

# GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

## Introductory Activities: Worldview, Frames and Themes

### Part 1.

#### Introducing the concept of worldview

*"The fish is the last creature to discover water."*

We start our introduction to worldview with a couple of activities that help make visible the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that exist all around us, like water surrounds a fish.

The first activity explores worldview through commonsense sayings: the condensed versions of

popular or folk wisdom that we grow up hearing, modifying and repeating. Some examples of commonsense sayings include:

- The nail that sticks out gets hit the hardest.
- Tigers don't change their stripes.
- Only the strong survive.
- You can't fight city hall.

### ACTIVITY #1: COMMONSENSE SAYINGS

#### **PURPOSE:**

*To surface the rich and varied forms of popular wisdom and beliefs that help shape the participants' ideas about politics and the social world. In this activity, these take the form of the commonsense sayings they have heard and repeated throughout their lives. These may include sayings that participants have heard and rejected, as well as ones that reflect their deeply held beliefs. This activity helps us make visible these aspects of worldview.*

#### **STEPS:**

- A. Divide the participants into smaller groups of four or five. Each person will take turns sharing examples of commonsense sayings they remember. A scribe will record a few of the sayings that come up.
- B. Bring everyone back together. Have each group share a couple of sayings. Write them up on flipchart paper. Process the list of sayings in the following way:
  1. Note the sayings that discourage political involvement and collective action. Mark them with a minus sign. We could call these ideas and themes that are 'demobilizing' because they discourage action and in some way reinforce peoples' sense of powerlessness.
  2. Now look and see if there are any on the list that would actually encourage action – that could be used to give people a sense that they can be agents of change. Mark these with a plus sign. Some examples of these kinds of sayings include:
    - a) Without struggle, there is no progress.
    - b) Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
    - c) An injury to one is an injury to all.
    - d) United we stand, divided we fall.
    - e) Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
- C. Hand out one-page sheet with definitions of worldview, frames and messages.

### ***SUMMARY POINTS:***

Worldview is made up of many elements that come together to shape peoples' understandings of social and political issues -- common sense and other popular ideas, stereotypes, myths as well as more formal belief systems and ideologies. Beliefs can be an obstacle for us as we try to motivate people to get involved, or they can be an opportunity for us, if we can tap those beliefs that encourage collective action.

## **ACTIVITY #2. FORMS OF RESISTANCE**

The dominant worldview affects and limits us politically and organizationally. It can divide, de-mobilize, and discourage us. And it can constrain our political imaginations.

At the same time, the dominant worldview is not monolithic. People resist mainstream narratives and/or seek alternative ways of understanding the world around them and their own relationship to that world.



### ***PURPOSE:***

*To name the kinds of resistance we see in our communities and our organizations.*

### ***STEPS:***

- A. If the group is small enough, do this altogether: Brainstorm a list of activities and other examples of signs of resistance. You may need to get the discussion started with a couple of examples, like alternative consumer choices, cultural expressions outside of the norm (tattoos, body piercing, clothing), hip-hop culture, some kinds of youth culture, etc. If the group is large, have them brainstorm in smaller groups.
- B. List examples on flipchart paper.
- C. Look over the list and ask: Which of these are individual forms of resistance? Which of these are collective forms of resistance? Collective forms of resistance may include these kinds of things (suggest the ones that are not already listed):
  1. Self-sufficiency movements
  2. Third party activism
  3. Evangelical and fundamentalist religious movements
  4. Labor unions
  5. Social movements for human rights: Civil rights, women's, immigrants' rights, LGBT, etc.

### ***SUMMARY POINTS:***

Many of the acts of resistance we named were more individual than collective. As organizers and activists, we want to channel peoples' resistance toward collective action. Still, we see a lot of resistance in so many places. We can tap into this energy.

## Part 2.

### Introducing *Framing*

---

#### Frames and Frame Analysis

**F**raming refers to the ways that groups use elements of worldview to give meaning to an issue or social problem. For our purposes, a good frame defines the problem, the causes and solutions. It can take the form of a story that helps people make sense of the issue and relate it to their own lives. Or it can be very condensed—a cartoon or photo can ‘frame’ an issue by relying on stereotypes and catch-phrases to convey a complex message about the issue.

To help us lift up the worldview elements that shape and constrain political debate, we like to use a tool called ‘frame analysis.’ When asked for a definition of power, a right-wing pundit once said: “Power is the ability to define what the problem is, who the good guys and bad guys are, and what can be done

about it.” This is exactly what a good frame does. A frame is simply a way of organizing information and ideas into a story that defines the problems, causes and solutions for an intended audience. It is much like a picture frame that surrounds a subject to highlight and distinguish it from its surroundings. Issue frames are central organizing ideas that provide coherence to a designated set of idea elements, such as themes and values, along with carefully-chosen facts and information from authoritative sources. They are not the same as policy positions, but they can be used in service of policies and agendas.

What follows are several sample materials that you can use as a way of introducing framing to almost any audience. The materials include versions of stories, cartoons and other examples of framing from everyday life.

### **ACTIVITY #1: INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF FRAMING**

#### **PURPOSE:**

*Participants experience the power of framing to define the problem, suggest the causes and point people toward some solutions while steering them away from other solutions.*

#### **STEPS:**

1. Hand out the worksheet called “One story, three frames.”
2. Read aloud (or ask someone to read aloud) Version one of the story. Discuss the three framing questions that follow version one.
3. Divide the participants into smaller groups of four or five people.
4. In each group, have someone read the second version of the story, followed by the three framing questions. Discuss the questions. Then, have someone read aloud the third version of the story, and discuss the framing questions.
5. Bring the groups back together. Capture highlights from their discussion of the two versions of the story.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

1. How did the answers to the questions change from version to version?
2. This is an example of framing a story. You can tell very different stories about an event or problem depending on which aspects you want to emphasize, which details you want to include or leave out. This is what happens in public discussions and political debates about issues.

### SUMMARY POINTS ---- WHAT FRAMES DO:

- They tell us a story about what the issue or problem is, and they suggest what the causes and solutions are.
- They draw upon assumptions, stereotypes and themes in society.
- They either implicitly or explicitly reinforce a set of values.
- They tend to serve a set of interests.

## ACTIVITY #2: ANALYZING A CARTOON

Take a look at this cartoon and describe the story it tells.



### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) What story does this cartoon tell us about the issue?
- 2) What does this cartoon suggest is the problem? Does it suggest causes and solutions?

### Tips for Trainers:

You may also introduce framing with a political cartoon (or use both – even better). Repetition can be useful. They may need to do frame analysis several times, with different issues, using a mix of written and visual examples. We have included a cartoon here as an example.

### How to prep for a session on framing:

Once you've established what a frame is and the basic tools for analyzing a frame, have people

analyze/deconstruct a few issue frames. You may want to start with a basic opposition frame, then a more progressive frame. We have included some examples in the packet of materials. Have people practice deconstructing frames.

1. Try to have people do this with more than one issue. Note how similar themes are used across issues.
2. Things to do, as a trainer, in order to conduct a session on frame analysis:



3. Choose issues that are of concern to your audience.
4. Find good examples of conservative and progressive frames. Keep them short. Don't be afraid to embellish frames that you find – write them yourself, if necessary. Also try to supplement with something visual.
5. Prepare worksheets in advance.

### Part 3.

## Themes and Values

---

### Introduction to *Themes*

**F**rames draw upon powerful *themes* in society. Themes convey popular values and beliefs, as well as common sense. Themes related to competition and the free market, privatization, the role of government, personal responsibility, family, gender and race are used to frame most of the issues that progressives care about. Conservatives appeal to many of the same values that we do: equality, fairness, good government, family and community. However, they embed these values in a coherent ideology that is linked to the dominant worldview. In addition, the Right infuses their issue frames with 'values' language in ways that galvanize their core constituencies. Their best frames engage people's feelings and aspirations to the fullest.

For most issues, themes come together in a frame that links it to the dominant worldview. For example, stories about welfare reform bring together themes about the role of government, work and the economy, individualism and self-reliance, and, implicitly, themes about race, gender and family. Look at any given story about welfare, and you will find these and other themes are linked together in a frame. Themes about competition, family, gender, race, personal responsibility, privatization, etc. are used to frame most of the issues that we care about. These themes are used in ways that can make it more difficult for us to tell a different story, or help people see other possibilities.

### Introducing Corporate-Conservative Themes

The dominant worldview works well for both corporate America and cultural conservatives. These interests have come together around a shared set of themes and values, and they use these themes and values consistently in their frames. What we like to call the "corporate-conservative" worldview has

three themes at its core: **rugged individualism**, **free market fundamentalism** and **limited role for government**. These three elements can easily be tied together with themes about race and gender. They have been used to discourage or exclude people from many communities, in particular communities of color and immigrant communities, from participating in civil society.

Different conservative and corporate interests can be brought together using over-arching frames, built around these themes.

### How Conservatives Use Core Themes

Corporate/conservatives often draw upon the same kinds of themes and values as we do, but they frame them differently, in part by 'chaining them' to different meanings. The conservative version of these same themes promotes a very different worldview.

1. **Democracy** (role of government in a democracy): We understand democracy to mean self-government, which is based in individual rights and responsibilities. Government should not impinge upon the rights of an individual to pursue his dreams. Likewise, the government should not interfere in market activity, because markets reflect individual choices and provide opportunities for individuals to use their talents and innovations to the fullest.
2. **Community**: Communities, like families, are places that promote important values: honesty, the virtue of work, individual responsibility, a sense of right and wrong, etc. We need to make our communities safe and secure again. We must stop tolerating crime. Communities need to regain the spirit of entrepreneurship that has been eroded by too much government interference in economic development and by the prevalence of welfare programs.
3. **Freedom**: We value each individual's freedom to decide how and where he wants to live and work, and with whom he wants to associate. Societies do better when people are free to pursue their interests. Innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship and consumer choice are possible when markets are unrestrained. We must guard our freedoms by resisting governmental interference in our lives and in the market.
4. **Justice**: Our system of justice protects the individual who takes responsibility for himself. The best way to ensure justice is to insist on law and

order, and to apply laws fairly and equally to everyone.

5. **Equality:** We support 'equality of opportunity,' which means, each of us should be free to use our talents and potentials to be successful, regardless of where we come from. The beauty

of America is that we are a classless society. Rewards are based on merit. We oppose 'equality of outcome,' because it suggests government interventions in social and economic life that impinge upon freedom.

## ACTIVITY #1: MAPPING A THEME



### PURPOSE:

*This activity illustrates the multiple ways in which a theme may be understood. Therefore, we have to embed a theme in a broader context – a collection of ideas and themes that comprise a progressive worldview.*

### STEPS:

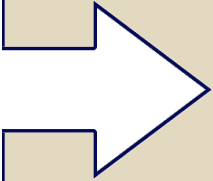
- A. In one large group, start with one word: "Equality." We are going to create a mind-map using this concept – one that the majority of people in this country would say they believe in.
- B. In the front of the room, on easel paper, write the word 'equality' in the middle of the pad and draw a circle around it. Draw 5 or 6 prongs that radiate out from the circle.
- C. Ask each person to very quickly write down 5 or 6 words that they associate with the concept of 'equality.' Don't think about them; just put down the first 5 words that come to mind. Give them one minute to do this.
- D. Ask someone to share a word. Write it down. Ask people to raise their hands if they also had this word on their mind-map. Do this with 4 or 5 other words.
- E. Ask people to share words that they don't think anyone else would have written down.
  - Observe the words that are more common and the ones that are less common. Does a shared definition of 'equality' emerge?
  - Do we have some differences, or nuances, in our understandings of 'equality?'
  - Do we think our understandings of this concept might differ from other groups or communities?

**Note:** We could do the same thing with many other themes and values that most people would say they believe in. For example, people talk a lot about 'justice.' When he nominated John Roberts as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, President Bush said he is 'deeply committed to justice' And yet, as we learn more about Roberts' record, it becomes clear that he does not support existing Civil Rights laws. What do he and Bush mean by the word 'justice?' What do we mean when we say 'justice?'

### SUMMARY:

Commonly used terms that convey widely-held beliefs can be understood very differently, depending on the social, historical context, the sets of experiences and daily realities of those who hear the words. This means, it is not enough for progressives to say that we believe in equality, or equity, or egalitarianism. We may think we are being clear about what we believe, but those who hear us will interpret it based on their own social situations, experiences, etc. And for many, it will be understood in accordance with the frames that dominate the news and popular culture. For ourselves, we need to interrogate what we mean by so many of the words we use, in order to really get to the points of unity.

## ACTIVITY #2: FRAME ANALYSIS



Once you've established what a frame is and the basic tools for analyzing a frame, have people analyze and deconstruct a few issue frames. You may want to start with a basic opposition frame, then a more progressive frame. Have people practice deconstructing frames.

Try to have people do this with more than one issue. Note how similar themes are used across issues.

Here are a few sample frames that can be used for frame analysis and deconstructing a frame.

### *Sample Frames: Education*

#### **Conservative frame:**

Rather than throw even more money at the problem, states should institute school choice on a broad scale, moving toward a competitive education market. One proposal that moves us in this direction is vouchers for low-income parents who want to escape failing public schools.

Teachers' unions and ultra-liberals are afraid of vouchers because they would open up the possibility that parents would seek higher standards in the public school curriculum, educational materials, and teacher-administrator qualities, or else these parents could easily cash in on their vouchers and move on to an alternative institution that is more likely to listen to their wishes, and modify its overall teaching program accordingly.

The only way to transform the system is to break up the long-standing government monopoly and use the dynamics of the market to create innovations, better methods, and new schools. To realize the positive effects of a competitive education market, school choice programs must ensure autonomy and independence for private schools and flexibility for public schools.

#### **Liberal and Progressive frames:**

Frame 1. Corporate-conservatives know they cannot come out and propose full-scale privatization. Instead, they push measures that move us slowly toward corporate control of public schools and public money for private schools. Their proposals include vouchers, school choice, school-based corporate management and increased use of standardized tests. Blaming public schools makes it easier to blame our children for market failures. The corporate leaders and their politician friends are saying that, if our society is becoming more

### *Sample Frames: Social Security*

#### **Conservative frame:**

The money that goes into Social Security does not belong to the federal government. It comes from the individuals themselves or a combination of the individual employees and their employers. It belongs to the employees, the workers. They're the ones that deserve to determine how this money is going to be invested in safe and sound investments for the long term so that they can have the assurance that their retirement benefits will be there.

If you weren't required to give it to government, you'd maybe spend it on your child, maybe spend it on your spouse, maybe spend it on yourself, or maybe even invest it. So in fact, it is your money. The question is, "What's the best way to invest your money for your future?" Social Security has got to be a part of it because we have made a pact with generations in this country and so we have to continue that. And so the question is, is that the best way to provide the future for the younger generation?

#### **Progressive frames:**

Fundamentally, this is a debate about what kind of society we are. Do we respect and value the elderly members of our society? Do we believe in the inherent dignity of all people? If so, then we must reject all efforts to weaken Social Security. To do less would suggest that we value potential personal gains from market speculation more than we value the elderly. The Conservatives' promise of getting more freedom to invest your money, get a higher return and build a better 'nest egg' for your own retirement may sound attractive. You just might make more money by investing a portion of the funds that currently are withheld from your paycheck. But Social Security is not about making individual investment choices. Reducing our

unequal, if good jobs are harder to find, if health care is inadequate, the fault lies with the people – us and our children – who could not make the grade.

Frame 2. We reject privatization as solution to our school's problems because we value democracy and community. Public school systems can nurture skills and knowledge of democratic citizenship in classrooms and communities alike. For students, public schools offer the opportunity to interact with others who may not share their background or their outlook, and to learn how to work together for common goals. Public school systems can offer parents opportunities to put democracy into action. All parents should have a voice in the governance of their schools. One important reform that we advocate is making school governance more democratic. For example, African American and Latino parents still struggle for representation on school boards and in other aspects of governance. As we make them more democratic, our public school systems can model grassroots participation in decisions that affect communities and families. Private school systems do not offer such opportunities.

Frame 3. Universal, public education is vital for our democracy. And yet, public education is under assault by conservatives and their corporate sponsors. As concerned parents, teachers, students and members of our communities, we want reforms that help us meet our society's promise that every child may enjoy learning and have access to the benefits that education can bring. We believe that only a public system can enable us to meet this promise. We must continue the struggle to make quality education available for students in all communities, regardless of income levels, race, ethnicity and immigration status. Support for public education is under assault.

***Questions to ask about each frame:***

- 1) How does this frame answer the three framing questions—*problems, causes, solutions*?
- 2) What values and themes does it appeal to? What audience would this work with?
- 3) Whose interests are served in this frame?
- 4) What action is suggested?

national commitment to eliminating elder poverty to individual choices about investments takes the 'social' out of Social Security. The only crisis we face is a weakening of the public will to continue and expand our commitment to the elderly and disabled.

***Questions:***

1. How does this frame answer the three framing questions?
2. What values and themes does it appeal to? What audience would this work with?
3. Whose interests are served in this frame?
4. What action is suggested?



## ACTIVITY #3: PRACTICING FRAMING THROUGH A ROLE-PLAY



### **PURPOSE:**

*To apply themes analysis and reframing to a familiar and informal setting where people 'talk politics,' like a family dinner.*

### **TIME:**

This activity will need a good deal of time: 5 minutes for set up, 30 minutes in small groups, and at least 30 minutes, probably longer, for the performances and discussion.

### **PREPARATION AND PLANNING:**

Think about how large the group is and decide how many small groups of 4 to 6 people you will need. Develop a skit topic for each group. If you can, give each group a different topic. However, it works best if the topic is related to an issue the group has worked on, is currently working on, or plans to work on.

### **PROCESS:**

Small groups of no more than 6 people will develop a 5-minute skit in which they act out a dinnertime discussion.

### **THE SETTING:**

A family dinner, with friends and relatives who have diverse opinions about an issue or set of issues that your organization is working on.

### **THE CAST:**

- The Organizer. One person in the group gets to play her or himself.
- The Challenger: One person plays a family member or relative who challenges the organizer in a very direct way.
- The Mediator. This person tries to contain the discussion by saying everyone is right and/or we should not be talking about this.
- The Undecideds. These are a couple of relatives or friends who are not sure what they think about the issue.

### **DEVELOPING THE SKIT:**

- Spend 10 to 15 minutes sorting out the roles—who will do what—and planning the kinds of arguments that each person will use. Because this activity should follow work they have already done on themes analysis and reframing, they should draw upon this work. For example, the challenger will speak from the dominant frame, bringing in themes that support that frame. The organizer will be trying to reframe the issue and bring in powerful themes and images that support the campaign goals. The mediator will be trying to point out the merit in 'both points of view,' while the undecideds will be bouncing back and forth.
- Take 10 minutes to practice the skit. If a facilitator is not available to act as Director, the group may want to designate someone to make sure the skit stays focused.

Note: While people really enjoy this kind of role-play, they tend to spend too much time trying to figure out who is going to do what and don't allow enough time to practice and hone the skit. You may want to have facilitators float from group to group, observe and intervene to help them stay focused and move toward creating and practicing their skits.

***PERFORMING THE SKITS.***

Group 1 is introduced. The introduction reminds the audience of the issue that is being debated.

Group 1 performs their skit, within 5 minutes.

The Audience discusses Group 1's skit, by doing the following:

- Identify the themes that were used by the Organizer and the Challenger.
- Discuss how well the themes resonated with the Undecideds.

The players will debrief by noting what they think worked well and what they thought was difficult.

The process of challenging status quo issue frames can help members develop a more critical consciousness. With a critical consciousness, people start to understand the issues differently and see other possibilities. These are important steps toward overcoming a sense of powerlessness. Engaging members in frame analysis is one step. However, it needs to be followed by 'reframing' or making over frames to convey our stories in compelling ways.

## Handout #1: Definitions of Worldview, Frames and Themes

---

**Worldview** refers to the rich variety of beliefs, both formal and informal, that we draw upon and inherit from the larger social world in which we live. We all have conceptions and images of our place in our family, our workplace and community, and in political and civic life. We have notions about race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. And while we each have our own collection of such values and beliefs, we absorb meanings, frames of reference and ideologies from our social world, which can shape our understandings in mostly unconscious ways.

At any given moment a certain worldview is dominant - in our current era, a corporate-conservative worldview dominates political debates. Worldview, however, is not static or eternal. Alternative beliefs and values are always contesting for people's hearts and minds, and for the ability to shape our society and policies. In order to win lasting changes and achieve our social justice goals, we need to struggle on this terrain in order to shift the terms of the debate and enlarge peoples' sense of what is politically possible.

**Frames** are like lenses that bring some aspects of a picture into focus, while distorting others. Part of the power of a frame is that it points the audience toward particular solutions. A conservative commentator once said that power is "the ability to tell others what the issues are, what the issues mean and who the good guys and the bad guys are." This is exactly what a frame does. "Framing an issue" is a way of shaping the terms of the political and social

debate by defining the problem, the causes and the solutions.

Different stories can be told about the same set of facts. Every frame also directly or indirectly serves an interest. Because we are trying to move people to action for justice we need to develop powerful and compelling frames that tell a progressive story and that support progressive solutions.

**Themes** help anchor frames to a larger world of meanings. Themes are expressed through myths, stereotypes, images, catch-phrases and appeals to commonsense. Our opponents' frames are linked to and reinforce a corporate-conservative worldview. They consistently interweave a triad of themes—rugged individualism, limited government, and market competition. When combined with conservative-right messages about race, gender, sexuality and nationality, these themes provide a framework for their political agenda. These combined themes are a powerful force against our ideas and issues.

Themes that support our work and a progressive worldview also exist. We can draw upon a long history and deeply-held beliefs that grow out of peoples' struggles for social and economic justice. These kinds of themes include ideas like democracy, liberation, equality, freedom, commonwealth, stewardship, and more. We need to develop and use progressive themes and values in our frames and in our organizing so that we can break through the corporate-conservative barriers to social change.

## Handout # 2:

### One Story, Three Frames

---

Please read each version of the story and answer the questions about each.

#### Version One

An infant left sleeping in his crib was bitten repeatedly by rats while his 16-year-old mother went to cash her welfare check. A neighbor responded to the cries of the infant and brought the child to Central Hospital where he was treated and released to his mother's custody. The mother, Angie Burns, from the South End, explained softly, "I was only gone five minutes. I left the door open so my neighbor would hear him if he woke up. I never thought this would happen in the daytime."

Questions about Version One:

- 1) What is the problem?
- 3) What is the solution?
- 2) What is the cause?
- 4) What title would you give this story?

#### Version Two

An eight-month-old South End boy was treated and released from Central Hospital yesterday after being bitten by rats while he was sleeping in his crib. Tenants said that repeated requests for extermination had been ignored by the landlord, Henry Brown. Brown claimed that the problem lay with the tenants' improper disposal of garbage. "I spend half my time cleaning up after them. They throw garbage out the window into the back alley and their kids steal the covers for sliding in the snow."

Questions about Version Two:

- 1) Does your thinking about the causes and solutions shift after reading this version?
- 2) What solution or solutions are suggested in this version?
- 3) Would you give this story a different title?

#### Version Three

Rats bit eight-month-old Michael Burns five times yesterday as he napped in his crib. Burns is the latest victim of a rat epidemic plaguing inner-city neighborhoods labeled the "Zone of Death." Health officials say infant mortality rates in the neighborhoods approach those in many third world countries. A Public Health Department spokesperson explained that federal and state cutbacks forced short-staffing at rat control and housing inspection programs. The result, noted Dr. Joaquin Nuñez, a pediatrician at Central Hospital, is a five-fold increase in rat bites. He added, "The irony is that Michael lives within walking distance of some of the world's best medical centers."

Questions about Version 3:

- 1) In this version, how is the problem defined?
- 2) What solutions are suggested?
- 3) What has happened to the individual, Angie Burns, featured in Version One?
- 4) What about the tenants versus the landlord described in version 2?
- 5) What title would you give this story?

## Dominant Worldview

### Key Conservative Themes - Chained Together

