



A New Narrative to Promote Democracy in the United States:

A Findings and Recommendations Report

Developed by Metropolitan Group

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Metropolitan Group

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INTRODUCTION

Powerful narratives that delegitimize democratic norms—and intentionally seek to deepen polarization—are an increasingly global trend. As the last decade has demonstrated, the United States is not immune to this trend, which undermines belief in democratic institutions, civic life, social cohesion, and the fundamental freedoms that are the promise of democracy.

Narratives are critical, because they shape social norms and community expectations. They are the meta-stories through which people make sense of the world around them, process information, and make decisions about what to do or not do. Narratives can either inoculate against or create a fertile environment for mis/dis/malinformation. As such, they are a powerful social and behavior change lever because they impact attitudes, behaviors, and actions (including support or opposition to specific policies).

Today, the information landscape is becoming increasingly saturated with misinformation, weaponized with disinformation and malinformation, and evolving in unknown ways with the proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI). These trends are both a reflection of—and are further aggravating—declining faith and trust in democracy, and in the institutions essential to its survival, including representative governance, a free and independent press, and a fair justice system.

In 2024, an estimated 1.7 billion people—including 155 million in the United States—participated in 74 national elections around the world.¹ The results of those elections were mixed, with some countries experiencing an expansion of their democracies and others leaning more towards authoritarianism. Overall, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index concluded that 2024 saw a continuing decline in democracy globally, down from 5.52 in 2006 (based on a 0-10 scale) to “an historic low of 5.17.”² For its part, the United States' score remained unchanged in 2024, ranking 28th out of the 167 countries included in the index. The United States was described as a “flawed democracy”, but the report also noted that “it remains to be seen if historical checks in balance will remain in force and serve to improve or worsen the US's ranking in 2025.”³

Developing and advancing a proactive narrative that strengthens understanding of—and trust and active participation in—democracy is a critical part of building an inclusive and durable democracy that transcends elections and partisan politics here in the United States and around the world.

Since 2022, Metropolitan Group (MG) has been working globally to identify, map, and deconstruct dominant and salient narratives that advance the principles of liberal democracy and narratives that seek to undermine it or to explicitly promote authoritarianism. That work has included research to examine the core values reflected in this range of narratives and to identify those values that are more widely associated with—and authentic to—pro-democracy narratives. It also included development and testing of alternative narratives to increase understanding of and support for the principles of liberal

¹ <https://www.idea.int/initiatives/the-2024-global-elections-supercycle>

² <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2024/>

³ Ibid.

democracy⁴, as well as social and behavior change analysis of effective methods to deploy these narratives. The work was intentionally focused on a diverse set of 11 countries on five continents with very different population demographics, cultures, experiences with democracy, economic circumstances, and histories.

More recently—with funding from more than a dozen public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and foundations—Metropolitan Group has had the opportunity to engage in similar work in the United States. This work has focused on narratives directly related to democratic governance and related issues and topics from foreign aid and promoting democracy abroad to alleviating the nuclear threat. MG has also researched and developed narratives on other issues that rely on faith and trust in the institutions that are essential to a functioning democracy, including: public health, structural racism, environmental justice, economic well-being, and immigration reform, and more.

In developing a more effective pro-democracy narrative for the United States, this report applies and tests relevant learnings from the global work, which revealed many similarities in the core values evoked and the narrative frames deployed in both promoting and undermining liberal democratic principles and institutions. It also pulled from narrative findings in the U.S. related to democracy and trust in institutions. The findings and recommendations described in the pages to follow are not based on any single project, and they reflect work that is ongoing both here in the United States and around the world. Further findings, insights, and recommendations will be shared as that work continues to unfold.

⁴ The term “liberal democracy” (used here and throughout this document) refers to a representative democracy with separation of powers, respect for the rule of law, protection of individual rights and liberties, limits on the power of elected representatives, and other principles and democratic institutions connected to international definitions of the term. The term does not refer, nor should it be inferred to imply, the presence of any specific political party in positions of leadership and power.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **Narrative is the articulation of a way of understanding the world** and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do. As such, it can be a powerful tool in creating a more just, healthy, and sustainable world.
2. **The majority of narratives showing up in public discourse about democracy are primarily either critical or defensive in their framing**; far fewer narratives make a compelling positive case for democracy. This is true in the United States and globally.
3. **Most people in the United States and around the world prefer to live in a democracy** and they recognize and value the freedoms they associate with—and the benefits they see as possible in—a democracy.
4. **Many people struggle to define democracy** beyond the holding of elections and they express both disappointment in the current state of democracy and fear for its future.
5. **Freedom, fairness, and fearlessness are the most prominent of the core values associated with an authentic, functioning democracy.** These and other core values (see pages 6 and 25) are essential to connecting the issue of liberal democracy with what people care about.
6. **A narrative frame and message framework articulating that “freedom matters” is effective** in connecting with people across the political spectrum, making the case for democracy, and motivating interest in taking steps to advance and protect it (see pages 6 and 27).
7. **The lack of social cohesion and extreme polarization in the United States** are seen as key obstacles to overcome in living up to the promise of democracy. Acknowledging these conditions and pointing out that they are being intentionally encouraged by forces inside and outside the United States to advance their own interests is a powerful motivator in elevating the desire to find a solution to these challenges.
8. **Reminding people that protecting freedom is a shared responsibility is critical** to evoking understanding of—and a desire to be part of—the solution to the challenges our democracy faces.
9. **A strong democracy is seen as better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice.** While recognition of some benefits of a democracy are dependent on a person’s political worldview, “trust in the justice system” is recognized as a benefit across the political spectrum.
10. **Acknowledging the challenges our democracy faces while conveying a sense of optimism that together we can improve it is key** to minimizing rejection as being too naive and inspiring questions and conversation about specific actions people can take to “protect our freedoms and improve our democracy so it works better for everyone.”

CORE VALUES KEY

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY/SECURITY
FAMILY	ASPIRATION	BELONGING

FREEDOM MATTERS

NARRATIVE FRAME

In America, **our freedoms** matter. This country was built on the **right** to **have our voices heard**, to **make our own decisions**, to be **treated fairly** by the justice system, and to **vote** in **free** and **fair** elections. These **freedoms** are at the heart of democracy and our **security**. But, they require **checks and balances** on power and government that is **open**, **honest**, and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** hasn't fully lived up to these **freedoms**. But, a **strong democracy isn't afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.

CHALLENGE

These days, it can feel like Americans can't find **common ground** on anything. **Healthy debate** and **working toward compromise** are **a good thing** in a **strong democracy**. But, there are some who are **working every day to weaken American democracy** and further **divide us** to serve their own interests. **Defending freedom** and **fairness**—and **finding solutions** to the challenges we face—doesn't have to mean **fighting each other**. Instead, **we** need to find a way to **work together**.

SOLUTION

Protecting our freedoms has always been **up to all of us**, not just **our elected representatives**. But, democracy is about more than **voting**. It's about **securing freedom** and **fairness** for **all Americans**, **ensuring all voices are heard**, and **demanding** a government that is **honest**, **open**, and **responsive to the people**. **Fearless** and **free people working together** can **find solutions** that **make our lives better** and **our democracy stronger**.

BENEFITS

A democracy where **freedoms are protected**, **fairness** is something **everyone** can expect, and government is **open** and **accountable to the people** is **better able to advance freedom**, **safety**, **opportunity**, and **justice for every one of us and our families**.

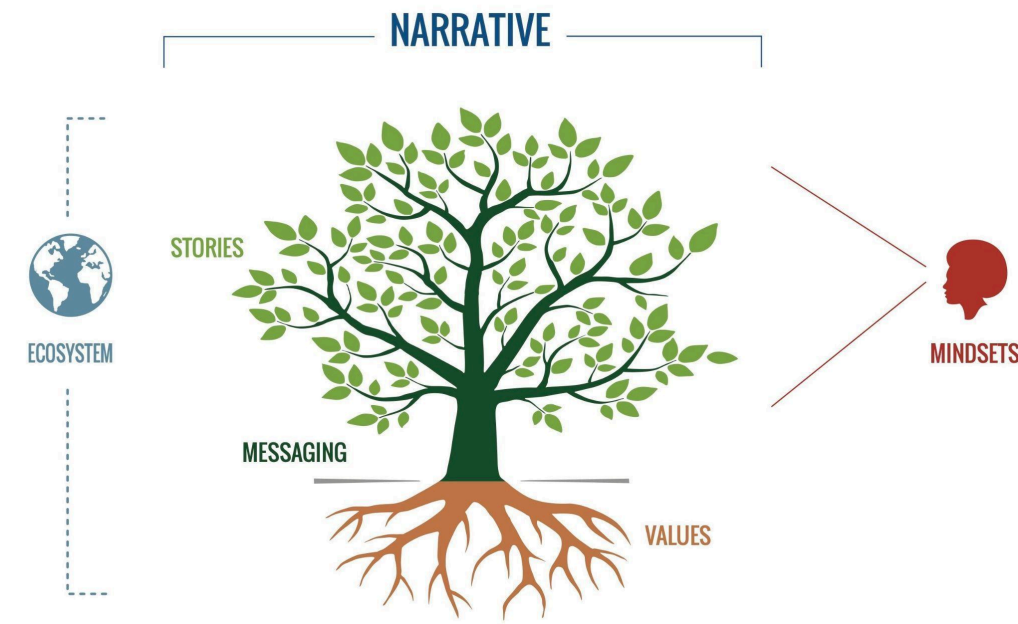
CALL TO ACTION

None of this will happen on its own. It will take **all of us working together** to **protect** our **freedoms and improve our** democracy **so it works better** for **everyone**. It won't be easy. But **we've done hard things before and we can do them again**.

NARRATIVE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative can be one of the most important tools change agents have in advancing a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. But what is narrative?⁵ Drawing on our decades of experience in using strategic communication to advance social change, MG defines **NARRATIVE** as the articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do. Narrative informs our experiences, what we see as normative, how we filter what we believe and the meaning we assign, how we define problems and solutions, what we accept without challenge, and what we tolerate (or actively promote and protect), or what we seek to change in systems, policies, and practices.

No narrative exists in a vacuum. It is deeply influenced by—and in turn can influence changes in—the social, cultural, environmental, and political ecosystems all around us. Similarly, while the mindsets people hold shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives, narratives can also influence changes in people’s mindsets.



As seen in the illustration, narrative is created, expressed, and experienced through the following:

VALUES: The deeply held beliefs that ground the narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action.

MESSAGING: The core ideas that provide the foundational structure for the narrative.

⁵ The content of this section describes an approach to narrative as a tool of social change that was created—and is deployed globally by—Metropolitan Group in advancing a wide range of issues to build a just, healthy, and sustainable world. For more information about this approach, please visit <https://www.metgroup.com/our-work/case-studies/narrative/>

STORIES: What people experience over time both literally (e.g., through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (e.g., through policy, the built environment, etc.) that aggregates to create or reinforce a particular narrative.

People's **MINDSETS**, or collection of perspective and attitudes, shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives and to changes in behavior, social norms, or policies/systems.

All of this occurs within a narrative **ECOSYSTEM**—the contexts in which people are exposed to narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and the echo chambers through which they receive information.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, the findings and recommendations contained in this report draw from a body of work on multiple projects both domestically and globally since 2022. Our work in the United States was conducted on behalf of more than a dozen public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and foundations working directly on promoting democracy and also on behalf of those who are advancing issues that are essential to—and reliant on—the principles and institutions of liberal democracy. Globally, this work involved efforts in 11 countries across Latin America; Central Europe; East, West, and North Africa; and East Asia.

Our methodology in developing narratives and message frameworks is deeply versed in all stages of narrative analysis, assessment, development and testing, implementation and iteration, and monitoring and evaluation. The methodology employed in the development of the narrative and message framework described in this document is typical of the methods we use. We start with grounding ourselves in the current context for an issue, including the narratives, core values, and messaging that are already present. This activity is accompanied by a deep-dive literature review into anything we can access to provide insights on the existing mindsets, behaviors, motivators, and barriers that confront those seeking to make change, and any research on what has been tried before and what can be learned from it.

More specifically, the US-based work described here included the following:

- Global research conducted that included:
 - A literature review of approximately 800 bibliographic sources, including academic articles, books, and reports.
 - Approximately 140 interviews with a wide range of local experts, journalists, academics, activists, community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations, private-sector individuals, and former government officials.
 - A robust scan and analysis of over 1,000 search terms used on the most popular social media platforms to scan and analyze over one million messages and posts.
 - Review of nearly 5,000 articles and posts from more than 80 media outlets.
 - Consultation of over 25 national and international indices that track democratic institutions, rule of law, press freedom, and corruption.
 - Review of approximately 27 national, regional, and international surveys on elections, democracy and democratic values, national issue priorities, social norms, and closely held values.
 - Political discourse analysis of speeches and social media posts from almost 60 key figures, including politicians, government officials, opposition leaders, and presidents.
 - A total of 34 focus groups (across both formative and testing phases).
 - Surveys with a total of more than 3,700 participants in three countries.
- Identification, coding, and analysis of narratives and messaging showing up in the United States in the following:
 - More than 1,000 social media posts

- Political discourse analysis of statements, speeches, and online activities originating from leaders (e.g., presidents, opposition leaders, government officials, politicians, etc.) across the political and ideological spectrum
 - Articles published in traditional legacy media outlets
 - Content of organization websites
- A literature review of publicly available research, presentations, reports, and other source materials (e.g., podcasts). This review also included dozens of national and international indices that track democratic institutions, rule of law, press freedom, and corruption, as well as surveys on elections, democracy and democratic values, national issue priorities, social norms, and closely held values.
- Development of narrative and messaging concepts tested using Pluralytics ValuesFinder platform. The purpose of this testing was to gauge the likelihood that existing or draft narratives or messaging components would resonate across a bipartisan audience. The three narratives originally developed for testing in October 2024 are shown below:

FREEDOM MATTERS

In America, freedoms matter. The freedom to speak our minds while protecting that same freedom for others. The freedom to make our own decisions for ourselves and our families. To expect fair treatment from our justice system no matter who we are and open government that is accountable to the people. And the freedom to vote in fair and honest elections that are essential to a functioning democracy in keeping us safe and protecting our freedoms. Our country has never fully lived up to these freedoms. But, a strong democracy isn't afraid to admit that and do the hard work of being better tomorrow than it is today.

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY ARE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Protecting our freedoms has always been up to us. All of us. Speaking our minds while respecting the views of others, demanding fair treatment under the law for everyone and a government that is open and accountable to the people. And casting our votes in free and fair elections that are essential not just to the survival of our democracy, but to keeping us safe and protecting our freedoms. Fighting for our freedoms doesn't have to mean fighting each other, but fighting together to make our democracy stronger, more fair, and more prosperous for all our families and communities.

DEMOCRACY IS WHAT WE DO. FREEDOM IS WHY.

In America, democracy is not just an idea. It's what we do. When we are free to speak our minds and stand up for the right of others to do the same. When we demand open and honest government, and a justice system that treats everyone fairly no matter who they are. When we protect the right of every American to decide what's best for themselves and their families. And when we cast our votes in free and fair elections. When we do all of this, we make our democracy stronger and better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice for all.

- Three focus groups (virtual) with moderate Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans were conducted in October 2024 (prior to the 2024 Presidential Election) to test the three narrative frames and other messaging elements.

- Based on feedback from the first round of focus groups, two narratives were refined for further testing (again using the Pluralytics ValuesFinder platform to assess their likelihood of resonating across a bipartisan constituency).
- Another round of three virtual focus groups with moderate Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans were conducted in January 2025 to test the revised narrative frames and messaging elements.
- Key informant interviews with thought leaders, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and others were conducted in January-February 2025 to gather input on the narrative frames and messaging elements.
- Refinement of narrative and messaging concepts based on input from the focus groups.

The U.S. narrative was constructed based on formative research (including a review of existing quantitative and qualitative data gathered globally and domestically) and was tested with focus groups in the U.S. (with moderate Republicans, Independents, and moderate Democrats) in October of 2024 and again in January of 2025. Quantitative testing is being conducted in the summer of 2025 and the U.S. narrative will be updated/refined based on testing results. The testing findings will be shared with the updated narrative.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings below focus on the United States, but also reflect learnings identified across the full body of work conducted by Metropolitan Group globally since 2022. Findings drawn from both domestic and global research are presented first, followed by findings focusing on the United States. Lastly, we present findings from the testing of the narrative and messaging concepts developed and tested as part of our US-focused narrative work.

Context-setting findings across the full body of research, domestically, and globally

The findings below reflect insights that informed our understanding of the current context for development of a new narrative to promote democracy in the United States. These findings were drawn from across the full body of research described in the Methodology section on page 9.

FINDING 1: Most people prefer to live in a democracy...

United States	Globally
<div><div>1. The vast majority of Americans (80%) say it's important to them to live in a country that is democratically governed. It's worth noting that the global average of citizens who agree with this statement is higher at 86%.⁶</div><div>2. Between 2018 and 2023, Americans' belief that democracy is the greatest form of government rose from 46% to 59%. Increases were seen across all age groups and political identity.⁷</div></div>	<div><div>1. "On average, 86 percent of respondents want to live in a democratic state. People still believe in its potential for generating solutions to common challenges: presented with 10 imperatives like building schools and hospitals, protecting the environment, and reducing crime, those surveyed strongly tend to the view that authoritarian regimes are less able than democracies to fulfill these needs. Only 20 percent believe that the latter can 'deliver what citizens want.'" ⁸</div><div>2. Presented with a list of nine major countries and asked which most align with their values, respondents are most likely to pick democracies, and most frequently the United States. Moreover, 65 percent say they would prefer their country to build relationships with democracies rather than authoritarian governments" ⁹</div></div>

⁶ Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 9-10.

⁷ <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/48238-most-americans-support-democracy-and-oppose-dictatorship>

⁸ Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 2.

⁹ Open Society Foundation, 3.

FINDING 2: The bedrock principles of democracy are known, valued, and seen as central to the U.S. identity.

United States	Globally
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Over half of Americans surveyed say either “voice of the people in influencing government” or “protection of rights and liberties” is the most important aspect of democracy.¹⁰2. The freedoms most often identified as important to the identity of the United States as a nation are: the right to equal protection under the law (91%), the right to vote (91%), freedom of speech (90%), and the right to privacy (88%), freedom of religion (84%), the right to assemble peacefully (83%) and freedom of the press (77%).¹¹	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. “Not only are most people unconvinced by the alternatives to democracy, they also identify with open society principles. On average, majorities of between 85 percent and 95 percent agree it is wrong for governments to deny access to individual rights on grounds of appearance, religion, sexual or gender orientation, or in cases of disruptive acts of protest.¹²

FINDING 3: ...but support for authoritarianism is alarmingly high.

United States	Globally
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 57% of Americans think our country’s leaders should have total, unchecked authority.¹³2. 50% of Americans under age 40 are open to non-democratic systems of government.¹⁴3. 48% of Americans say a system in which experts, not elected officials, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country would be a good way of governing the US.¹⁵4. 38% of Americans agree that “because things have gotten so far off track in this country, we need a leader who is willing to break some rules if that’s what it takes to set things right.”¹⁶	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. “(A)bout one-third of respondents say that having the army rule or a leader who “does not bother” with parliament or elections is a good way of running a country—33 percent and 32 percent, respectively.”²⁰2. One-in-five people surveyed globally believe authoritarian countries are more capable of delivering “what citizens want” and 16% think authoritarian states are better than democracies at tackling climate change, which many survey respondents identified as their top concern facing the world.²¹

¹⁰ <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-americans-belief-in-democracy>

¹¹ AP-NORC, The March 2024 AP-NORC Center Poll, (Chicago, IL: The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2024), 12.

¹² Open Society Foundation, 3.

¹³ Davis, Jr., Elliott. *A Leader With ‘Unchecked Authority’? Americans Might Not Mind*, (US News Decision Points, September 11, 2024).

¹⁴ Issue One, *A New Narrative for American Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022), 8.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, But People Around the World are Critical of How It’s Working*, February 2024, 27.

¹⁶ PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 5.

²⁰ Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 16.

²¹ Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 11.

5. 29% of Americans agree having army rule or a leader who does not bother with parliaments or elections is a good way of running a country.¹⁷

6. 23% of Americans agree that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country (up from 15% two years prior).¹⁸

7. 23% of Americans say a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law would be a bad way of governing the US (above the global average of 20%).¹⁹
3. Nearly one-in-three people globally (31%) believe authoritarian countries are better than democratic countries at growing the economy and 37% believe authoritarian countries are better at keeping crime low.²²

FINDING 4: ...and disappointment in democracy is prevalent.

United States	Globally
<div><div>1. As of 2023, an overwhelming majority of Americans (77%) said the country was moving in the wrong direction. While Republican and Independent survey participants are far more likely to say this, a majority of Democrats also agreed.²³</div><div>2. Two-thirds of Americans surveyed think the United States is not a well-functioning democracy or not a democracy at all. Only 31% of those surveyed in 2024 said the U.S. is a well-functioning democracy.²⁴</div><div>3. 72% of Americans say the United States used to be a good example of democracy, but only 19% believe that’s true today.²⁵</div><div>4. “Many Americans have come to believe that their voice is not represented in our democracy. Majorities of voters across the ideological spectrum say, for example, that citizens do not get enough say in the governance of the country. Less than 50% of Americans are confident that electoral</div></div>	<div><div>1. “Today’s young people have grown up and been politicized as the age of polycrisis has emerged, during which forms of climate, economic, technological, and geopolitical turmoil have grown and reinforced each other to a degree never seen before. So, although most people globally still have faith in democracy, that faith is running on fumes. And these findings suggest that it may be set to weaken with each generation.”²⁷</div></div>

¹⁷ Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 17-18.

¹⁸ PRRI, 6

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, But People Around the World are Critical of How It’s Working, February 2024, 23.

²² Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 11.

²³ PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 2.

²⁴ AP-NORC, The March 2024 AP-NORC Center Poll, (Chicago, IL: The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2024), 15.

²⁵

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/10/72-of-americans-say-the-us-used-to-be-a-good-example-of-democracy-but-isnt-anymore/>

²⁷ Open Society Foundation, 4.

outcomes actually reflect the will of the people, a sentiment that is more pronounced on the ideological right. And more than 4 in 10 Americans say American democracy does not represent them.”²⁶

FINDING 5: The majority of narratives about democracy are either critical or defensive in their framing; far fewer narratives make a compelling positive case for democracy.

United States	Globally
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. MG’s scan of existing domestic narratives found the same anti-democracy narratives we had identified globally. The most dominant of these narratives are: Stronger leadership is needed than democracy can provide; Security justifies all; democratic institutions are corrupt; and Enemies, outsiders, and others.”2. The most dominant pro-democracy narrative frames are defensive: “Authoritarianism is harmful” and “Democracy is under threat.” Narratives with a more positive frame (e.g., Democracy promotes equity and fairness) are seen far less often.3. MG’s scan of existing domestic narratives found that anti-democracy sources evoked a narrative referencing freedom and democracy even more frequently than did pro-democracy sources (see chart on page 19).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In a global scan of existing narratives about governance, MG found 41 narratives that express a pro-authoritarian worldview compared to only 14 that advanced a pro-democracy worldview.2. The most frequently deployed anti-democracy narratives advanced the ideas that: Stronger leadership is needed than democracy can provide; Democratic institutions are corrupt; or evoked fear of Enemies, outsiders, and others.3. As with the U.S. scan, the most frequently seen pro-democracy narrative was actually defensive in its framing, advancing the idea that “authoritarianism is harmful.” There were far fewer narratives that made a positive case for democracy (e.g., “Democracy promotes equity and fairness”).

FINDING 6: The concept of “democracy” is frequently appropriated by authoritarians, who recognize its power and appeal.

United States	Globally
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. MG’s scan of existing domestic narratives found that anti-democracy sources evoked a narrative referencing freedom and democracy even more frequently than did pro-democracy sources (see chart on page 19).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. MG’s global scan of existing narratives found that authoritarians in particular are skilled at appropriating democracy narratives (and describing what they are doing as being evidence of the existence of democracy in their countries) because they recognize that democracy appeals to the majority of people.

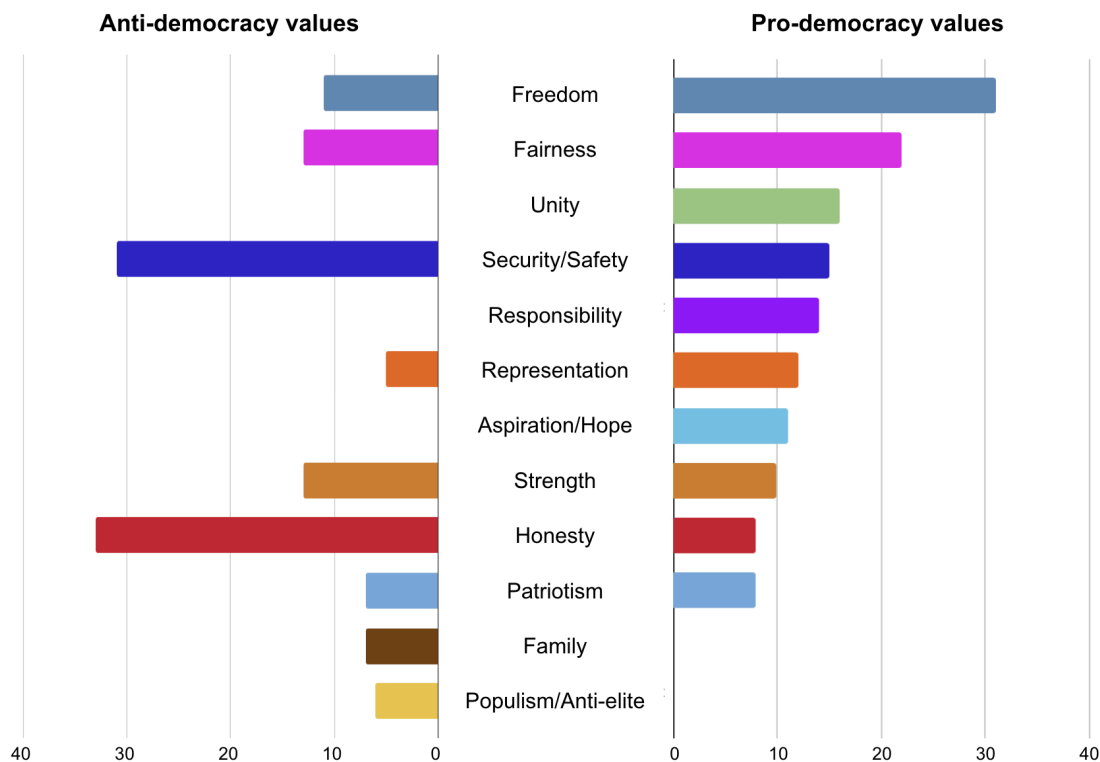
²⁶ Issue One, *A New Narrative for American Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022), 9.

Findings relevant to defining, experiencing, and assessing democracy in the United States

The findings below are drawn from research focused exclusively on the United States, including the formative research (e.g., the literature review) and the testing process (i.e., the six focus groups). These findings provide additional context for understanding the existing narrative landscape relative to democracy in the U.S. and provide insights on the challenges and opportunities in advancing a new narrative.

FINDING 7: Freedom is a dominant, authentic, and compelling core value employed in narratives about liberal democracy.

1. As shown below, MG’s research found that domestic pro-democracy narratives were far more likely to evoke freedom, fairness, and unity values. Conversely, anti-democracy narratives were more likely to evoke security/safety, honesty, and strength values. The chart below shows the percentage of content in each category that evoked one or more specific values.



2. A 2023 survey conducted by PACE Funders found that the word “freedom” is deeply resonant with Americans.²⁸
 - a. Nearly 90% of Americans have a positive association with the word “freedom” while about 70% have a positive association with the word “democracy.”

²⁸ <https://www.pacefunders.org/language/>

- b. Similarly, the word “freedom” was more likely to motivate survey respondents to vote than was the word “democracy.”
- c. The word “freedom” is perceived as having a much higher likelihood of bringing people together (3.9 on a scale of 5) than does the word “democracy” (3.4).

FINDING 8: Most people—across the political spectrum—care about the future of democracy.

1. Prior to the 2024 general election in the U.S., more than three-quarters of Americans agreed that democracy was at risk in the election. Democrats were more likely to agree (84%) but Republicans agreement was not far behind (77%) and 73% of Independents also agreed.²⁹
2. “(W)hen asked what most influenced their vote (in the 2024 presidential election), about half of voters identified the future of democracy as the single most important factor. That was higher than the share who answered the same way about inflation, the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, abortion policy or free speech.”³⁰

FINDING 9: Democracy is not well understood beyond the holding of elections.

1. Only 47% of those surveyed could name all three branches of the U.S. government (down from 56% in 2021) and 25% of people could not name any of them (up from 20% in 2021).³¹
2. In MG’s focus groups (October 2024 and January 2025) to test democracy narratives and messaging, participants talked about lack of clarity around what it means to be engaged in our democracy. Here are two examples:
 - a. “I am not sure how to stand for democracy outside of voting.” Allison, age 30, female, Conservative
 - b. “A healthy democracy requires more action than simply showing up to vote once every four years.” Elliot, age 35, male, Independent
3. It is worth noting that concern about the separation of powers emerged as a theme in the one-on-one interviews conducted in February 2025, although it had not been raised during the focus groups in Fall 2024 or in January 2025. Although this concern was raised in connection with the executive orders then being issued by the White House, the fact that separation of powers was never raised in any of the focus groups illustrates the low levels of awareness of the core elements of democratic governance.

FINDING 10: The gap between the ideal and reality of democracy is profound in the US.

1. In focus groups conducted by MG, messaging about democratic ideals were consistently met with cynicism. People see so many things wrong with the reality of democracy in the United States today that expressions of idealism are perceived as hopelessly naive. Others whose

²⁹ PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 37.

³⁰

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/economy-ranked-as-a-top-issue-but-concerns-over-democracy-drove-many-voters-to-polls-ap-votecast-shows?utm_source

³¹

<https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/americans-civics-knowledge-drops-first-amendment-and-branches-government>

lived experience has been shaped by enduring structural racism question whether the United States has ever lived up to its ideals.

FINDING 11: Context matters and satisfaction with democracy can be influenced by whether your side wins or loses.

1. The first round of focus groups conducted by MG were completed in October 2024 (in the last few weeks prior to the presidential election) and the second round was completed in January 2025 shortly before the inauguration. Not surprisingly, participants had a hard time divorcing the narrative and message from the current context.
2. Focus group participants showed a noticeable partisan divide in their response to certain aspects of messaging, with greater division being observed in the post-election discussions. While those who identified as Liberal or Independent demonstrated heightened wariness and cynicism about the state of democracy in January 2025, Conservatives were demonstrably more helpful about our democracy and the future of the country than they had been in fall 2024.
3. Other research confirmed our focus group observations, as reflected in this survey showing that Americans tend to view democracy more favorably when their party wins or holds power, and more negatively when they do not, as evidenced by data gathered in January 2025 (see below).³²

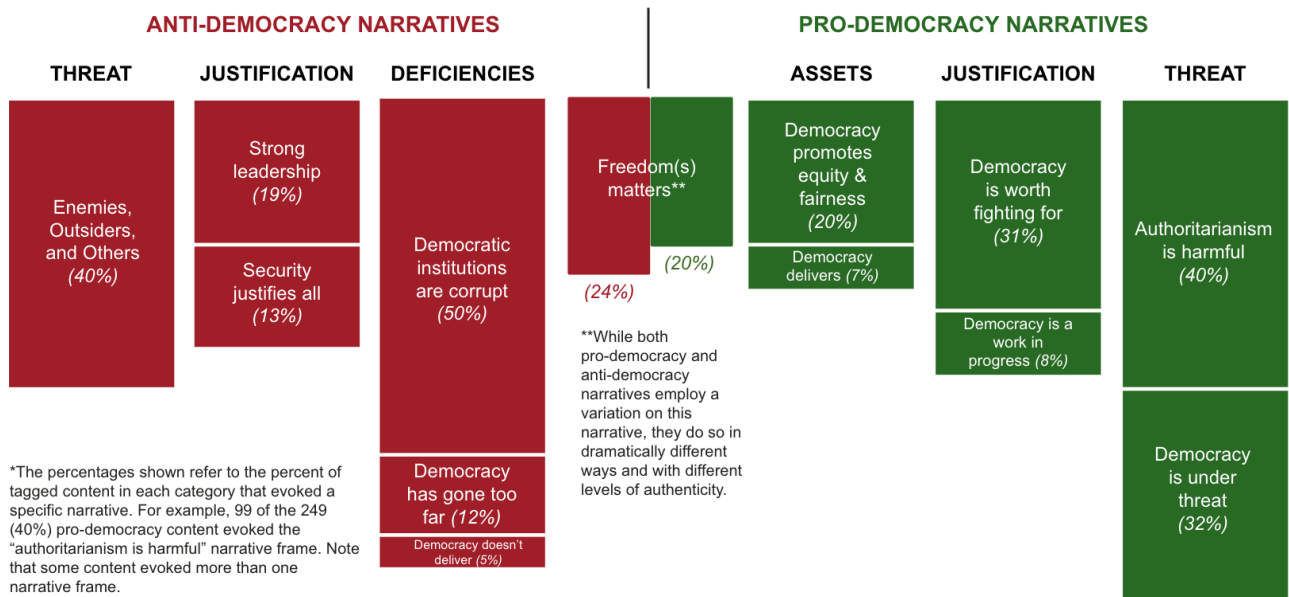
Level of satisfaction with democracy in the United States		
DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS	REPUBLICANS
47% (Jan 2021) 35% (Jan 2025) ↓12 pts	27% (Jan 2024) 34% (Jan 2025)	17% (Dec 2023) 33% (Jan 2025) ↑36 pts

FINDING 12: Some of the most dominant pro-democracy narratives have “deficit framing” (e.g., “democracy is messy”) that can bolster anti-democracy and pro-authoritarian narratives.

1. Mirroring MG’s findings from our global work, both pro-democracy and anti-democracy narratives showing up in MG’s scan of content in the United States rely heavily on negative and/or defensive framing. As shown below, Authoritarianism is Harmful, Democracy is Under Threat, and Democracy is Worth Fighting For showed up in the scan far more frequently than did the Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness narrative. Similarly, Democratic Institutions are Corrupt and Enemies, Outsiders, and Others were the dominant anti-democracy narrative frames (both domestically and globally).
2. In the United States, both pro- and anti-democracy narratives employ some version of a Freedom Matters narrative, although they do so in dramatically different ways and with arguably different levels of authenticity. These negative and defensive frames can reinforce concerns for high-frequency values of stability and security that further advance authoritarian narratives.

³² Jones, Jeffrey M. *Satisfaction with U.S. Democracy Edges Up from Record Low: Republicans Mostly Responsible for Increased Satisfaction*. (Gallup: January 22, 2025).

Some also directly contradict core values of stability and security that are seen in many dominant narratives.



Findings from testing of new narratives and messaging to promote democracy in the US

Drawing on the findings described above, MG developed a range of narrative concepts and components of messaging for testing. As described on page 9, the testing process was conducted in two phases, both before (October 2024) and after (January 2025) the 2024 Presidential Election.

The resulting narrative and supporting message framework emerging as most successful through the testing process is shown below in its entirety. In the pages to follow, specific sections of the narrative frame and message framework will be shown again and discussed separately with regard to their unique findings.

Finding 13: The Freedom Matters narrative frame (see below) tested strongest in increasing support for and belief in the possibility of liberal democracy, and connecting people to it.

NARRATIVE FRAME: FREEDOM MATTERS

In America, our freedoms matter. This country was built on the right to have our voices heard, to make our own decisions, to be treated fairly by the justice system, and to vote in free and fair elections. These freedoms are at the heart of democracy and our security. But they require checks and balances on power and government that is open, honest, and responsive to the

people. Our country hasn't fully lived up to these freedoms. But a strong democracy isn't afraid to admit that and do the hard work of being better tomorrow than it is today.

1. Three narratives were tested: one (shown above) framed democracy through the lens of the freedom value and how it matters to each of us; a second expressed the sentiment that freedom and democracy are worth fighting for; and a third defined democracy in terms of action rather than identity or philosophy (all three original narrative frames are shown on page 10).
2. The Freedom Matters narrative tested strongest (for relevance, increased understanding, and motivation to support democracy) across both rounds of focus groups. The Freedom Matters narrative was effective at increasing support for and belief in the possibility of improving liberal democracy and connecting people to the idea of it.
3. The Freedom Matters narrative met the “bridging benchmark” through the Pluralytics platform, indicating that it was likely to resonate with a bipartisan audience.
4. The second narrative (Freedom and democracy are worth fighting for) was rejected in the first round of testing (October 2024) because it served to remind people of the polarization and specter of political violence that people identify as a threat to our democracy.
5. In the first round of testing (October 2024), the third narrative (Democracy is what we do. Freedom is why.) tested well as an aspirational narrative that might be relevant in the future but was not seen as reflective of the current reality. In the second round of testing (January 2025), however, moderate Republicans gravitated toward this narrative, likely reflecting the higher degree of satisfaction they felt about U.S. democracy based on the outcome of the November 2024 elections. Moderate Democrats and Independents, however, did not share this sentiment and moderate Republicans' reactions to Freedom Matters remained positive and sparked engagement.
6. Some elements of the other two narrative frames tested well individually (e.g., “protecting our freedoms has always been up to us” from the Freedom and Democracy Are Worth Fighting For narrative frame and “we put democracy in action not just by voting” from the Democracy Is What We Do narrative frame. This content was subsequently incorporated into the final message framework (as shown on page 28).
7. The following reflect themes we heard across the two rounds of focus groups about the Freedom Matters narrative frame:
 - a. “Freedom DOES matter. We are better than most countries out there, but I agree that we haven't fully lived up to these freedoms.” - Jennifer, female, age 55, Moderate Republican
 - b. “I like the accountability implied in this paragraph. It needs to be said and it's a step in the right direction.” - Denzel, male, age 31, Independent
 - c. “To me, this reads as aspirational. It SHOULD be true but it's not true right now.” - Shaili, age 29, Moderate Democrat

FINDING 14: Lack of social cohesion and respect are seen as major obstacles to democracy in the U.S.

NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE:

These days, it can feel like Americans can't find common ground on anything. Healthy debate and working toward compromise are a good thing in a strong democracy. But, there are some who are working every day to weaken American democracy and further divide us to serve their own interests. Defending freedom and fairness—and finding solutions to the challenges we face—doesn't have to mean fighting each other. Instead, we need to find a way to work together.

1. Across the focus groups and interviews conducted by MG, a consistent theme was the lack of social cohesion and respect for one another, a desire to change that, and a belief that democracy shouldn't be as polarizing as it has become. The following reflect consistent themes we heard across the focus groups:
 - a. "If you're able to base conversation off commonalities, you can build from there. But we're so divided we can't figure out where those commonalities lie." Gibran, age 42, male, Moderate Liberal
 - b. "Trust should resonate with everyone. In order to make this right we need to trust each other. It boils down to trusting each other." Kevin, age 44, male, Independent
 - c. "Of course, we won't all agree because we have different ideas about policy. What matters is coming together to do what is best for the country. Lately we are too divided and can't seem to get along. People in Congress shout and almost brawl. It shouldn't be that way." - Jessica, age 40, female, Moderate Conservative
2. The reference to "defending freedom and fairness" resonated across groups, while "fighting for our democracy" was seen as reinforcing the aggressive nature of political and civic discourse.
3. Discussion in the focus groups illustrated the widespread recognition that the deep division in the United States is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but is being intentionally orchestrated by forces inside and outside the United States to serve their own interests.

FINDING 15: Reminding people that protecting freedom is a shared responsibility is key to the solution to the challenges our democracy faces.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SOLUTION:

Protecting our freedoms has always been up to all of us, not just our elected representatives. But democracy is about more than voting. It's about securing freedom and fairness for all Americans, ensuring all voices are heard, and demanding a government that is honest, open, and responsive to the people. Fearless and free people working together can find solutions that make our lives better and our democracy stronger.

1. The solution identified in the message framework (as shown above) was seen as positive and aspirational.

2. Including a specific reference to democracy involving more than voting was also seen as an important reminder to people who otherwise struggle to identify ways in which democracy is put into action.
3. Feedback from focus groups to the solution statement included the following:
 - a. “This statement reminds me of what happens when people remember that there’s strength in numbers.” - Allison, age 30, female, Moderate Republican
 - b. “If this happened it would be a big thing. I think it has happened in moments in history. In WWII people came together, and after 9/11 too.” Elliot, age 35, male, Independent
 - c. “I think there are a lot of screwed up things in this country, but at its core I think we have an opportunity to do something about that, do something about some of the problems. Democracy allows us to fix some of the things we want to fix. Makes me optimistic because it’s what I want.” - Alan, age 27, male, Moderate Democrat

FINDING 16: A strong democracy is seen as better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice.

BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH DEMOCRACY:

A democracy where freedoms are protected, fairness is something everyone can expect, and government is open and accountable to the people is better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice for every one of us and our families.

1. Focus group participants across the board endorsed the benefit statement, believing that a democracy is better able to deliver when it functions well, although they don’t necessarily believe that democracy in the United States is effectively doing so.
2. “Trust in the justice system” resonated with all three segments, while some benefits of living in a democracy worked better with specific audience segments, as shown below:

LIBERALS	INDEPENDENTS	CONSERVATIVES
A justice system everyone can trust.		
Access to the healthcare, education, housing and opportunities every person and every family needs and deserves.		
The opportunity to earn a living or start a small business to provide for your family.	Living in communities safe from violence.	Increasing trust in each other and in our government.

3. The following comments reflect themes we heard across the focus groups:
 - a. “This reads like a goal statement to me. If America were a well-oiled machine this would be what it would look like.” - Arik, male, age 39, Moderate Democrat

- b. “I’m going to be Pollyanna here. I would LOVE to live in a country where there’s a “justice system everyone can trust” and “earning a living to provide for your family”. These feel like things we can actually work on. Jacqueline, female, age 46, Independent
- c. “I like what this says. When we work together, we can do a lot and it makes a difference.” Kierra S, female, age 29, Moderate Republican

FINDING 17: Conveying a sense of optimism that together we can improve our democracy is key to inspiring action.

CALL TO ACTION:

None of this will happen on its own. It will take all of us working together to protect our freedoms and improve our democracy so it works better for everyone. It won’t be easy. But we’ve done hard things before and we can do them again.

1. The call to action was seen by focus groups as being “important” and “unifying” and most participants appreciated the acknowledgement of the challenge and the aspirational framing about the possibility of positive change. Some participants expressed concern about how feasible this would be.
2. Importantly, the call to action inspires questions and conversations about specific actions that people can take in response. Among the actions identified by the focus groups were educating oneself about our democracy, staying informed about current events, taking part in protests, and writing to an elected representative.
3. Feedback from focus groups to the call to action included the following:
 - a. “Inspiring but it leaves me hanging. You have my attention ... what do I have to do?” - Jacqueline, age 46, female, Independent
 - b. “I agree with it overall. I feel empowered to do something about the things I complain about.” - Alan, age 27, male, Liberal
 - c. “I like the part about working together.” - Jonathan, age 39, male, Conservative

FINDING 18: Other messaging elements tested strongly across all audience segments.

1. Across the content tested, some ideas resonated with all focus groups and were identified as key components of messaging to promote democracy in the U.S., as shown in the table below.

Tested Message Content	Rationale for Why it Works
We put democracy in action not just by voting , but by standing up for the freedom of every American .	Defines democracy as more than elections. Clearly addresses the mindset that democracy is only about elections and voting.
Our country hasn’t fully lived up to these freedoms . But a strong democracy isn’t afraid to admit that and do the hard work of being better tomorrow than it is today .	Acknowledges the disconnect people perceive between the ideal and reality of democracy, thereby minimizing rejection of the messaging for being too naive. Moves

	quickly to an asset frame, communicates the fearlessness value associated with democracy, and expresses optimism for the future of democracy.
open and honest government.	Articulates the honesty value and reflects transparency that is central to a functioning liberal democracy.
Ensuring a justice system everyone can trust .	Across the political spectrum, this is perceived to be a key benefit of a democracy.
Protecting our freedoms has always been up to us ; not just our elected representatives, but all of us .	Minimizes the default to assuming that responsibility to protect and strengthen our democracy rests only with elected representatives.
Fighting for our freedoms doesn't have to mean fighting each other.	Confronts the major challenge identified in the focus groups (extreme polarization and disrespect) that people perceive to be a barrier to a functioning democracy.
It will take all of us working together to expand and protect our freedoms and improve our democracy so it works better for everyone .	Delivers a clear and compelling case for shared responsibility in addressing the challenges we face so our democracy can be stronger.
It won't be easy. But we've done hard things before and we can do them again .	Reminds people that the people of the United States have found common ground on important issues before and can do it again. Reflects the hope and optimism people need and want to feel.

CORE VALUES TO EVOKE IN COMMUNICATING ABOUT DEMOCRACY

The research conducted by MG in the United States validated a set of 10 core values that are associated with democracy in an authentic and compelling way. These core values are shown below. The order of these values is intentional since freedom, fairness, and fearlessness rose to the top in terms of resonance with the “movable middle” audience (i.e., moderate Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans) we engaged in testing.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY/SECURITY
FAMILY	ASPIRATION	BELONGING

FREEDOM	Connects with the broad range of freedoms that are important to people, including the right to think and speak freely, to act and live their lives, to worship as they choose, to make choices, and express their views about their government without fear of reprisal. Connects to core democratic principles, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, etc.
FAIRNESS	Reflects the ideas of justice and equality, that everyone receives the same benefits or opportunities and is treated fairly under the law, regardless of position, power, or identity.
FEARLESSNESS	A reflection of strength (a key global value) and the courage and bravery that people like to associate with the American spirit and also a direct refutation of the fear-based appeals that authoritarians employ in their narratives and messaging.
REPRESENTATION	Conveys a sense of inclusion (political and communal), having personal agency or a voice, and actively participating in their governance.
RESPONSIBILITY	Connects with the widely held belief that freedom is not just a right but also comes with the responsibility to respect and help protect the freedom of others. Also reflects the importance of being civically active, people’s sense of duty, and the responsibility of governments to their people.
SAFETY/SECURITY	Defined in a broad sense in terms of personal security and safety, economic security, and cultural/identity security.
HONESTY	Associated with truth, trust, trustworthiness, openness, and transparency, and often triggered in contrast to concerns about corruption, accountability, and disinformation.

FAMILY	Connects people to their most important relationships, including family. Acknowledges that family is consistently among the top two values held by the American people (along with belonging).
ASPIRATION	Reflects the hope, optimism, and can-do spirit that people associate with America. While hope feels aspirational to many people today in this context, it is also seen as essential at increasing a sense of individual and collective agency in doing the hard work to improve our democracy.
BELONGING	Relates to the broader sense of kinship and community that people yearn for and want for their children. Also seen as the key to establishing a connection to, and responsibility for, each other. Surveys show belonging is among the top two (along with family) values held by the American people.

RECOMMENDED NARRATIVE AND MESSAGING TO ADVANCE DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.

The recommended pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework were developed by applying the research findings described earlier in this document. Drawing on these formative findings, we identified the following guidance for development of the narrative and supporting message framework to advance understanding of and support for liberal democracy in the United States:

1. Ground the narrative and messaging in core values (see page 28), with a special emphasis on leaning into the freedom value.
2. Articulate a shared definition of democracy beyond elections and what it means in people's lives.
3. Acknowledge that democracy isn't perfect, but stay asset-framed and grounded in hope.
4. Increase understanding of the core elements of liberal democracy beyond elections and voting.
5. Acknowledge and demonstrate the potential to address people's deep concerns about polarization.
6. Meet the urgency of the present moment while laying a foundation for sustained communication in the future.

Words and phrases that reflect the identified core values are shown in the corresponding colors in the narrative and message framework:

FREEDOM		FAIRNESS		FEARLESSNESS	
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY		SAFETY/SECURITY	HONESTY	
FAMILY		ASPIRATION		BELONGING	

FREEDOM MATTERS

NARRATIVE FRAME

In America, **our freedoms** matter. This country was built on the **right** to **have our voices heard**, to **make our own decisions**, to be **treated fairly** by the justice system, and **to vote** in **free** and **fair** elections. These **freedoms** are at the heart of democracy and our **security**. But they require **checks and balances** on power and government that is **open**, **honest**, and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** hasn't fully lived up to these **freedoms**. But a **strong democracy isn't afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.

CHALLENGE

These days, it can feel like Americans can't find **common ground** on anything. **Healthy debate** and **working toward compromise** are **a good thing** in a **strong democracy**. But there are some who are **working every day to weaken American democracy** and further **divide us** to serve their own interests. **Defending freedom** and **fairness**—and **finding solutions** to the challenges we face—doesn't have to mean **fighting each other**. Instead, **we** need to find a way to **work together**.

SOLUTION

Protecting our freedoms has always been **up to all of us**, not just **our elected representatives**. But democracy is about more than **voting**. It's about **securing freedom** and **fairness** for **all Americans**, **ensuring all voices are heard**, and **demanding** a government that is **honest**, **open**, and **responsive to the people**. **Fearless** and **free people working together** can **find solutions** that **make our lives better** and **our** democracy **stronger**.

BENEFITS

A democracy where **freedoms are protected**, **fairness** is something **everyone** can expect, and government is **open** and **accountable to the people** is **better able to advance freedom**, **safety**, **opportunity**, and **justice for every one of us and our families**.

CALL TO ACTION

None of this will happen on its own. It will take **all of us working together** to **protect** our **freedoms and improve our** democracy **so it works better** for **everyone**. It won't be easy. But **we've done hard things before and we can do them again**.

ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP

Metropolitan Group (MG) and its sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (ISMG), are full-service, strategic, and creative global agencies that research, design, test, implement and evaluate social impact initiatives. MG/ISMG develops and iterates innovation models on the impacts of narratives and social norms on policy, practice, behavior, attitudinal and culture change.

Our recent narrative work domestically and globally has included researching, developing, testing and/or implementing new narratives to:

- promote democracy and address rising authoritarianism in 13 countries on five continents, including North America;
- address structural racism, advance environmental justice, promote reproductive freedom, increase health equity, and support healthy and sustainable food systems in the United States;
- counter impunity and corruption, defend civic space, advance gender equity and address gender violence, and bolster support for addressing gross human rights violations in Mexico;
- advance women's rights in Tunisia;
- promote democracy and defend civic space in El Salvador;
- advance adoption of clean and renewable energy standards in the United States and Europe; and
- shifting health expectation norms and policies in the U.S. to a community-of-health framework.

MG and ISMG partner with local, national, and international organizations to co-create and design social and behavior change (SBC) strategies to advance human rights and to build resilience against authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives that erode public trust in democratic principles and institutions. We work with public agencies, nongovernmental organizations, entrepreneurs, and the private sector. MG is the coordinating partner of the *Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook*, an initiative to build open-source narrative infrastructure to support liberal democracy.

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