

# Climate Solutions for a Stronger America



**A Guide for Engaging and  
Winning on Climate Change  
& Clean Energy,  
Second Edition, 2014**

## The Moral Imperative

Climate change is no longer an abstract future threat; it is here now. We are experiencing it in our daily lives, as fires, floods, severe droughts and storms repeatedly damage our communities – and drain our public budgets with rapidly increasing expenditures for disaster response. Climate impacts are hitting far sooner and closer to home than many of us could have ever imagined. We have a moral obligation to protect our children. By cutting our carbon pollution and investing in clean energy and efficiency solutions in our communities, we can start building a safer and stronger America today.

## The Political Opportunity

Americans are ready – hungry – for straight talk and real solutions. Seven in ten voters (including 68 percent of Independents and half of Republicans) see climate change as a serious problem facing our country.<sup>i</sup> Strong majorities agree that climate change should be a priority for the President and Congress.<sup>ii</sup> In a recent survey, Americans were more than twice as likely to vote for a candidate who strongly **supports** climate action – and three times more likely to vote **against** a candidate who **opposes** climate action.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet media discourse and policy solutions have not kept pace with public opinion or the scientific consensus regarding the urgency of the problem. They haven't, largely due to fossil fuel-backed media campaigns designed to confuse the public and electoral spending designed to stifle political leadership and stall progress on American climate and clean energy solutions. With practical solutions now widely available and affordable, there is enormous opportunity both for our communities and for leaders who step up to the climate challenge with confidence and conviction.

## An Updated Guide

This guide is for leaders and citizens determined to push back against fossil fuel's tight grip on American energy policy and to move our country forward – to catalyze leadership and action toward a clean energy future and a safer climate. First developed in 2012, this message guide has been used as the foundation for numerous high-profile communications on climate and energy. Now fully updated, based on new original research, it features a slightly revised messaging triangle, updated supporting facts, and suggested responses to anticipated attacks.

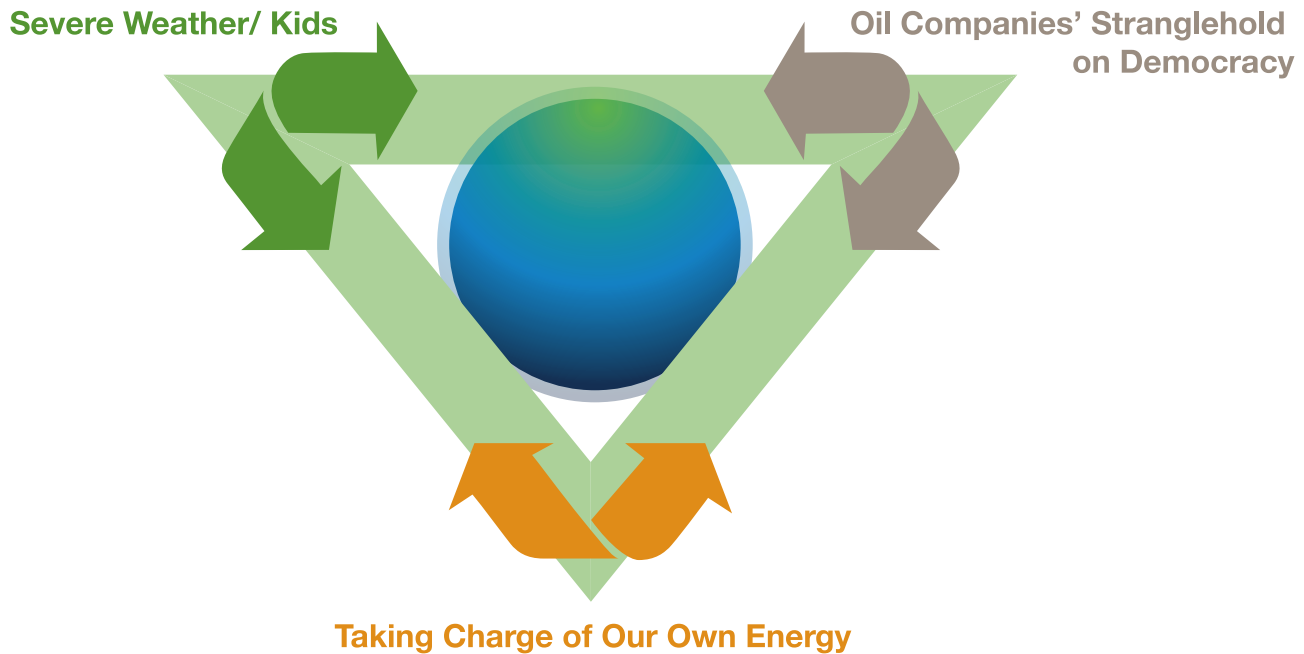
It draws on Americans' optimism and can-do spirit in the face of big challenges. Those who say nothing can be done about climate change forget what America is capable of – and underestimate what is already happening to transform our energy economy.

Use it, give us feedback, and help spark the kind of citizen action and political leadership we urgently need to ensure strong communities and a safer future.

Betsy Taylor and Kathy Washienko  
Breakthrough Strategies & Solutions, Inc.

# The Message Triangle

Our research identified **three top-performing messages**. Together, they form a persuasive **narrative triangle**.



## Why it works:

The triangle's narrative structure includes:

- **The Threat** – Pointing to strange and severe weather and our responsibility to protect our kids underscores the urgency of the climate challenge.
- **The Villain** – Holding oil companies accountable for rigging the system against clean energy shows why progress to date has been delayed – and demonstrates that there is a way forward – overcoming the roadblocks they've created.
- **The Solution** – Demonstrating the benefits of action, especially in our neighborhoods, cities and states helps avoid partisan debates and shows that local, practical solutions are available and effective.

## How To Use it:

**Aim to use all three corners.** The messaging is strongest when all three elements are used together, supported by key facts and local examples.

**If you start the conversation:** the storyline flows best:

**Severe Weather/Kids** → **Oil Companies' Stranglehold** → **Investing in People and Communities**

**If you are responding to someone else:** Start at the most related point. Then move to the other two messages.

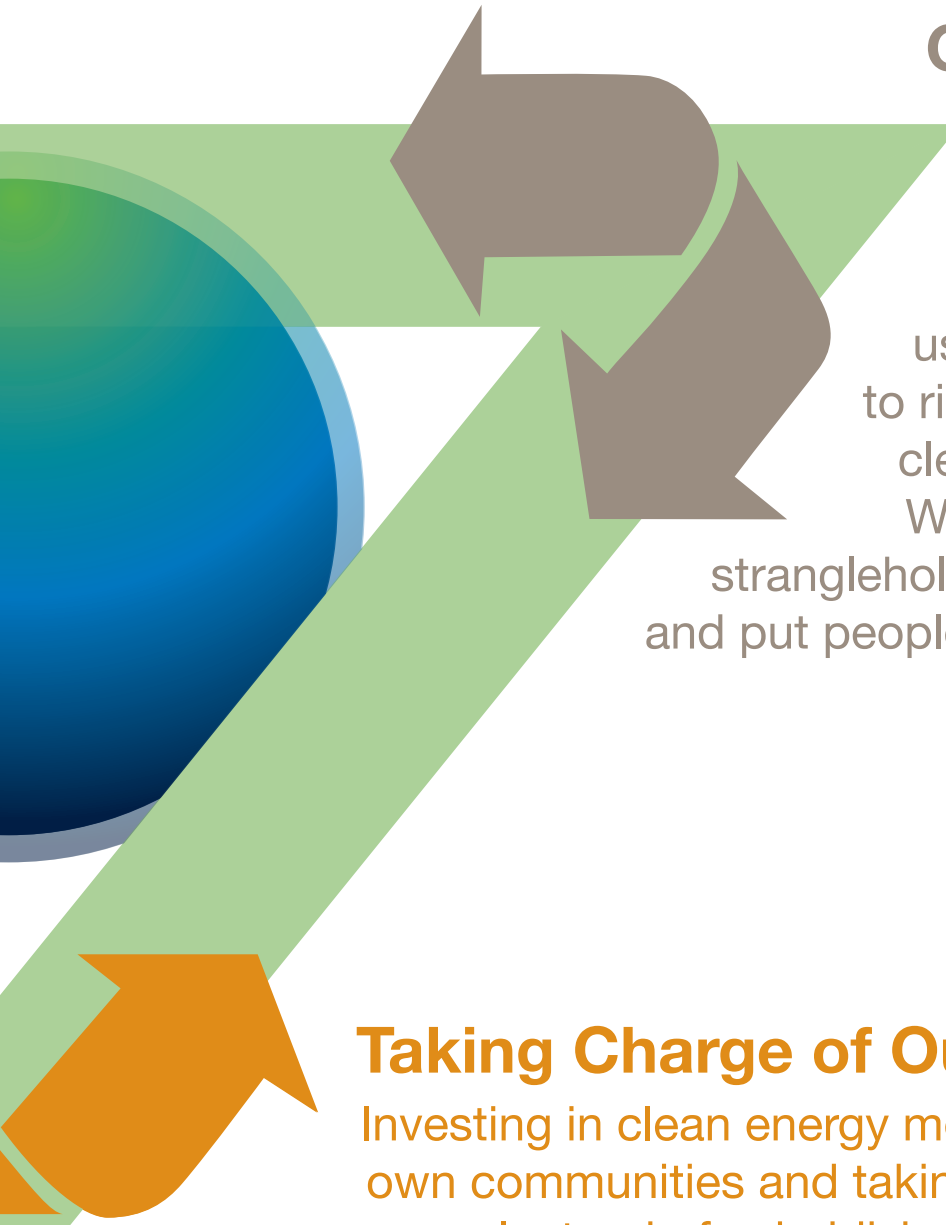
# The Message Triangle

Our research identified **three top-performing messages**. Together, they form a persuasive **narrative triangle**.

## Severe Weather/ Kids

We can no longer ignore our strange and increasingly severe weather. We have a moral obligation to our children to protect them – that means preparing for and tackling climate change now.





## **Oil Companies' Stranglehold on Democracy**

Oil companies are using billions in profits to rig the system against clean energy solutions. We need to break their stranglehold on our democracy, and put people, not oil companies, back in charge.

## **Taking Charge of Our Own Energy**

Investing in clean energy means investing in our own communities and taking charge of our own energy. Instead of subsidizing big oil, we invest in wind turbines on farms, solar on our roofs, and schools that use less energy – creating local jobs, stronger communities and a more stable climate.

# Severe Weather/ Kids

Underlying Value: Moral Responsibility

We can no longer ignore our strange and increasingly severe weather. We have a moral obligation to our children to protect them – that means preparing for and tackling climate change now.

## Key Supporting Facts:

- The 12 warmest years in recorded history have all come in the last 15 years.<sup>iv</sup>
- Climate change is already affecting every part of the U.S. There's more strange and severe weather – more flooding and wildfires, more intense hurricanes, longer droughts.<sup>v</sup>
- Nearly 1 in 2 Americans report being personally affected, or having family or friends affected, by severe weather or a major storm in the past three years.<sup>vi</sup>
- The global average temperature during the summer of 2014 was the hottest on record.<sup>vii</sup>
- Higher temperatures lead to more asthma and other respiratory problems, especially among kids.<sup>viii</sup>
- In the U.S., 7 of the top 10 natural disasters since 1900 (ranked by number of people affected) have occurred in just the last ten years; five storms, one wildfire, and one flood.<sup>ix</sup>



## Tips & Talking Points

- Stress **urgency**. Emphasize that we're seeing climate impacts **now**. People who feel more urgency are more likely to support efforts to cut carbon pollution. But it's important to also show them the solutions.
- Talk about **kids growing up today** (not "future generations," which creates the misperception that impacts and costs are far off.)
- Talk about **strange and severe weather**, not just heat.
- Talk about climate change and disruption as caused by **pollution** from burning oil, gas, and coal. (Some people concerned about climate change remain unsure of the cause.)
- Talk about the **costs of inaction** far outweighing investments in solutions. We are already paying the price for weather disasters, crop failures, and higher insurance rates. A single super-storm (Sandy) cost our nation over \$65 billion in total economic costs.<sup>x xi</sup>
- Pivot to Δ. Remember to pivot to the other 2 points.

## Why It's Powerful:

- It grounds the **threat** in **people's own experience** of strange and destructive weather (not abstract scientific data or distant melting ice caps).
- It makes a **personal, emotional** connection.

# Oil Companies' Stranglehold on Democracy

Underlying Value: Accountability

Oil companies are using billions in profits to rig the system against clean energy solutions. We need to break their stranglehold on our democracy, and put people, not oil companies, back in charge.

## Key Supporting Facts:

- Oil and coal companies have funded multi-million dollar campaigns to make people think climate science is uncertain, including targeting teachers and schoolchildren with misinformation.<sup>xii</sup>
- Oil companies are attacking renewable energy in our own communities. Groups funded by oil and coal interests have attacked and tried to reverse renewable energy standards in 17 of the 29 states that have passed them.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Two billionaires who have gotten rich off oil are planning to spend nearly \$300 million in the 2014 elections.<sup>xiv</sup> To protect their own profits, they're attacking candidates who support wind and solar.
- Oil companies aren't offering energy solutions that are safe for our communities, our drinking water, or our climate. Their new practice is to extract oil and gas by fracking – a more difficult, expensive and destructive way to extract fossil fuels. Fracking pumps millions of gallons of water and toxic chemicals into the earth, often contaminates drinking water, and leaks methane into our air, which further disrupts our climate. And that's all before we even burn it.<sup>xv</sup>





## Tips & Talking Points

- Emphasize the oil industry's ***deceptive, coordinated, and well-funded campaigns*** to mislead Americans on climate science and block clean energy solutions.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Point out it's the ***same strategy – using some of the exact same people – tobacco companies used*** to hide the truth about the risks of smoking.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Make it local. ***It's not just happening in DC.*** They've attacked many states' clean energy standards; targeted public school teachers and schoolchildren with misinformation, even sponsored local events with kid radio stations to promote gas and oil drilling.<sup>xviii</sup>
- Pivot to Δ. Remember to pivot to the other 2 points.

## Why It's Powerful:

- It identifies the ***villain***.
- ***It explains mixed messages.*** On one hand, Americans hear climate change is an urgent problem. On the other, they see little being done about it. Now they can see why progress has been slow; big oil and coal have thrown up many ***roadblocks to progress***.
- It ***counters the argument*** that people's behaviors are primarily to blame for climate change. People's choices do matter, but people need practical options and choices. Oil and coal companies have blocked those clean energy policies and solutions, while intentionally confusing Americans about the climate problem. They've tried to rob us of our ability to protect our kids.
- It fits with current attitudes. Americans are ***fed up with corporate interests writing the rules in Washington, DC*** and extracting profits at the expense of our middle class, economy, and communities.

# Taking Charge of Our Own Energy

Underlying Value: Empowerment

Investing in clean energy means investing in our own communities and taking charge of our own energy. Instead of subsidizing big oil, we invest in wind turbines on farms, solar on our roofs, and schools that use less energy – creating local jobs, stronger communities and a more stable climate.

## Key Supporting Facts:

- A new American solar installation is completed every four minutes AND
- We've installed more solar in the last 18 months than in the past 30 years<sup>xix</sup>, AND we're still only scratching the surface when it comes to America's clean energy potential.
- The US has abundant renewable energy potential — including offshore wind on our coasts and on the Great Lakes, onshore wind through middle-America, and solar energy almost everywhere, especially in the Southwest.<sup>xx</sup>
- Clean energy creates far more jobs per unit of energy produced than fossil fuels.<sup>xxi</sup>
- The cost of electricity from wind and solar has gone down dramatically year after year. And as technology improves, it will keep getting cheaper. And remember, no one owns the wind and sun; unlike oil and coal, they are free fuel forever.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Cities all across the country are leading the way in reducing their energy use. Cities from Orlando to Denver, Houston to Salt Lake City and more are saving money, reducing carbon emissions, and creating jobs by making their buildings more energy efficient.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- The Empire State Building had a major efficiency upgrade in 2009. In just the past three years, the improvements have saved nearly \$7.5 million in energy costs.<sup>xxiv</sup>



## Tips & Talking Points

- It's now. It's local. Talk about practical, clean-energy solutions available today. Describe a local clean energy success story – of solar, wind, a green building, or energy savings.
- Focus on benefits to people – our families, our towns, and our neighborhoods – and talk about regular people taking positive action.
- Take on opponents with patriotic pride: Those who say nothing can be done about climate change forget who we are and what we can do. No one should doubt America's ingenuity and resolve. People are proud of America's history of problem-solving and innovation. With gridlock in DC, this "can-do" appeal may work best when applied to our states, cities and neighborhoods. We can change things from the bottom up.
- Pivot to Δ. Remember to pivot to the other 2 points..

## Why It's Powerful:

- Climate change can feel overwhelming, even paralyzing. But Americans feel engaged and inspired when we focus on positive, hopeful solutions.
- It shows people a positive, concrete way forward – one that can happen in our own cities and towns, and doesn't rely on breaking DC gridlock.
- Americans support the idea of clean energy – but most aren't aware of the extent of our clean energy resources – or the progress that's already been made with solar and wind installations, electric and hybrid vehicles, and building energy efficiency.
- It focuses on solutions that are ready-to-go NOW; it doesn't rely on waiting for a future breakthrough.

# General Communication Tips

**Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Try not to stray far from the core messages. Repetition shows you are confident and consistent.

**Think about your audience in advance.** Try to understand their local issues and concerns and connect to those local needs and stories as you make your case.

**Connect emotionally to your audience.** Talk about where you and your audience’s personal concerns and values overlap. Don’t be afraid to say why climate solutions matter to you (as a parent, grandparent, person of faith, a business leader, firefighter, etc. )

**Make it about people.** Show how the threat and solutions matter to people’s lives. Frame messages around “our families,” “our kids,” “our neighborhoods,” how pollution harms our health (e.g., asthma rates on rise), how fracking contaminates our drinking water. In print or digital communications, use images of people rather than landscapes or animals.

**Make the local connection.** Refer to real people and local places to help your audience relate (local strange weather events, a local clean energy business, a local solar installation, etc.)

**Use plain language, words that people would say themselves.** Pollution, air, food, water, local jobs, strange weather, clean energy, wind and solar. Prepare, don’t adapt. Cut pollution, don’t mitigate.

**Use facts wisely.** Sandwich facts and data between messages about people and shared values. One or two memorable facts from a trusted source are far more powerful than a data overload. Use facts that evoke images rather than numbers.

**End on a high note.** Focus on solutions. The climate threat can be overwhelming. State the threat, call out the villain, and then inspire and empower with hope and opportunity.



# Responding to Common Attacks

The triangle is designed to help you keep the upper hand – and moral high ground – even under attack. Here's how:

- **Be flexible.** Adapt your response to your situation and audience.
- **Get back on offense.** Redirect the conversation back to where we win – our three key messages.
- **Make it about values.** Stay out of the weeds. Use a few supporting facts, but don't battle over details (e.g., the number of jobs a given project may or may not create.) That's not where we win. We win with shared values.
- **Use the triangle to stay on message.** Whenever possible, hit on at least two of the three messages. Together, the three parts of the triangle build a story that's more powerful and persuasive than your opponent's.



## Sample responses:

**Attack:** For the first time ever, America can be an energy exporter with our oil, coal and natural gas, boosting growth and jobs. Why are you against energy independence?

**Response:** Real energy independence is when we are no longer dependent on oil and coal companies but can make local clean energy instead. With solar installations on our roofs, wind turbines and bio-digesters on our farms. Oil companies and oil billionaires are rigging the system against clean energy solutions in order to protect their own profits—at any cost. They’ve attacked renewable energy standards in 17 states. They have even targeted our teachers and schoolchildren with climate disinformation campaigns.

Truth is, America’s safest and most abundant energy resources are clean and renewable. We have offshore wind off both coasts and the Great Lakes. Onshore wind throughout Middle America. Solar everywhere, especially in the Southwest. And we have the technology right now to harness those resources, cut our carbon pollution and make our kids’ future safer. And when we do that, instead of subsidizing oil companies, we’ll be putting people and communities in charge of our energy future.



**Attack:** Clean energy sounds good, but it's unrealistic.

**Response:** Oil companies and oil billionaires have thrown up all sorts of road-blocks to block clean energy solutions. They know clean energy is for real and are desperate to stop it. They've spent hundreds of millions of dollars attacking candidates who support it. They have waged attacks on renewable energy standards in 17 states. They created a multi-million dollar disinformation campaign to deliberately confuse Americans, even teachers and schoolchildren, about climate science.

But, even with their rigging the system against clean energy, our solar and wind industries broke new records in 2013. A new American solar installation is completed every four minutes and wind power has surged. Wind energy is now price competitive with fossil fuels in lots of places – even Texas. Just imagine what clean energy can do if – instead of taxpayers subsidizing big oil and coal, the most profitable corporations in the world – we take charge of our own energy, invest in clean energy cities and communities AND protect our kids' future.

**Attack:** You support higher energy costs and higher taxes because you want a price on carbon. Won't this hurt the average American by raising the price of energy?

**Response:** A price on carbon is a tax on polluters -- the oil companies and coal companies whose pollution is disrupting our climate and harming our children's health. For years, these companies have rigged the system. They don't clean up their pollution. They block clean energy alternatives, and they keep us on the hook at the gas pump and with our utility bills-- forcing us to pay more and more each year. They've had us over a barrel. But we can produce clean energy right here in our own communities. And let's face it; we can no longer ignore our increasingly severe weather. We have a moral obligation to our kids. We need to tackle climate change now. Putting a price on that carbon pollution will help us do just that..



## Sample responses:

**Attack:** Oil creates jobs here and it's cheap. Why are you against that?

**Response:** When we invest in clean energy solutions, we're investing in people and jobs here in our own communities. We're putting solar on our roofs and wind turbines on our farms. We're making our schools and office buildings more energy-efficient. We're creating good, local jobs that can't be outsourced. For the same amount of energy, oil produces far fewer jobs than solar. And it's not cheap if you count all its costs. Oil companies pollute for free. We pay the price in asthma, lung disease, water pollution and climate impacts. With all the climate disruption and destructive weather we're already seeing, we owe it to our kids to invest in clean energy and energy efficiency jobs and solutions instead

**Attack:** Clean energy costs too much.

**Response:** Investing in clean energy is an investment in our local communities. One that puts us in charge of our own energy future. When Big Oil say this will make energy too expensive, do you think that's really what they mean? They like energy to be expensive. It's money in their pocket. No, what they're really worried about is NOT that we'll pay too much for energy. They're worried we'll buy something else. We'll get a better deal. We'll take our energy dollars back and invest them in clean, local energy. They're worried that we'll use less fossil fuels and undermine their profits.

And about that, they are right -- that's exactly what we're gonna do! The cost of electricity from wind and solar has gone down dramatically in the last ten years and will keep going down. Unlike oil and gas, no one owns the sun and the wind. They are free, local, clean energy sources we can rely on forever. Meanwhile, Hurricane Sandy alone cost our economy 65 billion dollars. That's just one of the many extreme weather events we've seen with climate disruption. When we invest in clean energy and efficiency, we protect our children. We invest in people and our own communities and take charge of our own energy.





**Attack:** The Keystone XL Pipeline would create good American jobs and lower gas prices.

**Response:** We need to invest in clean energy for our state and local communities – so that we pay less for energy over the long-term, and aren't dependent on oil. Solar on our roofs, wind turbines on local farms, energy efficient schools right here. That's what will provide local jobs and stronger communities.

And we simply can no longer ignore the increasingly severe and strange weather – in the last 15 years, we've had the 12 warmest years in recorded history. We have a responsibility to our kids to protect them and that means addressing climate disruption before it's too late. Of course the oil and gas companies would rather have Keystone than have us take charge of our own clean energy future. But we want local jobs, more control over our energy, and a safe future for our kids. Keystone is about keeping us dependent on dirty energy. Let's do what's right for our kids instead.

**Attack:** You're more interested in making your billionaire eco-activist friends happy than you are in your constituents. You're just a handmaiden for out-of-state liberal donors who want to increase the size of government and raise taxes.

**Response:** The truth is that oil companies and oil billionaires have a stranglehold on our democracy. They use their billions in profits to rig the system against clean energy solutions. Let's face it – we can no longer ignore the reality of our increasingly severe weather. Nearly one in two Americans have either been affected or know someone who has been affected by severe weather in just the past three years. [Anyone here?] And it's only going to get worse unless we get serious about tackling climate change.

So would you rather be on the side of oil billionaires rigging the system for their own self-interest at any cost? Or those working to help strengthen our communities and fix our climate? I know whose side I want to be on. We have an obligation to protect our children and that means tackling climate disruption now.



## ENDNOTES

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# About the Guide

Breakthrough Strategies & Solutions, LLC commissioned a repeat national survey of likely voters to determine how leaders can successfully communicate on climate issues. Harstad Strategic Research, Inc., a leading national public opinion and research company, conducted a telephone survey of 1,205 likely 2014 voters– as a follow-up to the 2012 national survey and guide.

This guide also draws on several additional recent surveys conducted over the past year. Numerous communications and campaign experts were consulted during the development of the final guide. The project was led by Kathy Washienko and Betsy Taylor of Breakthrough Strategies & Solutions. The guide and complementary training materials were developed in cooperation with Anna Fahey and Sightline Institute. Special thanks to Andrew Maxfield, KC Golden, John Neffinger, and Vincent Wang.

***Trainings and coaching on this message strategy are available on request.***

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