is therefore never helpful for those promoting increased governmental support for programs.

### Who does the narrative suggest is responsible for implementing solutions?

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The conservative frame of individualism does far more than suggest that we all need to take responsibility for our actions. By focusing on the individual, it also suggests that we should solve the bulk of our problems ourselves. Instead of an inclusive health care system, for instance, we should have individual health savings accounts. Focusing on individual success stories can have the same effect. If one immigrant came to this country, learned English, started a business and became a model citizen, why would we need any community or

societal level programs to help newcomers? The solution is again portrayed at an individual rather than a systemic level.

What are the long term implications of this narrative? Does it point toward the solutions we want?

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Sometimes, in hopes of providing a dramatic, media friendly story advocates use examples that can lead audiences in unhelpful directions. For example, in appealing for money for a specific child abuse prevention program, advocates might use dramatic statistics of children injured or killed each year by abuse and neglect. These statistics will get media coverage and draw attention to the problem of child abuse. However, they are unlikely to lead audiences to the solution that prevention advocates desire. If the long term goal is to increase funding for prevention programs that support parents, advocates have instead made their audience less sympathetic to parents, and more supportive of punitive measures that do not include prevention.

Does the story inadvertently invoke unhelpful cultural narratives?

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For instance, in talking about health care, we sometimes use a consumer frame. But this competitive frame is actually unhelpful if the solution we want to promote is universal care. Consumerism implies that we are economic players competing for limited resources. Instead, we want to promote the idea that the system is stronger when we're all in it.

Does the story use our opponents' frame?

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Communications researchers like George Lakoff and Shanto Iyengar point out that using our opponents' frame, even to argue against it, just reinforces it. Consider the recent debate about proposed immigration reform. Many advocates engaged in conversations about whether reform would or would not grant "amnesty" to "illegal" immigrants. But by focusing on the word "amnesty," debaters deepened their opponents' "law breaker" frame. In this story, "illegal" immigrants are the villains, as are those who fail to punish immigrants by granting "amnesty" for their law breaking. The heroes of the story are people who want to enforce the law. However well intentioned, arguments that immigration reform is "not amnesty" reinforce the law breaker frame. We should be careful to avoid buying into such frames, particularly when we talk to persuadable audiences who might support our positions if we framed them differently.

## Community Values Caveats

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### *Additional Considerations When Building a Community Values Message*

In our efforts to articulate a compelling vision of community and inclusion, we have to be careful to not completely reject values that resonate for our constituency or unwittingly reinforce dominant frames that pit communities against each other. Below are a few examples of well-meaning strategies that can ultimately back-fire and undermine our shared values.

#### Attacking personal responsibility

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It's important to note that promoting Community Values should not appear to abandon all forms of individualism. Americans believe strongly in the value of individualism and "personal responsibility." And that belief cuts across ideological lines.

Research and experience show that people expect individuals to take responsibility and also to control their own destiny. These worries can prevent them from fully embracing Community Values if they view such values as letting people off the hook, providing handouts, or removing individual choices and empowerment. Bringing the idea of opportunity into the conversation can help us to point out that systemic barriers to opportunity prevent many individuals from moving forward.

#### Talking about interconnections that harm, rather than help, us

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In stressing community values, we want to emphasize the ties that bind us as neighbors, workers, Americans and humans. Our fates are connected, so it's in all of our best interests to move forward together. However, we should not imply that we only need to care about other people's circumstances if it's in our best interest.

For instance, advocates might make the case that we should cover all immigrants in new health care reform plans because if we don't, we are at risk of becoming infected with any diseases they carry. While invoking a linked theme, this narrative isn't helpful in the long-run as it implies 1) that immigrants are a danger to us and 2) that if their health does not affect us, we don't need to worry about including them.

Instead, we should emphasize that recognizing our connections is important not only to protect our own interests, but also to understand how we're part of something bigger.

#### Invoking the charity frame when promoting the common good

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The term common is useful because gives a name to the entity we hope to benefit. It names exactly what we want to win: an outcome that is good for the community. However, this term can also lead people to think of charity first. This idea says that we help others – often termed the "less fortunate" – through "handouts." There are certainly heroes to this story, but if we're not careful, those benefiting from charity can be painted as the villains. In addition, this is a judgmental frame that does not empower groups that have typically faced the biggest barriers to opportunity. In invoking the common good, then, it's important to point out the solutions we seek: shared power and responsibility, not a one-way, "privileged to unprivileged" exchange.

Sometimes we lean toward limited or nostalgic Norman Rockwell illustrations of community that call up ideas of “the old days”, the Eisenhower years, childhood neighborhoods, or our own, limited surroundings. This is problematic for several reasons.

Neighborhoods, for one, are rarely inclusive, so that metaphor alone can be troubling. We need Community Values to mean benefit for everyone, not communities pitted against each other only looking out for their “own.”

Similarly, “the old days” didn’t hold a lot of promise for many groups. People do like the idea of old-fashioned small towns where everyone knows each others’ names, families are intact, and white picket fences prevail. But the old days in the form of 1950’s America was also home to racism, segregation, limited opportunity for women, and hostile to gays and lesbians.

Community Values should mean drawing on our shared history of collectively solving our problems. We can do this by using examples of how we’ve solved problems collectively, such as the New Deal or Civil Rights. This is an instance where patriotism can aid our cause by igniting people’s pride in our ability to work together.

History shows we move forward when we invest in an effective partnership between government and our people. Think of child immunization programs that have wiped out devastating diseases in our country. Think of our Social Security system that has enabled millions of seniors to stay out of poverty. Medicare has kept them safer and healthier without regard to their wealth, race, or region of the country. Think, even, of the interstate highway system, which connected us as a single prosperous nation. To address our health care crisis effectively, we need to invest in those kinds of policies of connection.

## Community Values in Current Political Discourse

### *How Political Leaders Are Embracing or Attacking Community Values*

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Community Values is not a new concept. In fact, recently, various versions of community values have been making their way into political discourse, championed by some, attacked by others. In order to elevate Community Values as a dominant theme in American culture, we need to recognize when and how current leaders are using it. We then need to encourage its champions, and find effective ways to confront opponents.

Below are several examples of current defenses and attacks on the Community Values theme by presidential candidates, along with our analysis. Because this Toolkit does not encourage the support of any particular candidate or party, we have not identified the speakers, who were all candidates for their party's nomination as of September 2007.

### Invoking Community Values: the Ladder of Opportunity

#### Excerpt 1

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*“Nobody gets to pull the ladder up behind them, once they’ve gotten to the top. And everybody has a chance to make the climb.”*

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This metaphor acknowledges personal responsibility: it takes initiative to climb the ladder. However, the speaker also insists that the ladder is communal and shared, not the exclusive property of one group or individual.

#### Excerpt 2

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*“It’s a simple principle of fairness and opportunity, first and always, even in a complex world.”*

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The speaker elevates the values of fairness and opportunity – which are complementary to community.

### Defending Community Values: Part of Something Larger

#### Excerpt 1

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*“They will tell you that the Americans who sleep in the streets and beg for food got there because they’re all lazy or weak of spirit.*

*That the inner-city children who are trapped in dilapidated schools can’t learn and won’t learn, and so we should just give up on them entirely.*

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The speaker challenges the individualism frame’s blame of those facing challenges in our country. By explicitly and harshly stating the mindset’s implicit judgments, the speaker characterizes the approach as lacking in compassion.

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*That the innocent people being slaughtered and expelled from their homes half a world away are somebody else's problem to take care of...*

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### **Excerpt 2**

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*[But their struggles are yours] because our individual salvation depends on collective salvation.*

*And because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential – and become full grown."*

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The speaker urges a rejection of the mindset he's just described, linking the individual to the collective. He also suggests that there is a wisdom and maturity in moving beyond individual concerns and valuing community.

## **Attacking Community Values: Invoking Socialism**

### **Excerpt 1**

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*"Look at how [they] talk about the economy. [They] said that it is "time to reject the idea of an 'on your own' society" and replace it with shared responsibility. [they prefer] a "we're all in it together society."*

*I see, out with Adam Smith and in with Karl Marx!..."*

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This quote is interesting because it explicitly attacks the community values frame and its iteration in recent political discourse. Clearly meant for a conservative base, this derisive attack on terms such as "all in it together" might not work with other audiences.

However, it is telling that these terms can still be used as 'red scare' tactics with some audiences.

### **Excerpt 2**

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*"Don't [they] see that individual initiative is at the heart of America's unprecedented march to world economic leadership"?*

*Adam Smith wasn't heartless. Adam Smith saw that individual initiative would produce the greatest wealth for the entire society..."*

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This either/or approach to personal initiative and collective benefit is important to note. Individual initiative is an important American value; we just need to balance it with the community spirit and collective action wherever possible.