

MESSAGING MEMO: Reframing Engagement Talking to Congress about Global Issues

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents the results of a year-long research process designed to help advocates of cooperative, principled, engaged U.S. foreign policies craft effective messages to Congress.

Adapted from the principles of [U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues with Americans – a Practical Guide¹](#), we started with the premise that how we say what we say matters, not only when talking with public audiences, but also when talking with Members and staff in congressional offices – those with a different lens for how the world works. This memo contains advice, developed through consultation with congressional staffers, on how to frame arguments most effectively for this non-public audience, convincing them to not only hear us, but to follow through.

This tool is meant for use by advocates and others skilled in congressional communications. Because it presents suggested frames for all global issues, and not issue-specific talking points, it is recommended that the broad advice given here be translated into more specific, useable bits for public consumption.

We hope that this tool will help guide the communications of advocates across a wide range of issues, reinforcing each other's arguments and making each one of our individual cases stronger.

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Appendices:

- [Appendix 1](#): Final Report on In-Depth Congressional Interviews by Purnima Chawla (released October 2005)
- [Appendix 2](#): Presentation of all research results by Purnima Chawla (presented November 30, 2005)

¹ Although based on the summary recommendations published in *U.S. in the World*, this messaging memo is not part of the *U.S. in the World* brand nor was it a product of the same kind of broadly based consultative process. This memo presents recommendations pulled from our own research with congressional offices.

Introduction

Rooted firmly in the advice of [*U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues with Americans – a Practical Guide*](#), the Reframing Engagement project seeks to identify the “big ideas” – like pragmatism and farsightedness – to which advocates of cooperative, principled U.S. global engagement can relate our arguments in order to achieve a greater response from congressional offices.

The hundreds of foreign policy and public opinion experts who contributed to the *U.S. in the World* communicator’s guide deduced from extensive research that people are most receptive to proposals when they are framed with these “big ideas” in mind. The “big ideas” help open mental shortcuts, connecting new information to an already familiar story, value or idea. They are the responses to the audience’s persistent, usually subconscious question, “what is this message really about?” As human beings, we are hard-wired to look for cues that allow us to make sense of new information quickly. When the “big ideas” are used as the framework for arguments, people can connect a message with a big idea they view positively; for example, describing U.S. actions as “the right thing to do.”

Although the Reframing Engagement project is an extension of the *U.S. in the World* guide, the target audience is different. *U.S. in the World* presents frames tested to resonate with the American public. This messaging memo presents frames tested to work with congressional policymakers. Research has repeatedly shown that policymakers have a fundamentally different understanding of how the world works than does the general public. While the public tends to perceive the world as a truly interdependent place that we can make better for everyone, policymakers are more likely to see the world as a competitive, zero-sum game, where for ‘us’ to gain, others must lose (and vice versa). This presents proponents of a cooperative, principled, engaged United States with the challenge of communicating to an audience that sees the world through a different lens.

This memo presents the “big ideas” or frames shown through research to resonate most with congressional offices. These answer the question, “what is this about?” They are NOT policy recommendations, slogans or talking points for any issue. We hope that the “big ideas” presented here will inform the creation of these other bits of communications, making all our messages coherent, consistent, and mutually reinforcing – making each one of our arguments stronger. We’re all in it together!

Summary of research process

The messaging recommendations presented here are the result of a year-long, multi-stage research process. In the first stage of the research, both issue-specific and communications experts were consulted in designing an initial set of test frames – the “big ideas” in which we couch our arguments – that they thought would be the strongest in gaining congressional support for a cooperative, principled, engaged U.S. foreign policy. Purnima Chawla of the Center for Non-Profit Strategies performed an initial test of these frames through a series of 10 in-depth interviews with the “persuadable middle” within Congress - moderate Members or staff - gathering reactions to the frames presented. (Results of these in-depth interviews are attached in [Appendix 1.](#)) Communications and issue experts were again consulted to tweak the test frames using the data gathered in the interviews in preparation for the second phase of testing.

In the second phase of the research, RDD, Inc. – a professional research firm, conducted telephone interviews with 45 congressional offices – again, aiming for the “persuadable middle” of Congress. During each interview, congressional staffers were presented with pairs of statements meant to evoke different kinds of thinking and asked to choose which one most closely reflected the views of his/her office. Paired statements were designed to be “policy neutral” so that reactions to the statement reflected the relative affinity for the frames presented and not specific policy choices. Interviewees were also asked if the decision between the statements was easy or difficult, indicating the strength of the preference. The research company presented raw data results broken out by political party affiliation. (Analysis of this data is presented in [Appendix 2.](#))

Details of our research methods and findings are listed in [Appendix 1](#) and [Appendix 2](#), at the end of this report. For more in-depth questions, please contact us at info@globalsolutions.org.

Why is this kind of coherent and consistent messaging important?

- Those in the foreign policy community advocating cooperative and principled American engagement in the world need to find new ways to work together. Using a common set of big frames for messages on issues as diverse as environmental protection, human rights and nonproliferation will make each of our cases even stronger when we talk to Congress. There is room for each of our efforts to reinforce the other – no more “funding of aid while pulling funds from education,” etc.
- Opposition research shows that isolationists and those opposed to these cooperative, responsible kinds of American engagement with the world have successfully used consistent, coherent messaging across issues. We can also be more effective if we present a united vision for the U.S.’s role in the world.
- The international community is working together – with us or without the United States – to move forward on steps to help solve global problems. At a moment when unilateralist and isolationist policies are gaining momentum in Washington, we all urgently need tools to help us communicate on behalf of the multilateralist majority in America.
- The right messaging can help all of us gain new allies in Congress – for all our issues. By signaling that each of our individual issues and individual policy asks are actually part of the same bigger picture we can get our elected officials to recognize the importance of each piece in achieving this larger vision.

How to Use these Recommendations

This messaging advice is meant to inform communications of all kinds where the final target audience is our elected policymakers in Congress. We all know that advocacy is most effective when messages are tailored to the concerns and orientation of the particular Member you are addressing. This big general frame research is meant to help inform that process, but is more specifically geared for those moments when this level of individualization is not feasible. Some examples of materials and occasions that demand a broader messaging approach are:

- “Leave behind” documents for congressional offices;
- Fact sheets, policy briefs or other reports meant primarily to educate or persuade congressional policymakers;
- Template letters or e-mails to congressional offices on issues;
- Talking points for lobby visits or telephone campaigns to congressional offices;
- Congressional testimony;
- Op-ed submissions to The Hill, Congressional Quarterly or other Hill publications.

This memo is meant to build on the messaging advice [U.S. in the World](#) gives for talking with the public, while highlighting how talking with Congress as an audience is different. Therefore, when applying the following “big ideas” to your own issue or organization, don’t forget to consider some of the basic communications advice highlighted in the *U.S. in the World* guide. Of particular importance when talking to Congress, **consider who you are as a messenger**. Are you the right messenger to deliver this message? Are you credible? This may influence which “big idea” you choose to employ for different actions. (For example, imagine that you are talking to an elected leader about the International Criminal Court (ICC): it would be more effective to have a retired military officer or former State Department official make the case that participation in the ICC is critical to U.S. credibility in foreign affairs than to have a human rights advocate make the same case. However, if you choose to frame the issue as the importance of U.S. support for justice, a human rights advocate might be just the right credible messenger. The

key is to be aware of how your listeners will hear what that individual is saying based on who they are, not just what they are saying.)

Messaging Recommendations

DOs:

1. Do set the big frame of an interdependent, interconnected world. Prompt your audience to think about the many ways we are linked with the rest of the world, emphasizing the values, aspirations, challenges and outcomes we all share. This is THE big frame that we should place all our communications within. This kind of frame points the public toward cooperative, principled, engaged U.S. foreign policies. Yet according to our research, this frame is helpful, but not sufficient for gaining support from all segments of Congress. We must also make the case for why the action we are recommending is in the U.S. national interest. THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM TALKING WITH THE PUBLIC.
2. Do make the link to American national interest. Research consistently shows that the public does not require actions to be couched in terms of U.S. national interest to gain support. It is sufficient to paint the picture of global problems requiring global solutions in our interdependent world. Our research showed that policymakers feel some tension between solving global problems for all people and pursuing the United States' interests more aggressively. Therefore it is safe to say that neither of these frames trumps the other and that for policymakers as a body, it is necessary to make a national interest argument as well. Be specific in your messaging that pursuing *common solutions* with other countries is a smart and effective way to advance our national interest.
3. Do talk about smart, practical ways that we can refine and expand our existing international institutions to make them effective for meeting the challenges of the new century. Majority support shone throughout our research for improving the international institutions we have today, rather than paring them down or dismantling them.
4. Do be specific about what real international cooperation means and why we need it. This research clearly showed that although a majority of congressional offices supported international cooperation, there were two differing understandings of what was meant by the term. Many staffers view ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing' as an acceptable and efficient model for international cooperation. Therefore, while international cooperation is an effective frame, we must follow up this "big idea" with specifics of what true international cooperation means and why it is important.
5. Do talk about the need for comprehensive approaches to solving global problems. Remarkably, in a time when military solutions are prevalent, the majority of congressional offices responded favorably to messages about balanced, comprehensive solutions to global problems. Our research subjects recognized that in order to build a better, safer world, we must use all the tools in our toolkit.

DON'Ts:

1. Don't use words or frames that reinforce an "us-versus-them" way of thinking. Research consistently shows that through this lens, the rest of the world gains only when we lose something. Once we lead policymakers down this path of reasoning, cutting support for global initiatives makes sense. Yet through a lens of interdependence, we see that only by combining the forces of the world can we solve the problems that no single country can solve alone. We're all in it together.
2. Don't use America's withering reputation abroad as motivation for policies. The research shows that policymakers know our reputation is in disrepair but there is no consensus on why this is so, and whether this is something to be worried about.

3. Don't discount economic and military sources of American power. Throughout the research, congressional representatives found messages touting "soft power" mechanisms to be naïve and too idealistic to take seriously. For example, the message "The 21st Century needs leadership based on bringing people together for the common good in a principled way, rather than on military and economic clout," was viewed as unrealistic. There was a resounding feeling that soft power mechanisms are effective only when backed by strong economic and military power. Remember, we still need all the tools in our toolkit, even when we choose not to use them.
4. Don't talk about the need for international cooperation, international institutions or treaties for their own sake. Congressional representatives are interested in solving problems. Make a case for why international cooperation, international institutions or treaties are effective tools for doing so. These are the means, not the end in themselves.
5. Don't deny the need for improvement and reform. The majority of respondents agreed that our international institutions should be made more effective rather than dismantled. Therefore recognize this need, while reinforcing that they are vital tools in solving global problems.

KEEP IN MIND:

1. Think carefully when using the changed world frame. When asserting that the world has fundamentally changed since [point to your favorite catastrophic event], be aware that this will sound hollow for much of Congress. "Post-9/11," "post-Katrina," "post-Cold War," it's a changed world, simply doesn't fly with the majority of Congress. Much of Congress recognizes that the world didn't suddenly change to something that it wasn't before the event occurred. Many of them recognize the gradual changes that occur in the world and that we are fighting battles today that we have been fighting in one way or another for decades. What has changed is the public's perception of what is going on in the world. Ultimately, you may want to choose not to use this frame simply because stronger ones are available.
2. There is no overall consensus on whether Congress wants to build a better, safer world for all or a more stable world. Overall, those interviewed felt that both frames were too vague to be meaningful. Be cautious when using either of these frames because there is no single common understanding of what each of them evokes in the minds of policymakers. (Does building a stable world mean supporting dictators because they are in positions to provide that stability?)
3. Arguments framed as the "right thing to do" were just as effective as arguments framed as "practical, get the job done" solutions. Our takeaway? Either works...depending on the issue and the messenger.
4. Congressional staffers almost unanimously commented on the unique responsibility the United States has in the world today. This is a concept that resonates for many, yet there is no consensus on the implications of that responsibility. If you choose to use this "big idea", be specific about what you mean, about what this responsibility is. Use this "big idea" with care.
5. Similarly, congressional staff frequently mentioned the role of U.S. leadership in the world, and yet held drastically varied ideas of what this role is or should ideally be. If you choose to use this frame, be specific about what your view of U.S. leadership in the world looks like and why it needs to be this way.
6. Be cautious about using American values as the sole rationale for your policy asks. Staffers repeatedly stated that policies should be judged in the long-run by how they fit with and reflect American values, but that often our values have to be compromised to achieve the short-term objective. Also, when tested in larger surveys there was no consensus on whether a value-based argument would fare any better or worse than other, more practicality based arguments. Therefore, take care when using the argument that a policy

goes against American values or we should pursue another policy since it is totally consistent with our values.

7. Overwhelmingly, research participants agreed that our policies should create opportunities for other countries to create free societies. Yet when asked about helping other countries obtain the same opportunities we enjoy within the United States, interviewees disagreed as to whether that should be a goal of U.S. policy or even if this would be desired in other countries. Again, other frames could make a stronger argument.

About the Process and the Participants

This resource is the result of a consultative process funded by ConnectUS that [Citizens for Global Solutions](#) facilitated in conjunction with Purnima Chawla at the [Center for Nonprofit Strategies](#) between October 2004 and December 2005. A cross-section of foreign policy advocates and messaging experts contributed to this resource.

Participants: The following individuals generously participated in advising, consulting, creating, critiquing, drafting or editing throughout this project. Responsibility for final content, of course including any errors, lies with Kristin Poore and Heather Hamilton at Citizens for Global Solutions.

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A comment on the project's transformation:

We initially set out to find ways to message to Congress specifically about international institutions and treaties. Our initial research found those hostile to international institutions and treaties used a common set of messages that were working fairly well in igniting in Members of Congress a feeling that treaties and international institutions were ineffective and unworthy of support. We convened a meeting in October 2004 during which we heard from a number of activists in the field that there was a bigger problem. It was about more than simply treaties and international institutions. Those not favoring principled, effective, cooperative U.S. global engagement were using these same sets of messages across a large number of issues. Perhaps we needed the same kind of initiative. We needed a common set of messaging advice – the big frames – that could be used on all of our issues when talking with Congress.

Throughout the Reframing Engagement project we have focused on finding the “frames” - or what *U.S. in the World* calls the “big ideas” – that resonate best when making arguments to Congress about global issues – including international institutions, treaties and the like. Much of the previous research showed that while the public tends to perceive the world as a truly interdependent place that we can make better for everyone, foreign policy experts tend to see the world as a competitive game, where gains for some necessitates losses for others. With this in mind, we set out to discover: 1) if Congress thinks like the public, like foreign policy experts, or a mixture of both, and 2) what this means for effective messaging on global issues to this particular audience. We hope that helped move the community closer to answering these important questions.