



Fall 2008

To: Interested Parties

Fr: Women Donors Network

Re: Voter Support for a Broader Agenda on Important Life Decisions

In 2006, the Women Donors Network and the Communications Consortium Media Center created *Moving Forward*, a research-based initiative to test and develop a new, expanded frame and language on reproductive health that can win policy debates and deepen public understanding without compromising support for abortion rights. We also sought to build upon those issues that American voters overwhelmingly support such as birth control, comprehensive sex education, stem cell research and better end-of-life care.

The *Moving Forward* research team, led by Harris Interactive and Breglio Consulting, talked to voters about an interrelated set of issues that included comprehensive sex education, emergency contraception, stem cell research, and the HPV vaccine. We used a wide range of qualitative research methods including individual interviews, focus groups, online bulletin boards and eight instant-response dial groups. The research examined the personal relevance, values, language usage and positioning on these issues among likely voters. After completing this research, in July 2006, we fielded a comprehensive national survey of 1,001 randomly sampled likely voters to confirm, quantify and further understand our findings.

The result is a set of message frames anchored in values and based on comprehensive research. This memo is the first in a series of analysis of the *Moving Forward* research. We focus on the top key findings that were consistent and clear across different audiences.

For more information or to download a copy of this memo, visit:

www.ImportantLifeDecisions.org.

MOVING FORWARD TOP 10 KEY FINDINGS

A NEW FRAME LEADS TO A NEW DISCUSSION; IT MATTERS WHERE YOU START THE CONVERSATION.

Our research shows Important Life Decisions is a frame broad enough to encompass reproductive health and other issues and is an effective way to start a conversation with voters on a larger set of progressive issues. Our findings also suggest starting conversations with the broadest frame possible, not with individual issues.

- The frame incorporates the word “life” in a new way and prompts people to naturally use language that conveys a set of core American values including individual decision-making, responsibility, respect, freedom and prevention.
- By using the word “decisions,” we can highlight the more serious, deliberative nature of making a choice, supporting public opinion for many choices and options.
- Starting with the broader frame and then introducing one or more of the issues we studied provides a new point of entry to the discussion of important and personally relevant life decisions.

TALKING VALUES ABOUT IMPORTANT LIFE DECISIONS BROADENS THE DISCUSSION AND DRAMATICALLY INCREASES VOTER SUPPORT.

Expanding the discussion frame to important life decisions can be a mediating approach to current polarizing issues.

- As we widen the debate over abortion and bring in related issues such as birth control, which is supported by 91% of voters, people from all sides will be open to your point of view.
- If we broaden the conversation through new metrics such as the number of couples who use birth control or the number of families who face end-of-life issues, our base widens and becomes overwhelming.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY IS A CORE VALUE THAT VOTERS WANT ACKNOWLEDGED; DEFINE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ACKNOWLEDGE ITS A TWO-WAY STREET.

Voters value personal responsibility, but realize that people need options, knowledge and choices so that they can be personally responsible, especially when it comes to making important life decisions.

- An overwhelming majority of voters (93%) ranked personal responsibility as the best descriptor of the broader agenda with almost half (46%) saying it perfectly describes these issues.
- It is important to define the way you use the words “personal responsibility” since it means different things to different people.
- It is equally important to acknowledge that society and government can also be responsible in providing the options that foster personal responsibility.
- In the opinion of eight out of 10 voters (78%), the government has a responsibility to ensure birth control methods, emergency contraception and the HPV vaccine are safe and available.

THE MORE YOU RELATE TO INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE, THE MORE POWERFUL AND RELEVANT THE MESSAGE.

Often, even within families, there will be differing points of view on who best makes life decisions. If you focus on individual decisions and personal responsibility, your messages will resonate more effectively.

- A large majority (81%) believe that regarding these important life decisions, individuals, not politicians or the government, should decide which option is best for themselves and their families, according to their own circumstances and values.
- Instead of talking about family life decisions, speak about individuals' decisions based on what's best for themselves and their families.

WOMEN'S EQUALITY IS A POWERFUL ARGUMENT FOR ACCESS TO FAMILY PLANNING.

Stress the positive effect of family planning services for women and relate it to their aspirations and future opportunity.

- Both men and women (78%) believe that for women to achieve equality, they must have access to family planning services, including birth control.
- For some audiences using "reaching full potential" may be just as effective as "equality."

COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION AND BIRTH CONTROL HAVE OVERWHELMING SUPPORT.

Support is overwhelming on the number of people who feel strongly in favor of birth control availability and comprehensive sex education.

- 91% believe couples should be able to have access to birth control options.
- 86% believe that on comprehensive sex education, schools can do a good job, probably better than most parents, on the biological and scientific aspects of sex education, but it's a parent's job to provide the moral and ethical guidance.
- Further, 76% believe that for teenagers, prevention starts with comprehensive sex education including abstinence. But, if we are serious about wanting to decrease unintended pregnancies, we also need to make sure birth control is widely available and accessible.

VOTERS WANT ABORTION TO BE PUT IN PERSPECTIVE AND NOT BANNED.

The current political discussion focuses mostly on abortion, but voters want a broader discussion that is more relevant to their everyday lives.

- A strong majority of voters (81%) think that issues such as birth control, emergency contraception, comprehensive sex education, stem cell research, end-of-life decisions and the hpv vaccine are just as important as abortion.
- Eight out of 10 voters (81%) agree that they "may have one position on abortion, another on birth control and still a third on end-of-life decisions" and that "sometimes we must just agree to disagree."
- Support for legal, safe abortions has been consistent for three decades.

ACKNOWLEDGE PEOPLE'S DIFFERING VIEWS WITH RESPECT, AND AGREE TO DISAGREE.

Respect for differing views came through loud and clear, with many participants mentioning that it is an American value that is "uniquely ours." In the view of eight out of 10 voters (81%), we should each appreciate and respect our individual opinions. Sometimes, we must just agree to disagree.

INTENSITY AND HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR THE BROAD AGENDA EXIST ACROSS RELIGION, PARTY AFFILIATION AND OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS.

Our research shows that regardless of religious affiliation, church attendance, abortion stand or voting history, a strong majority of voters agree with key statements that support a broader agenda:

- A strong majority of Catholic (81%) and Republican (62%) voters agree that: “The current political debate focuses on abortion. But there is a much broader discussion that needs to happen that includes issues such as birth control, emergency contraception, comprehensive sex education, stem cell research, end-of-life decisions, and the HPV vaccine, that are just as important.”
- A strong majority of Catholic (85%) and Republican (66%) voters also agree that: “We need to respect people’s ability to make their own life decisions and not impose our values and views on them.” Support is strong regardless of religion, church attendance, voting history or abortion stance.

VOCAL HARD RIGHT ACTIVISTS STOPPING PROGRESS ON THE BROADER AGENDA ARE ONLY 9% OF ALL LIKELY VOTERS.

A cluster analysis of our research reveals that a small percentage of voters dominate the discussion of the broader agenda.

- These extremely politically active voters are opposed to family planning and comprehensive sex education; their opposition is fueled by moral and religious beliefs.
- They largely identify themselves as Republican voters: 81% (14% say they are ticketsplitters; 5% say they are Democrats).
- Arguments on both sides of the abortion debate are well understood and unlikely to be persuasive to those of the opposite points of view.

MESSAGE TIPS

Try starting conversations with the prime focus as *Important Life Decisions* and include topics such as birth control, comprehensive sex education, and end-of-life issues with the following statement:

Important life decisions can only be made responsibly if we have access to information and options.

- 90% of voters ranked “individual life decisions” as a good descriptor of a range of issues discussed including birth control, comprehensive sex education, stem cell research and end-of-life issues.

Therefore, an important message tip supported by our research:

| Try saying... | Here’s Why |
|---|---|
| There are important life decisions we all face. | Broader frame that highlights core American values and encourages discussion on a larger set of issues. |

Other message tips include:

| Try saying... | Rather than... | Here's Why |
|---|---|--|
| Choices (which implies a larger agenda) | Choice | In Dial Groups, implies and increases support for a larger set of issues. |
| Protection, Planning, and Prevention | Prevention (by itself) | Includes language that appeals to both men (planning) and women (prevention). |
| Unintended or Unwanted Pregnancy | Unplanned Pregnancy | Voters from bulletin boards and focus groups linked unintended and unwanted pregnancies more often to prevention. |
| Try saying... | Rather than... | Here's Why |
| Preventing Unintended or Unwanted Pregnancies | Preventing Abortions | Preferred by voters by a margin of 20% and 16%, respectively. |
| Preventing Diseases and Unintended/Unwanted Pregnancies | Preventing Unintended/Unwanted Pregnancies (by itself) | Bulletin boards and focus group participants brought up prevention of disease as being as important as prevention of pregnancy. |
| For women to achieve equality, they must have access to birth control | The war on contraception is a war on women | A strong majority of voters (78%) agree, including regular churchgoers (72%) and swing voters /independents (83%). |
| Women/couples need access and information to be responsible | The word "responsibility" is out of context and by itself | Voters ranked language in context much higher in the dial group research. |
| Personal Responsibility and Responsible Society including Government | Personal Responsibility by itself | A responsible society including government provides safety and security and also is a resource for individuals to utilize without a feeling of government intrusion. |
| Birth Control Options, including Emergency Birth Control | Emergency Contraception (by itself) | Broader acceptance of emergency contraception when discussed in context of birth control options. |

*The Women Donors Network, in partnership with the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC), has embarked on a project, **Moving Forward**, that seeks to keep abortion issues in perspective and broaden the conversation, without backing away from preserving the right to abortion as currently defined under the Constitution.*

These findings are based on research led by Vince Breglio of Breglio Consulting and conducted by Harris Interactive from April 2006 through July 2006. Qualitative research was conducted among likely voters and included in-depth interviews, focus groups, online bulletin boards groups, and eight pulse-line groups in Seattle, Tucson, Grand Rapids and Atlanta. Quantitative research was a July 6-12, 2006 validation telephone poll of 1,001 likely voters with a margin of error of +/- 3.0 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.