

The four messaging pillars

In the lead up to the elections of 2024, Issue One set out 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. Below is message guidance designed to help practitioners talk with the “moveable middle” of the electorate in a way that can help restore their confidence in our democracy and spur action to protect it. Learn more at IssueOne.org/narrative.



1. Frame reforms as a way to protect the freedom to vote

Americans believe that people should have the freedom to vote for their representatives and that we all should have an equal say in how our country is governed, no matter who we are, what we look like, or what we believe. Messaging that frames reforms as a way to protect the freedom to vote is met with strong agreement among the movable middle, is the most likely to trigger activating emotions — inspiring a sense of hope and community — and provides the most convincing reasons to take action.

Sample language:

“Right now, our democracy is under threat and politics is so divisive that it can be hard to see a way out. Some cynical politicians and special interests want to keep it that way so they can hoard power — leaving the rest of us with even less say in how things are run. But even though we may not agree on much right now, we all believe in an America where every person has the freedom to vote for who represents them — where people have an equal say in how we are governed, regardless of our skin color or how much money we make.”

2. Show how commonsense reforms lead to both fairer elections and a fairer country

A majority of the movable middle agrees that “fair elections are the cornerstone of our strong country,” and that they are a necessary predicate to an America where everyone “has the freedom to pursue their own interests and a community to share life’s moments with.” Movable middle voters believe that fairer election laws and processes will lead to more equality, less polarization, and a society that is healthier, wealthier, and safer. More than just words, these are the kinds of perceived benefits that can motivate voters to undertake sustained action.

Sample language:

“America works best when we have voting laws and processes that make sure both sides play fair. There are simple, commonsense things we can do to ensure our elections do right by everyone and everybody can accept the outcomes... Fairness in elections will lead to a fairer and stronger country, one where all Americans can shape their lives, advance their livelihoods, build community, practice the faith of their choice, and find happiness.”

It’s critical that we help the moveable middle connect the dots between election reforms and the broader vision of the America they would like to see.

3. Look forward rather than relitigating the past or casting blame

There can be a tendency among those worried about the state of American democracy to try to convince others that the election system is working well and the 2020 election was decided fairly. Don’t do it. It’s a wasted effort, and it often makes things worse. Especially for the hardcore, election denial is now an article of faith, without regard to the facts or the messengers who deliver them.

One of the least convincing messages to the moveable middle is the assurance that “when there is fraud” in American elections, “we catch it, prosecute it, and punish the violators,” that various experts have characterized the 2020 election as “the most secure in the history of our country,” and that “any fraud that occurred [in 2020] was minor and had no impact on the results of the election.” All of that may be true, but it was the least likely message to evoke agreement from the movable middle, did markedly worse among the independents and traditional Republicans who comprise an important part of the movable middle, and elicited the most angry responses from the movable middle. Casting blame and pointing fingers may energize the wings, but it’s too political for the movable middle, which they can find alienating. Look forward; don’t look back.

4. Empower people to take action

A lot of the talk about democracy these days can take on an apocalyptic tone, and the solutions can feel abstract and remote. That may be an accurate expression of how the wings assess the stakes and what we need to do, but it’s discouraging to the movable middle. A better path for this audience: acknowledge the challenges we face, but then offer a set of simple, concrete, commonsense steps that can help inspire confidence in upcoming elections and the results they generate and that we can achieve in the near term if we take action now. And yes, we should ask people to act — people find it empowering when we show them what needs to be done, help them understand how we get there, and then encourage them to demand the change they want to see.