Finish the Story on Immigration

A FrameWorks MessageMemo

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Table of Contents

Introduction

> *"What we know intuitively about stories is enough to get us through the familiar routines, but it serves us much less well when we try to understand or explain what we are doing or try to get it under deliberate control."*
>
> *–Jerome Bruner, Making Stories: Law Literature and Life*

Recent executive actions on immigration policy have crystallized the urgent need for immigration reform for many Americans, but in varied ways. Those variations attest to the relative limitations of the stories being used to make sense of changes in public life. Two recent examples illustrate the range of public responses to current immigration policies:

- In 2012, the Obama administration established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which deferred deportation and provided work permits and Social Security numbers for eligible undocumented youth and young adults. Some groups applauded this action as a step towards more humane treatment of young immigrants who have lived in the United States for most of their lives, and who deserve greater opportunities to contribute to U.S. society. Other groups argued that this action would be interpreted as the United States giving undocumented immigrants "amnesty," and warned the public that the United States would soon be "flooded" with new young people arriving without legal status.

- The Obama administration has overseen over two million deportations, a number that has far outpaced the rate of deportations under the Bush administration,[1] and all prior administrations. Some groups lauded the administration's law-and-order approach to immigration — for them, increased deportations will serve to deter immigrants from entering illegally, secure the Southern border and generally ensure American safety. In April 2014, groups that support comprehensive reform protested by highlighting the human costs of the record number of deportations. These groups argue that most deportees have strong family ties in the United States, they do not have criminal records, and the manner in which the deportations take place exerts undue stress on deportees' family members, some of whom are U.S. citizens.

The media, not surprisingly, portrayed public response to these actions as two distinct sides in a highly polarized debate over immigration reform. FrameWorks' research suggests another interpretation. Rather than distinct sides, these views reflect two prominent, yet contradictory, modes of understanding that *most Americans* toggle between as they attempt to think about the function of the U.S. immigration system and the place of immigrants in American society.[2] At times, Americans think the immigration system should severely restrict the flow of new immigrants and punish those who have entered without legal status. However, those same Americans simultaneously think about the United States as a nation of immigrants that needs an immigration system that will welcome, assist and provide opportunity to new entrants as well as immigrants who already reside in the country. As psychologist Jerome Bruner cautions, the stories available to people to explain what we are doing, why, and with what consequences, are largely inadequate to forge a consensus and move public policy toward concrete resolutions. To move forward, the stories themselves need to be subjected to scrutiny.

Whether the U.S. public identifies an immigrant as one of "them" or one of "us," or whether the public understands the immigration system as one tasked with exclusion or inclusion, is largely dependent on the narratives and frames that the public encounters. **That is, frames powerfully shape public perceptions of immigration issues and impact the direction of immigration policy.** In the framing contest over immigration policy, historically anti-immigration groups have held the advantage. Even a brief look at the history of U.S. immigration policy demonstrates that concerted efforts to frame immigrants as dangerous and threatening "others" has led to the implementation of punitive and restrictive immigration policy. From the demonization of Chinese laborers that led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to California's Proposition 187 — a ballot measure to deny public services to undocumented immigrants that passed in 1994, and whose electoral success stemmed from the dissemination of negative stereotypes about Mexican immigrants — negative and often xenophobic framing strategies have built public support for restrictive policies.[3] So pervasive is this narrative in American history that former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich has included "the mob at the gates" as one of the recurrent "four parables," or organizing principles, through which ordinary Americans routinely interpret historical events.[4]

The persistence of the old "Us vs. Them" dichotomy puts pro-immigration groups and social movements working for immigrant rights at a disadvantage; they lack a coherent set of historically grounded and empirically tested framing practices with which to contest the dominant narrative. In the most recent debates over immigration reform, organizations working toward comprehensive reform have tended to rely on two general, and often

mutually exclusive, framing strategies. First, they use *economic* arguments that draw attention to immigrants' contributions to the country's economic growth and prosperity and, second, they construct *moral* arguments that emphasize that immigrants deserve respectful, dignified and humane treatment.[5] Devotion to these two lines of argumentation rests on the assumption that these strategies will, in fact, increase support for comprehensive reform.[6] But the efficacy of these framing strategies in building popular support for more expansive immigration policies has yet to be confirmed through empirical research.

Frames powerfully shape public perceptions of immigration issues and impact the direction of immigration policy.

This MessageMemo is therefore directed toward creating an evidentiary base to identify the most effective ways of communicating about immigration, capable of expanding the discourse to better explain and support comprehensive immigration reform. Here we summarize an extensive body of empirical research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and supported through a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In general, the research confirms the wisdom of arguing for immigration reform on the basis of moral obligation and potential economic benefit. But here, the devil is in the details; the research also argues strongly for framing tactics that navigate around the virulent and poisonous processes of "othering" that tend to emerge in public conversations about immigration. In sum, an effective framing strategy requires flexibility and agility in communicators' wielding of these moral and economic arguments, matching tool to task. This report provides the empirical base to unequivocally demonstrate that there are, indeed, reframing strategies that are able to call forth Americans' better selves. These strategies successfully evoke the understanding that comprehensive immigration reform will benefit everyone living in American communities, regardless of the immigrants' legal status. Importantly, these framing strategies are most potent when wielded as a complete narrative, which fills in gaps in the well-worn story of how the world works. For example, framing strategies offer concrete explanations about why immigration matters and how the system works or does not work. The strategies can demonstrate the practical benefits of reform for all Americans, and offer reminders of our own humanity. In sum, the story of immigration is stuck in a tired groove of "othering" that appears to be assailable if Americans are helped to rethink the story.

The research base that informs this MessageMemo includes:

1 EXPERT INTERVIEWS
Interviews with experts, conducted in March and April 2013, with 19 leading immigration scholars, to codify key themes, points and policy recommendations.[7]

2 CULTURAL MODELS INTERVIEWS
Interviews with members of the public, conducted in July and August 2013, with 30 Americans in California, Illinois, Maryland and Nebraska, to document cultural models connected to immigration.[8]

3 FIELD FRAME ANALYSIS
A field frame analysis of nearly 200 pieces of advocacy communication materials that identifies the dominant narratives among organizations that support comprehensive reform as well as organizations advocating for more restrictive policies.[9]

4 EXPERIMENTAL SURVEY
An experimental survey involving 8,000 respondents matched to represent the population of the United States, which investigated and established the impact of value frames and counter messages on public support for comprehensive reform as well as related programs and policies.[10]

5 METAPHOR TESTS
Qualitative and quantitative research with over 1,400 Americans that tested the ability of explanatory metaphors to explain how the immigration system works.

6 SECONDARY EXPERIMENTAL SURVEY
A second experimental survey involving nearly 4,000 respondents that explored effective ways of constructing narratives to heighten public understanding of the immigration system and increase support for policies associated with comprehensive reform.

All in all, more than 13,000 Americans were queried as part of this research. Detailed reports of the findings of this research are published at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

This MessageMemo is not intended to replace the research reports that inform it; FrameWorks strongly recommends that communicators avail themselves of these reports and challenge their own creativity to apply this learning. Representative quotations are used here to remind the reader of the research base behind these recommendations; more nuance and variety can be found in the original reports. In addition to summarizing and synthesizing these reports, this MessageMemo adds more detailed interpretation to inform the communications work of supporters of comprehensive reform.

This MessageMemo charts a course through the dominant patterns of reasoning employed by the public, identifies the major challenges for communicators, and recommends how communications may be redirected to improve public understanding. It is organized as follows:

I. Charting the Landscape

We first **Chart the Landscape** of public thinking by providing a description of the dominant ways that Americans reason about immigrants and the immigration system, and the communications implications of these dominant models.

II. Gaps in Understanding

We then identify the **Gaps in Understanding** between experts and ordinary Americans — features that bring into relief the specific locations where translation is needed if expert knowledge is to become accessible in order to increase public support for comprehensive reform.

III. Redirections

We then provide an outline of **Redirections**, research-based recommendations that represent promising routes for improving public support for comprehensive immigration reform.

IV. Traps in Public Thinking

We end with a cautionary tale of the **Traps in Public Thinking** that must be avoided if reframing is to succeed.

# I. Charting the Landscape: Default Patterns of Thinking

The mental landscape on immigration and immigration reform presents a well-worn terrain, with many pathways carved out over time in public thinking. In this section, we discuss the most prevalent and highly shared paths, or "cultural models,"[11] that ordinary Americans rely on when asked to think about the place of immigrants in American society, how immigration works, and what should be done to reform the immigration system. These patterns in understanding constitute the challenges that reframing strategies must address. It is crucial that communicators who seek to build support for comprehensive immigration reform become familiar with these default patterns of understanding in order to anticipate what they are up against and what their communications must overcome.

The following foundational cultural models shape public thinking about immigration issues:

- *Immigrants As Them*, in which members of the public focus on the differences between "Americans" and "immigrants," and the perceived threat that immigrants pose to Americans' safety, financial security and cultural homogeneity. Thinking with this cultural model, the immigration system should function to secure the border, punish those who have not followed the rules, and make sure that "they" do not take "our" resources.

- The *Immigrants As Us* model is also an important way that Americans understand immigrants and immigration. Employing this more inclusive model, people view immigrants as people "just like you and me," who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. When thinking in this mode, the public is reminded that the United States has benefitted economically and culturally because it is "a nation of immigrants."

- *Fatalism* shapes the way that people talk and think about immigration *reform*. This cultural model highlights several inaccurate perceptions about the rising rates of immigration and the negative impact of immigration on the economy. *Fatalism* also infuses the public's sense of the corruption and political gamesmanship involved in the current immigration debate, and fuels pessimism about the possibility of meaningful change.

- *Pragmatism* characterizes much public thinking about how to improve the immigration system. This cultural model becomes operative especially when people are asked to reason about how to deal with the millions of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. On this issue, people often argue that we need to do "what makes sense" to incorporate undocumented immigrants into American society.

- *Black Box Thinking* is a label we use to characterize the fundamental lack of understanding of how the immigration system itself actually functions. FrameWorks researchers characterize this as a "black box," or cognitive hole. Americans struggle to think about how the immigration system works, and therefore have difficulty evaluating the potential efficacy and benefits of specific immigration policies.

Together, these models comprise the "swamp" of public thinking about immigration — a set of implicit understandings and assumptions that become active when people are asked to think about immigration issues. These models are illustrated in the diagram below.
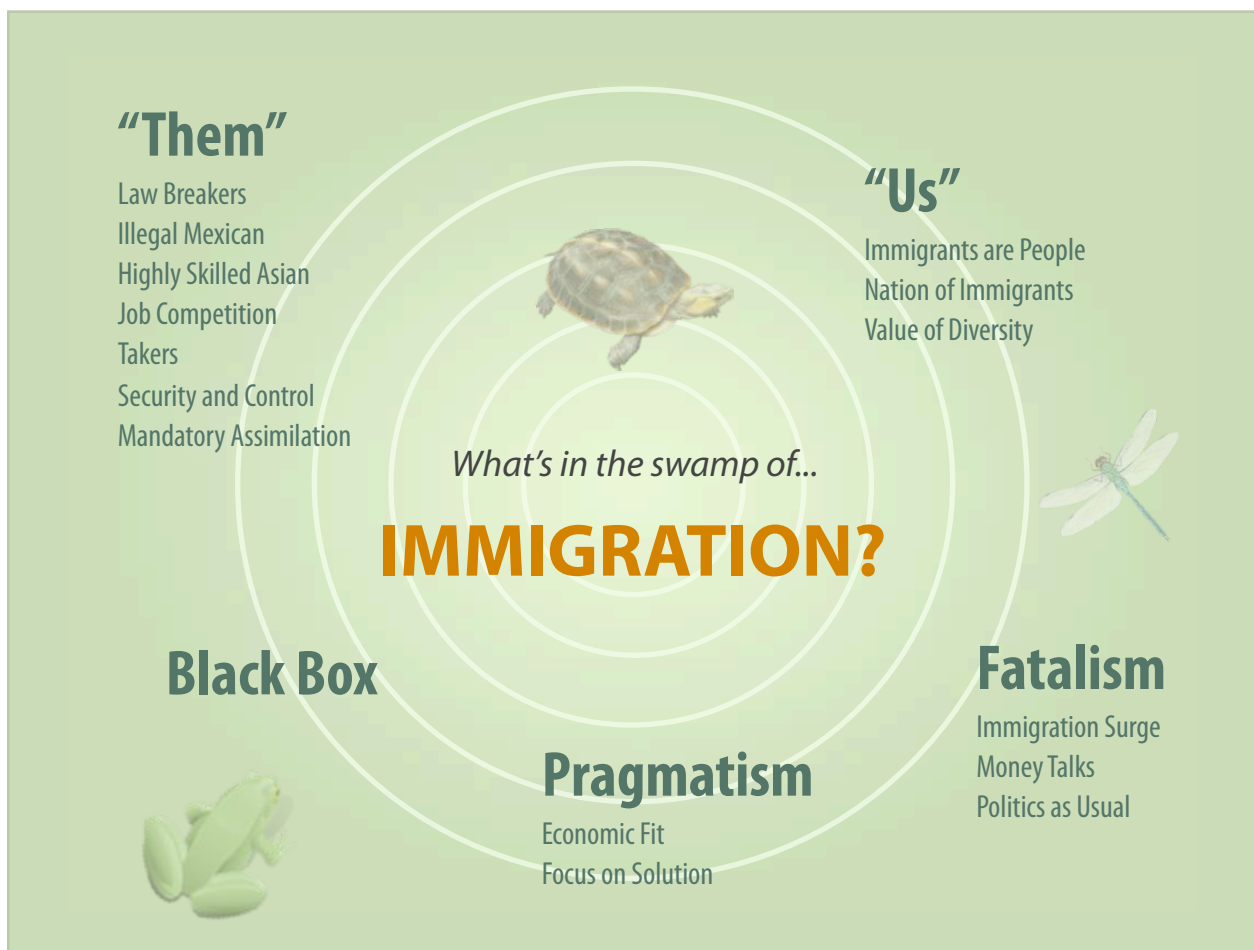
II. Gaps In Understanding

Gaps in understanding are those places where the cultural models employed by the public to think about an issue differ significantly from experts' understanding of the same issue. As such, they represent strategic opportunities for reframing that will bridge gaps between expert and lay understandings. Below, we enumerate the most critical gaps on issues of immigration and immigration reform. This is followed by a detailed set of recommendations, strategies and tools that can be used to bridge these gaps.

Gap No. 1: Who are Immigrants: Us vs. Them.
The *Us vs. Them* gap constitutes the most significant gap between experts and members of the public. Experts view immigrants as an integral part of the country, and have a clear sense of immigrants' economic, cultural and social contributions. They also focus on the difficulties that the system creates for immigrants living in the United States without legal status, or those who are trying to enter legally, including significant periods of time separated from family members and loved ones, lack of access to basic social services, exploitative work conditions, and social stigmatization.

The public's dominant *Immigrants As Them* model sets up a very different way of looking at the situation. Members of the public frequently view immigrants as *threats* because they believe immigrants break the law, compromise national security, and take jobs and public services away from U.S. citizens. In short, the *Immigrants As Them* model positions *Americans* as disadvantaged by the country's current immigration issues. It is important for communicators to understand, however, that the public is able to apply the more recessive *Us* model to think about immigration and immigrants, but this ability requires very careful reframing strategies.

Gap No. 2: Immigrants and the Economy: Source of Economic Expansion vs. Economic Threat.
Experts and members of the general public have divergent understandings of how immigration impacts economic growth. Experts explain that immigrants work in every sector of the U.S. economy, from day laborers to small business owners to university professors. In addition, immigrants' consumption of U.S. goods and services and their contributions to municipal, state and federal tax bases are an important source of economic development. In short, immigrants are a *source* of economic expansion and growth.

In contrast, members of the public view the economy as fundamentally limited, with a finite amount of resources and jobs to go around. They think about immigrant labor in often contradictory ways: immigrants are a source of competition in a tight labor market, they are unskilled laborers who take jobs that Americans do not want, or they are highly skilled technology and engineering professionals who fill jobs that Americans are not qualified to perform. Despite the contradictions, immigrant labor is consistently understood to be a threat to Americans' economic well-being.

Gap No. 3: Problems with the Immigration System: Outdated and Ineffective Policies vs. Leaky Border.

Experts explain that immigration from Mexico has been declining over the last several years; moreover, approximately forty percent of unauthorized immigrants in the United States today are people who entered legally with visas that have since expired. As such, experts view proposals for securing the southern border as a diversion from more pressing immigration issues, such as the need to update policies that are not aligned with current economic realities and that often violate immigrants' rights. The public, in contrast, believes that illegal Mexican immigration is dramatically increasing, and that securing the border is *the* central task in improving the system.

Gap No. 4: How the Immigration System Works: Complex System vs. Black Box.

Members of the public have very little knowledge about how the immigration system works and have trouble describing the policies, agencies and actors who make up the system. Experts, not surprisingly, have an extremely sophisticated knowledge of immigration policy and are acutely aware of the problems impacting the current system. In short, while experts are able to draw on a concrete understanding of the system to inform policymaking, the public is left to use its vague notions of how the system works to reason about ways to improve it. Not surprisingly, when the system is hazy, people focus on the characteristics of individual immigrants or groups and judge the worthiness of these people, not the systems that confront them; this is rarely the case in expert thinking.

Gap No. 5: Solution to Immigration Issues: Make the System More Flexible and Functional vs. "Keep 'Em Out" or "Nothing We Can Do."

Overall, there is a major gap between how experts and members of the public think about effective immigration reform. The former see more flexible, humane, pragmatic and responsive policies as the key to addressing current immigration issues. Working from their dominant *Immigrants As Them* and *Fatalism* models, and limited by their *Black Box* understanding of how the system works, members of the public either focus on border security, or disengage from what they see as a problem that cannot be fixed.

III. Redirections

Building a more productive route along the public's cognitive map concerning immigrants and immigration will require communicators to address those highly accessible, but unproductive, patterns of thinking that limit support for comprehensive reform. By introducing empirically tested framing strategies that translate expert knowledge into language that the public can readily absorb and use, advocates can help clarify the place of immigrants in American society, explain how the immigration system works and the problems impacting it, and, finally, enhance public understanding of how comprehensive reform would benefit U.S. citizens and immigrants alike. Based on the research findings, we offer the following evidence-based strategies for communicators.

What to Do:

1. Lead with moral/humanitarian arguments in contentious communication contexts. Using a *Moral Argument* proved to be the most effective way to lead off messages in support of comprehensive immigration reform (see *Figure 1*). The *Moral Argument* appears to tip the definition of immigration away from "them" and toward "us," achieving an important priming function for the consideration of policies. Appeals to humanitarian concerns about immigration also give audiences a clear sense of what is at stake if we fail to enact reform, which helps to inoculate against more divisive models of understanding immigrants and immigration. The first experimental survey FrameWorks conducted for this project showed that, as a lead message, the *Moral Argument* increases public support for key policies that are a part of the comprehensive reform agenda, including crafting a path to citizenship, reforming the visa system, funding social programs that support immigrants, and investing appropriate but not excessive resources to secure the U.S.'s southern border.[12]

The following are the key components of the *Moral Argument* that communicators should emphasize:

➡️ Reference our shared humanity and inoculate against the tendency to see immigrants as others:

> *"We need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings. No matter where we were born, we are all people and are all entitled to the same basic respect."*

➤ Demonstrate how the current system does not recognize immigrants' humanity:

> *"Our country should not keep family members apart or deny people basic assistance."*

➤ Connect comprehensive reform to our ability to fulfill our moral obligation to other human beings:

> *"Treating all people with compassion should be the goal of immigration reform."*

Figure 1:
Effects of Lead-Off Values on Immigration Policy Support
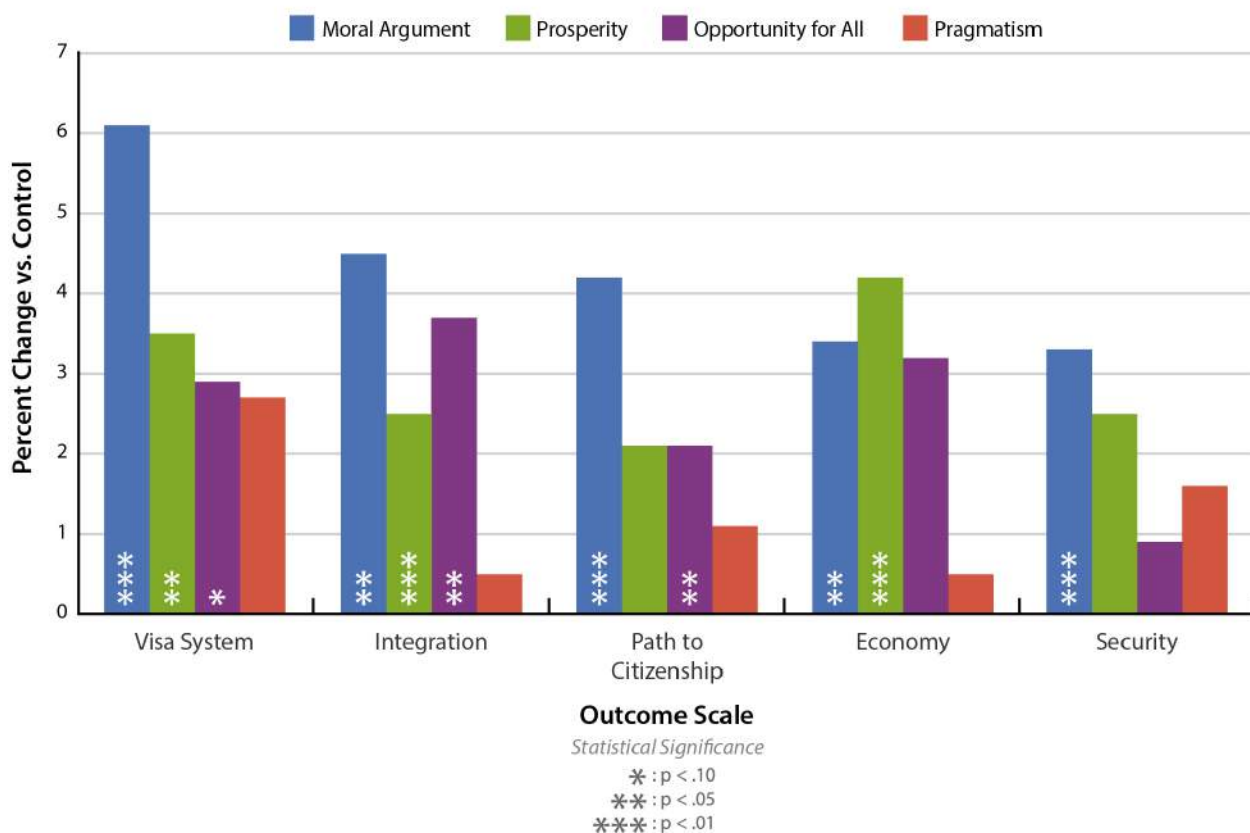
2. When making moral arguments, hew to humanitarian rather than rights-based language. The American public's sense of moral obligation to fellow human beings consistently transcends legal status and breaches the "Us vs. Them" divide that often characterizes public debate about immigration reform. Nonetheless, FrameWorks' research shows that this sense of inclusiveness can be undermined when communicators invoke rights-based arguments. Appeals to respecting and honoring immigrants' humanity *rather than their rights* proves to be a more effective communications strategy in garnering support for comprehensive reform.

Experimental survey research powerfully demonstrates the framing benefits of moral arguments that avoid rights-based language. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, moral messages outperform rights-based narratives on three important outcome measures: support for policies designed to assist undocumented immigrants, policies designed to improve legal immigration, and knowledge about how immigrants contribute to American society.[13] In fact, moral messages increase participants' knowledge of immigrants' contributions by 10 percentage points, which is a statistically significant (p < .01) and substantively remarkable gain in respondents' ability to accurately describe the role of immigrants in U.S society.

Figure 2:
Effects of Humanitarian vs. Rights-Based Narratives on Immigration Knowledge and Policy Support
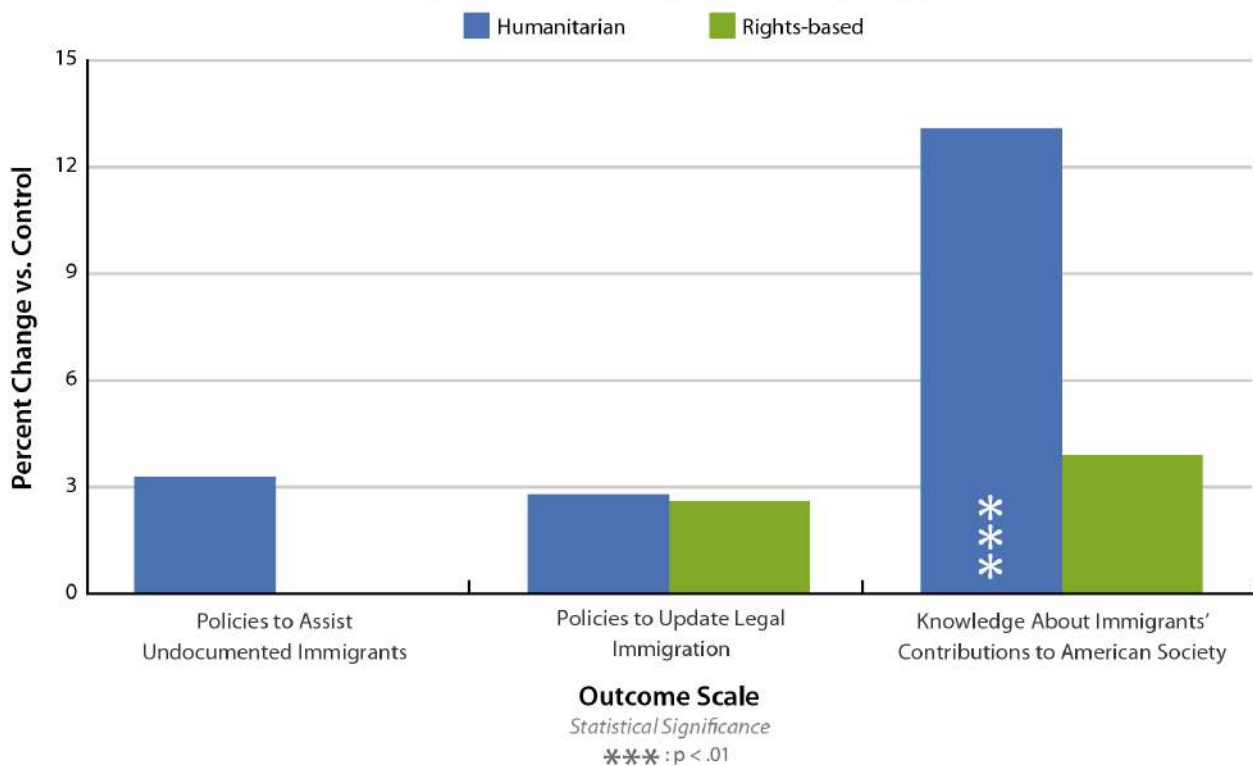
FrameWorks' qualitative research sheds more light on this important finding. Experts and advocates often invoke the language of rights because they understand how those rights are consistently violated in the current system. Understandably, immigration experts and advocates want to explain that immigration legal proceedings often infringe on basic due process protections, that immigrants' precarious position in the labor market can lead to worker exploitation, and that the exclusion of millions of residents from the political process abridges basic rights.[14]

The public, however, starts at a less nuanced understanding and is ill-equipped to comprehend or appreciate the importance of these rights-based messages. Instead, rights-based language appears to inadvertently activate the *Immigrants As Them* cultural model. When this model is operative, the public reasons that rights should be afforded to law-abiding citizens. The public is reminded that undocumented immigrants broke the law and, therefore, may believe that the undocumented do not deserve legal protections.

FrameWorks' research indicates that advocacy organizations should continue to activate Americans' sense of moral obligation to all members of their communities. However, moral narratives are most effective when used in specific communications contexts and when narrowly constructed to invoke humanitarianism rather than immigrants' rights. Moreover, evoking the *Moral Argument* is not a panacea; communicators need to be prepared to shift to other modes of argumentation. Below, we provide guidance as to when and how to make those shifts.

3. Pivot to *Pragmatism* in the face of counter messages. In a contested environment where audiences are exposed to rebuttals built around negative perceptions of immigrants, it is imperative that communicators be prepared to shift from communications strategies centered on moral arguments. Experimental work illustrates that moral arguments are undermined by competing messages that concentrate on immigrants' alleged rule-breaking, threats to citizens' jobs and overall threat to security. These counter-arguments have the effect of "otherizing" immigrants to the degree that their "illegal status" negates their worthiness or qualification for humanitarian consideration. Instead of staying "on message," FrameWorks' research strongly suggests that communicators switch their strategy and invoke *Pragmatism.* When responding to negative rebuttals, pragmatic arguments restore initial gains in public support.[15]

The following are key components that should be included when using the *Pragmatism* follow-up value:

➡ Appeal to common sense by emphasizing how problems with the immigration system can be addressed with practical measures:

> *"We need a common-sense, practical approach. Solutions should come from carefully considering all possible ideas, and then moving forward with the ones that have the best chance of improving our country."*

➡ Point out how alternative proposals for immigration reform are not practical:

"It wouldn't make sense to send all the people that are in the country without documentation back to their country of origin — this would be impractical, and wouldn't reform the situation."

➡️ Highlight the feasibility of comprehensive reform and counter overly partisan and unproductive messages:

"We need to focus on taking reasonable steps toward solutions, rather than adopting extreme and impractical measures that can never actually work."

4. Connect legalization and economic growth with the *Shared Prosperity* narrative.
Economic arguments are another important piece of a pro-reform framing strategy. The first phases of this research project revealed two important findings about prosperity-based and economic arguments that informed subsequent experimental tests: One, organizations that are arguing for pathways to legalization are steering clear of economic arguments,[16] and two, *Prosperity* as a value *statement* increased public support for policies that were directly linked to economic growth (e.g., expansion of the employment-based visa system), but did not increase public support for legalization initiatives (see *Figure 1*).[17] This means communicators can increase support for visa reform by simply stating the value of *Prosperity*. Our final experiment demonstrated, however, that communicators need to use *narrative* to explain how providing a pathway to citizenship contributes to our nation's prosperity. That is, *telling a complete story anchored in the value of* Prosperity *is a highly effective strategy in making the case for the full suite of policies associated with comprehensive reform, including legalization initiatives.*

Narratives are powerful framing tools because of the deep and durable ways in which they organize information and events, and make information cognitively "sticky." Structuring information as narrative helps people remember, retrieve and interpret information when they make decisions and when they communicate with others.[18] In experimental testing, the *Shared Prosperity* narrative increased positive attitudes about immigrants and immigration, and raised support for a range of policies associated with comprehensive reform. Compared to the control group where respondents did not see a message, the *Shared Prosperity* narrative moved respondents in a positive direction across all the outcome measures (see *Figure 3*). For example, the *Shared Prosperity* narrative increased support for more humane treatment, legal assistance, and the provision of legal status to unaccompanied child migrants[19] by approximately 5 percent — a finding that achieved high levels of statistical significance. Exposure to the *Shared Prosperity* narrative also increased people's understandings of the mechanisms by which immigrants contribute to American society by almost 9 percent.

Figure 3:
Effects of Shared Prosperity Narrative on Immigration Knowledge and Policy Support

Statistical Significance
✳✳ : p < .05
✳✳✳ : p < .01
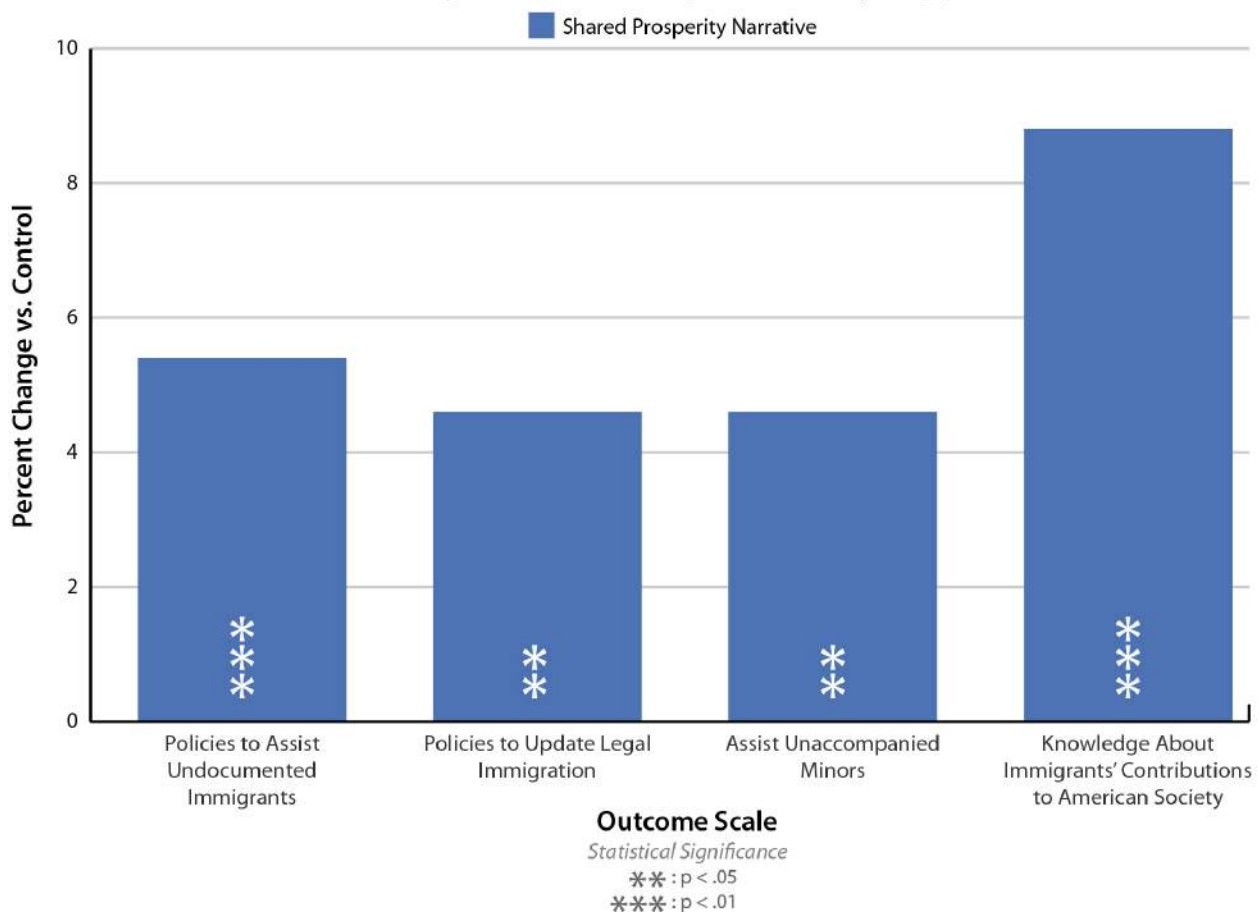
Open-ended questions suggest that the narrative was highly effective in activating *Immigrants As Us* models and inoculating against *Them* models. Exposure to the *Shared Prosperity* narrative lowered the level of vitriol and negative tone of participants' responses, especially when compared to the responses of participants who were exposed to other narratives or to the control condition. For example, informants volunteered these observations once exposed to the *Shared Prosperity* narrative:

> *"Streamline the citizenship process for people here both legally and illegally. Don't deport people who would be persecuted in their home countries. Try to keep families together."*

> *"We have talked enough about this — we need to start putting steps in place to help people obtain their citizenship. Many people have lived in the U.S. their entire lives. They are culturally American, just not legally."*

> *"Immigration reform is needed; it should be flexible and allow those who contribute to society to have a path to citizenship in a short time period."*

By contrast, volunteered responses from people who were not exposed to the shared prosperity narrative sounded more like this:

> *"There are too many Americans without jobs, benefits and needed help. The illegal immigrants get benefits and jobs, due to the fact that they "need help." I believe our country should help its own, before helping outsiders."*

> *"We need to stop the influx of undocumented people coming from the southern border. We must make these countries accountable for this problem, and make things fair for everyone, and we cannot ask the American people to keep footing the bill."*

> *"I have a difficult time being sympathetic to those who don't follow the law and go through the proper channels. I think it is unfair to those who DO follow the rules. I also live in a community with a large immigrant population, many of whom do not work and are receiving welfare. I think that all who come here should have to provide for themselves without going on our welfare system."*

The following are key components that should be included when using the *Prosperity* value:

➡ Appeal to the public's sense of common goals for the country's economic future:

> "*One of the most basic American goals is to make sure our country is prosperous and its people are living a good life.*"

➡ Use language that aligns the public with expert understandings of how immigrants contribute to economic growth:

> *"Prosperity requires harnessing every individual's skills and energy to grow our country's economy."*

➡ Alert the audience immediately to the need for a more inclusive immigration system:

> "*In order to achieve this goal, we need to improve the way people become a part of this country.*"

The recommendations that follow detail the other integral components of the *Shared Prosperity* narrative.

5. Use the *Immigration Sail* metaphor to explain comprehensive immigration reform. While values are important elements of a narrative, they cannot do all the reframing work; other reframing tools are required. Metaphors are familiar to us all as poetic devices, but FrameWorks' research shows that they can also be uniquely powerful devices for thinking. An Explanatory Metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. FrameWorks' researchers identified the following tasks for immigration Explanatory Metaphors:

- Explain that the economy can expand and grow, rather than being a fixed and finite system in which more for some means less for everyone else.

- Highlight how immigrants contribute to the economy, and to American society more generally.

- Demonstrate that the country can better realize the potential social contributions of immigrants with comprehensive immigration reform.

- Show that we can move the country forward by legalizing immigrants currently residing in the United States without status.
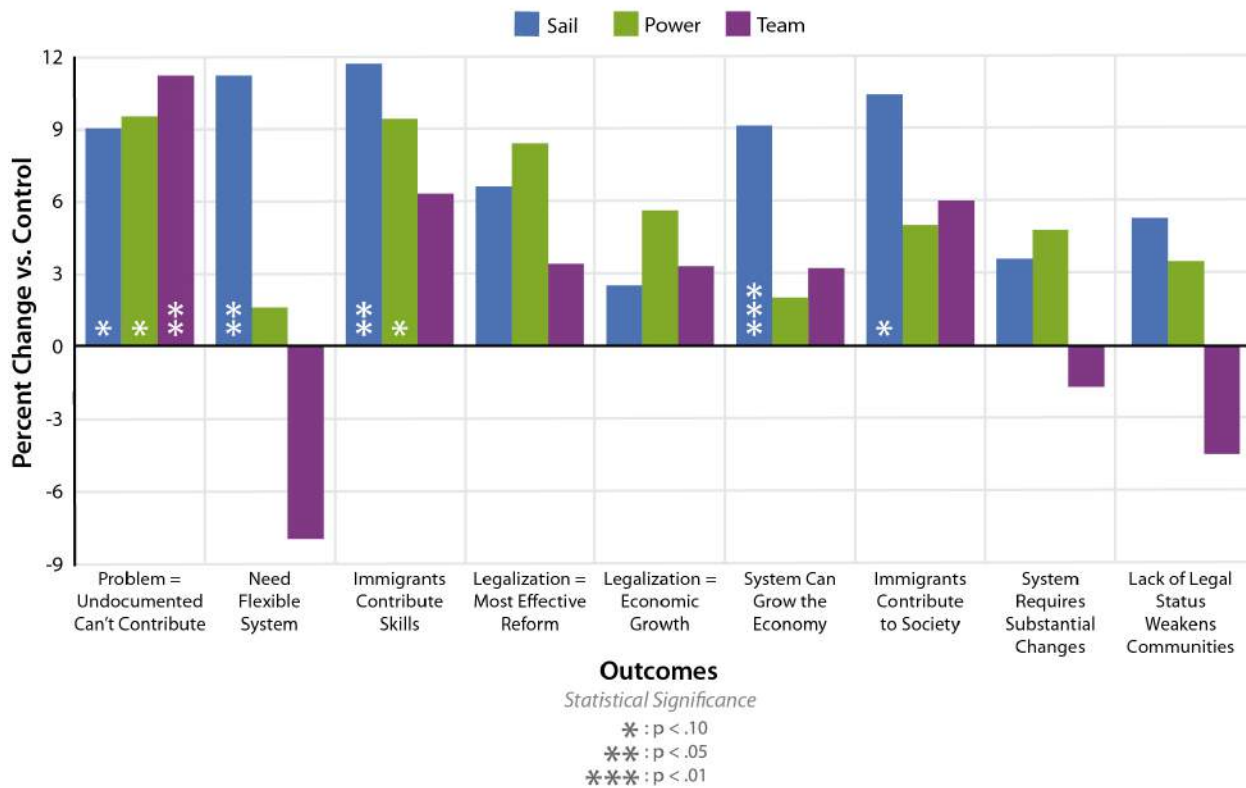
The *Immigration Sail* metaphor emerged from FrameWorks' iterative, multi-method metaphor research process as an effective way of addressing these conceptual tasks. Below is a sample iteration of the metaphor:

IMMIGRATION SAIL

Immigration is wind in our country's sails — it's the labor, skills and ideas that move our country forward. But right now our sails are poorly positioned — and our policies are letting valuable wind power go to waste. We need to fix the policies and laws that make up our sails so that all of our wind power can fill our sails and move our country forward.

FrameWorks began testing the metaphor by comparing its effects with other candidate metaphors quantitatively. The *Sail* metaphor outperformed all other metaphors in increasing people's understanding of immigrants' contributions and encouraging more inclusive attitudes about immigration.

Figure 4:
Effects of Explanatory Metaphors on Attitudes and Knowledge about Immigration Reform

Legend: ■ Sail ■ Power ■ Team

Y-axis: Percent Change vs. Control (scale from -9 to 12)

Outcomes (X-axis categories):
- Problem = Undocumented Can't Contribute
- Need Flexible System
- Immigrants Contribute Skills
- Legalization = Most Effective Reform
- Legalization = Economic Growth
- System Can Grow the Economy
- Immigrants Contribute to Society
- System Requires Substantial Changes
- Lack of Legal Status Weakens Communities

Statistical Significance
※ : p < .10
※※ : p < .05
※※※ : p < .01

Further qualitative research confirmed the productive effects of the *Sail* metaphor. By helping communicators detail *how* the immigration system impacts economic development and *why* the current system is not optimal, the metaphor helps members of the public think more expansively about immigrants' contributions to the country. It also elucidates how adjusting immigration policy benefits all people living in the United States. The metaphor simultaneously inoculates against the *Immigrants As Them* model, thereby decreasing public support for more restrictive immigration policies. Equally importantly, immigration experts are able to use the metaphor with ease to communicate with members of the public about how the immigration system works, and to delineate a range of benefits that derive from comprehensive immigration reform.

Additional recommendations for using the metaphor include:

➤ Show the potential benefits of a pathway to citizenship and avoid "Us vs. Them" thinking with the wind component of the metaphor:

> *"Immigration is **wind** in our country's sails, alongside the wind provided by those who are not immigrants. We need to gather all our energy so that we can propel the country forward."*

➤ Explain how reform will improve the system by elaborating on the sail's positioning:

> *"A well-functioning **sail** helps us maximize wind power. We need an immigration system that allows us to mobilize all our available labor, skills and ideas to push our economy and our country forward."*

➤ Describe current problems with the immigration system by focusing on the poor positioning of the sail:

> *"Right now, our immigration system is a sail that's poorly positioned and only partly opened. The system is excluding wind power and keeping our country from moving forward as far or as fast as we could."*

➤ Highlight the need for an adaptable system by discussing the flexibility of the sail:

> *"We need to navigate a **sea** of changing conditions. It is important for this system to be adjusted and made more flexible because the needs of the country are changing over time."*

➤ Illustrate the role of elected officials and experts in addressing immigration reform by making space for policymakers on the boat:

> *"We need a **crew** of policymakers to adjust the sail. Policymakers should adjust the immigration system so that immigrants who are in the country can be included, and fully contribute their wind power to our nation's sails."*

➤ Talk about how immigration reform will help the country achieve its goals by referencing a common destination:

> *"When we adjust the sails, we move to a better future. If we change our policies, we can maximize our immigration wind power and move our country forward to a better future for everyone."*

Further experimental research demonstrated the *Immigration Sail* metaphor's centrality in the *Shared Prosperity* narrative. When compared to respondents who were exposed to a version of the *Shared Prosperity* narrative without a metaphor, the inclusion of the *Sail* metaphor significantly increased survey respondents' knowledge of how the economy works, how immigrants impact economic development, and how our current system is impeding immigrants' potential contributions (see *Figure 5*).

Figure 5:
Effects of Narratives With and Without Sail on Knowledge and Attitudes about Immigration Reform
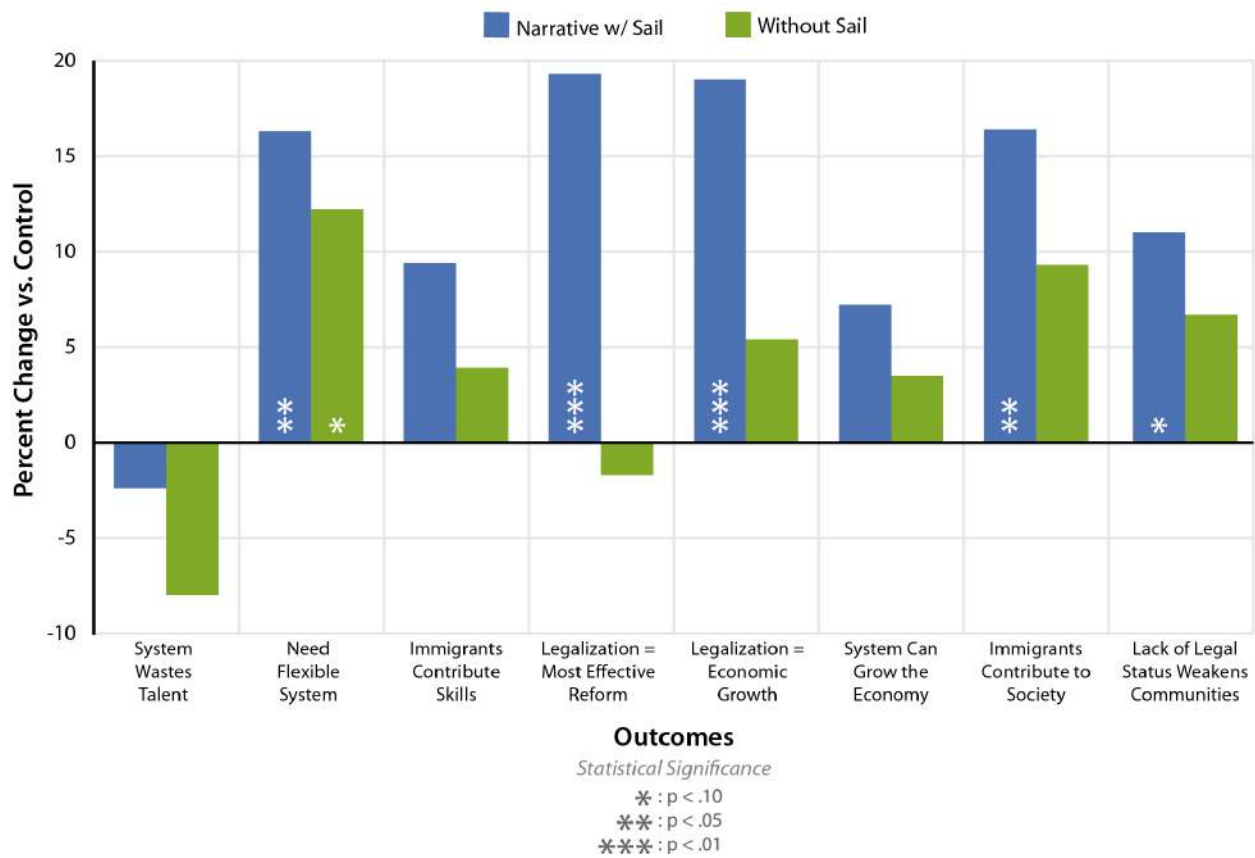
6. Include facts to provide evidence of potential economic growth. The *Shared Prosperity* narrative benefits greatly from the use of supporting facts. Facts and statistics in the narrative provide supporting evidence of the economic benefits of comprehensive immigration reform. However, it is extremely important for communicators to note that, while they are an important supporting narrative element, facts and statistics cannot tell the whole comprehensive reform story by themselves. The potential dangers of employing facts in isolation are detailed below in the *Traps* section.

The following facts are regularly included in pro-immigration advocacy materials to demonstrate the economic impacts of comprehensive reform, and proved to be essential components of the *Shared Prosperity* narrative.

> *With immigration reform, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase by 3.3 percent over current projections within 10 years — an increase of roughly $700 billion — and by 5.4 percent in less than 20 years — an increase of $1.4 trillion.*

> *The overall federal budget deficit would decrease by almost $850 billion over the next 20 years, shaving trillions of dollars off the national debt in the long run. Immigrants would also boost Social Security's financial foundation by adding younger people to the U.S. workforce, meaning an extra $300 billion in contributions to the Social Security Trust Fund over the next decade.*

> *Estimates indicate that, with immigration reform, immigrants will have the stability to invest more in their communities, which will increase average annual wages for every household in the United States by $250.*

7. Complete the story with clear calls for a pathway to citizenship. It is important to recognize that the *Shared Prosperity* narrative is designed to prime a conversation about *solutions*. The narrative is incomplete without the final solutions chapter: a discussion of how providing legal status for undocumented immigrants is necessary to tap into a potential source of shared prosperity. However, this prospective solution needs to fit into the appropriate position in the narrative. That is, before this solution is introduced, people must be primed with values, metaphors and facts.

Here is a sample of the **complete** *Shared Prosperity* narrative:

SHARED PROSPERITY

One of the most basic American goals is to make sure our country is prosperous and its people are living a good life. Prosperity requires harnessing every individual's skills and energy to grow our country's economy. In order to achieve this goal, we need to improve the way people become a part of this country.

We can think of the immigration system like a sail on a boat. A sail works best when it is positioned to gather the wind it needs to move forward. Similarly, our immigration system should be positioned to capture immigrants' skills and energy. Right now we're limiting our nation's economic progress because not all people living in the United States can contribute.

There are several ways that improving our immigration system would move our economy forward:

1. *Improving the immigration system would help the U.S. economy grow, because we would have a larger labor force, higher productivity and investment, stronger technology, more tourism, and more growth in the hospitality, agriculture and housing industries. In terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), growth would increase by 3.3 percent over current projections within 10 years — an increase of roughly $700 billion — and by 5.4 percent in less than 20 years — an increase of $1.4 trillion.*

2. *Improving the system would allow immigrants to become more stable members of our workforce. When individuals are insecure and uncertain about their future, they do not make the kinds of investments in houses and cars that grow the economy. When they are more stable, they tend to save more money and focus on long-term education, steps that also enhance worker productivity. Estimates indicate that this will increase average annual wages for every household in the United States by $250.*

3. *Improving the immigration system would decrease budget deficits and offset the problems our country will face from an aging population. As immigrants become part of the legal economy, they pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. The overall federal budget deficit would decrease by almost $850 billion over the next 20 years, shaving trillions of dollars off the national debt in the long run. Immigrants would also boost Social Security's financial foundation by adding younger people to the U.S. workforce, meaning an extra $300 billion in contributions to the Social Security Trust Fund over the next decade.*

To ensure our prosperity and move our country forward, we need to provide a clear way for people living here without documentation to become full citizens, without requiring them to wait for years or pay massive penalties. And we need to reform our policies for admitting new immigrants to make sure we are using everyone's skills, talents and energy to help America thrive. Improving the immigration system is vital for our country's prosperity.

IV. Traps in Public Thinking

In the following section, we list communication practices that trap public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. We focus here specifically on traps that are common in advocacy communications, as these tend to represent unexamined hypotheses about effective communications.

1. **Incomplete Narrative Trap**
   FrameWorks' analysis of the field's extant communication practices shows that, when compared to organizations that advocate for more restrictive immigration policies, organizations advocating for expansive immigration policies are telling incomplete stories. In their public-facing materials, organizations that argue for tighter restrictions on immigration and harsher punishments for undocumented immigrants clearly and consistently explain to their readers their interpretation of the problem (cause), provide clear reasons why this issue is important (value statement), and end with concrete policy recommendations (solution). One or two of these critical narrative elements were consistently absent from the materials disseminated by organizations advocating for comprehensive reform.[20] When organizations do not tell a complete story, they lose control of the direction of the narrative, as the public will "fill in" missing information with cultural models that may not support the organizations' intended messages.

2. **Salience Without Solution Trap**
   There is an influential cluster of organizations that argues for comprehensive immigration reform based on moral and humanitarian concerns. Our research shows that, while these organizations consistently explain to the public why immigration reform is a critical issue, they are less likely to offer concrete solutions about how to address the problem.[21] Communication materials that only inform the public about the stakes of the problem are unlikely to deepen public understanding of the issue, or garner support for legalization proposals.

3. Just the Facts Trap

There is an ideologically diverse set of pro-immigration organizations advocating for immigration policies that are directly linked to economic development, primarily the expansion of employment-based visas. Unlike the organizations that employ humanitarian rationales for immigration reform, these organizations present clear policy solutions in their organizational materials. However, they do not consistently explain how the current system is disrupting economic development, nor do they explicitly state why immigration reform is important. Instead, they simply state the economic benefits of comprehensive immigration reform to the audience without making the connection between reform and economic growth.

Figure 6:

Effects of Shared Prosperity Narrative vs. Isolated Facts on Attitudes and Knowledge about Immigration Reform
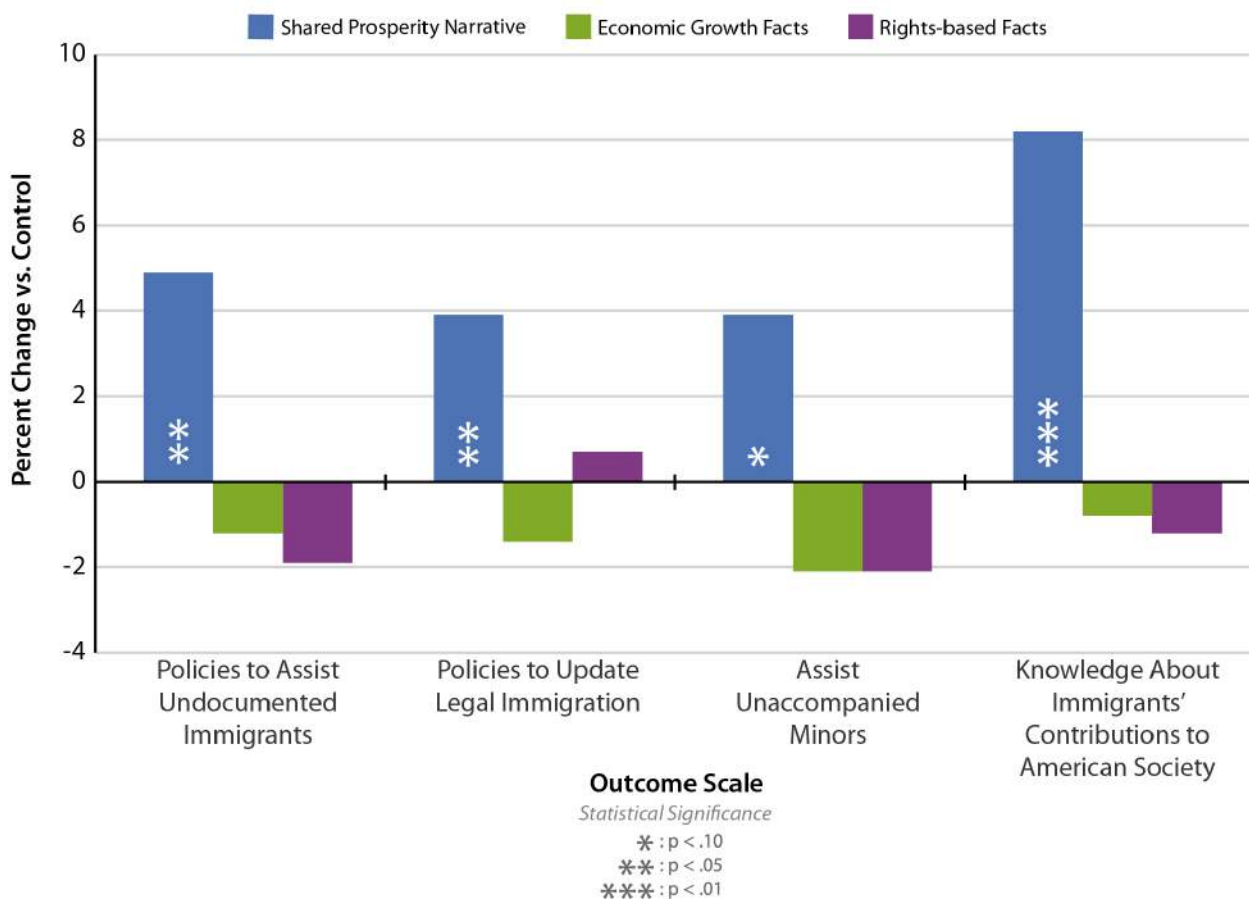

FrameWorks' research shows the potential dangers of a communications strategy that relies on the presentation of economic facts and statistics in isolation. When compared to the *Shared Prosperity* narrative, economic and worker protection facts actually decrease public support for a range of policy measures, including those measures with a direct link to economic growth (see *Figure 6)*.

4. **Putting a Face on the Issue Trap**

   Advocates of immigration reform often rely upon messengers to describe policies, challenges, and solutions. Common messengers are representatives of the immigrant community, business leaders, "Dreamers," civic leaders, and policy makers. FrameWorks' research demonstrates that messengers are a volatile frame element in the issue of immigration reform. *Figure 7* shows that there was not a specific messenger whose presence in the narrative <u>increased</u> support for policies that assist undocumented immigrants *and* policies designed to update legal immigration processes. There is clear indication here that messengers may have the potential to *decrease* support for comprehensive reform policies.

Figure 7:
Effects of Messengers on Immigration Policy Support
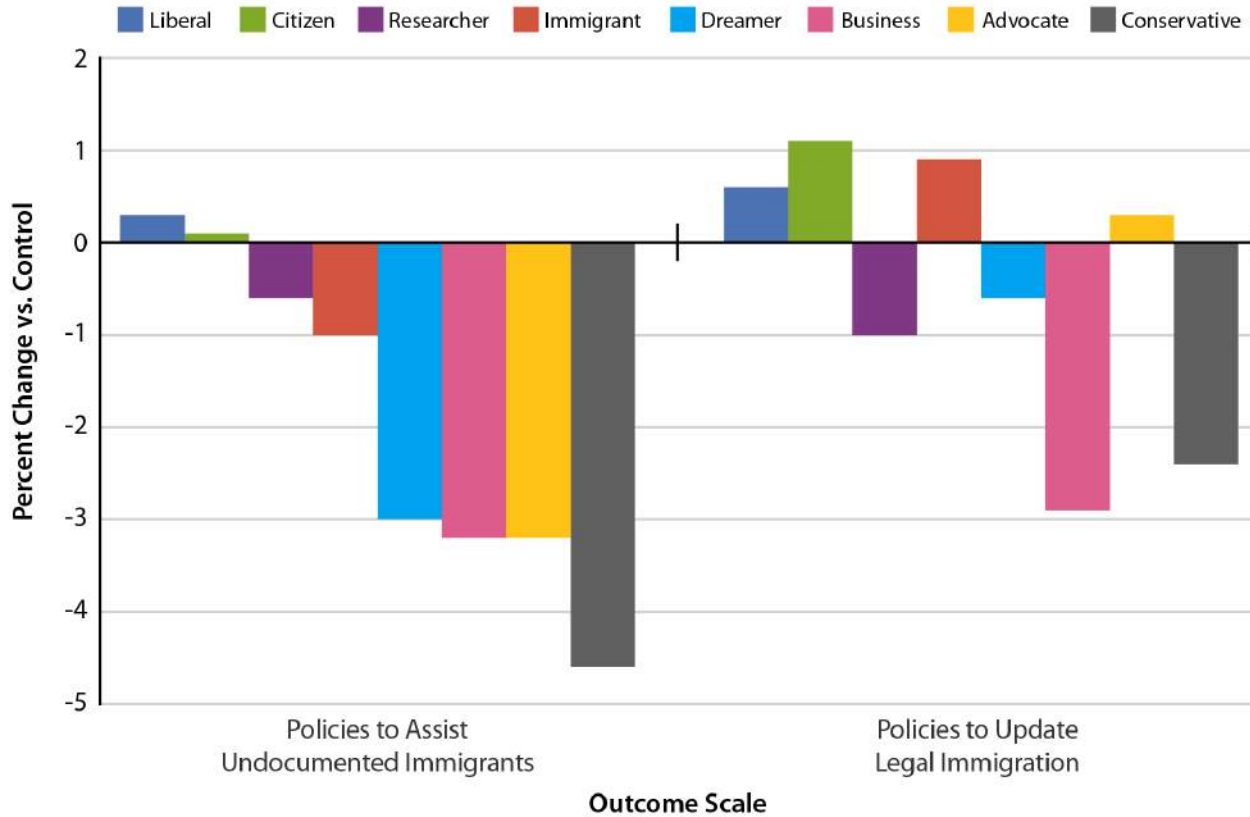
Communicators working towards comprehensive reform will obviously continue to employ spokespeople to disseminate their organizational message. This finding is not a warning against using messengers, but against employing one type of messenger who then becomes the "face," or identity, of the organization or movement. Instead, organizations should strategically choose a range of spokespeople who are in strong positions to argue for comprehensive immigration reform. Most importantly, pro-immigration groups should avoid over-reliance on a single messenger. This also speaks to the importance of an orchestrated coalition-wide strategy.

Conclusion

Immigration reform appears to be at a critical impasse. President Obama stated that he will announce a new executive action creating a legalization program for undocumented immigrants within the calendar year 2014.[22] Legislation to enact a comprehensive reform remains stalled in Congress. This pause provides additional time for groups active in their communities and in places where people learn stories — from professional groups to places of faith — to start new conversations about comprehensive immigration reform. Reframing immigration is, in many ways, a contest over the stories we tell ourselves about who belongs and who does not, and with what consequences for the country.

To overcome the well-worn patterns in Americans' minds, immigration experts need to use all the tools available to them — especially their myriad communications with the public and policymakers — to build public support and ensure the passage of pragmatic, flexible and humane immigration policies.

FrameWorks' body of research confirms that Americans are indeed less practiced at understanding the immigration system from a humanitarian and expansive perspective. Tapping into the public's more inclusive interpretive frameworks requires that communicators be flexible, nimble and agile in the face of anti-immigration messages. The following is a map summarizing how to navigate around, and inoculate against, Americans' more divisive, xenophobic and fear-based ways of understanding immigrants and immigration.

Lead with *Moral Argument*

Lead off with the **Moral Argument** in debate, but be prepared to switch strategies.

Pivot to *Pragmatism*

Pivot to **Pragmatism** to undermine frequently recited anti-immigration messages.

Appeal to *Shared Prosperity*

Appealing to **Shared Prosperity** is another effective part of a pro-reform strategy.

- *Prosperity* as a value statement can build support for clear economic policies (e.g., reforming an employment-based visa system to respond to labor shortages).

- Making the case for legalization requires explanation with a *Shared Prosperity* narrative.

Avoid Common Set Backs

There are communications practices that can set back communications gains.

- Using rights-based language in humanitarian arguments can backfire because such arguments cue a legal mindset and lead people to focus on the distinction between those who did and did not abide by the law. Through this perspective, undocumented immigrants quickly become "them"—groups who broke the law and therefore do not deserve legal protection.

- Relying on facts and statistics alone to argue for immigration reform is ineffective because, without careful framing, these facts are interpreted through people's dominant understandings of the issue — a process that, at best, diminishes the effect of these facts and, at worst, distorts their meaning.

- Overreliance on a single messenger to be the "face" of an organization's policy goals can be unproductive because of the volatile role that messengers play in affecting support for comprehensive reform.

Armed with empirically tested communication strategies, we believe pro-reform groups are poised to chart a new history of framing and immigration policy, one where communicators are consistently able to inspire public demand for comprehensive, inclusive immigration policies.

About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national, nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues — the environment, government, race, children's issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth — from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks™ and Framing Study Circles. See **www.frameworksinstitute.org**

Appendix A

The following research reports have been published by FrameWorks Institute (Washington, DC) as part of this inquiry.

Getting to "We": Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Immigration Reform (2014) This report lays the groundwork for a larger effort to reframe the public debate on immigration and immigration reform by comparing how experts talk, and Americans think, about immigration, the immigration system and comprehensive immigration reform. Using data from interviews with both expert and pubic informants, the report details a set of key communications challenges and presents initial strategies to address these challenges.

Stories Matter: Field Frame Analysis on Immigration (2014) This Field Frame Analysis maps the competing narratives used by influential organizations to frame the debate on immigration and immigration reform. It finds that narratives that support restrictive immigration policies are more coherent and complete — and therefore more likely to "stick" in the public's mind — than those that support comprehensive immigration reform. The report concludes with recommendations as to how organizations working towards comprehensive reform can communicate more effectively.

Don't Stay on Message: Experimental Survey on Immigration Messaging (2013) This is the full report of a large-scale experimental survey of 8,000 Americans, which weighs the effects of pro-immigration values on immigration attitudes and policies by testing how values affect support and how pro-immigration messages fare when confronted with an anti-immigration message.

Valuing Immigration: How Frame Elements Contribute to Effective Communications (2010) Findings from several survey experiments with registered voters demonstrate that immigration advocates ought to be very careful in how they sequence issues of race and ethnicity in the conversation about immigration reform. Communications about reforms that remind the public that the primary beneficiaries are likely to be racial or ethnic minorities fail to successfully elevate policy support, while frames that emphasize mutual benefits across groups and interconnectedness are more effective in building support for immigration policies. We provide examples from our Talking Disparities Toolkit about how advocates can structure more effective frames.

Endnotes

[1] For purposes of comparison, George W. Bush deported 2 million people in his 8 years, while Obama reached 2 million in just over 5 years.

[2] Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., O'Neil, M., & Haydon, A. (2014). *Getting to "we": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of immigration and immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[3] See, for example: Chavez, L. (2008). *Latino threat: Constructing immigrants, citizens and the nation.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press; Cisneros, J.D. (2008). Contaminated communities: The metaphor of "immigrant as pollutant" in media representations of immigration. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs 11*(4), 569-601; Mehan, H. (1997). The discourse of the illegal immigration debate: A case study in the politics of representation. *Discourse and Society 8*, 249-270; Ono, K.A., & Sloop, J.M. (2002). *Shifting borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

[4] Reich, R. (2005, March 21). The lost art of democratic narrative. *New Republic.*

[5] O'Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[6] Lakoff, G., & Ferguson, S. (2006). *The framing of immigration*. Berkeley, CA: The Rockridge Institute; Viladrich, A. (2012). Beyond welfare reform: Reframing undocumented immigrants' entitlement to health care in the United States, a critical review. *Social Science & Medicine 74*, 822-829.

[7] Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., O'Neil, M., & Haydon, A. (2014). *Getting to "we": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of immigration and immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[8] Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., O'Neil, M., & Haydon, A. (2014). *Getting to "we": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of immigration and immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[9] O'Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[10] Simon, A., & Gilliam, F. (2013). *Don't stay on message: What 8,000 respondents say about using strategic framing to move the public discourse on immigration.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[11] Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). Culture and cognition. In D. Holland & N. Quinn, (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought* (pp. 3-40). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[12] Simon, A., & Gilliam, F. (2013). *Don't stay on message: What 8,000 respondents say about using strategic framing to move the public discourse on immigration.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[13] *Policies to Assist Undocumented Immigrants:* This outcome measure included questions referring to undocumented immigrants, including creating a path to citizenship, reforming border patrol policies, and providing other social services such as tuition assistance and coverage under the Affordable Care Act.

Policies to Improve Legal Immigration: This outcome measure included questions referring to improvements to the legal processes of the immigration system. For example: streamlining the issuance of visas, including employment-based and family reunification visas; easing the process of adjusting to legal status; making the system more responsive to the needs of immigrant communities and the U.S. labor market.

Knowledge about the Immigration System: This outcome measure included questions that assessed respondents' knowledge about the possibility of economic development, immigrants' role in economic growth, how immigrants contribute to society, and the benefits of a more flexible system.

[14] Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., O'Neil, M., & Haydon, A. (2014). *Getting to "we": Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of immigration and immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[15] Simon, A., & Gilliam, F. (2013). *Don't stay on message: What 8,000 respondents say about using strategic framing to move the public discourse on immigration.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[16] O'Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[17] Simon, A., & Gilliam, F. (2013). *Don't stay on message: What 8,000 respondents say about using strategic framing to move the public discourse on immigration.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[18] Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Hinchman, L.P., & Hinchman, S. (1997). *Memory, identity, community: The idea of narrative in the human sciences.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

[19] This scale tested items including: providing legal representation to minors, finding alternatives to ICE detention facilities and providing legal status.

[20] O'Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[21] O'Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[22] The President previously suggested he would take this action by the end of the summer of 2014.