

# Talking Politics to Union Members:

## Political Communication and Issue Messaging

### Overview

Unions represent a broad range of political ideologies, with an almost even split between self-described republicans, democrats, and independents. This is a key difference from traditional political parties, which often represent a single political ideology.

Another big difference between unions and political parties is that politics is not our central purpose. **We don't live to do politics; we do politics to live.**

Our primary role is to serve the interests of workers on the job, whether on the legislative front or at the bargaining table. As a result, we end up dealing with a more focused list of issues than most political parties. While Democrats and Republicans try to balance the often-competing needs of corporations and workers, labor unions advocate entirely on behalf of workers and their economic interests.

How we talk to other union members about these issues is a unique process reflecting our unique role and relationship with our fellow workers.

1. This chapter will review the **basic rules for Political Communication** with union members as highlighted in the 10 Rules for Talking to Union Members about Politics.
2. It will then go through the steps of **messaging** a political or labor issue. The key ingredients to making a successful issue message will be discussed.
  - The Message Frame**
  - The Message's Values**
  - The Simple Choice**
  - The Believable Message**
  - The Mental Picture**
3. Finally, we review **ground rules of one-on-one organizing** on political issues. Given the sometimes-contentious nature of talking politics, this is an important section to help organizers develop an effective approach at one-on-one organizing.

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **Union Members' Views on Politics**

Union members are typically skeptical of parties, campaigns and candidates. Despite this, there are key issues that unite union members, and in general they support the Labor Movement's engagement in the political process and its legislative priorities. Opinion research by Peter Hart Research Associates over the past few years shows:

- **75 percent** of union members agree that, "unions need to invest time and money in politics and legislation today to counter the influence of corporations and wealthy special interests."
- **70 percent** of union members say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who "is supported by the AFL-CIO and national unions, and has strong pro-union positions on the issues."
- **86 percent** of union members agree with labor's positions on issues like the minimum wage and Medicare.

Yet, members have real concerns about the way unions approach politics.

**Members sometimes feel their union is overly partisan, focusing more on political candidates and parties than on working family issues.** This alienates many union members who feel the political system is generally corrupt and hostile to working people. Members prefer that their union give working people a voice in a political system that currently excludes them.

**Members do not like being told who to vote for.** Members understand that knowledge is power, so they want their unions to give them the information to make intelligent choices on their own.

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **10 Rules for Talking to Union Members about Politics**

The following **10 Rules for Talking to Union Members about Politics** outline the core principles of political communication.

### **1. Issues come first, not candidates and parties.**

From the members' perspective, political action should be based on issues. Working to elect pro-worker candidates is a legitimate union activity, but only as a means to win on important issues like better wages and benefits—not as an end in itself. This means we need to let members know consistently—not just before elections—what issues the union believes are important, what our position is on the issues and why.

### **2. Members want information, not voting instructions.**

Members say they do not want to be told for whom to vote; instead, they want credible information about the candidates. Members prefer union literature that shows the positions of both candidates on key issues. If we provide solid information, most members do not object to the union making a formal endorsement, but recommendations are better received than commands.

### **3. Present information credibly and objectively.**

Members are very skeptical of anything dealing with politics, so they are looking for independent sources of information. Therefore, it is important that our information is credible—with cited information sources and without implausible claims about how good or bad a candidate might be. Members consistently tell us their favorite political materials are voter guides that evaluate candidates. Such pieces also show the union actually evaluated all candidates—and didn't simply make a partisan choice.

### **4. Downplay partisan rhetoric and stress the union's role as an independent voice for working people.**

Union members are turned off by partisanship. Union members are Republican, Democrats and Independents, yet they share common concerns. Our political communications should be based on issues, not parties or candidates. Members want reassurance that unions support candidates because of their commitment to workers issues, not their political affiliation.

### **5. Unions should be watchdogs that hold politicians accountable.**

We cannot overstate how skeptical our members are of politicians. Many fear that politicians will say anything to be elected but then do something different once in office. Unions must acknowledge this possibility to their members and hold accountable those officials receiving union support.

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **10 Rules for Talking to Union Members about Politics**

### **6. Members want unions to tackle issues that affect them the most and fight for populist values.**

Labor's agenda should focus first on economic and work-related issues that are most important to workers. Members trust their union on those issues. Link our issues to our populist values. Describe how our positions are shaped by those values.

### **7. Union communications should be “of, by and for” the members.**

Our literature and material must look and sound different from political advertising. The less the messages look and sound like a continuation of partisan political dialogue, the more they will be heard by the members. Union communications should empower the members. Therefore, our political communications should involve the members as much as possible and not be “top down.” Members are more likely to get involved if they are invited to do so. We should provide members with visible opportunities to be involved in the process, such as through surveys or candidate forums.

### **8. Education leads to persuasion and participation.**

Traditionally, education is thought of as being a different activity from persuasion of members to support a candidate or issue. Research shows, however, that the largest barrier to participation is members' low level of knowledge about a candidate or issue. Members who are not informed are reluctant to vote. Consequently, the best way to increase turnout and support is to assist them in becoming better informed.

### **9. Members are best reached by a combination of methods.**

Worksite leaflets and worksite based organizing conversations should be supplemented with mail from the local union and local union publications. A variety of contact methods will help our message reach the membership and stay with them.

### **10. Personalize the message to the particular union audience, rather than rely on “one size fits all” messages.**

Employment sector differences, gender, race and language differences should be addressed with tailored messaging.

# Talking Politics to Union Members

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## Developing a Message for your Issue

Talking with our fellow workers about political issues can be an uncomfortable experience for some people. We risk debating, annoying, or offending our co-workers. Politics can be a touchy subject, and this is why having a strong message is important.

A strong message presents a simple, clear perspective on an issue. It is an essential ingredient to uniting different groups of people together on common ground, and providing the motivation to get active on an issue. A good message can steer a discussion away from a debate and toward a more pleasant and productive conversation. So how do you create a strong political message?

## Framing your Message

First, strong messages have a **compelling perspective, point-of-view, or as they say in politics – “Frame.”** A message frame is a unique and valid perspective on an issue. Here’s an example:

**A man came upon a construction site where two people were working.**

**He asked the first, “What are you doing?” and the man answered, “I’m laying bricks.”**

**He asked the second, “What are you doing?” and the man stood up and smiled and said, “I’m building a cathedral.”**

In this story, two men are describing the same activity, but the first focuses on the process, while the second highlights the outcome. Each man’s viewpoint is valid, but by choosing to highlight different aspects of the activity, each man conveys a different message about their work. This is a very simple example of “message framing.”

When forming a political message, decide which aspect of an issue you want to focus on. It should be compelling, simple, and believable. Let’s use the issue of the **Minimum Wage** as an example:

**Support Raising the Minimum Wage:** People are working 40 hours a week making less than \$11,000 a year. Costs are increasing and these workers are finding it hard to make ends meet. We need to raise the minimum wage.

**Oppose Raising the Minimum Wage:** The minimum wage is a job killer and burden to small businesses. It will force small businesses to cut their workforce, or risk going out of business. We can’t afford to raise the Minimum Wage.

This example shows how each position on the minimum wage is typically framed. Those supporting the Minimum Wage make the issue about the employee; those opposed to the Minimum Wage make the issue about the employer. The decision we make on whether to support or oppose an issue depends on the way it is framed, and which perspective is the most appealing.

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **Focusing on Values**

Statistics are helpful in illustrating a point or supporting a position, but they make for a poor message. Trivia, facts, statistics, and math are weak messages because they rarely evoke any emotional feelings and it's very easy to argue against them.

A good message needs to produce an emotion to be appealing, and the most appealing messages tap into our universal values. Universal values are those core values common to everyone regardless of their political affiliation. Values like: compassion, fairness, honesty, safety, etc.

Let's look at the previous example again to illustrate this:

**Support Raising the Minimum Wage:** People are working 40 hours a week making less than \$11,000 a year. Costs are increasing and these workers are finding it hard to make ends meet. We need to raise the minimum wage.

**Oppose Raising the Minimum Wage:** The minimum wage is a job killer and burden to small businesses. It will force many small businesses to cut back their workforce, or risk going out of business altogether. We can't afford to raise the Minimum Wage.

Both positions appeal to a person's sense of compassion and fairness. Do you sympathize with poor people who put in a full workweek and still can't make ends meet? What about small businesses forced to cut jobs just to remain open? Both messages generate sympathy and touch on the issue of fairness, but which one is more persuasive?

In most Minimum Wage campaigns, the public generally shows more sympathy with the worker than the business. People simply see the poor as being much more vulnerable than any small business owner. Most people also identify more with being an employee than an employer. The pro-minimum wage position is generally stronger because it resonates more with the public and generates stronger feelings of compassion and fairness.

Think about the union issues most important to you. What values underlie your issues and your position on those issues?

Try constructing a sentence as follows: "(insert your issue) is about (insert a value here)." Now try to describe how your issue and that particular value are related.

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **Offering a Simple, Clear Choice**

When an issue is framed to be simple and straightforward, it is easy to make the choice of what position to take on it. In the Minimum Wage example, both messages use simple language and succeed in making their position sound like common sense positions to take. Each message evokes core values and natural emotions. Finally, each message frames the issue with two clear positions you can take, either you are for it or against it.

A strong message makes a simple case about an issue, either it is good or bad, right or wrong. Messages simplify issues into two opposing values. Either you are compassionate or you are not. Either you are fair or you are not. In the case of the pro-Minimum Wage message, your choice is to support poor workers or not. In the anti-Minimum Wage message, your choice is to support struggling small businesses or not.

Below is a list of common values that we share. Next to them is a list of the opposite value.

<b>Honesty</b>	<b>Deceit</b>
<b>Fairness</b>	<b>Discrimination</b>
<b>Hard Work</b>	<b>Laziness</b>
<b>Prosperity</b>	<b>Poverty</b>
<b>Security</b>	<b>Danger</b>
<b>Freedom</b>	<b>Oppression</b>
<b>Efficient</b>	<b>Bureaucratic</b>
<b>Compassion</b>	<b>Cruelty</b>

Our society has strong opinions about these values and an issue that is rooted in these values is easy to take a position on.

Think about the issues important to you. What does it mean to support your issue? What does it mean to oppose it?

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **Making a Message Believable**

Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election in mid-September.

In September of 2008, the U.S. Economy began a massive downward spiral. Foreclosure rates increased, job losses increased, the stock market reported record losses almost everyday. The situation looked dire when, on September 15, 2008 while campaigning in Florida, Republican Presidential candidate, John McCain, declared not once, but twice that:

“The fundamentals of our economy are strong.”

For daring to express a message that flew in the face of reality, John McCain was ridiculed mercilessly in the press. He validated the criticism that he was out of touch and his poll numbers weakened. He never regained the momentum that he won coming off the Republican National Convention only two weeks before, and watched over the next two months as Barack Obama surged past him to claim victory on Election Day.

This is an extreme example, but shows the need for your message to be believable. You may not lose a Presidential Election because of it, but you will likely lose your listeners if they don't find your message to be believable. Your credibility is on the line, so don't exaggerate your message or distort your issue or position. There is a word for that, it's called “spin” and is highly discouraged. Messaging is about imparting a simple, believable, and appealing perspective on your issue.

What makes a message believable? It cannot contradict the opinions or knowledge someone already holds. Instead, it should build upon and reinforce someone's opinions, values, and knowledge.

When John McCain couldn't remember how many homes he owned, and then responded that the economy was strong when in fact it wasn't, people began forming an opinion that John McCain was out of touch. So when Barack Obama appeared at each of their four debates and said to a national audience that John McCain, “just doesn't get it” on national security, healthcare, or environmental issues, people listened and nodded their heads in agreement. Obama's message built on an opinion people already held about McCain and applied it to several other campaign issues.

When the AFL-CIO launched it's healthcare reform campaign in 2008, the number one concern people had was insurance costs. In a bad economy, people's primary value regarding healthcare was security, specifically, financial security. The AFL-CIO message was simple, believable, and appealed to the value of financial security, “Healthcare costs too much.” No one argued with that message; in fact, everyone nodded in agreement and the discussion took off.

A strong message reinforces both the values and the opinions someone already holds.



# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **The Message's Mental Picture**

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. That means a picture is a handy tool to have when delivering a message. The right image can communicate even complex ideas quickly and clearly. Strong messages carry powerful visual images that serve to reinforce and crystallize ideas.

At the 1976 Republican Convention, Governor Ronald Reagan spoke out against welfare programs and invoked the now famous "Welfare Queen" to support his position that welfare was an abused and wasteful expenditure of government resources. Since then, the concept of the "Welfare Queen" has largely proven to be a myth, but the potency of the image keeps it alive in the public mind.

Take a minute to think about the "Welfare Queen." Where does she live? What kind of car does she drive? How many children does she have? How old is she? What race is she? Like many people, you probably have an answer to each of these questions, and they likely conform to the majority of other people's responses. This simple example demonstrates the power of the right message to conjure up a powerful and lasting image in people's minds.

There are other examples of language that evoke a strong visual response. In the last few years, progressive groups and individuals have talked about the "Middle Class Squeeze" to highlight the burden of working people trying to make ends meet in an economy where wages are stagnate and costs have risen. It leaves people with an image of the continued pressure this economy is causing.

Conservative groups have used the image of "Big Government" to raise the specter of a large, bloated, and impersonal bureaucracy. They have contrasted this with the image of "Small Government," which is non-threatening, lean, and efficient organization.

What other examples of message imagery can you think of? Think about your own issues. What visuals capture the idea of your issue? How can you weave that descriptive language into your own message?

## **Review: The Five Parts of a Strong Message**

- Frame**
- Values**
- Simple**
- Believable**
- Picture**

# **Talking Politics to Union Members**

## **Delivering the Message**

A strong message is nothing without a strong delivery, and the best delivery is through a one-on-one conversation. Good organizing skills are essential for talking about potentially touchy issues, especially politics. Organizers need to develop a solid approach to open up listeners to the message.

Here are 5 basic ground rules for talking one-on-one with someone about a political issue.

- 1. Conversation:** Open up a conversation, not a debate, and certainly not a classroom lesson. Organizers are there to encourage people to get active and join the cause, not to prove who's right, and not to teach people what they don't know. These put the listener in a position of inferiority. Conversations succeed in getting people to open up, listen, and join the effort.
- 2. Ask and Listen:** Asking questions and listening to the other person respond aren't just polite things to do. You won't persuade someone to join your effort if you do all the talking. Listening to the other person gives you valuable information about what they think, what's important to them, and allows you to better tailor your message to them.
- 3. Agreement:** Look for common ground that you can both agree on. This is a conversation not a contest. Build on the areas you agree on, and don't waste time talking about all the ways you disagree. Always remember your goal is to get them to join your side.
- 4. Repeat your Message:** It takes a while for a message to sink in. Use every opportunity to repeat your message to help it stick.
- 5. Stay on Message:** Sometimes you will find yourself pulled off message by unrelated questions, complex hypothetical situations, or by arguing against the opposition's message. Avoid being pulled off message by pivoting back to your original message. Talk about your position, defend your position, but don't waste time attacking the opposition's message.