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Framing Versus Spin: Rockridge as opposed to Luntz

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Two weeks ago, Rockridge published *The Framing of Immigration* by George Lakoff and Sam Ferguson, an analysis of the framing surrounding immigration used by progressives and conservatives, as well as a discussion of framings not being used, but which would reveal important truths. Late last week, the DailyKos leaked a memo by Frank Luntz, the Republican messaging strategist, advising Republicans how to talk about immigration. If you want to compare what Rockridge does with what Luntz does, this is your chance.

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The Rockridge Institute is a non-partisan progressive think tank that goes behind the language (the surface words and slogans) to reveal the deep frames — the moral values, political principles, and fundamental ideas, both progressive and conservative — that are implicit in political discourse.

Our goals are simple:

- First, to educate the public about how issues are being framed and what hidden agendas lie behind the words being used.
- Second, to point out how truth and fundamental American values can better be served by alternative framings, both deep and surface.
- Third, to help progressives better express what they really believe.
- And fourth, to caution progressives against accepting political frames that either hide the truth or undermine our moral values.

We seek to empower the public to recognize framing on their own, to be less susceptible to the spin tactics of political operatives, to express their deepest beliefs, and to come up with the best framings, both deep and surface, for revealing important truths. Language matters, and we show why.

The Framing of Immigration exemplifies these goals.

Framing the situation in terms of “illegal immigrants” skews

the discourse. It characterizes people who are almost all honest and hardworking as criminals, thereby ignoring their contributions to American lifestyles and the American economy. And it ignores the systemic causes and problems: our cheap-labor economy that drives down the cost of labor, and the many political and economic causes that contribute to pushing so many people to leave their home countries.

Contrast this approach with Luntz's. Luntz understands the power of language and political frames. However, he uses it for manipulative ends. Here's a sample: "This is about overcrowding YOUR schools, emergency room chaos in YOUR hospitals, the increases in YOUR taxes, the crime in YOUR communities."

Luntz understands, as we have pointed out, that there is a large split in the Republican party between nativist and free-market activists. The nativists want to expel undocumented immigrants, whereas the free-marketeers want to keep the undocumented immigrants here as a permanent non-voting source of cheap labor. Luntz suggests using the language of prevention to gloss over this rift in the party:

Put simply, the solution to immigration reform starts with the Principle of Prevention. Not only is it seen as critical to effectively implementing all other reforms, but it is also politically neutral. Those who take a less aggressive approach to illegal immigrants currently in the country still agree with the idea of preventing new illegal immigrants from entering.

What this hides are the two ugly sides of the conservative split:

- The nativists whipping up fears of a cultural takeover, calling honest people criminals, promoting inhuman treatment of decent human beings, and seeking deportation.
- The free-marketeers profiting from the desperation of others and proposing a permanent underclass of temporary workers with no voting rights and few other rights.

Luntz is working to hide the ugly truth. He is a spin-doctor, and this is what spin-doctors do — use language to maneuver out of sticky situations.

Where we shed light on the information masked by frames

—presenting as many considerations to the public as we can, Luntz uses frames to mask information in the service of conservative ends. We use frame analysis to open the debate. Luntz uses frames to constrain and manipulate public discourse for the sake of Republican victories.

Our paper predicted much of what Luntz wound up suggesting — framing the debate about “illegal immigration,” a pre-eminent concern for “border security,” a central focus on the immigrants themselves and a wholesale disregard for issues of international trade, foreign policy, human rights and a cheap labor economy. Luntz simply scapegoats the immigrants for the sake of Republican votes.

Luntz is at his most manipulative when he tells Republicans first how to appeal to nativists for their votes and then to Hispanics for theirs. Here is Luntz, appealing to anti-Hispanic nativists.

Let’s talk about the facts behind illegal immigrants. They do commit crimes. They are more likely to drive uninsured. More likely to clog up hospital waiting rooms. More likely to be involved in anti-social behavior because they have learned that breaking the law brings more benefit to them than abiding by it.

And here is Luntz advising on words that do NOT work with Hispanics. It’s worth quoting at length what he tell Republicans NOT to say to Hispanics:

Illegal immigration has a corrosive impact not just on LEGAL immigration but also on all of our society. Illegal immigrants operate outside of the law. They are a part of an underground economy and underground society. They are more likely to commit crimes. More likely to drive uninsured. More likely to clog up hospital waiting rooms. More likely to be involved in anti-social behavior because they have learned that breaking the law brings more benefits than abiding by it.

Luntz is advising Republicans to be two-faced, to speak one way to the nativists and avoid that very language when speaking to Hispanics.

The purpose of spin is to get oneself out of tricky political situations, to repackage bad political ideas and sell them under a different name. The Republicans are in such a situation. According to Luntz, they have made significant

inroads in the Hispanic community. To keep these gains, Republicans must be cautious. Overzealous nasty rhetoric about immigrants might reach the ears of Hispanics and threaten these gains. So he urges speaking to the nativist base out of one side of your mouth, and to Hispanic supporters out of the other. As Luntz says:

It would be a shame if poorly chosen words and overheated rhetoric were to undermine the credibility the [Republican] party has built within the [Hispanic] community. Communicating your position on illegal immigration will require a *different approach among Hispanics and Latinos* [emphasis added].

We deplore these tactics.

Nevertheless, critics have continued to confuse what Luntz does and what we do here at Rockridge. We are using this as an opportunity to demonstrate the wide differences. Yes, we both analyze language and we are both involved with framing. The similarities end there.

Luntz's aim is to unify Republicans by pointing out which frames work to their political advantage — whether or not they serve the truth and whether or not they are moral. We use frame analysis coming from a cognitive science perspective to educate the public and help progressives to better understand and express their deepest values and to better serve the truth.

Luntz creates secretive messaging for political elites (his memo was leaked—all of our papers are public). We empower grassroots progressives by articulating our shared values openly, and hope that political leaders might be listening as well.

Luntz spins and creates slogans to sell right-wing policy to the American public and to keep hidden agendas hidden. We examine and critique political framing to expose implicit values and agendas.

Where Luntz suggests language for manipulating the public, we are interested in authenticity — in helping progressives say what they believe, in advancing traditional progressive

values, and in framing important truths so that they can be recognized.

We take an honest look at our own beliefs as well as those of others. Our intentions are explicit and open.

We believe that you can abide by the deepest of democratic values, say what you believe, tell the truth, and win elections — and that deep and honest framing is essential to those ends.