

HOW TO TALK ABOUT RURAL ISSUES

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute’s research on public perceptions of rural issues. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, a toolkit with sample talking points and other communication materials, and an interactive eworkshop.

(www.frameworksinstitute.org/rural.html) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials.

In this summary, we provide highlights from this research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

Situation Analysis

Looking across the research reports on rural issues, there are several observations which are especially important in reframing:

1. Invisibility of rural issues.

The paucity of substantive news coverage of rural areas and issues leaves most Americans with a sketchy sense of rural reality. From framing research we would expect that, when news accounts of rural issues are sketchy or merely suggestive, most Americans will fall back upon residual narratives and stereotypes.

2. Stereotypes about rural areas dominate.

Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia are strong, available and harmful default stereotypes of rural areas. Rural Utopia assumes that rural people are hard-working, virtuous, simple, and have little money. Rural Dystopia describes a negative and largely unfixable situation, which is believed to be (partly) due to the inherent nature of the rural inhabitants themselves. It is associated with labels such as Deep South, Appalachia, and Indian Reservations. Both stereotypes are problematic for communicators. They obscure any solutions put forward by rural advocates that emphasize the interconnection between rural, suburban and urban areas.

3. Rural residents are considered worthy but different.

While FrameWorks often counsels that focusing on individuals leads to assessments of unworthiness, rural people are seen as almost heroic, the exemplars of traditional values. Respect, then, is defined as letting these self-sufficient and noble people get on with the business of rural life, unfettered by the (presumed) unwelcome interference of strangers and outsiders who would only destroy their culture. Rural people, then, are presumed to be inherently different from other people, and not amenable to the same programs or policies.



4. Change is understood as a problem.

Our research found that most “solutions” are devalued because change is perceived, by definition, as the cause of rural problems. Rural advocates and the solutions they put forward must position change as a positive factor, and rural people as not unilaterally against change. Without a change orientation, there can be no substantive discussion of solutions. The question of responsibility—who made and who gets to fix the problem—must be addressed explicitly if rural people are not to be perceived as either buffeted by fate or responsible for their own situations.

5. Consensus among rural, suburban and urban residents.

Rural, suburban and urban dwellers are more alike than different in their understanding of rural issues and their appraisal of solutions. Without a broader view, few Americans can explain why rural areas might be struggling. They lack a foundation as well as specific information that would allow them to appreciate how national policies negatively impact rural areas.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

Advocates for rural America find themselves in a difficult position: Both the public and policymakers often seem indifferent, and slow progress on rural issues seems to result from low levels of motivation and engagement among those whose support would make progress possible. As a result, smart and committed advocates on rural issues have consistently fallen into tempting but counterproductive traps in their communications. These can be thought of as wide, deep ruts on either side of the narrow road that advocates must walk.

1. The bad news about rural America

Because rural advocates believe that Americans simply aren’t aware of the difficulties faced by rural people they often highlight these problems in their communications. The theory behind this strategy is that a startling picture of rural poverty and deprivation will wake up American voters and leaders, and spur progress on correcting this unacceptable situation. But this approach is just as likely to disengage readers as to motivate them. It may simply confirm the Rural Dystopia model discussed above.

2. The good news about rural America

When rural advocates are not emphasizing the problems facing rural America, they are likely to be focusing on the unique virtues and assets associated with these parts of the country. The problem with messages like these is that they can trigger and reinforce the positive stereotypes of rural people and rural life in which the countryside is filled with poor but noble, tough and hard-working people living healthier and fundamentally better lives than the rest of us (the Rural Utopia model).

Casting rural life in such a glowing light would seem to be desirable, on the theory that it should motivate people to care. But this mode of thinking is actually as counterproductive. The Rural Utopia model suggests that, most of all, rural America needs to be left alone, or at best, to be preserved like a museum exhibit. This is a model tied closely to nostalgia for the past, making it difficult to wield as a motivator for change and progress.

3. Rural America as “a world apart”

While trying to raise awareness of rural problems, or remind people of rural assets, advocates often inadvertently reinforce the most critical problem in average non-rural Americans’ thinking about the topic: the underlying view of rural America as a world entirely different and separate. This sense of difference and separation has profound impact on people’s interest in rural issues, and some of advocates’ familiar ways of presenting rural America only reinforce this damaging perspective.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Rural Issues

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal sequences, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively elevate support for rural issues. For the latest research findings and publications, please visit our website.

Values

Fairness: In this country, we believe that all Americans should have the same opportunities. But the reality is that people in small towns and rural places are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation.

Interdependence: In this country, we believe that what affects Americans in one part of the nation affects us all and that we will only succeed when all parts of the nation are in good shape.

Patchwork Effect Simplifying Model:

Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect. This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been developed—from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on. The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy.



Putting It All Together

In this country, we believe that what affects Americans in one part of the nation affects us all and we will only succeed when all parts of the nation are in good shape. But indicators of well-being suggest that small towns and rural places are breaking down and the effect is spreading to the nation as a whole. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has not been developed—from transportation services to health care services, and so on. This Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy. This is happening because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development and opportunities for a good education, have disproportionately benefited metropolitan areas. We can prevent further damage to rural areas by working together to reconnect the skills and resources that exist in the nation's heartland, which will then reverberate throughout the nation. People in rural areas have ingenuity and a desire to work hard; they just need the same resources to succeed. We need to level the playing field and make sure that every community has good opportunities.



Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about rural issues.

DON'T

- Fall into the Rural Utopia or Rural Dystopia frame traps.
- Position change as the enemy of rural areas and people.
- Wait till the end of the message to surface solutions.
- Promote sympathy for, or attempt to prove worthiness of, rural people.
- Make government the sole solution, inadvertently evoke the widely held belief that government's intrusion or inefficiency will only make it worse for rural Americans.
- Create a competitive mind-set, in which rural, urban and suburban areas compete for the same resources.
- Assume that people know how the source of problems affecting rural America nor how they work.

DO:

- Connect rural to the rest of the country.
- Understand how to make the fairness argument to stress opportunity for all and access to resources for all Americans including rural people.
- Position change on the side of positive policy solutions.
- Begin with solutions high in the message, to give people hope and avoid the notion that rural demise is inevitable.
- Promote empathy and identification with rural people by underscoring sameness, not differences.
- Demonstrate empowerment and a solutions-orientation in rural America's civic society, show rural actors engaged in positive change.
- Establish shared fate through the impact of rural problems on the rest of the country.
- Use simplifying models and causal links to drive home the way that policies affect rural life and opportunities.
- Understand how different frames may impact different geographic and demographic audiences and build messages most useful to your overall purpose.