Selling Conservation to Politically Polarized Audiences:

What's Being Done, & How to Maximize Engagement

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Abstract

The way concepts are communicated are just as important as what's being said. When the goal is inspiring pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes, it is vital to consider your audience and frame messaging in ways that will be best-received. To do so requires an analysis of their priorities, values, and points of view. This project explores how messaging from conservation organizations in politically conservative (red) states compare to that of liberal (blue) states. There was a marked difference observed in both subject matter and language used in the two groups. Literary research of best practices for conservation messaging reveals that the current messaging strategies of these conservation organizations have some merit but can be improved. Sample mock-up campaign materials were created to model research findings.

Introduction

When the goal is inspiration, finding strategic ways to communicate effectively is of utmost importance. Conservation is no exception. In fact, "selling" conservation is arguably the most critical component of the field. Without garnering support, nonprofits will not receive the donations needed to protect wildlife and their habitats. If the messaging does not resonate with the community they speak to, the public will be less inclined to pick up pro-environmental behaviors (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). If advertising is not compelling and relevant to the local audience, organizations will have lower levels of attendance at events, and reduced volunteerism (Wald et al., 2016). This is not an exhaustive list of justifications for conservation organizations to focus intently on what they are saying and how they are saying it. Nonprofits in general have a

critical need to be engaging and relatable. It is likely a harder sell to ask people to devote their time and money to a cause, than it would be to market a product or service. People tend to pursue immediate personal gratification, and unlike "stuff" or short-lived yet exciting entertainment, charitable works are typically long-term endeavors, and often not supremely glamorous (O'Donoghue & Rabin, 2000). It is imperative that environmental organizations adequately make the case for conservation.

There is no "one size fits all" approach to conservation messaging. Organizations need to take care to tailor conservation messaging to their specific audiences (Kidd et al., 2019). Now, seemingly more than ever, America is divided – especially when it comes to political ideology. Stances, attitudes, and priorities are not uniform throughout the country. "Red states" and "blue states" vote differently, and their citizens see the world in distinctive ways. From climate change, to oil drilling, to regulations on emissions or environmental protections, political beliefs can bleed into thoughts on conservation. I purport that American nonprofits should take into account their state's ideological and political affiliations when communicating to the public. For this project, I decided to investigate whether or not conservation organizations are already doing this, and how. In other words, how do conservation organizations in "red states" and "blue states" utilize different messaging to their local audiences? I also wanted to explore the literature for best practices that can be utilized to create effective conservation campaign materials geared toward politically conservative audiences.

Methods

Using 2018 Gallup poll data, I determined the 5 most conservative states: Mississippi, Alabama, Wyoming, West Virginia, South Dakota (*Most Conservative States 2020*, n.d.) and 5 most liberal states: Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Washington, New York (*Most Liberal States 2020*, n.d.). Then using Google.com's search engine, I searched "conservation organization _____" where the blank would be the state name. For example, for Maine, I searched "conservation organization Maine" (without quotation marks). I created lists of the organizations for each state. To do this I used the first 3 local organization website home page hits for each state, skipping the following sites: those with lists of organizations in the state, national

conservation organizations with state chapters, those focused on only one city or portion of the state, those that had a regional focus (multiple states), those targeting conservation voters (niche audience), and government-run organizations. To avoid bias, site content was not explored at this stage and had no bearing on if an organization made the list. further

The 30 conservation organizations which made it to the list were then filtered. For each set of 3 organizations for each state, one was omitted from the study. Organizations that did not have a Facebook page, or one that was regularly managed were removed. When these conditions were not applicable, I removed the organization with the smallest Facebook following. Once the list of 20 was finalized, conservation organization profiles were created for each nonprofit. The following information was acquired for each organization: From website: mission statement, tagline, homepage imagery; From Facebook page: date FB page created, number of likes, number of followers, number of hits for search term "climate," number of hits for search term "hunt,"; And generally: main focuses, notable exclusions, messaging takeaways, and surprises (Appendix A).
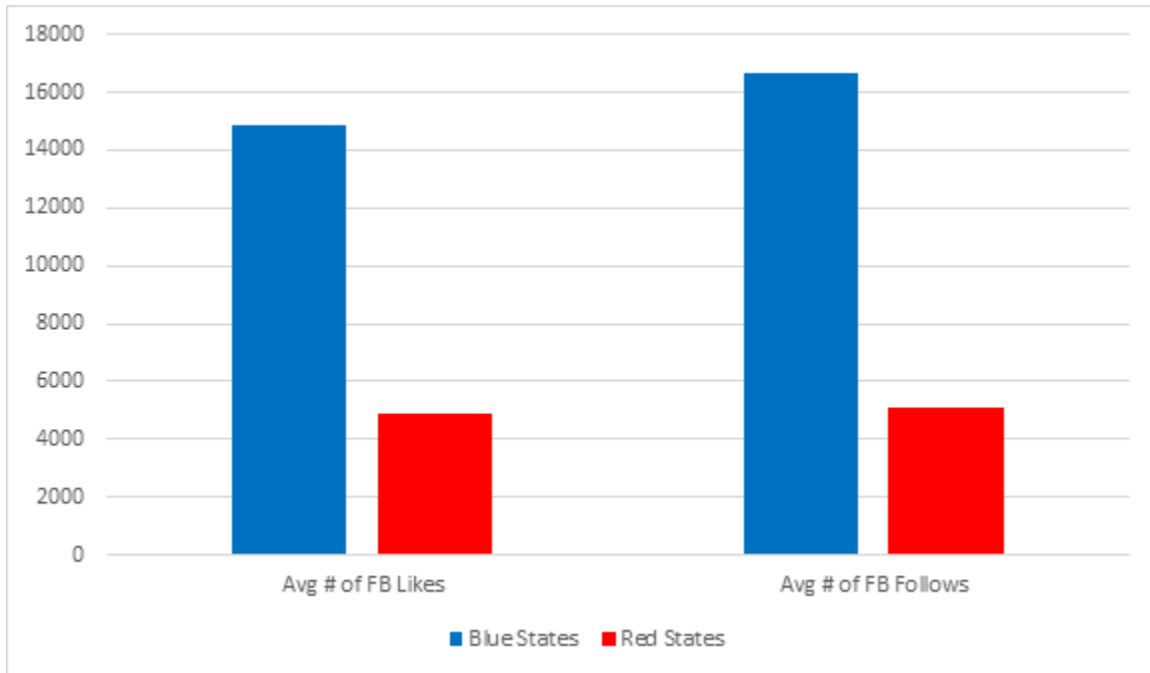
Conservative/"Red" State Conservation Organizations	Liberal/"Blue" State Conservation Organizations
MISSISSIPPI Mississippi Wildlife Federation Wildlife Mississippi **ALABAMA** Conservation Alabama Alabama Wildlife Federation **WYOMING** Wyoming Wildlife Federation Wyoming Wilderness Association **WEST VIRGINIA** West Virginia Land Trust West Virginia Conservation Agency **SOUTH DAKOTA** South Dakota Wildlife Federation South Dakota Grassland Coalition	**MASSACHUSETTS** Environmental League of Massachusetts Mass Audubon **MAINE** Natural Resources Council of Maine Maine Audubon **VERMONT** Vermont Wildlife Coalition Vermont Natural Resources Council **WASHINGTON** Washington Wild Washington Environmental Council **NEW YORK** Environmental Advocates NY Citizens Campaign for the Environment NY

Figure 1. Conservation Organizations. Through a strategic filtering method, the list of state-focused conservation organizations was narrowed down to just 20 nonprofits - 10 "red state" organizations and 10 "blue state" organizations to be studied.

With this structured format, I collected the qualitative and quantitative data on the topics covered (and not covered), and language used in messaging. To acquire hit counts for the search terms "climate" and "hunt" for each organization's Facebook page, I had to use the desktop version of Facebook. Once each organization's FB page was located, utilizing the search button (a magnifying glass graphic) the terms were searched. For all search terms, hits were removed from the counts if the term was not found in the organization's authored post (i.e. a random follower used the word in a comment on a post). For search term "hunt" hits were removed if the term was used in the following contexts: "egg hunt," "treasure hunt," "scavenger hunt," if "hunt" was part of someone's first or last name, or if "hunt" was solely used to describe animal predation behavior. Due to what I assume is a Facebook glitch, the misspelled term "cliate" generated more "climate" hits than the correctly spelled "climate." This was consistent for all pages. It is unknown if an alternative spelling of "hunt" would have generated more hits but the correct spelling did produce a considerable number of hits (more so than that of "CLIMATE"). The Facebook algorithm limits the hit count to a maximum of 50 results. When 50 hits came up they were recorded as "50+".

The websites were examined for content and language use. Taglines, mission statements, and homepage imagery were recorded. Once the observations were logged, they were analyzed for presence of any trends within the two groups, and similarities and differences between the two groups.

Results

Figure 2. Engagement. The number of "likes" and "followers" from the Facebook business pages for the 20 conservation organizations in the sample were tallied and averaged. There were substantially less "likes" and "follows" for "red state" organizations suggesting that community engagement in "red states" is not as robust.

The total number of Facebook "likes" for the 10 "red state" conservation organization pages was 48672. The average number of "likes" per "red state" organization was 4867. The total number of Facebook "followers" for the "red state" conservation organizations' pages was 50621. The average number of "followers" per "red state" conservation organization was 5062.

The total number of Facebook "likes" for the 10 "blue state" conservation organization pages was 148271. The average number of "likes" per "blue state" organization was 14827. The total number of Facebook "followers" for the "blue state" conservation organizations' pages was 166554. The average number of "followers" per "blue state" conservation organization was 16655.
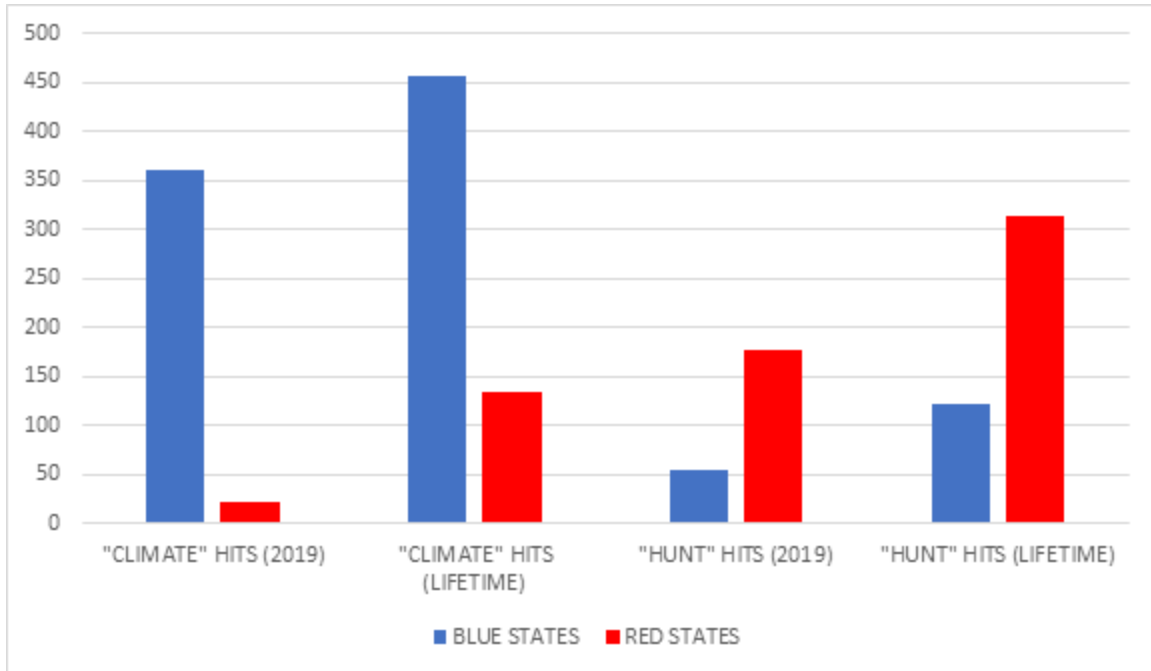
Figure 3. Subject matter. Terms were searched on the Facebook pages of the 20 conservation organizations between 9/24-10/4/20. A Facebook algorithm maxes out hit counts at 50 so the actual discrepancies (with complete totals) are likely to be even more pronounced. The data above reflects "CLIATE" and "HUNT" as the actual search terms.

The total number of hits of the search term "cliate" (a surrogate for "climate") for the 10 "red state" conservation organization pages was 23, with an average of 2.3 per page. The total number of hits for the search term "hunt" for the 10 "red state" conservation organization pages was 178+, with an average of 17.8+ per page.

The total number of hits for the search term "cliate" (a surrogate for "climate") for the 10 "blue state" conservation organization pages was 360+, with an average of 36+ per page. The total number of hits for the search term "hunt" for the 10 "blue state" conservation organization pages was 54, with an average of 5.4 per page.

Discussion

I was uncertain if I would find notable messaging differences between conservation organizations in red and blue states. I was somewhat surprised by some of what I observed but
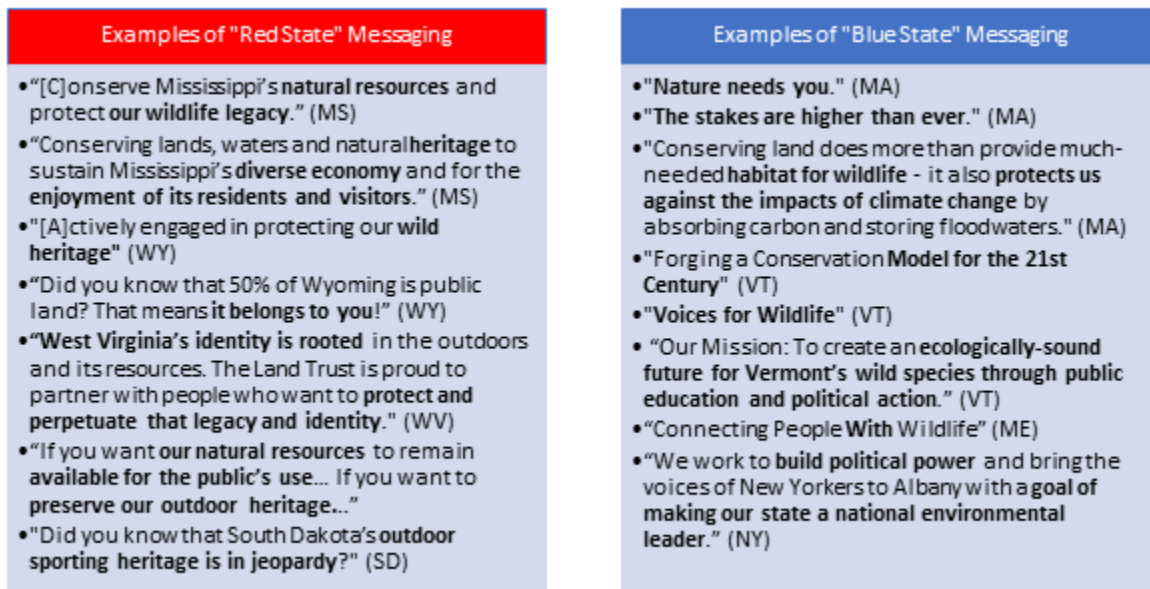
the phenomena I observed confirmed many concepts that have been studied and published in peer-reviewed academic journals. This is what I found in "red states," "blue states," and in both groups:

Conservation messaging in the "red states" had a strong focus on hunting and fishing. The environment was very often framed as a resource for human consumption. There was little to no focus on human behavior change or attributing anthropogenic fault for environmental issues. There was a notable absence of attention on climate change and green alternative energy.

There was a frequent usage of the term "heritage" and similar concepts throughout the "red state" messaging. Conservative political ideology grew from apprehension to progressive change so the value of tradition and a penchant for the past over the future is "baked in" for right-leaning psychology (Baldwin & Lammers, 2016). This may explain the motivation behind and in-party success of President Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, or former President Obama's messages promoting "Hope & Change." Tailoring conservation messaging to relate to temporal fascinations with each group makes sense for organizations in places that are strongly conservative or liberal. My observations largely reflected that this is in fact being done, yet it is unclear whether these are purposeful and strategic messaging moves, or if simply the authors are like-minded to their audience. Comparing our current environmental state to that of our forefathers may be effective for "red states," while focusing on future impacts and new green energy technologies will be more attractive to liberal audiences.

Conservation messaging in "blue states" was markedly different. There was little to no mention of hunting. There was a strong focus on clean energy and climate change. Communications on climate change were made in no uncertain terms. Rather climate change was expressed as an indisputable fact, and a dire one at that. There were no euphemisms or masking of the topic of climate change and global warming. The messaging was not presented as to sway people to accept the science of climate change; rather, there appeared to be an assumption that the consumers (readers) are like-minded. There was markedly less framing of the environment as a human-owned resource than in "red state" messaging. As in "red state" messaging, air and water quality was discussed but it was more focused on anthropogenic causes and a call to action to remedy it. In fact, a call to action was extremely strong in the messaging; that is, "blue state"

messaging not only put onus on citizens, but strongly urged them to make behavioral changes and advocate for environmentally-friendly policies. It seems as though "blue state" conservation organizations share the ideology of "ask not what nature can do for you, but what you can do for nature" whereas "red states" encourage conservation by connecting with human self-interests.

Examples of "Red State" Messaging	Examples of "Blue State" Messaging
• "[C]onserve Mississippi's **natural resources** and protect **our wildlife legacy**." (MS) • "Conserving lands, waters and natural **heritage** to sustain Mississippi's **diverse economy** and for the **enjoyment of its residents and visitors**." (MS) • "[A]ctively engaged in protecting our **wild heritage**" (WY) • "Did you know that 50% of Wyoming is public land? That means **it belongs to you!**" (WY) • "**West Virginia's identity is rooted** in the outdoors and its resources. The Land Trust is proud to partner with people who want to **protect and perpetuate** that legacy and identity." (WV) • "If you want **our natural resources** to remain available for the public's use... If you want to preserve our **outdoor heritage**..." • "Did you know that South Dakota's **outdoor sporting heritage is in jeopardy**?" (SD)	• "Nature needs you." (MA) • "**The stakes are higher than ever.**" (MA) • "Conserving land does more than provide much-needed habitat for wildlife - it also **protects us against the impacts of climate change** by absorbing carbon and storing floodwaters." (MA) • "Forging a Conservation **Model for the 21st Century**" (VT) • "**Voices for Wildlife**" (VT) • "Our Mission: To create an **ecologically-sound future** for Vermont's wild species through public **education and political action**." (VT) • "Connecting People With Wildlife" (ME) • "We work to **build political power** and bring the voices of New Yorkers to Albany with a **goal of making our state a national environmental leader**." (NY)

Figure 4. Language Discrepancies. Messaging in "Red State" organizations differed greatly from that of "Blue States." "Red States" employed language that was traditionalist (nature/wildlife perceived as a resource for human consumption), and past-focused (stressing the value of nostalgia, heritage and tradition). "Blue States" employed language that was mutualistic (nature/wildlife perceived as equivalent in value (not subordinate) to humans), and future-focused (stressing the need to progress, make change).

Views on wildlife may fall within a range with two dimensions: domination and mutualism. With domination, wildlife is viewed as a resource which is subordinate to humans. In mutualism, wildlife is seen as equivalent to humans with inherent rights and value without regard to human benefit (Manfredo et al., 2018). Mutualists are more concerned with protecting habitats and saving species, while those with domination values are more concerned with economic impacts, public access to wild places, and the rights of private property owners (Manfredo, Teel, & Dietsch, 2016). The data collected suggests (via the messaging to each group) that "red states" view wildlife through a lens of domination while "blue states" have more mutualistic perceptions. At the very least, these conservation organizations appear to believe this to be true as this is how they choose to communicate with their local audiences.

Facebook likes and follows in "blue states" were much higher than those of "red states." This suggests that there is a higher level of engagement in "blue states." It also suggests that there is opportunity for "red states" to enhance their outreach efforts and perhaps that their messaging is too narrow and results in smaller niche audiences. At least a portion of this phenomena though may simply be a result of state population differences. While both "red" and "blue" state-based organizations seem to be tailoring their messages to the priorities and values of their locals, they may be missing valuable opportunities for engagement by "preaching to the choir" and not reaching out to non-traditional audiences (Nadkarni, 2006).

Literature Review for Best Practice Guidance:

The literature provides diverse and interesting strategies for communicating conservation. A study by Jacobson et al. (2019) showed that positive messaging was more impactful than using negative language and imagery. That is, if the benefits of saving biodiversity were highlighted, rather than warning of the dire impacts of doing nothing, audiences are more apt to donate and volunteer. The samples tested were not divided by political ideology, so it is unclear if controlling for this would create alternate results. Similarly, Wright, et al. (2015) assert that hopeful messages generally inspire action more effectively than those of impending doom. As conservation relies heavily on human behaviors, conservation outreach should be guided by marketing principles (Wright, et al., 2015).

Wolsko et al. (2016) posit that moral framing has a significant impact on politically conservative audiences, with little impact on liberal consumers. Their study found conservative engagement was heightened when values such as patriotism, religiosity, and respect for authority were infused in the messaging. Focusing on outreach to smaller, homogenous audiences versus larger, more diverse audiences is beneficial as it allows organizations to tap into the attitudes and values. This informs strategic message framing and language use which can most effectively connect with those targeted groups (Davis, 1995).

 Action Component

For my project's action component, I am using what I've learned in my inquiry and literature review to create sample components for a proposed conservation campaign geared toward politically conservative audiences. I have produced mockup materials for message delivery for this hypothetical campaign. I created an animated commercial/PSA via Powtoons to represent my vision for a scripted TV commercial (Appendix B). Videography is not a skill of mine and obtaining willing pro bono actors to star in this theoretical commercial would prove difficult. Still, I wanted to give a representation of my ideas and create what could be inspiration for a live action commercial. This animated video showcases character "Jim," a patriotic everyday American who becomes surprised and upset to learn that while he thinks he does all he can for this country by wearing red, white, and blue, flying the flag, and buying American products, his garden is not as American as he is! The video's premise is that planting native (American) species would not only be better for Jim's local environment, but can be a reflection of his undying patriotism.

Using the creative platform Canva, I created mockup logos for this campaign titled "Grow American" (based on "Buy American") which combines garden plant imagery with nods to identifiable "American" images (i.e. red/white/blue, American flag, bald eagle, feather pen etc.) (Appendix C). Via Canva, I also created a mockup sign for a "Certified American Garden" (Appendix D). This is something that people could stake in their garden beds to communicate to others that they participate in "patriotic planting." This concept is inspired by signage from the National Wildlife Federation's "Certified Wildlife Habitat" campaign. It would help to spread the conservation message to others who pass or visit the home. The sign as well as other campaign materials will have the social media hashtag #GrowAmerican to further disseminate the message.

I believe this hypothetical campaign would connect with politically conservative audiences because it concurrently appeals to national pride and civic duty, as well as personal choice and autonomy (Wolsko et al., 2016). The Powtoon video, while animated, is geared toward adults, yet the language and concepts used will be simple enough for those with limited knowledge of (or interest in) ecology and conservation. I hope that it will be effective in sending a motivating message to remove invasive plant species and grow native ones. Native plants provide optimal habitat for local wildlife and support pollinator species. Native gardens require less maintenance (like weeding, pesticides, and fertilizer) as they are well-adapted to the

environment. Removing invasive plant species is critical as they degrade the value of habitats and reduce biodiversity. As per the suggestion of Jacobson et al. (2019), positive messaging was used in the video highlighting the benefits of planting native species rather than the negative impacts of invasive species.

Conclusion

The existing messaging of conservation organizations based in and serving "red" and "blue" states was observed to be markedly different in terms of content and style. This echoes the published research on messaging strategies and the psychology and values associated with political affiliation. Understanding the priorities and ideals of the intended audience is critical for meaningful outreach and the development of effective conservation campaigns. It is important to "know your audience" and "read the room," both appealing to consumer motivations and being open to adjust your strategy if it's not maximizing engagement. It is a delicate balance for conservation organizations (especially national and global ones) to neither exclude potential addressees with narrow niche messaging, nor generalize so much that they don't connect with key groups in a meaningful way. State-based and smaller organizations have the opportunity to target relatively attitudinally homogeneous groups of individuals. Their messaging must be thoughtfully strategic, as not to blunder this benefit. Communicating concepts to consider include temporal framing (past vs. future focus), wildlife values (domination vs. mutualism), polarity (positive or negative framing), and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT).

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APPENDIX A : Quantitative & Qualitative Data for Conservation Organizations in "Red" & "Blue" States

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MihAEYUtX1pTMbef2xqnBcxIelNkl4-jiSY-fiv5mnM/edit?usp=sharing

APPENDIX B : Powtoon Animated Commercial Video Geared Toward Politically Conservative Audiences

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JMerBMQg2VwPIJvLwzR2hatvgLGM7r7a/view?usp=sharing

APPENDIX C : Mock-up Logos for Hypothetical "Grow American" Campaign Geared Toward Politically Conservative Audiences

APPENDIX D : Mock-up Garden Sign for a "Certified American Garden"