



# UNITED FOR HEALTH

Messages that bridge the political divide  
to finish the job on health reform

REDACTED

**FAMILIESUSA**   
THE VOICE FOR HEALTH CARE CONSUMERS

# It's time to talk about health and health care differently

What people KNOW about health care policy affects maybe 1% of their support. It's the values they care about that drive them to support or oppose policies.

COVID-19 has removed any doubt. Despite heroic efforts by nurses, doctors and caregivers, the American health care system doesn't work for those who need it the most, particularly people of color. After four long years of attacks on health reform, the Biden Administration brings new hope that we can finally give all Americans the opportunity to live a healthy life and receive high quality care regardless of where we live, our gender, how we identify, our ethnicity, our immigration status, or the other the factors that make us who we are. At Families USA, we believe in a nation where the very best health and health care are equally accessible and affordable to all in our nation — it's the kind of nation America should be and it's within our reach.

How can we hope to bring people together in support of health care reform in a time when even the most basic public health protections in a global pandemic have become politically polarizing? We must answer this essential question quickly, or we will find ourselves in a rerun of the debates over the Affordable Care Act, trapped in our opponents' frame and helplessly trying to debunk "death panels." The health care industry is already running ads convincing our neighbors that important reforms to improve the value of health care are "socialized medicine" and "government overreach." We must offer an alternative — the truth. This work has never been more urgent.

That is why we are so excited to be able to present this message guide to you. It comes from work we've been doing with Dr. Drew Westen, PhD, who is one of the nation's leading researchers on how to identify and recognize voters' values and beliefs and what drives them to support or oppose public policies.

Our work on health reform is organized around three central values:

- **Making health care more affordable to everyone in our country**
- **Bringing health care coverage to more children, families and adults living in America**
- **Improving the health care system to make it more equitable and just**

There are many paths to reach those goals. This guide is not focused on detailed policy proposals, but rather the core values that drive those policies and how we should talk to people about them. We found these messages elicit the strongest positive responses among progressives, conservatives, and folks in between and set the stage for bold action on health reform.

# ABRIDGED MESSAGING GUIDE

We learned that outside the headlines and polls about political divisions, there is a more fundamental truth about Americans and what we want for health care in our communities. Whether Republican or Democrat, the overwhelming majority of Americans share a set of values – and fears – around health care.

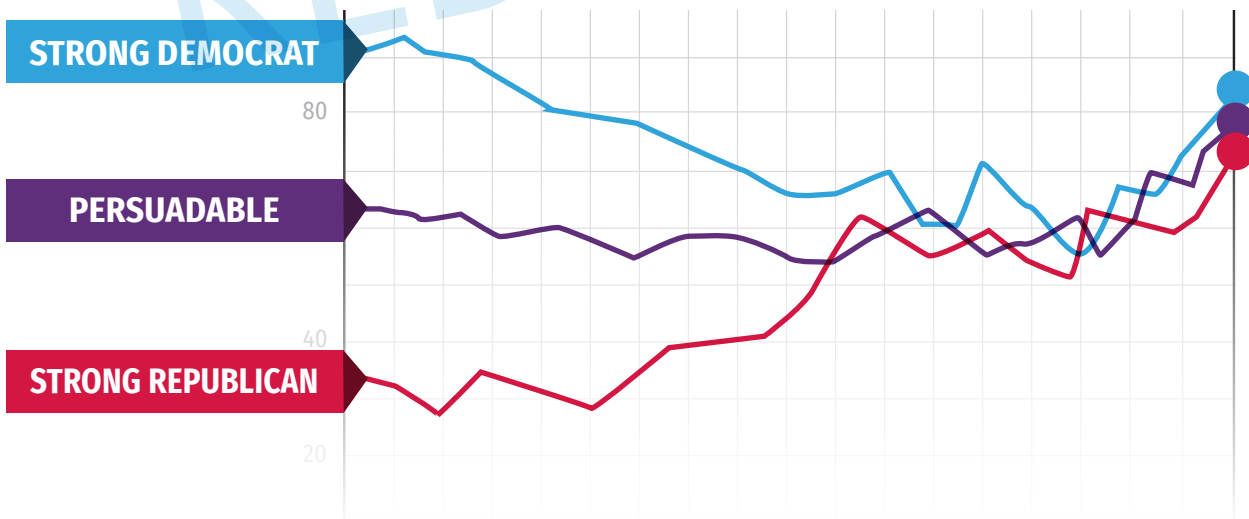
- **Americans believe every child, every family, every individual should have access to quality affordable health care and shouldn't face financial ruin if they need care.**
- **Americans believe that too many people have been shut out due to cost, coverage or color.**
- **Americans want their leaders to come together and finally fix the problem once and for all.**

We also learned that when it comes to talking about health policy, we've made some mistakes. We have been making appeals to intellect, not values. We have assumed that if we just explain policies better, Americans will respond. But human brains are not organized this way. Research shows that if we do not first reach people with shared values, we won't reach them at all.

We will not be successful if we are only talking to ourselves.

TRADITIONAL PARTISAN  
MESSAGING

VALUES-BASED  
MESSAGING



**This guide is a science-based tool for advocates, policy makers and everyone working to advance health reform in our country. This guide also is premised on the idea that we have to keep the political end in mind, as we fight for better health for all people in America. That we must build narratives that can appeal to divided government and inoculate against attempts to divide us. It is our hope that together, in this new era, we can continue to create powerful change and build a more affordable, equitable and accessible health care system for everyone.**

—Frederick Isasi  
*Executive Director, Families USA*



## Who we are



Families USA, a leading national voice for health care consumers, is dedicated to the achievement of high-quality, affordable health care and improved health for all. We advance our mission through public policy analysis, advocacy, and collaboration with partners to promote a patient and community-centered health system. Families USA has been working at the national, state and community level for almost 40 years.



Drew Westen, Ph.D. is a professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University. He is the founder of Westen Strategies, LLC, a strategic messaging firm, which develops and tests messages on a wide range of issues, including health equity, health reform, unconscious bias and income inequality. He is the author of three books and over 150 scholarly articles.

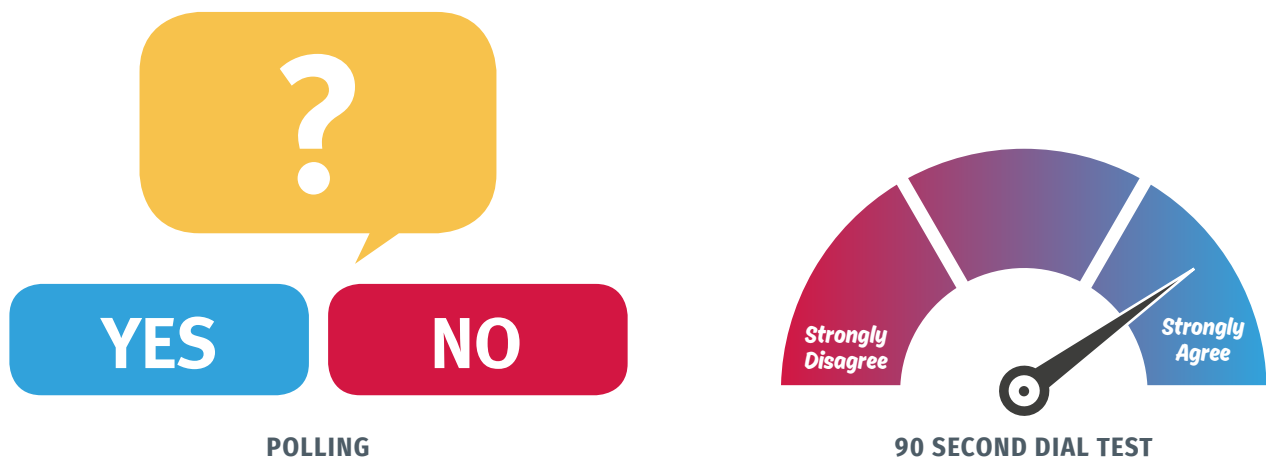
# Methodology

In August 2020, we completed national online dial tests with nearly 1,700 registered voters. Our sample was weighted to reflect the voting population, including an estimated 50% of voters who describe themselves in the middle of the partisan spectrum. These voters may identify with one of the major parties but are not among the 50% who call themselves strong Republicans or strong Democrats.

Participants heard a series of roughly minute-long messages that went head to head with messages opponents use against any kind of healthcare reform. Through dial testing we were able to identify which words, phrases, and examples elicited positive responses and what kind of language made us lose people. We were also able to identify a set of core values and beliefs that voters from both parties found compelling.

Narratives and messages that tested over 50% positive are considered strong. Our research found even stronger messages that tested over 70% and those are presented here.

## The difference in results between dial-tested and poll-tested messages



### TAKE AWAY

It's important to distinguish this message testing research from public opinion polling. Our goal was not to see where the public is. Our goal is to see where the public could be if we simply talk with them about our values in clear, evocative language.

## How to use this guide

### Steal these messages!

They are for you to use in the way that works best for you. From this research we know that there are many paths to access widely shared values and motivate voters.

This guide can help you, whether you need short sound bites for when you have only a few words to get your message across in a TV interview or social media or longer talking points or narratives for when you have more time or space such as an email blast. We have also provided the complete text of the stories we found to be most effective, which can be used in articles or speeches – in whatever ways are helpful.

You'll see that these messages do not go into great detail about specific policy proposals. We want these messages to be valuable to you no matter what policies you're pursuing on coverage, affordability, or equity.



# Unifying messages to connect with voters and policy makers

People do not make decisions about whether to support or reject policy proposals based solely on the merits. If they did, logic would rule the day and our policies would clearly win. But in the political arena, it's just not that simple.

**Research shows that when we are talking to persuadable voters and policy makers about health care policies, we lose them when we jump into wonky talk too quickly or even just relay facts.** In

reality, no matter the topic, our values and beliefs drive our responses on everything we encounter. Specific words or phrases – or even the order that words follow one another – light up our neural networks, those parts of our brains that house our associations, our memories, our emotions. When we hear information, our brains immediately responds and categorize it to place it in a context we can understand, not as stand-alone information, but in association with our experiences. It happens in a nanosecond and determines whether people are open to or reject information.

Based on years of work, Dr. Westen has identified three principles of effective messaging, grounded in psychology, neuroscience, and his own and others' research on political persuasion:

No matter the topic, our values drive our responses to everything we encounter, and it happens in a nanosecond.

**1**

**Activate the right  
neural networks**

**2**

**Speak to values  
and emotions**

**3**

**Tell coherent,  
memorable stories**



Please note that the messages  
and narratives have been redacted  
from this guide. To receive the full,  
unredacted guide please contact  
Families USA at

**info@familiesusa.org.**

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