

Politicians have long faced the challenge of how to effectively communicate with citizens who largely see them as dissemblers and promise-breakers.

On the face of it, the task for the major parties to construct messages that resonate with voters appears even more daunting in the 2019 federal campaign. After all, the campaign is occurring against the backdrop of [historic low levels of voter trust and engagement](#).

At the same time, the policy battle lines between the major parties heading into the election are among the [starkest in recent memory](#). As such Labor and the Coalition appear to have seeded a rich harvest of cut-through messages organised around very different themes.

Read more: [*As election 2019 kicks off, the only certainty is a cranky and mistrustful electorate*](#)

'Fairness' versus 'strength'

Federal Labor's campaign communications are organised around a single word: "fair". At a party, leader or candidate level, ["fair" or "fair-go"](#) is threaded through nearly every piece of communication to voters.

Bill Shorten's [budget reply](#) – the unofficial start of Labor's election campaign – was replete with the word, or variations such as "fair go action plan" and "intergenerational fairness".

In truth, fairness has always been part of the ALP's messaging DNA. But its core campaign message in 2019 is aggressively leveraging what the party sees as an emerging zeitgeist in the Australian electorate against [undue economic power and privilege](#).

The Coalition, on the other hand, has its own singular message: “ [strength](#) ” and its semantic sibling “security”. Both words have been campaign talismans for the Coalition since the Howard years, when 9/11 and the

[Tampa debate](#)

sensitised voters to national and border security.

This is why “ [strong economy](#) ”, [“securing our future”](#); and “ [secure borders](#) ” will be repeated ad nauseum by the Coalition in the hope that old wine in new bottles will again prove to be its election elixir.

These juxtaposed themes appear to promise a level of campaign frisson that might potentially reengage a jaded electorate. The reality, however, is likely to be the opposite.

Fighting the framing wars

Campaign communications based on pithy slogans have always been [integral to electioneering](#) . Slogans seek to compress complex realities into bite-sized messages that are simple and memorable. But in the 21st century, slogans and other highly truncated communications have become even more critical to political campaigning.

In this so-called [age of distraction](#) and [information overload](#) , every communicator faces major challenges not just to gain the public’s attention, but hang onto it. This attention/traction dilemma is compounded for politicians given the rapid rate at which citizens are tuning out of mainstream politics.

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These structural factors have meant the semantic contest between parties – otherwise known as [framing wars](#) - have become increasingly influential in how political campaigns are structured and run.

“Framing” in political communications parlance means marking semantic boundaries around the debate that a party’s campaign or policy speaks to. Values - such as fairness, strength, opportunity, equality and continuity - are the most effective words to frame political messages.

This is because distracted and distrustful voters are more likely to listen to political messages that speak to the universal and positive principles that values espouse. Hence, values framing potentially addresses the “attention” problem.

Their simplicity also readily lend themselves to the repetition required by politicians to hang onto public attention, thus helping to overcome the “[traction](#)” problem.

Seeking a connection with voters

While values framing - formalised as political communications practice in the United States [over a decade ago](#)

- has become an integral tool for Australia’s political parties to connect with voters, there are major drawbacks.

First, the number of values – as expositions of basic moral principles – are relatively limited. This is why the same values, with minor variations, keep being churned out by parties in successive elections. They are also used by competing parties in the same campaign to neutralise the impact of rival frames. Already we see the Coalition attempting to [reframe Labor’s fairness mantra](#)

as well as Labour’s assurances they too are [“economic managers](#)

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As a result, rather than helping to differentiate parties, values framing can reinforce voter perceptions that there is little difference between them.

Read more: [***The end of uncertainty? How the 2019 federal election might bring stability at last to Australian politics***](#)

Embracing the vacuous

The universality of values helps major parties – facing an eroding support base – to appeal to many voters simultaneously.

But their catchall character can also make them and their leaders appear shallow and unimaginative. Think of Malcolm Turnbull's “[Continuity and Change](#)” slogan in 2016. Not only was it widely criticised as a meaningless cliché. It was also seen as a knock-off from a popular political comedy series.

Finally, relying on a singular value to frame campaigns hard wires parties to lean on other generalisations that reinforce public perceptions politicians are out of touch.

Take both parties' perennial appeal to “ordinary Australians” (is there such a thing in the [world's second most multi-cultural society?](#)) or “working families” (at a time when more voters than ever [are single](#)).

In short, while voters will hear “fair” and “strength” robotically communicated throughout this campaign, what is viewed by the major parties as a “cut-through” cure to [voter disengagement risks only adding to it](#).

Mark Triffitt does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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