

Do's and Don'ts

In the lead up to the elections of 2024, Issue One conducted a strategic research and messaging project to develop a new narrative about American democracy - one that offers an aspirational story that can transcend the hyperpartisanship of our current politics, reach beyond coastal bubbles, and speak directly to the hearts of everyday Americans, from supporters looking for a home to the “movable middle.” The following do's and don'ts are part of a comprehensive toolkit, including a report and interactive data website. Learn more at IssueOne.org/narrative.

Do's

Do use messaging that is forward-looking, aspirational, hopeful, and inclusive

Rather than looking backwards, focus on how forward-looking reforms can help achieve an America that works better for all of us.

Do talk about “simple,” “practical,” and “commonsense” reforms

Talking about how to save democracy can feel overwhelming. Use language that helps the movable middle to understand that making change is achievable.

Do root efforts to strengthen elections in broader American values

Reforms are more likely to gain purchase among the movable middle if we connect them to the larger values they hold dear.

Do acknowledge people's doubts and distrust

It's ok to acknowledge that people have real doubts about our elections, and that there are things we can improve (like increased federal funding to local and state elections to implement changes voters want). Use questions as an invitation to offer commonsense ways concerns can be addressed.

Do arm people with information to combat false narratives

While we don't want to look backward and relitigate the past, it's important to educate people to see the difference between unintentional and insignificant errors in the system and false claims of widespread conspiracies about voter fraud.

Do demystify and offer transparency into the electoral process

One thing that helps fuel our opponents' arguments is how little people understand how our elections actually work. We should change that. Showing people how elections really work can help defang disinformation.

Do ask voters to play a role

Asking people to take action is empowering and inspires activating emotions, like hope.

Don'ts

Don't go on the attack

When we attack or impugn the motives of those who doubt the integrity of the 2020 election, or engage in an us vs. them mentality, it just fans partisan flames and alienates the movable middle.

Don't relitigate 2020

Trying to convince people that the 2020 election was fairly decided won't work. We don't need people to agree with us on whether the past election was decided fairly; we need to explain how elections work and enact measures that will further protect our elections and increase their trust in the next one.

Don't talk about the "Big Lie"

Talking about the "Big Lie" gives oxygen to claims of cheating or voter fraud and it locks us into an adversarial, blame casting posture, rather than one that might breed consensus.

Don't let claims of voter fraud enable voter suppression

We need voters to feel confident that our election system is fair and free, but we can't allow measures aimed at making it hard to vote to be implemented in the name of the baseless fraud narrative/disinformation.

Don't frame the debate in apocalyptic terms

When we couch the challenges facing our democracy in apocalyptic terms it plays to the wings, but it shuts the middle down.

Don't project doom and gloom

Voters already have negative impressions about democracy and feel demoralized about elections - hyping up their fears and misgivings can perpetuate harmful ideas and keep people from looking ahead to what's next. It's important to create urgency, but people shouldn't feel like we are inches from going off a cliff.

Don't be dismissive of concerns about democracy that may feel smaller in scale

While most of the media coverage in the democracy space focuses on the "Big Lie" and election denialism, most concerns expressed about our democracy are on a smaller scale (if still fueled by disinformation), like people voting twice. Providing concrete, commonsense, forward-looking responses to these kinds of concerns can go a long way.

Don't center your argument on unity

According to our research, a majority of people no longer think unity is possible in the U.S., and don't see achieving unity as a predicate to supporting reforms that would strengthen our democracy. That doesn't mean we should abandon any messaging about reducing polarization. But don't make the bar higher than it needs to be by adding admirable objectives that aren't necessary to what we are trying to do.

Don't talk about election integrity in a way that suggests a political or partisan bias

If we talk as if one side holds the higher ground than the other, we'll never find our way to consensus. Remember that our audience isn't the leaders of the "Stop the Steal" effort, but rather the everyday voters who have doubts and concerns.

Don't make the entire story about election workers

We love election workers! They are an important part of the story, and the best messengers we have. But we also have to deliver other kinds of messages that help elicit activating and hopeful emotions from our targets.

Don't talk about one-off reforms

Given the ideological differences of the demographics that make up the movable middle, offering one-off reforms is less likely to garner majority support than a thoughtfully constructed package of reforms offered together.