

# Campaign Skills Handbook

## Module 6

### Message Development

### *Creating Powerful and Persuasive Messages*





## Introduction

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As the election approaches, your candidate is stopped on the street by a voter and asked to tell her why she should vote for your party. She's in a hurry to catch a bus, so you only have one minute to respond. It's a simple question, but the answer is not always so simple.

In that one minute, you need to convey your values, your vision and your understanding of the issues that matter the most to voters. You need to show that you understand the challenges that they, and their family, face every day and that you have practical solutions that can make their lives a little bit better. They need to see themselves in your narrative. They need to see hope.

Election campaigns that are prepared to answer this question – “Why should I vote for you?” — win elections.

As a candidate or political party competing in an election, one of your key challenges will be communicating with your targeted voters in a way that is meaningful, memorable and persuasive. You will have only a certain number of opportunities to do this. You want voters to remember who you are and to understand the difference it would make if they voted for you.

Making every communication opportunity work for you is the main goal of having a clear, succinct and powerful message.

Your message is the heart of your communications strategy. A message is a short, truthful statement that lays out for voters why they should vote for you, and provides a contrast between you and your opponents. This message is an important part of telling your narrative – your story. Crafting and consistently using a compelling message is essential to persuading targeted voters to choose you and motivating supporters to go and vote on Election Day.

This module covers the fundamentals of political communications: what is a political message, why having one is important, and how to come up with an authentic and compelling message that suits your candidate and/or political party. Topics covered include:

- |                                     |                            |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Defining Your Campaign Narrative | 6. Developing Your Message |
| 2. What is a Message?               | 7. Framing Policy Issues   |
| 3. Know Your Audience               | 8. Testing Your Message    |
| 4. The Challenge: Getting Heard     | 9. Using the Message:      |
| 5. Criteria for Effective Messages  | Discipline and Repetition  |

## Defining Your Campaign Narrative

Before you begin the work of developing your message you must clearly define your campaign narrative. Your campaign narrative is the story that you tell about why you are in this election, what you value and why you are the better choice. Your narrative is like a picture frame – it creates clear borders and boundaries for all of your campaign communications.

One of the best ways to do this is to see the choice in this election through the eyes of your target voters. As your target voters make their decision on who to vote for on Election Day (recognizing that many will make their decision late in the campaign) what do you want them to be thinking about when they do? What is the dominant question or thought you want to be on their minds when they make their decision about who to support? In the eyes of your target voters, what must you be saying and doing to win their vote?

**As your target voters make their decision on who to vote for on Election Day what do you want them to be thinking about?**

**What is the dominant question or thought you want to be on their minds when they make their decision about who to support?**

**In the eyes of your target voters, what must you be saying and doing to win their vote?**

**The answers to these questions define your campaign narrative.**

For example,

- If you are the incumbent, then your campaign narrative is designed to get you re-elected. You want voters to think about your accomplishments. You want voters to believe that voting for you will allow your positive work to continue. You want voters to believe that change is reckless and will put at risk all that has been accomplished so far.
- If you are a challenger, from the opposition or a new party or candidate, your campaign narrative must help voters believe that change is not only good, but necessary. You need your target voters to believe that you will bring new ideas, energy, integrity, fairness and new opportunities for voters. You need them to embrace the idea, not fear the idea, that it is time for change.

In many elections, your campaign narrative may also be influenced by issues. For example,

- Many incumbent governments have been successfully re-elected by having their campaign narrative focus narrowly on the economy. They have convinced their target voters that despite any other concerns they may have, the economy is

the most important issue and they are the only party that can provide economic leadership.

- Other successful campaigns seeking change have focused their campaign on issues where voters think the government has failed, like corruption, security, basic services or job creation. These campaign narratives showcase issues where the incumbent failed. Focusing on these areas can, in the eyes of the voter, build confidence in your candidate or party and your ideas. It can also help eliminate the fear of change.

The language and images you use in your strategic communication are often a blend of hope and fear, or continuity and change. Having a clear sense of what your narrative needs to be provides a solid foundation for your message, so you know what and how you need to be communicating to target voters.

### **Activity 1: Defining Your Campaign Narrative**

1. In 2-3 sentences, describe what it is you want your target voters to be thinking about when they make their decision on who to vote for in the election.

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2. Describe elements of hope and fear that could support your campaign narrative. What should voters hope for or aspire to? What should they be worried about?

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3. Identify 2-3 key issues that your campaign could use as part of your narrative.

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4. Identify experience or qualities that your candidate or political party has which would support your campaign narrative.

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## What is a Message?

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In its simplest form a message is a statement of why someone should vote for a party or a candidate on Election Day.

Once you have identified your target audiences, you need to decide what you will say to persuade them to vote for you. This is your campaign message. It tells the voters why you are running for office and why they should choose you over your opponents for the same position. It is influenced by your strategy and narrative - what you need voters to be thinking about when it comes time to cast their ballots.

### What is a Message?

A message is a short, truthful statement that lays out for voters why they should vote for you.

The test of a good message comes when a supporter can give a concise, persuasive reply to the question, “Why should I support your candidate or your party?” The answer to that question should be your message.

Your campaign needs a message so that you can answer this question – which is asked a million times in a million different ways during an election campaign – and to give focus to your efforts, particularly your campaign communications. This is why your message is a simple statement that can be repeated over and over and over and over throughout the campaign to mobilize supporters and persuade undecided voters.

Your message is the heart of your campaign communications. From your message, you can extract a slogan, which is a short catchy phrase that’s useful for limited communication pieces like posters. To support your message, you must develop a comprehensive platform of policy issues that define the issues on which you are taking a stand and what you will do when elected. For example, if you are the party or candidate supporting job creation, what is your plan for doing this if office?

These three things – slogan, message and policy platform – all compliment one another, but they are not the same things. Consider the differences outlined below.

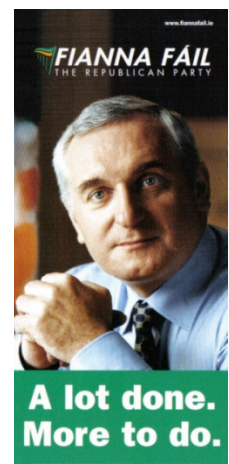
Slogan	Message	Platform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Very short</li><li>• Limited information</li><li>• Seen by all voters</li><li>• Designed to stick easily in people's memories</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Short</li><li>• Substantive</li><li>• Tailored to target voters</li><li>• Statement of purpose - why you deserve support</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Long</li><li>• Comprehensive</li><li>• Not many people read it</li><li>• Statement of intention - policies you will pursue if elected</li></ul>

To further illustrate what a message is and why it's such an important part of your campaign strategy, consider the case studies below. The first is an election in Ireland; the second comes from a presidential race in the United States. These are older elections, but they provide good examples of solid campaign messages.<sup>1</sup>

### Case Study 1 – Fianna Fail<sup>2</sup>

*A message from an incumbent trying to stay in power*

**Background:** In 2002 in the Republic of Ireland, the governing Fianna Fail (FF) party was facing an election against several challengers. In addition to its traditional rivals, Fine Gael and the Labour Party, two additional parties (the Green Party and Sinn Fein) had recently emerged as viable opponents. The Progressive Democrats (PD) were also in the race. The PDs had been in coalition government with Fianna Fail and their supporters didn't like it. Now, they had to distance themselves from FF to reclaim their support. In short, FF was facing attacks from many sides.



**Strategy:** FF's strategy was to remind voters of everything it had achieved in government, to highlight how life had improved for citizens during their years in leadership, to create a desire among voters to maintain

<sup>1</sup> Additional case studies can be found in Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> The party's television broadcast from this election can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBnnoGrytVU>

this momentum, and to demonstrate that they had a clear plan for the years ahead in order for the progress to continue.

**Narrative:** “Fianna Fáil has led a Government which has helped our country to achieve a lot. Real progress has been made on problems which we have struggled with for generations. We have worked hard to implement our promises and we are proud of what we have achieved – but we also know that there is a lot more that remains to be done. We are setting out an agenda for the years ahead to protect and build upon our recent peace, prosperity and progress.

**Message:** “Our message is that our country has achieved a lot and can, with the right policies, achieve much more in the years ahead.”<sup>3</sup>

**Slogan:** “A lot done. More to do.”

## Case Study 2 – Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party<sup>4</sup>

*A message from a challenger trying to create change*

**Background:** In 1992 in the United States, Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party were trying to regain the presidency after 12 years of domination by their political opponents, the Republican Party. George Bush Senior was the Republican president at the time and had won three successive elections in a row, two as vice-president to popular Republican President Ronald Reagan.



**Strategy:** Clinton’s strategy was to focus voters’ attention on what was happening domestically in the country, and in the quality of their own lives. Bush and Reagan had been seen as successful on the foreign stage, but the country was in recession and unemployment was on the rise.

**Narrative:** The narrative was summarized with the catchphrase, “it’s the economy, stupid,” meaning that no matter what the issue was, nothing was more important than what was going on in the US economy.

<sup>3</sup> Fianna Fail 2002 Election Manifesto, <http://irishelectionliterature.wordpress.com/2010/09/20/a-lot-done-more-to-do-full-95-pages-of-the-fianna-fail-2002-2007-manifesto/>, accessed 22 April 2014.

<sup>4</sup> One of the campaign ads from Clinton’s election illustrating this message can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoBFL6iwiid4>

Message: "After 12 years of Republican leadership resulting in social stagnation and economic recession, the American people are ready for a change. The choice in 1992 is clear: Change or more of the same?"

Slogan: "Change, or more of the same?"

### **Activity 2: Message**

1. What do you think makes a good campaign message? Write down 2-3 political, or even commercial, messages that you find especially compelling. What do you think makes these messages effective?

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2. Consider the two case studies in this section. What do you think works well with these messages? In the same situation, what might you do differently?

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## Know Your Audience

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In most countries, there are millions of eligible voters, all of whom come from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are older people and younger people, people from rural areas and from urban areas, and people who work as teachers, farmers, police officers, factory workers, lawyers, students, homemakers, business owners, military officers, and street vendors. There is a vast assortment of people with a variety of life experiences and political perspectives.

No matter how hard you try, you will not be able to persuade all of these different types of people to support your party or candidate. Think about it. Does everyone you know support the same football team? Does everyone in your family like the same music, or the same food? People have distinct differences, preferences and dispositions. Your task, in terms of your communication strategy, is to understand what these preferences are among your target voters and speak to these directly. If, instead, you try to offer a campaign message that speaks to everyone, it's likely that you will not connect with anyone.

Although your message can be heard by everyone, the core elements of your message will be strategically aimed at your target voters. By focusing your efforts on specific subsets of the general population, you'll be able to connect with voters who are most likely to support you, and reflect their particular needs and values.

**Your campaign's communications should focus on your target audiences: specific groups of people that you have identified as supporters or potential supporters.**

So if you aren't communicating with everyone, with whom exactly are you trying to communicate? Your campaign's communications should focus on your target audiences: specific groups of people that you have identified as supporters or potential supporters. Before you embark on any communications planning or designing your message, it's vital to understand the wants, habits, preferences and perspectives of these voters.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In order to complete the exercises in this section, advance work is required. Module 3 of this program identified helps you conduct geographic and demographic targeting to determine who your supporters and potential supporters are, and where they live. Module 4 looks at how to communicate with voters directly and how to track what voters are saying to your campaign. Module 5 examines how to identify and develop policies around issues that are important to your voters. All of this information will help you address the two key questions you'll need the answers to before you can begin to craft your message: 1) Who are my targeted voters; and, 2) What are the issues and problems they care most about?

One of the ways to do this is to create audience personas. Personas are hypothetical “stand-ins” for your actual audiences; they are characters you create to help you tell your story and convey your message. Personas are a communication tool that help to make numbers and figures more understandable, and to apply a human element to policy issues. You’ll find far greater success writing a communications plan, message or speech that works for a specific person rather than trying to plan or write for a faceless demographic audience.

Although personas are fictional, they must be defined with rigor and exactness. The more information you have about your targeted voters, the easier it is to create accurate personas. When you base personas on research, you’ll ensure that the personas truly represent your audience.

Once you have created personas to represent your target audiences, the entire campaign team should keep them in mind when designing all communication materials, including posters, signs, advertisements, and flyers.

### **Activity 3: Creating Audience Personas**

1. Return to the targeting exercises you conducted in Module 3. Below, write down the groups of individuals that you identified as your target voters in this election.

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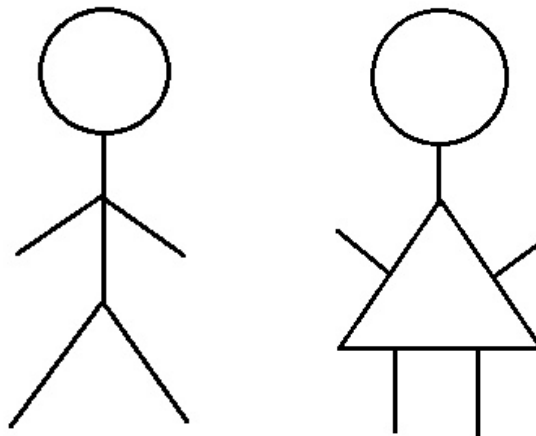
2. Review the answer you have given to the previous question. In your mind, begin to draw a mental picture of what a typical person from each of these groups looks like. How old are they? Are they male or female? What is their level of education? What do they do to earn a living? What clothes do they wear? What cars do they drive? What do they do for leisure or pleasure? What TV programs do they watch? Where do they live?

In the space below, give a name or title to each category of voters you are targeting. Then, create a persona for each. You can either draw a picture of what a typical voter from each category looks like, or use the table to write down as many descriptive words about them as you can.

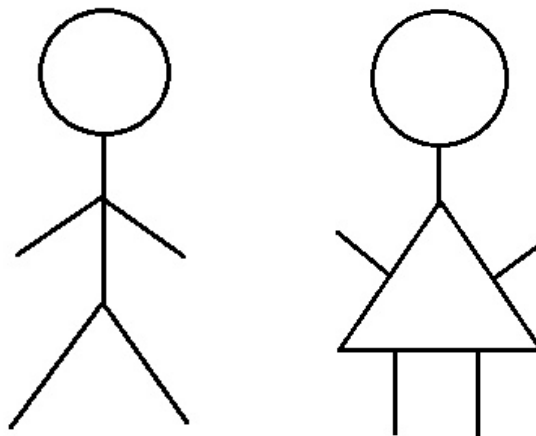
Persona 1:	Persona 2:	Persona 3:

3. Illustrate the stick figures below to match your description of these personas.

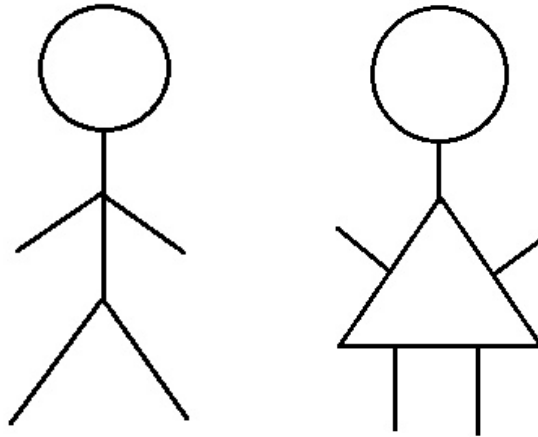
Persona 1:



Persona 2:



Persona 3:



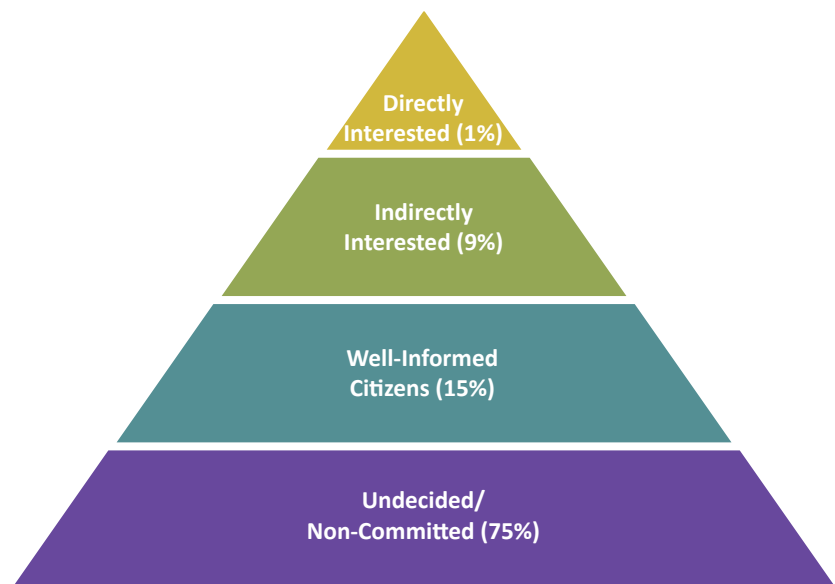
## The Challenge: Getting Heard

Your targeted voters receive thousands of messages every day – from the news, entertainment media, commercial advertisers, family, friends, neighbors, billboards, posters, television, radio, etc. You are not just competing with your opponents; you are competing with all of the other messages out there just to be heard.

The fact that most voters are not very interested in politics makes things even more challenging. The pyramid below gives a general breakdown of the level of interest in politics in most societies around the globe. At times of significant political events these figures can change dramatically, but outside of these unique moments the level of enthusiasm for politics follows ratios similar to those below.

At the top of the pyramid are the people who are eagerly engaged in politics. This makes up about 1% of the population. These are people who have a direct interest in the outcome of the elections, as it might affect their jobs or way of life. It includes political leaders and activists who spend large amounts of time and financial resources campaigning, or political analysts who make a living by commenting on what's going on in politics.

These people in the **Directly Interested** category are going to listen to every word your campaign says, no matter how complicated you make it sound.



The next segment on the pyramid is composed of people who are **Indirectly Interested** in politics. They make up about 9% of the population. This is a wider group that includes members of political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, some employees of state-owned companies and public institutions, and professional organizations that could be affected by a change of state policies. The results of the elections might affect them, but won't necessarily change their lives. This group will also be very interested in what you have to say.

The next group is **Well-Informed Citizens**, making up about 15% of the population. This segment of society includes all of those who like to read beyond the catchy headlines

and who like to know what is going on in their societies. It frequently includes lawyers, journalists and school teachers, but it is not limited to these professions as you can find well-informed citizens in just about any social group. They are interested in what political parties are saying in their campaigns and they will make sure they learn about you no matter how you craft your message.

**These first three groups usually already know who they are voting for.** They understand the environment, follow politics and usually already have a political stance that is unlikely to change. Together, these three groups comprise 25% of the population.

**It is the next and largest group on the pyramid that often has the biggest impact on politics.** These are the people who can decide whether you win or lose the election. This group of **Undecided/Non-committed Citizens** is 75% strong and includes ordinary people who live ordinary lives. They go to work if they have jobs, they spend time with their families and neighbors, and they watch popular shows on television.

A big portion of this group doesn't vote and may never vote, but those who do make all the difference. Sometimes, as in the illustration below, they are simply busy with their own lives and don't have a lot of time to think or worry about politics. Keep in mind as well that at the same time your campaign is trying to communicate with them, they are also receiving multiple messages from other campaigns and other media. This can mean that they don't have a lot of information when it's time to vote, and can support a candidate or party based on information that's easily accessible to them, such as affiliation, appearance or who is likely to win.

These voters typically don't have the time or the interest to pay much attention to political campaigns, and give volunteers little opportunity to actually talk to them. This is why, if you have a chance to talk to these voters, you need to make sure that your message is clear and relevant.

It is for this reason that research and preparation are such important parts of your campaign. Voters in the base of the pyramid are not going to listen to you if you are not talking about issues that matter to them, which means they will not remember your message or recognize you on the ballot when and if they come out to vote.



## Who has time for politics? . . .

What can you do to increase your chances of being heard by voters who are not very interested in politics and are overwhelmed by the number of advertising and political messages they are receiving? The best way to communicate effectively with these voters is to develop a message that is short, simple and speaks directly to the hearts and minds of voters.

You will also need to be very disciplined in how and when you integrate your message and repeat it in every communication. Incorporating message discipline into your communications is discussed in the final section of this workbook.

## Criteria for Effective Messages

A campaign will spend the majority of its resources getting the candidate or party's message out to targeted voters. To ensure your message is effective in influencing your target voters, make certain it meets the following criteria:



## Criteria for Effective Messages

### *Short and Simple*

Messages must be concise. Nobody remembers all the things you say in a speech that takes an hour, nor will they be able to remember all the points in a leaflet if it is 10 pages long. However, they will remember what you have to say if it is only a few sentences long.

The general rule is that if you cannot effectively deliver your message to a voter in less than one minute, then you are likely to lose that voter's attention and possibly their vote.

Your message must be easily communicated and easily understood. It must also be delivered in language the voters use and understand easily. Don't use technical words that have no real meaning to voters. Creating a visual image in the minds of voters is

much better than talking about abstract ideas. For example, talk about people, things and real-life situations to validate or illustrate your message.

### *Truthful and Credible*

Your message needs to authentically reflect the values, practices, policies and history of the candidate or political party. It must be consistent with what has happened in fact.

In addition, your message should be believable. Candidates and political parties that make unrealistic promises simply add to voter apathy. Voters must believe that what you say, both about yourself and what you will do, is true. One way to establish trust is to back up your statements with validators such as proof of past experience and knowledge or know-how on issues relevant to your message.

### *Important to Voters*

An effective message reflects the values and concerns of your target audience — the voters. Keep in mind the problems that voters face everyday in their lives, not issues that politicians think are important to public policy. Voters must see themselves, their hopes and their fears, in your message.

### *Show Differences*

Voters must make a choice between you and other candidates, or your party and other political parties. You need to make it clear to the voters how you are different from the others in the race by contrasting yourself with them. If every candidate stands for economic development and more jobs, then voters will have no way of making a clear choice. If, on the other hand, you support visible electoral reforms or ending corruption and your opponents do not, then the voters will have a very clear choice.

### *Speak to the Head and the Heart*

Politics is an emotional business. This means that you must find a way to tie your campaign message to the concerns of your voters and make it clear that you understand the problems they face everyday. Effective messages that appeal to the heart and the head generally carry one or more of the following characteristics:

- Capture the traditions and beliefs of the region or country
- Appeal to peoples' hopes and aspirations, or address their fears and worries
- Focus on maintaining stability and continuity, or forcing necessary change and reform

People everywhere are generally proud of their cultural heritage, traditions and country. People might be from different regions, different tribes or different upbringings, but above all they have a shared history. When you develop and deliver your message, consider whether it makes sense in this election to include some of the symbols, imagery, traditions and beliefs of your region or country, so that you can connect these images to positive feelings about your party or candidate.

Additionally, consider where your party or candidate is in the eternal debate between hope vs. fear and continuity vs. change. Most elections can be boiled down to these two spectra. Your message should either provide hopeful concepts and imagery, or ones of warning and concern. Your message should describe what you are hopeful about, why people should aspire to something better, and relate that to your party or candidate.

By contrast, your strategy may instead need to focus on peoples' worries or concerns. What is going wrong, or what might go wrong in your country? What could the consequences could be and why? Most often, you will use this kind of apprehension to describe your opponent, or to contrast the hopeful part of your message to the consequences if you are not able to get enough votes to wield political influence. The other dominant theme that every election is about is continuity vs. change. This plays into the same dynamics as hope vs. concerns. Consider whether the election is about remaining in power and continuing on the same path, or aspiring to power for your party or candidate. Your position will significantly affect the language you use in your message.

### **Targeted**

If your campaign message speaks to everyone, then in reality, it speaks to no one. The people who will vote for you are different from those who will not vote for you and both groups have different concerns. Your campaign must determine what these differences are and address your message to your likely supporters. In many cases, voters just need clear information about who really represents their interests. If they have that information, they will vote for that person or that party. Don't fail to provide it.

### **Tested**

Once you have drafted your message, it is essential that you test it. Do it with professionals from your network and groups of your target voters. If you have a message about education, talk to teachers, a professor of education and directors of schools. If your message targets youth, talk to young people from different backgrounds.

But also, talk about it to your family and friends. They are voters too! Get feedback on what all these groups like about the message, what they do not like about the message and why. Ask them what they would change and whether the language convinces them to vote for you. Even this kind of informal testing will help you strengthen your message.

### *Repeated with Discipline*

The real value of a clear message for voters is only realized if you have the discipline to stick with it and incorporate it into every communication that the party produces. This means every communication!

Your message must be adopted by all levels of the party and everyone should use it everywhere. This includes all candidates, party officials, and even volunteers and supporters. It must be communicated every day, in every way until voters absorb it into their minds. And wherever possible, your message should be validated by credible, external people or organizations that support your ideas and policy goals and by credible actions on the part of your party. Only when you repeat it a hundred times will people start to form the link between your candidate, your ideas and your message. If the message is not consistent and different people use different messages, voters will never know what you stand for and why they should vote for you.

## Developing Your Message

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Now, it's time to start constructing your own message, based on your narrative from Activity 1. This section will walk you through the building blocks to developing a strong message for your electoral campaign.

### Step One: Answer Essential Questions

A vital place to start developing your message is to answer a number of essential questions about why you are in this election. These may appear very basic, but many senior and experienced politicians have stumbled on the campaign trail when they couldn't provide meaningful answers to these essential questions:

- A. Why are you running for office?
- B. What problems are you running to solve?
- C. How will you solve these problems?
- D. What makes you a better choice than your opponents?

Answering these questions should give you a sense of purpose and direction. Answer them clearly and concisely, and don't move on until you're satisfied with your answers and you have a firm understanding of why you're competing for this leadership position.

When answering question B, make sure that the problems you want to solve match the problems that your targeted voters want to solve as well. If you are running to improve your country's system of higher education, but the voters whose support you need are concerned primarily with security or sanitation issues, then you have a problem.

When answering question C, help voters see that you have a realistic solution to these problems by explaining how you plan to make these solutions a reality. Elections are a time of promises; your task is to distinguish yourself or your party from other candidates and parties by offering persuasive plans and a clear strategy that clarifies how you will reach your objectives.

Answering question D is about making a clear contrast between your values, plans and priorities, and theirs.

#### **Activity 4: Answering Essential Questions**

1. In the spaces below, answer each of the essential questions to begin to develop your message, based on your narrative.

A. Why are you running for office?

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B. What problems are you running to solve?

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C. How will you solve these problems?

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D. What makes you a better choice than your opponents?

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2. Let's look now at an example of two competing messages.

Two presidential candidates are running for election in a country that struggles with unemployment. In the final stage of the campaign period, they were both given a minute to give their final words at a candidate debate. Review their final remarks from the perspective of a voter choosing between the two candidates.

**Candidate 1, Mohamed:**

"I am a man of action and I will bring financial success to our great nation. I plan to provide employment to every citizen and to get our country to be the economic power in the world.

**Candidate 2, Ahmed:**

"I am running for office because we've had too many empty promises that leave families hurting because the government failed to secure jobs for our citizens. My plan is to tackle this issue by providing tax benefits to new employers, reorganizing the National Development Bank to fund the business ideas of our citizens, and prioritizing job creation in the national budget.

My opponent is full of promises, but I'm the only one who cares about people and can deliver solutions."

Based on these messages, which candidate would you vote for? Why?

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Which of the candidates does a better job answering the essential questions discussed earlier in this section? When a candidate does a better job answering these questions, have they delivered a better message?

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Consider the following analysis of the candidates' messages. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

*Ahmed told you what he plans to do and how. Mohamed is a typical politician who says a lot, but doesn't provide clear plans and solutions. His words are empty clichés that you have heard many times.*

*Ahmed's message is different. It provides a lot of information, but remains fresh and simple. His message stays realistic, concrete and creates a mental picture of an efficient society where people are employed in new companies. It also appeals to values such as opportunity, hard work, fairness, responsibility, community, democracy, and efficiency.*

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## Step Two: Choose the Right Words

The next building block to developing your message is the actual words you use. Different words invoke different feelings and reactions from the audience. For example, when you use a collective phrase like, “we” it creates a different understanding than when you speak in the first person and say “I” or the “party”. “We” invites the voters to be part of what you are proposing in your message, whereas with “I” or simply talking about the party or candidate, it is much more about one individual or one organization stepping up to leadership.

The words you ultimately choose for your message need to be tied to your strategy. What is it you want target voters to be thinking about or feeling as they cast their votes on Election Day? What are the words connected with these thoughts or emotions?

To figure this out, you can brainstorm a key word list as a starting point. This is a list of words that describe you, your priorities and/or what's at stake in the election. These are typically descriptive or action words that help paint a picture in a voter's mind of the type of person a candidate is, what principles or values a party is committed to, and what type of leadership a party or a candidate would bring to elected office. Here are some examples:

change	future	trust	effective
leader	traditional	skills	committed
cares	jobs	people first	hard-working
independent	progressive	fighter	new
devout	forward	peacemaker	honest
one of us	rights	respect	transparent
represent			

To put these words into practice, they must be tied to your strategy. The table below outlines a number of typical situations political parties and candidates find themselves in at elections, and the words or phrases they often use to generate a positive response from target voters.

Situation	What does the party or candidate's message need to achieve?	Message Language
<b><u>Incumbent</u></b> <b>This is a party or candidate who already holds office and is running for re-election.</b>	<p>A sense among the electorate that they have made a difference in their lives and made some important achievements</p> <p>A distaste among the electorate for change or disruption of the status quo</p> <p>Incumbent parties frequently run on their "record" – reminding voters what they have achieved and promoting their experience and effectiveness</p> <p>Evidence of progress and achievements, but also recognition that there is work still to do (the message seeks the support of the electorate to finish the job)</p>	<p>Experience</p> <p>Commitment</p> <p>Proven record</p> <p>Strength</p> <p>Stability</p> <p>Growth</p> <p>Building on what has been achieved</p> <p>Proud/Pride</p>
<b><u>Challenger</u></b> <b>This is a political party or candidate who has been in opposition or who has never been elected before. They are trying to unseat the incumbent.</b>	<p>A desire among the electorate for something new and better</p> <p>Hope among the electorate that change will bring a better life</p> <p>Disappointment with what the current government has delivered and belief that the challenger brings a better vision or plan</p> <p>Concern that things are going wrong</p> <p>Capitalize on voter anger or frustration with the incumbent due to issues of corruption, incompetence, nepotism, etc.</p>	<p>Change</p> <p>Better off</p> <p>New</p> <p>Reform</p> <p>Enough (had enough/not enough)</p> <p>Hope</p> <p>Belief (in something better)</p>

<p><b><u>A Small Party</u></b>  <b>Smaller or newer political parties (as well independent candidates) are often challenged to convince voters that they are not a wasted vote</b></p>	<p>Belief among voters that supporting them will not be a “wasted vote”          Belief among a sufficient number of voters that a smaller party or independent candidate can make a difference in a larger system          In a likely coalition outcome, desire among the voters for a voice to challenge the largest party          A desire among the voters to place a “cat among the pigeons” – to create a disturbance among the larger or older political parties</p>	<p>Independent          Change          Different          Real reform          Clean          Voice of the people          Better (we can do better)          New          Bold</p>
<p><b><u>Contrast</u></b>  <b>Parties and candidates must use the language in their messages to create a contrast with opponents, to highlight what is at stake and to demonstrate what is different or better about them.</b></p>	<p>A sense among the voters that the party is offering something better than the other competitors; that is it stronger, more capable and more equipped to deal with the challenges ahead</p>	<p>New/Young vs. Old          Experienced vs. Inexperienced          Clean vs. Corrupt          Understanding vs. Out of Touch          Capable vs. Incapable of Governing          Vision vs. No Ideas</p>

Here are examples of the Incumbent and Challenger situations in practice:

**Incumbent Example**

*(In this example, a key concern of voters is the economy and jobs)*

“What we need today is a government with a proven record of building our economy and creating new jobs. Others will claim to be able to do this, but they have no real experience bringing jobs and prosperity to our country. Now is not the time to gamble our future on unproven promises. We need proven leadership to continue the important task of rebuilding our economy and creating new jobs today. Vote for Party X.”

**Challenger Example**

“We have a choice this election. We can return to the old parties of the past with more corruption and nepotism. We can continue to watch our elites getting richer and citizens getting poorer. Or, we can vote for change: new energy, new ideas, a new beginning. Together, we can vote to put the needs of citizens first and help build a strong, just and prosperous country. This election, vote for XXX and together we can build a new future.”

### **Activity 5: Choosing the Right Words**

Below are a number of questions to help you develop a message by using the key word list method. Answer each question and consider what types of words you should be using to communicate with voters.

1. List 5 words that describe you, your priorities or what's at stake in the election.

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2. Review the table above of situations political parties and candidate frequently face. Is there one that matches your current challenges? Which words are a good match for how you would like voters to think about you and feel about this election?

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3. What do these words say about you? Do they reflect the concerns of your targeted voters? Do they draw a contrast with your opponents? Do they give people a reason to support you? Are they tied to your strategy?

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4. Considering the key words you've chosen, come up with a simple statement that answers the three essential questions: why you are running, what you will do, and why you are the better choice in this election. This is your message.

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### Step Three: Finding Your Style

Your message should emerge from your research, your targeting and your strategy, but it should also be connected to who you are as a candidate or a political party. That is to say, it should be authentic, personal and represent who you are and the values in which you believe.

There is no single way to construct your message. In fact, some of the most effective messages are those that are a little bit different, a little bit creative, more distinct and genuine. How do you find your genuine voice? Make sure you're talking about your values, and what is most important to you in this election. The main point with style is that you do not want to sound like everyone else. Be different; it's what sets you apart! If you do not distinguish yourself from other parties, voters will not have a reason to vote for you.

Remember as well that when you are developing your message, you should imagine that you are talking to a friend in the street or a family member. Use words that are easy to understand and similar to what people use in their everyday language, communicating with one another. Keep it short and simple. Don't speak like an academic, referencing obscure policy issues.

If your friend on the street wouldn't understand you, or if they would disagree with your choice of language, others like them are likely to do the same. The words you use should be easily communicated and easily understood. People should know what you are talking about.

#### Activity 6: Finding Your Style

1. Review the message you constructed in Activity 5, Question 4. Are these words a good fit for you? Do they suit your style? Do they represent your values? Are they simple and easy to understand? Review the message you have written and, if necessary, construct any revisions below.

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## Step Four: Checking for Contrast

Along with everything else, elections are also about choice. Voters have to choose which party or candidate they support. To make this decision, voters frequently assess which party or candidate shares their vision for the country, or they ask themselves who they trust most to represent their interests.

**Elections are about choice. This is why you want to be clear that there is a difference between you and all other parties or candidates. There has to be something at stake, that you represent but your opponents don't.**

This important choice is the reason why you want to be clear that there is a difference between you and all other parties or candidates. There has to be something at stake, that you represent but your opponents don't. This creates a sense of urgency with voters. If they feel something is at stake, if they can win or lose something, they are far more likely to vote for your party or candidate.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most useful tools to ensure your message contains important contrast is the Message Box. The message box is a simple square with four separate quadrants, each of which covers a specific aspect of the electoral debate between a candidate or political party and their strongest opponent. These quadrants are: what we say about us, what we say about them, what they say about us, and what they say about themselves.

The two quadrants at the top of the box are about what we are going to say in our campaign. The first focuses on the message we have already constructed based on our research, our values, our strategy and what we want voters to think and feel about this election. Next to it is what we might choose to say about our opponent, essentially their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and the reasons why we are challenging them.

The bottom half focuses on what our opponent is saying. In one quadrant we list what they say about us: our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In the final column we analyze what they are likely to say about themselves: their strengths, values, and what they want target voters to think and feel about this election.

The message box helps us test our message for contrast, to ensure we are highlighting what makes us different and better choice for voters than our opponent.

<sup>6</sup> In terms of style, it can be helpful to describe the role of the voter in this description of what's at stake. In this way, voters are more likely to feel compelled to get involved to create the outcome they want, i.e., to vote for your party or candidate.

What we say about us	What we say about them
<i>The reasons people should vote for you</i>	<i>The reasons people should vote against your opponent</i>
What they say about us	What they say about them
<i>The reasons people should vote against you</i>	<i>The reasons people should vote for your opponent</i>

To use the message box in an election with multiple competitors, you must first figure out who your primary opponent is. To do this, consider who you are competing with directly for votes. If you're not competing with another party or candidate for votes, even if they are attacking you, they are not your opposition. When you are facing challenges from multiple candidates or parties, create message boxes for all of your significant opponents.

When working with the message box, it is important to include all factors that may play a role in the election campaign, including things that may go unsaid or charges that can be made by implication. For example, if you say that you are the more experienced candidate, you can also be implying that your opponents lack the necessary experience. By saying you are the more honest choice, you suggest that your opponents are dishonest, untrustworthy or corrupt.

Keep in mind that your opponents can do this to you as well. For example, your opponents may focus on your lack of experience or say you don't have any real plans or policies. A message box helps you anticipate these types of attacks, see where there are contrasts that are beneficial to you and think through how you will respond to both stated and implied charges.

The message box also helps you see your campaign or your party from the perspective of your opponent, which is not always easy to do. We're not used to seeing our opponents positively and ourselves negatively. However, being able to think through these dynamics clearly will make a significant difference in how effective your communications are during the campaign.

An example is offered below of the message box in practice. This is a competition for a local election between two candidates, Fatima and Mohammed. This is Fatima's message box.

### Fatima's Message Box

Fatima → Fatima	Fatima → Mohammed
"You can count on Fatima to fight for you."	"Mohammed won't be on your side when it matters."
Mohammed → Fatima	Mohammed → Mohammed
"Fatima fights with everybody and doesn't get the job done."	"Mohammed brings people together to get things done."

Fatima wants to present herself as someone who tirelessly works for the benefit of the community. To create contrast, Fatima characterizes her opponent as someone who will not be there when you need him.

Fatima anticipates that the opponent might try to undermine her position as a hard worker for the community, saying that she fights with everyone and that she doesn't get the job done. Fatima can address this by turning the image of a fighter into something positive by saying, "You can count on me to fight for you." She can give examples of people she has fought for in the community and what she has achieved to validate this image.

### Activity 7: Using the Message Box to Check for Contrast

1. Fill out the chart below, using your message and those of your main opposition party or candidate. In the first quadrant, write out the main things you say about yourself. Next to that, write out the main things your opponent says about him or herself. Now, in the third quadrant, write what you say about your opponent. Finally, in the last box, write the main things your opponent says about you.

What we say about us	What we say about them
What they say about us	What they say about them

- Review all of the statements in your message box, both those that could be attributed to you and to your opponent. Based on the strength of the statements, assess whose message is more likely to dominate in the campaign: yours or your opponent's? Why do you think this is the case? If you think your opponent currently has the stronger message or better contrast, what can you do to bolster your own message?

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## Framing Policy Issues

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All campaigns need to incorporate policy issues into their message in one form or another. Voters want to know where you stand on the issues that are most important to them and, in some elections, to help them define and understand what these issues are.

In your message, you should be able to speak about what issues affect your target voters the most, describe how you are going to solve that problem and talk about how you are going to do that. At its core, politics is about solving problems of ordinary people. Talk about the problems they experience, why you feel that should be solved and how you are going to solve them.

Crafting messages for policy issues is often referred to as “framing.” This is a useful term because it describes exactly what you are trying to do with subjects that can be complex and overwhelming. Framing issues puts borders around them, so you can talk about them solely in terms that connect your message, your targeted voters’ concerns and your proposed solutions.

The best approach is to:

1. Describe the problem
2. Provide solutions to the problem
3. Tell how you will implement these solutions
4. Describe the urgency and the role voters can play in securing the desired outcome

See if you can see the four steps put into practice in this example:

### **Policy Example**

“The poor quality of our education system is strangling our country. It weakens our economy, limits the opportunities for success of our children and marginalizes our mothers and sisters. We must make a full commitment to quality education for every child. We must allocate a fixed portion of our national budget to building new schools, recruiting qualified teachers and providing a modern education to help our children succeed. Together, we can provide our children the education they deserve.”

At times, voters can feel that policy issues are distant, too big or overwhelming, or little more than a tangle of numbers and statistics. One of the best ways to help connect your target audience to your policies is to personalize the issues at stake. Talk about the lives of people affected by the problem, give examples of personal experiences that demonstrate a political issue or belief. This helps voters form a better picture of what you are talking about.

Here's an example of how to talk about policy issues in the form of a story:

***Policy Example***

"My mother is not able to read and write. Because of illiteracy, she was not able to get a job and lead the life she wants. There are hundreds of thousands of women like my mother; over 60% of the women in our region cannot read or write. This is why I want to combat illiteracy, and why I am campaigning to fund reading centers in every community – so that women like my mother can have more opportunities and a better life."

Suddenly, the abstract figure of 60% female illiteracy feels more human and more real. Additionally, by making it personal you will be forced to talk about your values and beliefs, which are the reasons people vote for you. Voters vote for parties and candidates who share their values and that they believe will best represent what that voter stands for and believes in.

Talking about policy issues in this way also helps voters to understand your policy proposals better and to see the contrast between your ideas and those of your opponent. Consider the following examples from the case study of Fatima in her race against Mohammed:

**Issue 1: Affordable housing**

On the issue of affordable housing, Fatima uses her own experience of fighting for her house and creates a message where she promises to fight just as hard for people to get their own homes.

**Issue by Itself**

"Citizens who work hard deserve affordable housing for their families."

**Issue when Personalized**

"It took me 20 years of work and saving to build a house for my children and family. You can count on me to fight for every citizen's right to affordable housing when they put in a hard day's work."

The values she's sharing here are fairness, compassion, generosity, respect and hard work. The mental picture she's creating in people's minds is a happy family in a home they have worked to earn.

**Issue 2: Care for the elderly**

This time the issue is retirement benefits for the elderly, and ensuring families having the resources to care for older members. In this case, Fatima uses her experience with her own parents to assure us that she cares about the issue.

### Issue by Itself

“The government should protect retirement benefits for the elderly.”

### Issue when Personalized

“I learned how difficult it is for families when I took care of my parents as they got older. You can count on me to protect our older citizens.”

The values she is sharing here are again compassion, family, generosity, and the mental picture she is trying to create is ensuring our parents and grandparents are taken care of.

### Issue 3: Schools and education

The next example is about the issue of overcrowded schools and poor quality of education.

### Issue by Itself

“Our schools are overcrowded. Our kids need a good place to learn and good teachers.”

### Issue when Personalized

“Mohammed won’t fight for our children when he votes on the budget. I have supported our libraries and teachers for years and you can count on me in the future.”

In this example, Fatima uses the fact that she was active in a related field – supporting libraries and teachers – and at the same time she uses the “What we say about them” section in the message box to talk about Mohammed’s weakness.

### Activity 8: Framing Policy Issues

1. What issues do you think matter most to your voters? List at least 3 below.

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2. Of the issues you have listed, which would you focus on if you were elected? What policies would you fight for to address these issues?

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3. Construct a message around the issues you listed in the previous question. Try one of the methods illustrated in this section. Either use the four-step process to framing a policy message (describe the problem, provide solutions to the problem, tell how you will implement these solutions and describe the urgency and the role voters can play in securing the desired outcome) or personalize it with your own story or that of other affected by the issue.

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## Testing Your Message

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Would you buy a new car without ever testing it to see how well it runs and how it handles out on the road? Hopefully not. The same is true for your message. Before you take your message to the voters, you need to test it first.

**When you test your message, you are looking to see whether people interpret your message differently from what you meant, whether they respond positively or negatively to it, or whether the response is strong or weak.**

When you test your message, you are looking to see whether people interpret your message differently from what you meant, whether they respond positively or negatively to it, or whether the response is strong or weak. If there are misunderstandings or misinterpretations, if respondents seem to feel that it's bland, or if people clearly don't like it then you should tweak or change the message.

Organizing some form of focus groups is the best way to test your message. Recruit professionals from your network and groups of your target voters. If you have a message about education, talk to teachers, education experts from academia and civil society and directors of schools. If your message targets youth, talk to young people from different backgrounds.

Get feedback on what all these groups like about the message and whether they find it persuasive. Ask what they do not like about the message, why and what they would change.

This does not have to be a massive or expensive undertaking. If this feels too complex or you don't have enough time to organize more formal focus groups, run your message by family and friends – they're voters too! Even this kind of informal testing will help you strengthen your message.

### **Activity 9: Testing Your Message**

1. Think about your message and the types voters you are targeting in this election. What groups of people do you need to recruit to get their feedback on your message? List at least three different groups of people below who you will recruit as focus groups to test your message.

1) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Using the Message: Discipline and Repetition

Voters today get a great deal of information from many sources: friends and family, television, billboards and signs, newspapers, radio, and the internet, to name a few. Because people are exposed to so many different messages, they often only remember messages after they have seen or heard them many times. Think of how often you see most advertisements on television for commercial products like soft drinks or fast food. You probably see these dozens of times, because professional advertising agencies know that's what it takes for people to remember their advertising campaign messages.

The same challenge holds for political communication. A campaign only has a limited number of opportunities to communicate with voters. If the campaign message is repeated, the chances of it being remembered are better. If, on the other hand, the candidate talks about different issues during every speech and the campaign's signs and radio ads say different things, voters will be confused and the campaign's message will not get through.

**People are exposed to so many different messages that they often only remember them after they have seen or heard them many times.**

**Since a campaign only has a limited number of opportunities to communicate with voters, if the campaign message is repeated on every one of these occasions, the chances of it being remembered are better.**

Every time your candidate or the campaign communicates is an opportunity to repeat and reinforce the message. In fact, your campaign's message should be the foundation of all communications, whether it's training volunteers, meeting voters, giving news media interviews, posting on social media, designing signs and banners, advocating for policy proposals, or debating other candidates.

Sticking to your campaign's message, even when other campaigns or reporters are trying to change the subject, is referred to as message discipline. Message discipline is the best way to reach your audience among all the other competing messages and when opponents are trying to frame the debate differently. Those who stay on message stand out in the debate.

Remember, it's your campaign. You are campaigning for a reason and the people deserve to hear what that reason is.

### **Activity 10: Using the Message**

1. Consider each of the situations below. Write down how you would adapt your campaign's message in each of the following circumstances:

Recruiting volunteers \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Meeting potential supporters \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Posting on the campaign's Facebook page \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Fundraising \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 1 – Message Case Studies

Below are two additional message case studies. These offer additional examples of what a message is, continued from section two.

### Case Study 3 – Green Party of Germany<sup>7</sup>

*A message from a smaller party*

*Small parties can struggle to get the support they need if there is the perception that they will not make it into government and therefore they represent a “wasted vote.” To overcome this, small parties frequently position themselves as the agents of change, as the people who can deliver real policies that larger parties cannot simply because they are so deeply entrenched in the current system. In developing a message, it is most important that a smaller party identify who it is running against, i.e., from which party (or parties) does it expect to take voters?*

**Background:** In 2002, the Alliance 90/Green Party was standing in the federal elections in Germany. They had been in coalition government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for four years. It was the Green Party’s first time in federal government in its history, and it had been difficult for them. The Greens lost the support of some of their base voters over controversial policies and compromises it had made in government. At the same time, it was still perceived by other voters as a fringe party. The party had to find a way to bring its base voters back in and pick up votes from supporters of other left-leaning parties.



Top line: “Green works”  
Text box: “Outside minister, inside green.”  
The photo is of Joschka Fischer

**Strategy:** In the election campaign, Alliance 90/Greens Party focused on what they had recently achieved to demonstrate that they are a party capable of government. They also sought to create contrast with the alternative – the opposition Christian Democratic Party – to demonstrate to voters that the Greens (and their SPD coalition partner) were a better choice. Finally, the Greens’ campaign focused on Joschka Fischer, who had been popular as vice-chancellor and foreign minister and was perceived by voters as both likeable and capable.

<sup>7</sup> A party election broadcast can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK-1AgsgcKY>. It is in German.

Message: “The Greens have achieved a lot in government, but by no means are finished! We have successfully introduced a nuclear phase-out, a new law on citizenship, more renewables and more consumer rights. To deepen and perpetuate these environmental and social reforms, we want to continue the coalition with the Social Democrats for another four years – as an even stronger green partner. Edmund Stoiber [head of the opposition Christian Democratic Party] wants to send our country back to the 20th century. The policy he proposes is reactionary, cold-hearted and blind to environmental concerns. And he wants to send our troops to a war in Iraq!

If you want our country to stay on the path of social and environmental reform, and if you want Joschka Fischer to remain our foreign minister, vote Green on 27 September!”<sup>8</sup>

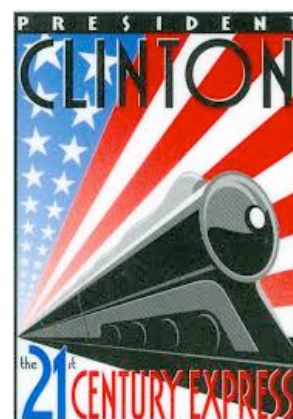
Slogan: “Green works!”

## Case Study 4 – Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party<sup>9</sup>

*A message focused on creating contrast with an opponent*

*It is always important that a party’s message creates contrast with its opponents so that it is clear to voters what makes that party different and better. In some elections, creating this distinction is vital – for example, when there are higher levels of disinterest among voters or when there is a sense among the electorate that “all politicians are the same.” Parties and candidates create contrast by using illustrative language that paints a clear picture in voters’ minds of what the contrast is and why it’s meaningful. The tighter the election, the more important contrast is.*

Background: In 1996, Bill Clinton was running for re-election to the presidency of the United States. It was not going to be an easy win. Clinton had been in office for four years and under his leadership the Democratic Party had lost majority control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years.



<sup>8</sup> Green European Foundation, Campaign Handbook, <http://campaignhandbook.gef.eu/campaign-messages/>, accessed 23 April 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Edits from Clinton’s speech accepting the party’s nomination as candidate for president at the 1996 Democratic convention can be found the following link. This is an excellent example of message discipline and the value of repetition as well.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZh9qiD1BK4&feature=youtu.be>

Additionally, there had been a number of scandals during Clinton's presidency which continued to be the subject of debate during the election. Clinton's chief opponent was Senator Bob Dole, a well-known political leader whose Republican Party was making gains with its ambitious Contract for America policy platform.

**Strategy:** Clinton had to create a contrast with Dole, whose party was making gains in elections to the House of Representatives and the Senate. He had to show that, in terms of the presidency, he was the only man who could deliver. He did this by positioning himself as the man with the plan and the capacity to build on what had been achieved and to deliver a better future for the country. He constantly talked about the future. How did this create contrast? At the time of the election, Bill Clinton was 49 years old; Bob Dole was 73.

**Message:** "Let us resolve to build a bridge to the 21st century, to meet our challenges and protect our values. Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help young people and adults to get the education and training they need, to make our streets safer, to help Americans succeed at home and at work, to break the cycle of poverty and dependence, and to protect our environment for generations to come . . . Let us resolve to build that bridge."

**Slogan:** "Building a bridge to the future."