



THE POWER OF VOICE

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# Developing a New Narrative to Promote Democracy in the U.S.

## Research and Recommendations Report

May 2025



Metropolitan Group

the power of voice

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# Purpose and scope

# Purpose and Scope of the Work

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 development and testing of alternative narratives to increase understanding of and support for the principles of liberal democracy, 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 13 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.

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. It also pulls 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.

# Methodology

# Global Landscape Scan | *April 2022-July 2024*

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1. **Literature review:** 800 bibliographic sources, including academic articles, books, and reports.
2. **Key informant interviews:** Conducted approximately 140 interviews with a wide range of local experts, journalists, academics, activists, CSOs and NGOs, private-sector individuals, and former government officials.
3. **Social media analysis:** Conducted a robust scan and analysis of over 1,000 search terms used on the most popular social media platforms to scan and analyze over 1 million messages and posts.
4. **Media analysis:** Reviewed almost 5,000 articles and posts from more than 80 media outlets
5. **Indices:** Consulted over 25 national and international indices that track democratic institutions, rule of law, press freedom, and corruption.
6. **Polling and survey analysis:** Reviewed approximately 27 national, regional, and international surveys on elections, democracy and democratic values, national issue priorities, social norms, and closely held values.
7. **Political discourse analysis:** Analyzed speeches and social media posts from almost 60 key figures, including politicians, government officials, opposition leaders, and presidents.

# Global Development and Testing | *Dec 2022-Apr 2023*

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## Formative Research:

1. **Focus Groups:** Research partners conducted a total of 15 focus groups in urban and rural areas.
2. **Surveys:** Research partners in one country conducted a survey with over 600 respondents.
3. **Key Informant Interviews:** Research partners conducted a total of 38 interviews with key stakeholder segments in geographically diverse regions.
4. **Indices, Surveys, & Literature Scan:** Partners reviewed relevant research, surveys, and polling, as well as academic, media, and social media coverage related to stakeholders and democratic issues.

## Narrative and Message Testing Research:

1. **Focus Groups:** Research partners conducted a total of 19 focus groups in urban and rural areas, with identified stakeholder segments.
2. **Surveys:** Research partners conducted national surveys with over 3,100 respondents across three countries.
3. **Key Informant Interviews:** Research partners conducted 18 interviews with key stakeholder segments in geographically diverse regions of their respective countries (in two countries).
4. **Indices, Surveys, & Literature Scan:** Partners reviewed relevant research, surveys, and polling, as well as academic, media, and social media coverage related to stakeholders and democratic issues.

## 1. **ATLAS.ti scan coding for narratives and values**

- a. 1,000 social media posts of 41 identified influencers reviewed (Facebook, Instagram, X)
- b. 56 traditional media articles reviewed from 8 sources
- c. 21 speeches of 9 identified influencers reviewed
- d. 16 organizations scanned
- e. 508 data points coded across social media, media, organizations, and speeches
  - i. 216 anti-democracy narrative data points and 246 pro-democracy narrative data points

## 2. **Literature review**

- a. 14+ reports, articles, and other publicly available research and source material on messaging around democracy



- AP-NORC, *The March 2024 AP-NORC Center Poll*, (Chicago, IL: The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2024).
- ASO Communications, *Deliver Our Democracy: Messaging Guidance to Pass National Election Standards and Combat State Attacks on Our Freedom to Vote*.
- ASO Communications, *Guide to Messaging Our Freedoms*.
- Callahan, David, *Recapturing the Single Most Important Value in American Life*, (Blue Tent, January 2024).
- Davis, Jr., Elliott. *A Leader With 'Unchecked Authority'? Americans Might Not Mind*, (US News Decision Points, September 11, 2024).
- Eisen, Norman L. et. al., *American Autocracy Threat Tracker*, July 22, 2024.
- Heritage Foundation, *Project 2025 Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, 2023
- Issue One, *A New Narrative for American Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022).
- Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023).
- PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023).
- Shenker-Osario, Anat, as quoted in *Democrats Need to Realize that the end of Roe is About More than Abortion*, (Mother Jones, July 1, 2022).
- Valuegraphics Research Company, *Global Values Survey*, 2023.
- Pew Research Center, *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, But People Around the World are Critical of How It's Working*, February 2024.
- World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020), United States, Study #WVS-2017, v 3.0.

# Sources | *Influencers (41 scanned across Facebook, Instagram, and X)*

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- |                             |                            |                     |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Joe Biden                | 14. Jake Tapper            | 28. Candace Owens   |
| 2. Kamala Harris            | 15. Van Jones              | 29. Dan Bongino     |
| 3. Bernie Sanders           | 16. Don Lemon              | 30. Tucker Carlson  |
| 4. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez | 17. Tim Walz               | 31. JD Vance        |
| 5. Barack Obama             | 18. Joy Reid               | 32. Mike Pence      |
| 6. Hillary Clinton          | 19. Robert F. Kennedy Jr.  | 33. Franklin Graham |
| 7. Anderson Cooper          | 20. Liz Cheney             | 34. Laura Ingraham  |
| 8. Rachel Maddow            | 21. Adam Kinzinger         | 35. Bill O'Reilly   |
| 9. Ezra Klein               | 22. Donald Trump           | 36. Joe Rogan       |
| 10. Stacey Abrams           | 23. Ron DeSantis           | 37. Sean Hannity    |
| 11. Rev. Al Sharpton        | 24. Ted Cruz               | 38. Charlie Kirk    |
| 12. Michelle Obama          | 25. Marjorie Taylor Greene | 39. Dinesh D'Souza  |
| 13. Ben Shapiro             | 26. Donald Trump Jr.       | 40. Tomi Lahren     |
|                             | 27. Mitt Romney            | 41. Mike Johnson    |

# Sources | *Media (traditional sources & organizations)*

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## Traditional Media Sources

1. The New York Times
2. Politico
3. The Washington Post
4. The Wall Street Journal
5. Forbes
6. Breitbart
7. New York Post
8. The Washington Times

## Organizations

- |                                 |                                       |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Business Roundtable          | 9. Center for Tech and Civic Life     |
| 2. One America                  |                                       |
| 3. Democracy Works              | 10. New America                       |
| 4. Heritage Foundation          | 11. BiPartisan Policy Center          |
| 5. SEIU                         | 12. Common Defense                    |
| 6. Defending Democracy Together | 13. Represent Us                      |
| 7. More in Common               | 14. American Autocracy Threat Tracker |
| 8. Interfaith America           | 15. State Democracy Defenders Action  |
|                                 | 16. Protect Democracy                 |

# Sources | *Political discourse (9 political influencers analyzed)*

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1. Joe Biden
2. Kamala Harris
3. Tim Walz
4. Donald Trump
5. J.D. Vance
6. Hillary Clinton
7. Michelle Obama
8. Barack Obama
9. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

# Landscape scan takeaways

# Current context in the US

77%

...of Americans say the country is moving in the wrong direction. GOP and Independents are far more likely to say this, but a majority of Democrats also agree.

67%

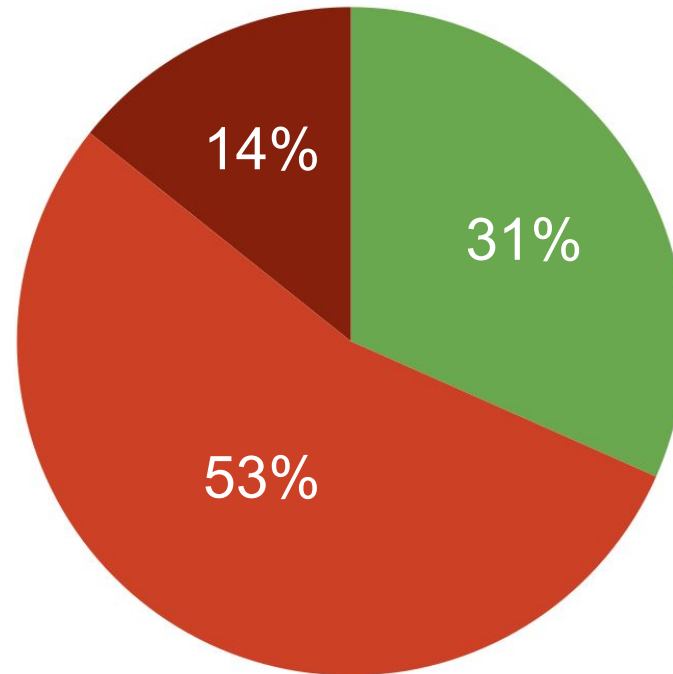
...of Americans fear political violence in the U.S. within the next year\* (compared to 58% globally).

\*Note that the survey was conducted prior to the attempted assassination of Donald Trump.

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

# 2/3 think the US is not well-functioning democracy or not a democracy at all

2024 AP-NORC Poll



- US is a well-functioning democracy
- US is a poorly functioning democracy
- US is not a democracy

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

# Support for democratic governance is strong

80%

...of Americans say it's important to them to live in a country that is democratically governed (below the global average of 86%)

56%

...of Americans say democracy is preferred to any other kind of government (below the global average of 62%)

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

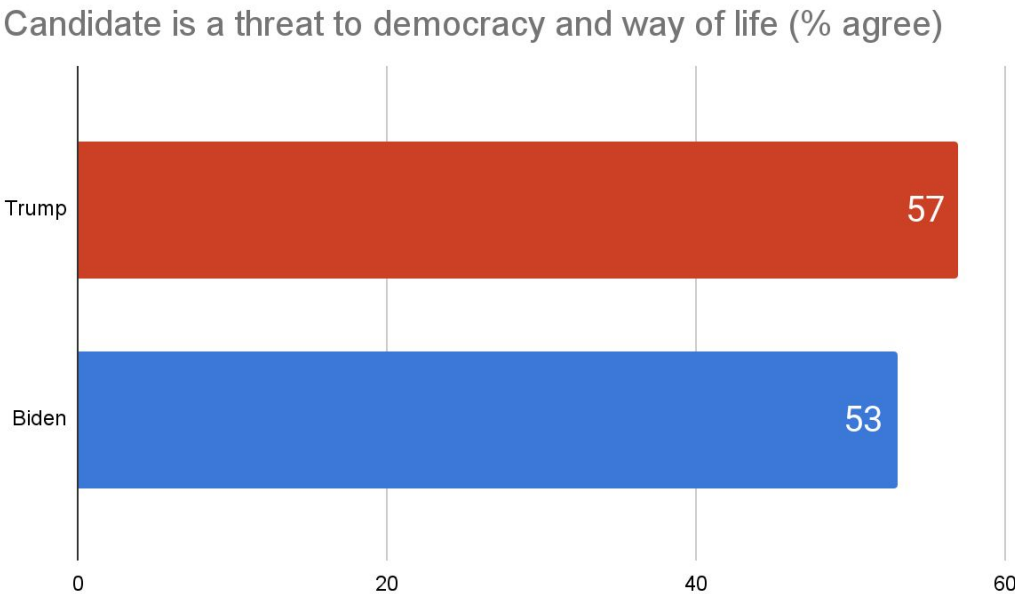
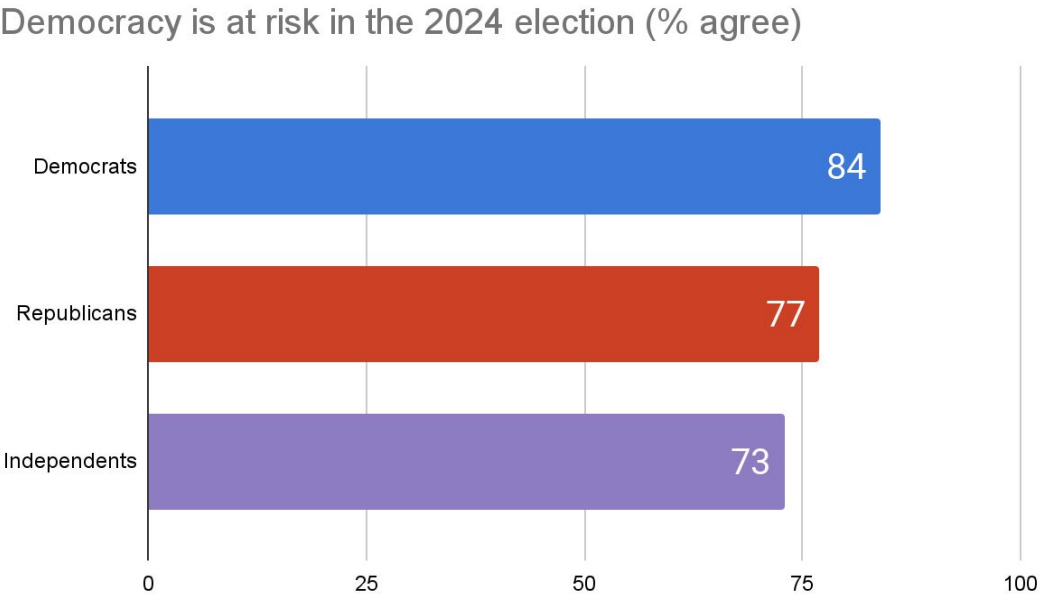


# Freedoms most associated with our national identity

When asked which freedoms are most important to our identity as a nation, the following were identified: **the right to vote** (91%), **the right to equal protection under the law** (91%) **freedom of speech** (90%), and **the right to privacy** (88%).

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

# Concern about democracy cuts both ways



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

# Support for non-democratic governance

**57%**

...of Americans think their country's leader should have total, unchecked authority.<sup>1</sup>

**50%**

...of Americans under 40 are open to non-democratic systems of government.<sup>2</sup>

**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.<sup>3</sup>

**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.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Jr., Elliott. *A Leader With ‘Unchecked Authority’? Americans Might Not Mind*, (US News Decision Points, September 11, 2024).

<sup>2</sup>Issue One, *A New Narrative for American Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022), 8.

<sup>3</sup>Pew Research Center, *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, But People Around the World are Critical of How It’s Working*, February 2024, 27.

<sup>4</sup>PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 5.

# Support for non-democratic governance

**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.<sup>3</sup>

**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).<sup>4</sup>

**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 global average of 20%).<sup>1</sup>

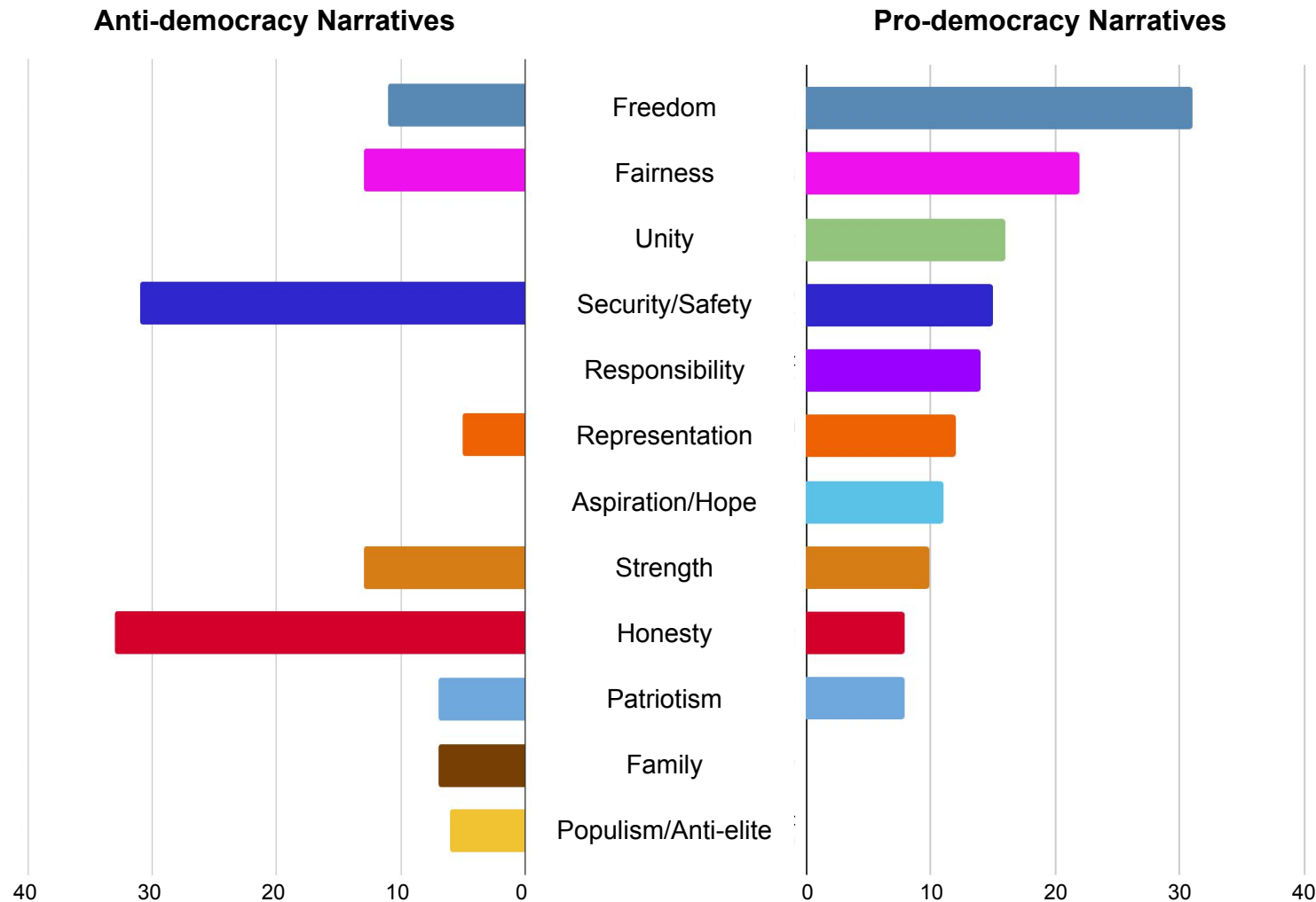
<sup>1</sup>Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>PRRI, 6

<sup>3</sup>Pew Research Center, Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, But People Around the World are Critical of How It's Working, February 2024, 23.

# Values drivers

# Values showing up in the ATLAS.ti data



- Pro-democracy narratives were far more likely to evoke freedom, fairness, and unity values
- Anti-democracy narratives were more likely to evoke security/safety, honesty, and strength values

## How to read this chart:

Chart shows the percentage of tagged pro-democracy and anti-democracy content evoking each value

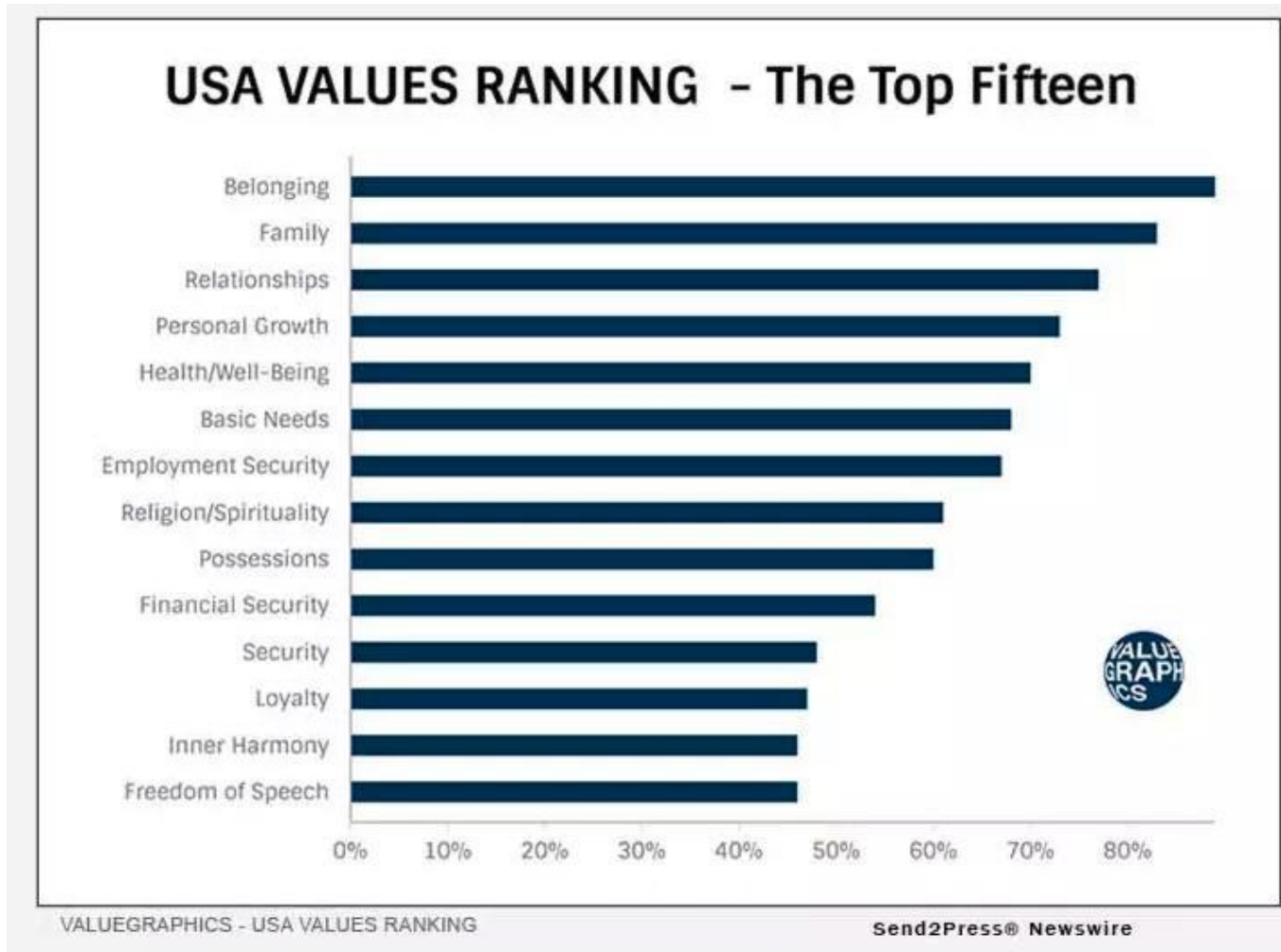
Reviewed content was likely to evoke more than one value

# Values (from the literature review)

Values to consider	Values to avoid
<p><b>FREEDOM</b> “Freedom is the single most powerful value in American life.”<sup>1</sup></p> <p><b>FAIRNESS</b> “A majority of Americans also consider life in America to be fair, though the finding is not monolithic.”<sup>2</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Freedom and fairness need to be at the heart of any messaging program aimed at the movable middle.”<sup>3</sup></li></ul> <p><b>FUTURE</b> “...a future in which we sort of still possess the freedoms to live, to fight for the rest of the promise of the American dream, which has heretofore evaded us, but we still believe.”<sup>4</sup></p> <p><b>INDEPENDENCE and STRENGTH</b> “In our research, a majority of those surveyed use words like ‘free,’ ‘independent,’ and ‘strong’ to describe this country.”<sup>5</sup></p>	<p><b>UNITY</b> “...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.”<sup>6</sup></p> <p><sup>1</sup>David Callahan, Recapturing the Single Most Important Value in American Life, (Blue Tent, January 2024)</p> <p><sup>2</sup>Ibid.</p> <p><sup>3</sup>Issue One, <i>A New Narrative for American Democracy</i>, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022), 16.</p> <p><sup>4</sup>Anat Shenker-Osario, <i>The Wilderness: Kamala Harris’ Winning Message</i> (Pod Save America, Ep. 7).</p> <p><sup>5</sup>Issue One, <i>A New Narrative for American Democracy</i>, (Washington, DC: Issue One, 2022), 7.</p> <p><sup>6</sup>Issue One 23-24.</p>

# U.S. Values

Not directly connected to governance



- Belonging, family and relationships top values rankings

<https://valuegraphics.com/>



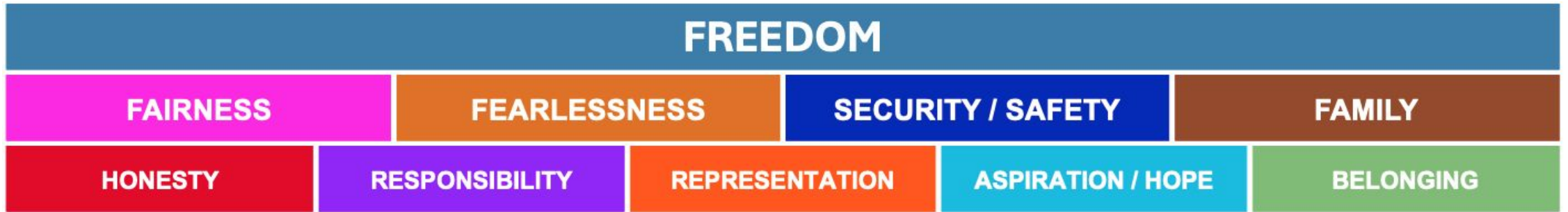
# Ideas that resonate

## Here are the political terms Americans like



<https://thefulcrum.us/bridging-common-ground/political-terms>

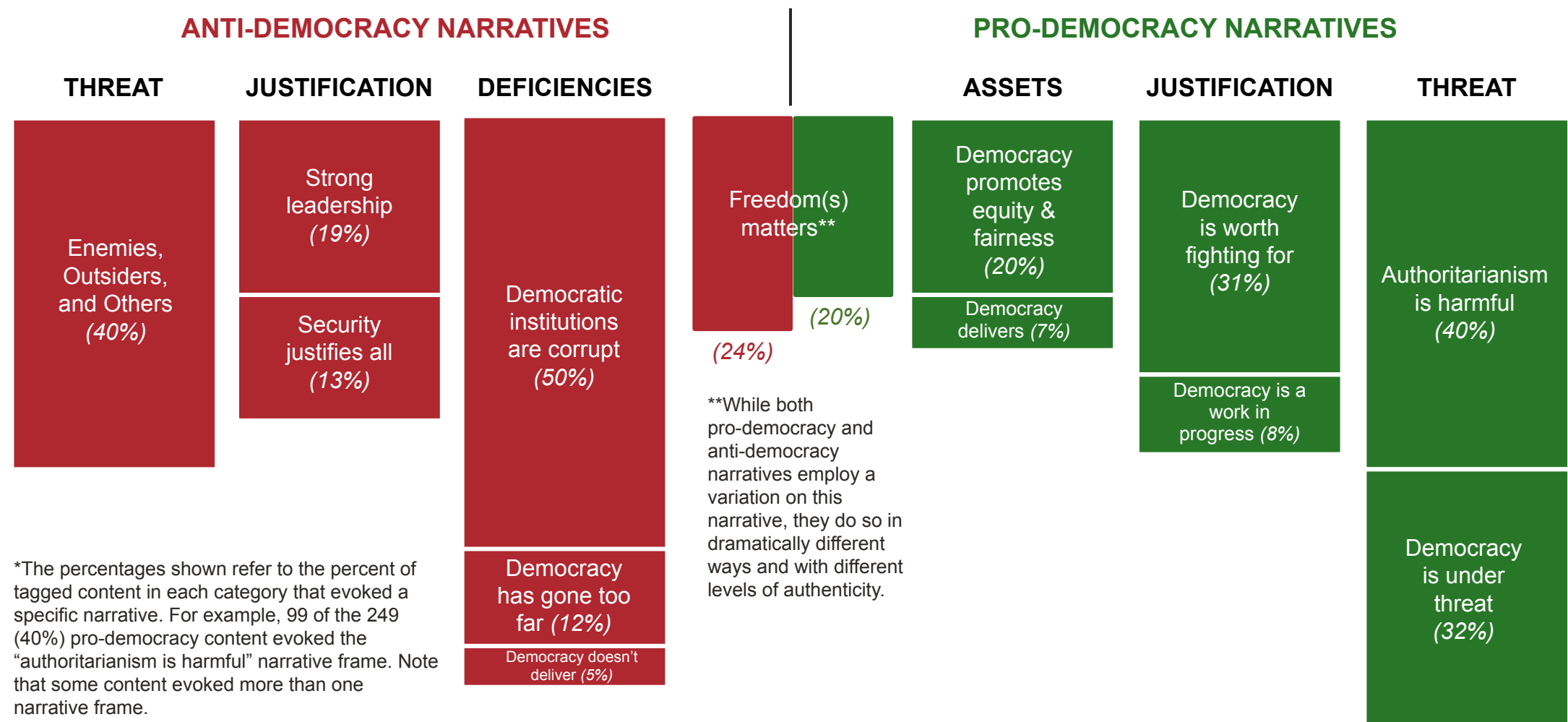
# Recommended core values



Recommended based on insights gleaned from the landscape scan and literature review described above, and informed by MG's prior research on global values associated with with democracy.

# Existing narrative frames about democracy

# Top narratives showing up in the scan\*



\*The percentages shown refer to the percent of tagged content in each category that evoked a specific narrative. For example, 99 of the 249 (40%) pro-democracy content evoked the “authoritarianism is harmful” narrative frame. Note that some content evoked more than one narrative frame.

# Messaging considerations

# Messaging considerations

1. Center the narrative and messaging on core values
2. Look to the future; don't re-litigate the past
3. Casting blame and pointing fingers may energize the wings, but it's too political for the movable middle, which they can find alienating
4. Acknowledge the challenges we face, but then offer a set of simple, concrete, common sense steps that can help inspire confidence
5. Convey urgency without projecting doom and gloom, which can leave people feeling demoralized

# Round 1 Testing

## October 2024

# U.S. Round 1 Testing | *Sep-Oct 2024*

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1. Narrative and message concept development
2. Testing via the Pluralytics ValuesFinder platform



# Narrative frames tested in Round 1

## **Freedom matters**

Evokes the core value that research shows is most resonant to the principles and practice of democracy, and the value that anti-democratic messengers cannot authentically espouse. Conveys the relevance, consequence, and real impact of freedom in people's lives and invites diverse storytelling of the many ways it matters to different people and cultures.

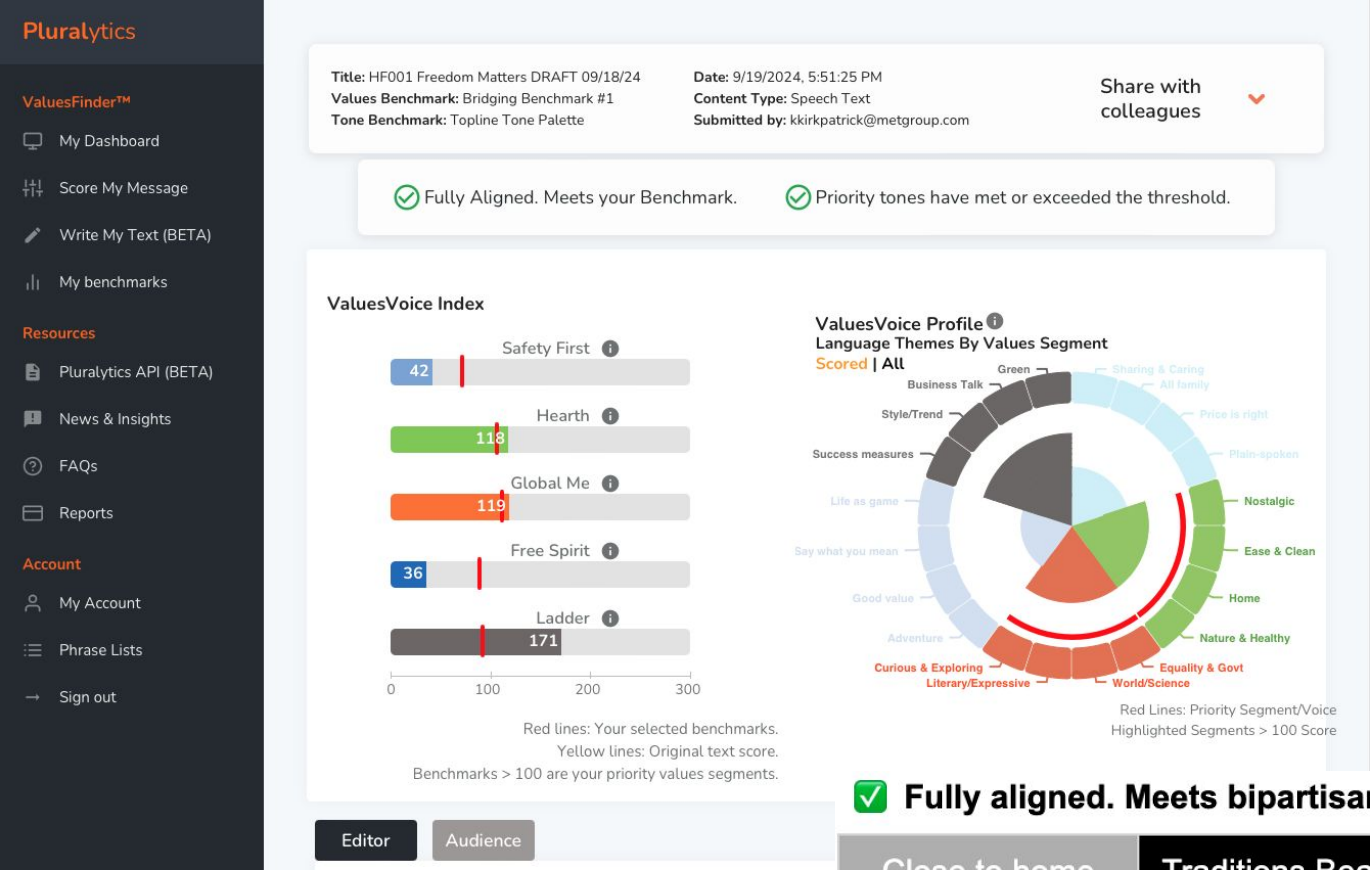
## **Freedom and democracy are worth fighting for**

Acknowledges the significant challenges facing democracy in a strength-based frame that invites others to be part of something bigger than themselves. Presents democracy as a communal undertaking. This conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of participation, including the rights and obligations enjoyed by citizens in a liberal democracy.

## **Democracy is what we do. Freedom is why.**

Grounded in data from ReD Associates showing that politics can be seen either through the lens of "identity" or as "a practice." The former is polarizing and paralyzing; the second is empowering. Presents democracy not as just a set of beliefs or a destination, but as a set of actions. It puts the focus not on what democracy has or has not been able to deliver, but on the obligation each person in a democracy has to be actively engaged in making it better.

# Pluralytics platform testing



- The ValuesFinder AI-assisted platform from Pluralytics was used to test likely alignment with a bipartisan audience
- Full alignment was gauged primarily by scores exceeding 100 in three audience categories: Hearth; Global Me; and Ladder (see next slide)

✓ Fully aligned. Meets bipartisan benchmark.

Close to home (Safety First)	Traditions Bearer (Hearth)	Expressive World (Global Me)	Live for Today (Free Spirit)	Achiever Central (Ladder)
42	118	119	36	171

# Pluralytics audience segments

## Three segments key to bipartisan appeal

Hearth	Ladder	Global Me
<b>Lean conservative</b> 60% woman / 40% men Like traditions Self-reliant Grounded in faith Thrifty/frugal Nostalgic Order, honor, duty Conservative leaning Value safety and Protection Civically engaged Read <i>Essence</i> and <i>Southern Living</i>	<b>More independent/middle-of-the-road</b> 53% men / 27% women Achievement and social status is important Seeks to influence others More connected to their ethnic heritage than their parents Self-interested Risk-takers Read <i>Black Enterprise</i> and <i>People en Espanol</i>	<b>More politically progressive</b> 60% women / 40% men Value self-expression and the search for meaning Civically engaged and a news consumer Care about social justice and global issues See global warming as a serious threat Like to learn about foreign cultures Try to eat healthy Interest in fine arts Expect brands they buy to support social causes Read <i>The Atlantic</i> and <i>The New Yorker</i>

## 3. Focus groups (Round 1)

- a. Somewhat Liberals (identified as “Liberals” in slides to follow)
- b. Moderates/Independents (identified as “Independents” in slides to follow)
- c. Somewhat Conservatives (identified as “Conservatives” in slides to follow)

## Finding | *Gap exists between the ideal and the reality of democracy*

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- Participants struggled to think about democracy in an aspirational way. There was frustration and a sense of futility with regard to the current state of our democracy and its leadership.
- Participants generally endorse the ideals reflected in all three narratives, but do not think these ideals are anywhere close to being realized. Narratives came across as being divorced from the contemporary context.
- Narrative content that acknowledged the current political reality tested strongly.

## **Finding** | *Lack of social cohesion and respect seen as major obstacle*

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- Across the focus groups and across different parts of testing, a consistent theme was disappointment in the lack of social cohesion and respect for one another, a desire for that, and a belief that democracy shouldn't be as polarizing as it has become.
- Participants across the groups had a hard time seeing themselves as part of “democracy.” Leaders were seen as responsible for the current state of democracy.

## Finding | *Need a shared definition of democracy beyond elections*

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- Language affirming different key components of democracy resonated to varying degrees of strength with respondents, indicating an interest in defining democracy more broadly than simply elections.
- These components include:
  - Ensuring a fair and equitable justice system we can trust
  - Demanding accountability and honesty from our government
  - Protecting our freedom of expression and our right to speak our minds
  - Guaranteeing our freedom of choice and autonomy to decide what's best for our families (note that this is not necessarily related to abortion)
  - Free and fair elections (this showed up in landscape review but was not brought up in the focus groups)

# Finding | *Hypothesis core values were validated by testing*

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- MG developed a set of hypothetical core values that we believed would resonate the most strongly based on our literature review, landscape analysis, and previous research into democracy narratives.



- Based on the language that resonated most strongly with audiences in testing, across all the narrative and messaging components, we were able to affirm our initial recommended core values as effective, relevant, and closely-held by core stakeholder audiences, with some adjustments in how they are prioritized (to be discussed later in this presentation).



# Finding | *Current political context impacts how people react to narratives*

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- As expected, the current political context and way people are experiencing democracy today has a significant impact in how they think about democracy. We found this to be true across the political spectrum.
- To account for this, we asked people to look at the narratives through two framing questions:
  - **Question 1:** *Which of the three statements would be MORE likely to convince you that this is an issue worth doing something about ... and maybe even motivate you to get involved somehow?*
  - **Question 2:** *Try to separate yourself from the current political climate: Which of these three paragraphs do you think would be AS relevant 5-10 years from now as it is today?*

# Narrative frames (as tested)

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**(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**.

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**(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**.

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**(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**.

# Finding | Narrative frame group preferences

<b>Question 1:</b> Which of the three statements would be MORE likely to convince you that this is an issue worth doing something about ... and maybe even motivate you to get involved somehow?	<b>GROUP 1</b> (Lib)	<b>GROUP 2</b> (Ind)	<b>GROUP 3</b> (Cons)
Statement #1 (Freedom Matters)	3	6	5
Statement #2 (Freedom and Democracy are Worth Fighting For)	6	3	0
Statement #3 (Democracy Is What We Do. Freedom Is Why.)	1	1	4

<b>Question 2:</b> Try to separate yourself from the current political climate: Which of these three paragraphs do you think would be AS relevant 5-10 years from now as it is today?	<b>GROUP 1</b> (Lib)	<b>GROUP 2</b> (Ind)	<b>GROUP 3</b> (Cons)
Statement #1 (Freedom Matters)	1 (-2)	4 (-2)	3 (-2)
Statement #2 (Freedom and Democracy are Worth Fighting For)	4 (-2)	1 (+2)	3 (+3)
Statement #3 (Democracy Is What We Do. Freedom Is Why.)	5 (+4)	5 (+4)	3 (-1)

# Finding | *Narrative frame components that resonated across all groups*

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- **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**.
- A government that is **accountable to the people**
- **Protecting our freedoms** has always been **up to us**
- **Fighting for our freedoms** doesn't have to mean fighting each other, but **fighting together** to make **our** democracy **stronger**
- When **we protect** the **right of every American** to decide what's best for themselves and their **families**.
- When **we do all of this**, **we** make our democracy **stronger** and better able to advance **freedom, safety**, opportunity, and **justice for all**.

# Benefit statements (as tested)

A democracy where **freedoms** are protected for **everyone** is better able to meet the needs of its people and address the challenges they face. The **fearlessness** that comes from **shared purpose** and the **mutual respect** of a **free people creates opportunities** to find solutions that **make it possible** for **everyone** to live in communities **safe from violence**. To breathe clean air, drink clean water, and live free from pollution. And to pursue an education, earn a living, and provide for their **families**.

*... Living in communities safe from violence.*

*... Loving who you love openly and with pride.*

*... Ensuring a justice system everyone can trust.*

*... Accessing the healthcare every person needs and deserves.*

*... Breathing clean air, drinking clean water, and living free from pollution.*

*... Pursuing an education for your children.*

*... Earning a living or starting a small business to provide for your family.*

*... Creating new technologies...that improve lives and grow the economy.*

*... Strengthening peoples' sense of connection to each other, their communities, and our country.*

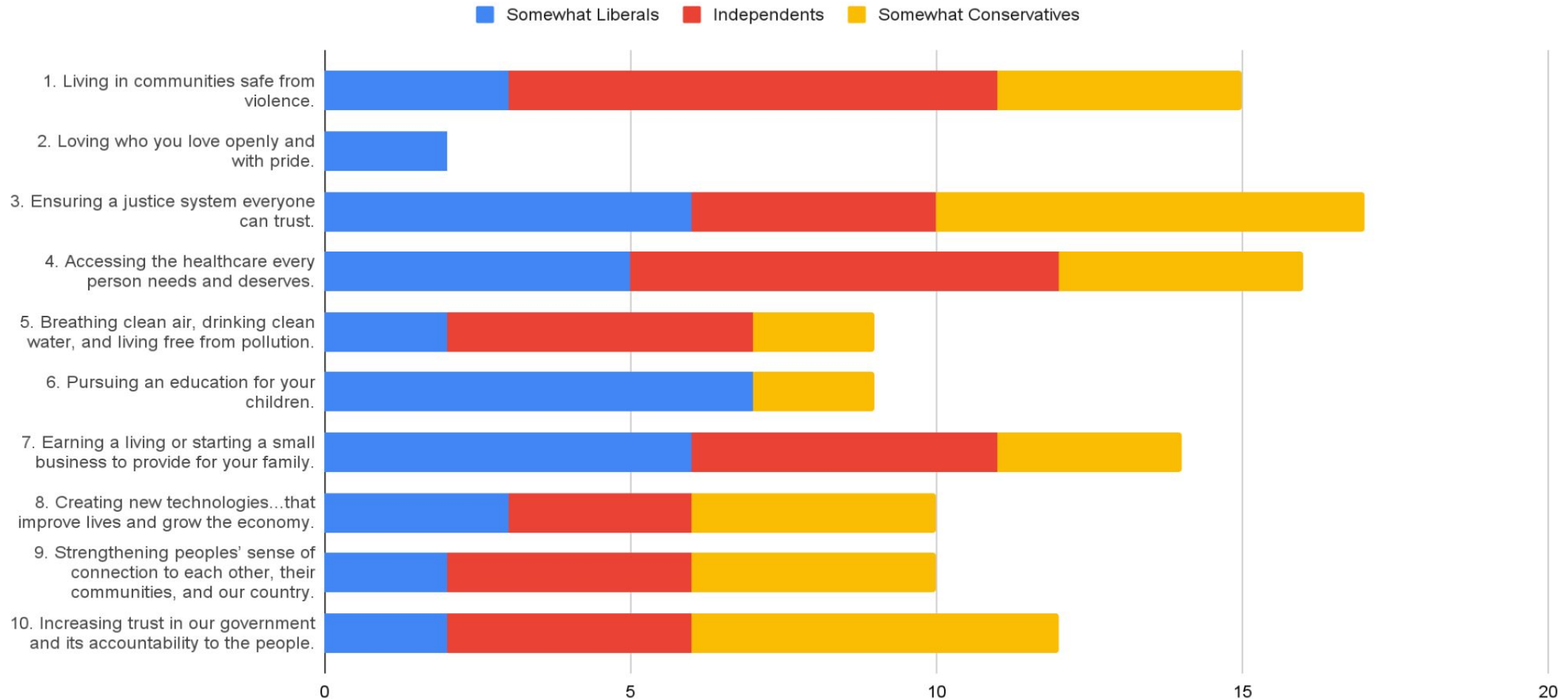
*... Increasing trust in our government and its accountability to the people.*

## Finding | *Strong preferences for certain benefit statements*

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- The **overarching benefit statement** worked well across the groups
- Certain statements tested strongest across the three groups:
  - #1: *“Living in communities safe from violence.”*
  - #3: *“Ensuring a justice system everyone can trust.”*
  - #4: *“Accessing the healthcare every person needs and deserves.”*
  - #7: *“Earning a living or starting a small business to provide for your family.”*
- **Trust** and **accountability** in government tested highly with Conservatives and above-average with Independents
- **Education** tested highly with Liberals only

# Finding | *Benefit statements group preferences*



# Finding | *Threat statement preferences split across political ideology*

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(VERSION A) Throughout our history, there have been times when American democracy has been tested. Now is one of those times. And while our **freedoms** are guaranteed by our Constitution, they are fragile. And once taken away, they are very hard to win back. But when we **work together** with a **common goal** of expanding and preserving our **freedoms**, **we can overcome any threat**.

- Preferred by Liberals (6/10)
- “Softer,” “less extreme,” “more realistic,” “more positive”
- Focuses on a more internal threat

(VERSION B) **Each day presents new challenges as forces inside and outside the United States work to erode our freedoms and weaken American democracy.** They aim to **divide us** in order to distract from their agenda of restricting our **liberties**, limiting our opportunities, and serving their own interests. They can only win if they succeed in **tearing us apart**. **Together, we** can **resist those forces** and **protect** the core **freedoms** that are at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

- Preferred by Independents (6/10) and Conservatives (5/9)
- “More serious,” “powerful,” “more patriotic”
- Seems to frame the threat as more external
- “They aim to divide us” line resonated most



## Finding | *Poor social cohesion emerged as potential threat statement*

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- Concern about fraying social cohesion and heightened polarization was raised by participants in every group, when discussing all elements of the narrative and messaging components, with many framing it as one of the biggest threats or challenges facing our country today.
- This demonstrated level of concern and wariness suggests that the lack of social cohesion could serve as the basis for a new threat/challenge statement to be tested in the second round.

# Finding | *Call to action succeeds in getting audiences to pay attention*

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**STATEMENT:** **Working together** to expand and protect our **freedoms**, we can preserve and improve our democracy so it works better for **everyone**.

- Seen as positive, hopeful, and promising.
- Also seen as vague and lacking in specifics.
- Some felt it could have provided more action items. “Not a lot of insight into how it works.”

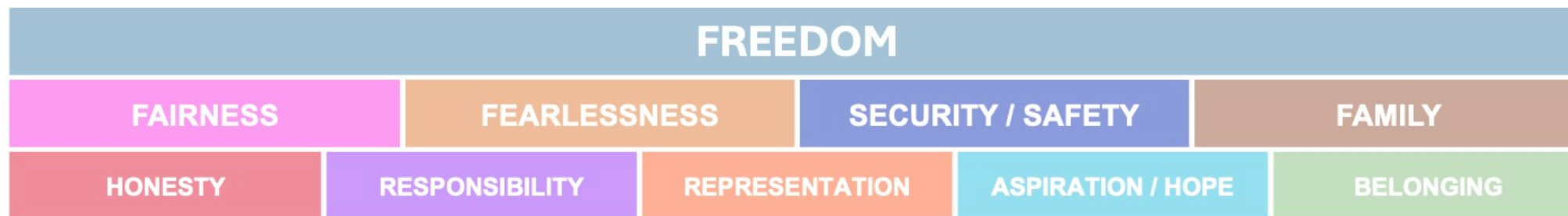
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**QUESTION:** *What kinds of actions might you be inspired to do having read this?*

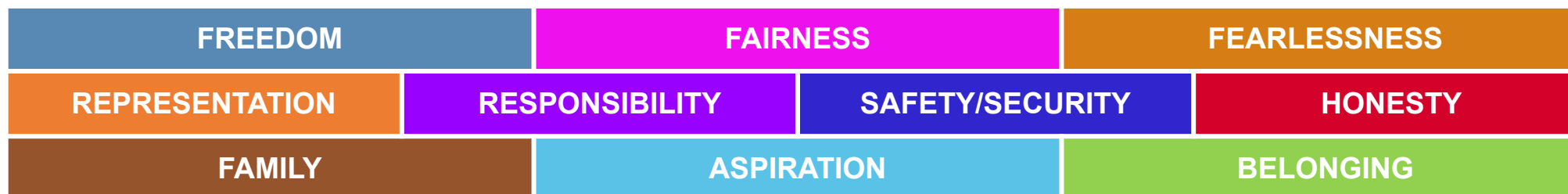
- Volunteering and helping in your community
- Voting and encouraging others to vote
- Attend a rally or get involved in a campaign
- Be better informed about what is going on
- Work together and stop judging each other

# Recommendations Based on Round 1 Testing November 2024

# Recommendation | *Reprioritize core values*



We refined the values prioritization levels to reflect those values that triggered the strongest responses, with **Freedom**, **Fairness**, and **Fearlessness** rising to the top as the most resonant with key audiences. **Representation**, **Responsibility**, **Safety/Security** and **Honesty** also tested strongly, with **Family**, **Aspiration** and **Belonging** showing up as valuable but less connected to how people think about democracy in the current context.



# Recommendations | *Across all messaging*

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1. Elevate and acknowledge the gap between the reality and the ideal of democracy. Build off of the narrative component “our country hasn’t fully lived up to these freedoms” to increase this emphasis and acknowledgement.
2. Ensure new message components represent updated value prioritization, with the values of freedom, fairness, and fearlessness being the most critical.
3. Elevate the need for social cohesion and respect across the political divide in the combined narrative and message frame.
4. Place greater emphasis on defining democracy beyond elections across all narrative frames, using the key characteristics identified as resonating most strongly with audiences.
5. Adjust the message framework to bridge from threat/challenge to benefits by moving and refining relevant content into a new “Solution” message.

# Recommendation | *Updated narrative frames*

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*We recommend two new narrative frames built off of the “Freedom Matters” and “Democracy is What We Do” narratives, incorporating resonant components pulled from all three narratives.*

(VERSION A) In America, **our freedoms** matter, including the **freedom** to **speak our minds**, to **make our own decisions for ourselves and our families**, to expect **fair treatment** from **our** justice system **no matter who we are**, to **vote** in **free** and **fair** elections, and to experience **open** and **honest** government. **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**.

(VERSION B) In America, democracy is not just an idea. **It's what we do**. **We put democracy in action** not just by **voting**, but by **standing up** for the **freedom of every American** to **speak their minds**, to **decide what's best for themselves and their families**, and to be **treated fairly by our** justice system and to experience **open** and **honest** government. **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**.



# Recommendation | *Updated threat statements*

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***We recommend making modifications to both original threat (now “challenge” statements) based upon takeaways from the testing. We also recommend adding a third challenge statement option centered around social cohesion.***

(VERSION A) Throughout our history, there have been times when American democracy **has been tested**. Now is one of those times. And while **our rights** are guaranteed by **our** Constitution, they are fragile. And **once taken away**, they are **very hard to win back**, **putting at risk** the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

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(VERSION B) And yet, **each day presents new challenges as forces inside and outside the United States work to erode our freedoms and weaken American democracy**. They aim to **divide us** in order to distract from their agenda of restricting our **liberties**, limiting our opportunities, and serving their own interests. And they put at risk the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

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(VERSION C) Sometimes it seems like Americans can't find **common ground** or agree on anything. Yet, **respect for the views of others** and **working toward compromise** are essential to any functioning democracy. **Fighting** for **our freedoms** doesn't have to mean **fighting** each other. Instead, we need to find a way to **work together** to **protect** the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

# Recommendation | *Added solution statement*

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*We recommend separating out a solution statement from the narrative frames to test on its own.*

Protecting our freedoms has always been up to us; not just our elected leaders, but all of us. The fearlessness of a free people working together can unlock the creativity and innovation America has always been known for in finding common-sense solutions to make our democracy stronger and better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice for all.



# Recommendation | Updated benefit statements

*We recommend refining and shortening the umbrella benefit statement, combining secondary issue benefits (education, etc.) with the leading issue benefit (health) and narrowing the list of benefit statements for further testing to the following:*

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 make a real difference** in the lives of people and their **families** by ...

- a. ensuring a **justice system everyone can trust**.*
- b. accessing the healthcare, education, housing, and opportunities **every person** needs and **deserves**.*
- c. living in communities **safe from violence**.*
- d. earning a living or starting a small business to **provide for your family**.*
- e. Increasing **trust** in **each other** and in **our** government.*

# Recommendation | *Call to action*

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*We recommend incorporating key themes of social cohesion and acknowledging the state of democracy while elevating the idea that we can do hard things to increase aspiration into the overarching call to action to reinforce believability and motivation.*

None of this will happen on its own. It will take **all of us working together** to **expand and 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 it again.**

# Round 2 Testing

## January/February 2025

# U.S. Round 2 Testing | *Nov 2024-Jan 2025*

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- 1. Pluralytics testing**
- 2. Key informant interviews**
- 3. Focus groups (Round 2)**
  - a. n=3 (Somewhat Liberals, Moderates/Independents, Somewhat Conservatives)

# Finding | *We lack a shared definition of democracy beyond voting*

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Language affirming key components of democracy resonated to varying degrees of strength with respondents in both rounds of focus groups, indicating an interest in defining democracy more broadly than simply voting.

- Ensuring a *fair and equitable justice system* we can trust
- Demanding *accountability and honesty* from our government
- Protecting our *freedom of expression* and our *right to speak our minds*
- Guaranteeing our *freedom of choice and autonomy* to decide what's best for our families
- *Open and honest* government
- “A healthy democracy requires more action than simply showing up to vote once every four years.” - Elliot, 35, male, independent
- “Voting is the best way to protect democracy.” - Justin, 32, male, liberal
- “I am not sure how to stand for democracy outside of voting.” - Allison, 30, female, conservative
- “We can’t come to a shared definition of what democracy is for our country. Democracy and freedom are just terms.” - Angie, 43, female, independent

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“Democracy just doesn’t have a lot of contact to it other than elections and voting.” — Interviewee

“There’s a risk in elected authoritarianism and populist and liberal governments. The risk is that it’s all about public participation (e.g., voting) and not about the checks and balances in the system.” — Interviewee

# Finding | *There is low understanding of (and appreciation for) democracy*

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The lack of a shared definition of democracy has contributed to low levels of understanding, appreciation, and prioritization of democracy, its values and principles, and how it impacts daily lives.

Participants struggled to think about democracy in an aspirational way. There was frustration and a sense of futility with regard to the current state of our democracy and its leadership.

- *“When I think about democracy I think of a system where power is vested in the people, but that is not the case.” - Jacqueline, 46, female, independent*
- *“We have a hard time admitting to our history and past, we can’t even teach the accurate history of how our democracy came to be...People who live here are not all free and many of the people do not get to partake fully in the democratic process.” - Angie, 43, female, independent*
- *Average citizens are happy to complain when things are awful, but good democracy is about more than voting.” - Elliot, 35, male, independent*

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“There is a pretty deep-seated lack of understanding among ordinary Americans about democracy and the rule of law, and they’re very subject to partisan and ideologically manipulated arguments about those core principles.” — Interviewee

“The problem is, in this hyperpolarized environment, Americans are very deeply divided. How do we build support for democracy in this environment when neither side can agree on basic facts?” — Interviewee

# Finding | *A gap exists between the ideal and the reality of democracy*

---

Participants generally endorse the ideals reflected in the narratives, but do not think these ideals are anywhere close to being realized.

Across all groups, people don't believe democracy is delivering the benefits we tested. They value these things (to varying degrees) but don't think democracy is delivering them.

- *“To be a strong democracy, you need to admit your failings. Until we as a nation do, all we will ever be is a country cosplaying as a fair nation.” - Angie, 43, female, independent*
- *“Democracy requires active participation, in that it helps to assure all generations that our freedoms are not infringed upon. If our freedoms have been in some way compromised, we have the prescription to resolve that right in the Constitution itself.” - Jonathan, 39, male, conservative*

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“People believe in the values and ideals of democracy, but feel like the system isn't working for them. There might be openness to think outside the box and being willing to vote for candidates who offer the option of breaking norms or bypassing some of the roadblocks.” — Interviewee

# Finding | *The current context impacts how people react to narratives*

---

Participants had a hard time divorcing the narrative from the contemporary context, while content that acknowledged the current political reality tested strongly.

Focus group participants showed a noticeable partisan divide in their responses to messaging, with greater division being observed in the post-election discussions.

Liberals and Independents post-election demonstrated heightened wariness and cynicism about the state of democracy, while Conservatives were demonstrably more hopeful about the government and the future of the country.

- *“Trying to overthrow an election makes me feel like my vote doesn’t even matter. Money speaks and controls what we receive from the justice system, economy, and government.” - James, 33, male, liberal*
- *“For the last few years our country has been so divided. If you are not on one side they try to cancel you. Freedom should be to an extent, however, if you feel that something isn't right you should be able to voice your opinion without being ridiculed, cancelled, or ostracized.” - Jessica, 40, female, conservative*

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“Look at the faith in the economy that shot up among Republicans immediately after the election. We have an incredibly polarized polity.” — Interviewee



# Finding | *Lack of social cohesion and respect are major obstacles*

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Across the focus groups and interviews, 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.

- *“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, 42, male, liberal*
- *“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, 44, male, independent*
- *“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, 40, female, conservative*

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“Most Americans want to have common ground and I think it's speaking to the idea of respect for the views of others. Democracy is ultimately about compromise. We learn in kindergarten that you can't get everything you want.” — Interviewee

## Finding | *Concern about separation of powers emerging as a theme*

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Concerns about the separation of powers and failing checks and balances emerged in interviews as a rising theme.

This theme was not prominent during focus group discussions, which could be due to the time they were conducted (prior to President Trump's inauguration and subsequent executive orders), but likely also illustrates a lack of awareness about these core elements of democratic governance.

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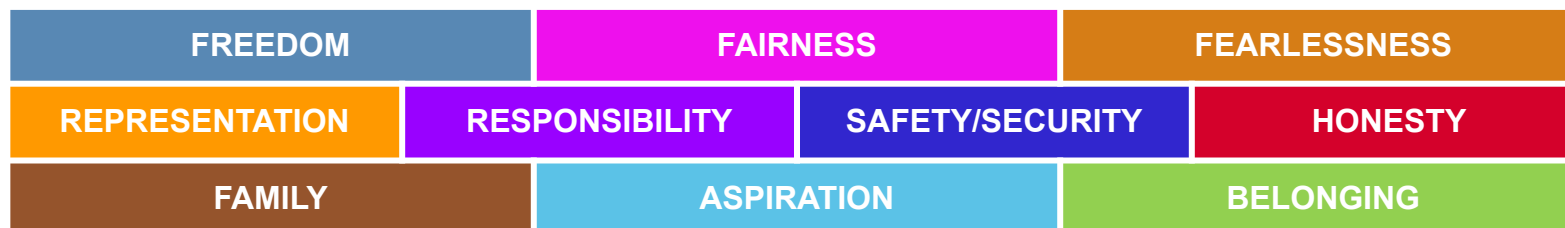
“One thing I’m not seeing in either of [narrative frames] is the idea of horizontal accountability. Namely, the idea of checks and balances. Not consolidated power into one president, for example. Separation of powers and checks and balances.” — Interviewee

“What’s changed? Division. We’re more tied to our own teams now. Congress used to be more proud of its own authority, standing up to executive overreach even from its own party. Congress needs to reestablish itself as a legislative body, instead of deferring responsibility to the courts and executive branch. Making sure the executive branch is doing what it’s supposed to be doing, and not more.” — Interviewee

## Finding | *Hypothesis core values were validated by testing*

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MG developed a set of hypothetical core values based on our literature review, landscape analysis, and previous research into democracy narratives that indicated priority values to trigger in narrative/messaging connected to democracy. We refined and adjusted the prioritization of these values following the first round of focus group testing, which produced the following priority core values:



This set of values and their relative priority was validated in the messaging that resonated most strongly across all political groups in both rounds of focus group testing, as well as with interviewees.

# Finding | *“Freedom Matters” narrative frame tested strongly overall*

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“Freedom Matters” was well-received by most groups over the course of both rounds of focus groups and interviews.

Even when groups did not vote for “Freedom Matters” in comparison with other narrative options (such as Conservatives in Round 2), their comments indicated the desired takeaways and reactions for its message.

- *“It puts the onus back on us, to change things by doing something. Yes, things aren’t perfect, but we have the ability to do something about it with these things, through freedom.” - Alan, 27, male, liberal*
- *“Freedom does matter but they are not letting us be free. We the people are supposed to be in charge. Freedom matters sticks out a lot.” - Kevin, 44, male, independent*
- *“Freedom matters in America because it lets people make their own choices, express their opinions, and live how they want. It’s the foundation of the country’s values and keeps the government accountable.” - David, 23, male, independent*
- *“I view these freedoms as a “perfect standard” that cannot ever be wholly attained, yet we should strive as a committed nation to reach them to the greatest extent possible. We are free people by nature. To form a perfect union is a goal that we strive for.” - Jonathan, 39, male, conservative*
- *“Our freedoms do matter and we should be able to make decisions about our bodies, have fair treatment from the justice system, and vote for people that will do what they say they will do. Those are the basic requirements of being an American.” - Angie, 43, female, independent*

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*“[Freedom Matters] is more streamlined. And freedom is a construct that resonates with people.” - Interviewee*

*“Freedom Matters is much stronger. I’m not sure why we would try to improve on ‘freedom’ [as our values driver].” - Interviewee*

# Finding | *Narrative frame group preferences*

## FREEDOM MATTERS

In America, **our freedoms** matter, including the **freedom** to **speak our minds**, to **make our own decisions for ourselves and our families**, to expect **fair treatment** from **our** justice system **no matter who we are**, to **vote** in **free** and **fair** elections, and to experience **open** and **honest** government.

**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**.

- Somewhat preferred by Independents and Conservatives in Round 1
- Strongly preferred by Liberals and Independents in Round 2

## DEMOCRACY IS WHAT WE DO. FREEDOM IS WHY.

In America, democracy is not just an idea. **It's what we do**. **We put democracy in action** not just by **voting**, but by **standing up** for the **freedom of every American** to **speak their minds**, to **decide what's best for themselves and their families**, and to be **treated fairly by our** justice system and to experience **open** and **honest** government.

- Liberals and Independents voted more favorably for this option when asked to consider their perspective 5-10 years down the road
- Chosen unanimously by Conservatives when asked to vote in R2

# Finding | *Narrative frames preferences influenced by current context*

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While Conservatives had preferred the "Freedom Matters" narrative in the pre-election group, they were universal in voting in support of the "Democracy Is What We Do" narrative frame in the post-election focus group (mirroring other data showing increased optimism among Conservatives post-election).

Nevertheless, their comments in discussing the narrative frames included many comments that reinforced ideas reflected in the "Freedom Matters" narrative frame and indicated desired takeaways from it. The core themes of their commentary did not change from the first round to the second round.

- *"First and foremost, refreshing to read that, that in the first line free speech is being encouraged." - Allison, 30, female, conservative*
- *"I like [Freedom Matters] a lot more than [Democracy Is What We Do]. We are not a democratic country really so I don't find [Democracy Is What We Do] relatable. The first one is much more catchy and is more of what i want to hear. The heading is catchy." - Hong, 39, female, independent*
- *"When I hear "freedom," I interpret it with people who are overly patriotic, associated with the military or America First, MAGA, etc. I don't know how free Americans are necessarily." - Adela, 39, female, liberal*
- *"I see [Democracy Is What We Do] as a dream and illusion. I feel like our government is more set up to protect a ruling class than the working class." - Tiffany, 44, female, liberal*
- *"Freedom matters to our country but our country has yet to understand this fully." - Jessica, 40, female, conservative*

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*"Just looking at the polling around people's faith in democracy and their concerns about 'democracy' in this last election. They were very polarized based on the arguments both sides were making. Of those who were concerned [pre-election], there were more Trump voters." - Interviewee*

# Finding | Acknowledgement of shortcomings tested well

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Participants often struggled to connect with the more optimistic language in the narratives, especially when it contrasted with their experience or perspective of American democracy in its current context.

Acknowledgement of the shortcomings of American democracy therefore tested very strongly, and allowed participants to hear and appreciate the other messaging.

- *“I'd keep the ‘strong democracy isn't afraid to admit that it hasn't lived up to its freedoms’ - that resonated with me.” - Elliot, 35, male, independent*
- *“Freedom as a citizen should follow the general terms laid out in the constitution and elected officials should represent that, but they don't. It skews our view of freedom and democracy but we need to keep fighting for it.” - Angie, 43, female, independent*
- *“It's nice to see admission of shortcomings, that we aren't living up to these standards, there's evidence of this daily in the headlines.” - Allison, 30, female, conservative*
- *“More people in power should admit the last paragraph- so many politicians can't admit mistakes or faults and that gets frustrating.” - Danielle, 24, female, liberal*
- *“I like that it points out the flaws in the system, and the ways that we can improve it if we can look into who we're electing.” - James, 33, male, liberal*



# Finding | *Division was the most resonant challenge*

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The most resonant statement was #3 (which discussed how divided our country has become). Option #2 (about inside and outside forces dividing us) also tested well.

People do believe there are forces actively trying to keep us divided, but prefer the tone expressed in #3 and also see our inability to work together as the core challenge.

- *“I went back and forth between 2 and 3 - #2 feels the most accurate describing the problem, while #3 does better at saying what a solution might look like.” - Alan, 27, male, liberal*
- *“I have friends who are extreme on both sides. I can’t have these two groups over to hang out together anymore. I wish there was a middle ground candidate that could bring us all together.” - Sonal, 33, female, conservative*
- *“[Option #2] points out how some people are trying to weaken democracy and divide us and how instead of fighting each other, we need to come together to protect our freedoms. This makes it clearer and more focused on the challenges we face right now.” - Brianna, 22, female, independent*
- *“The tone [in Option #3] is a lot warmer than the other two paragraphs. It’s what we need to unify people. Welcoming, less abrasive.” - Olu, 26, male, liberal*

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“I think [Option #3] resonates best with me. Most Americans want to have common ground and I think it’s speaking to the idea of respect for the views of others.” - Interviewee

“[Option #3] is how we are approaching it. The takeaway from our testing is that most people aren’t at either extreme, they’re somewhere in the middle.” - Interviewee



# Finding | Challenge statements group preferences

## OPTION 1 (*now is one of those times*)

Throughout our history, there have been times when American democracy **has been tested**. Now is one of those times. And while **our rights** are guaranteed by **our** Constitution, they are fragile. And **once taken away**, they are **very hard to win back**, **putting at risk** the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

- Preferred by Liberals pre-election

## OPTION 2 (*forces inside and outside*)

And yet, **each day presents new challenges as forces inside and outside the United States work to erode our freedoms and weaken American democracy**. They aim to **divide us** in order to distract from their agenda of restricting our **liberties**, limiting our opportunities, and serving their own interests. And they put at risk the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

- Preferred by Independents and Conservatives pre-election

## OPTION 3 (*we can't agree on anything*)

Sometimes it seems like Americans can't find **common ground** or agree on anything. Yet, **respect for the views of others** and **working toward compromise** are essential to any functioning democracy. **Fighting** for **our freedoms** doesn't have to mean **fighting** each other. Instead, we need to find a way to **work together** to **protect** the core **freedoms** at the heart of a **strong**, thriving, and lasting democracy.

- Added as an option *only* in the second round of voting
- Preferred by all three groups post-election

# Finding | *Partisan preferences for certain benefit statements*

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The overarching benefit statement worked well across the groups. They believe the benefits are things that should come out of a working democracy, and they value these benefits. However, they don't believe democracy is delivering them now.

There was a partisan split on what benefits are most possible in a functioning democracy:

- **Trust in the justice system** tested strongly with all groups
- **Trust and accountability in government** tested highly with Conservatives, but less well with Liberals and Independents
- **Access to services** like education and healthcare tested highly with Liberals and Independents, but poorly with Conservatives

- *"I liked it, but 'opportunities every person needs and deserves' is too lofty." - Jacqueline, 46, female, independent*
- *"I think this puts everything on a more level playing field. There can still be more wealthy people, but we don't need to have extreme poverty. Good starting point." - Natalie, 33, female, liberal*
- *"More important to me is trust in the government." - Jonathan, 39, male, conservative*
- *"Trust is a huge thing. Trust has been broken between us as Americans." - Sonal, 33, female, conservative*
- *"[Healthcare, education, housing and opportunities] these should be basic necessities for everyone in the U.S." - Hong, 39, female, independent*

# Finding | *Benefit statements group preferences*

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 make a real difference** in the lives of people and their **families** by ...

Ensuring a <b>justice system everyone can trust</b> .	Accessing the healthcare, education, housing, and opportunities <b>every person</b> needs and <b>deserves</b> .	Living in communities <b>safe from violence</b> .	Earning a living or starting a small business to <b>provide for your family</b> .	Increasing <b>trust</b> in <b>each other</b> and in <b>our</b> government.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred by all three groups</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred by Independents and Liberals</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred only by Independents pre-election</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred only by Liberals pre-election</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preferred only by Conservatives</li></ul>

# Finding | *The solution is endorsed, but aspirational*

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Protecting our freedoms has always been up to us; not just our elected leaders, but all of us. The fearlessness of a free people working together can unlock the creativity and innovation America has always been known for in finding common-sense solutions to make our democracy stronger and better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice for all.

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Seen as positive but also lacking in specificity and too “pie in the sky.”

Adding concrete examples of how people have bridged divides and worked together in the past may be helpful with impressing upon audiences that this is possible.

The phrase “common sense solutions” was controversial, with members of all groups indicating that they don’t believe they are possible to find at this moment.

# Finding | *The solution is endorsed, but aspirational*

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*“The part ‘America has been known for finding common sense solutions’ isn’t accurate at all.” - James, 33, male, liberal*

*“Makes me optimistic because it’s what I want, but there will always be people who shoot it down just because they can.” - Danielle, 24, female, liberal*

*“I would love to see this, but I can’t see it happening. If this happened it would be the best thing to ever happen in America.” - Kevin, 44, male, independent*

*“This statement reminds me of what happens when people remember that there's strength in numbers.” - Allison, 30, female, conservative*

*“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, 35, male, independent*

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*“I think you need at least one powerful example of how this has worked. That people coming together can and have made a difference. Can be at the macro or the micro level.” - Interviewee*

*“I like it. But, it’s all very high-level stuff. This is all at the level of abstract concepts. Could this queue up storytelling that gives people illustrative examples from our own history that we can be proud of and try to live up to?” - Interviewee*

# Finding | *Call to action gets people to lean in and ask “How?”*

---

None of this will happen on its own. It will take **all of us working together** to **expand and 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 it again.**

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Seen as important and potentially unifying, but also triggers some cynicism, much like all the previous messaging.

Inspires questions about what specifically people might do.

It is essential to identify actions consistent with democracy beyond voting or speaking up for freedom.

- *“Inspiring but it leaves me hanging. You have my attention, but what do I have to do?” - Jacqueline, 46, female, independent*
- *“Vague, but I agree with it overall. I feel empowered to do something about the things I complain about.” - Alan, 27, male, liberal*
- *“I like the part about working together. I would add that there is more that unites us than divides us.” - Jonathan, 39, male, conservative*
- *“Unclear, vague, but has the right idea.” - Danielle, 24, female, liberal*
- *“It's a nice opening message, but it doesn't tell us what to do. There needs to be a direction or suggestion of how this might happen.” - Angie, 43, female, independent*

# Finding | *Messaging components that resonated across all groups*

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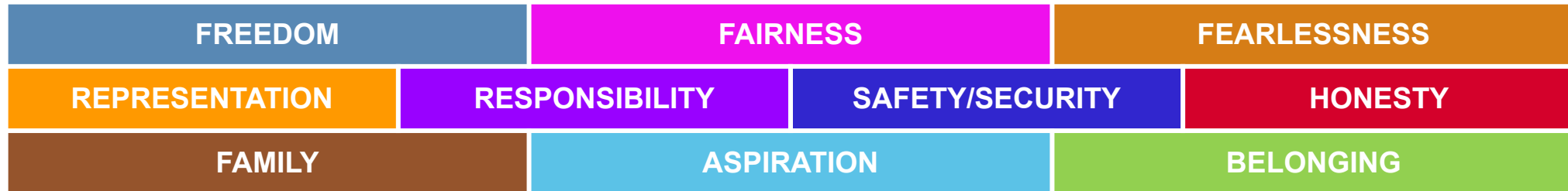
- We put democracy in action not just by voting, but by standing up for the freedom of every American.
- Our country hasn't fully lived up to these freedoms. But, a strong democracy isn't afraid to admit that and do the hard work of being better tomorrow than it is today.
- To experience open and honest government.
- It won't be easy. But we've done hard things before and we can do it again.
- Protecting our freedoms has always been up to us; not just our elected leaders, but all of us.
- It will take all of us working together to expand and protect our freedoms and improve our democracy so it works better for everyone.
- Fighting for our freedoms doesn't have to mean fighting each other.

# Recommendations Based on Round 2 Testing



# Recommendation | *Employ tested core values and priority levels*

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As this set of values tested well in both rounds and across all groups and the level of priority placed on the values aligns across groups (as refined from R1 testing and validated in R2), we are recommending this values grid as the recommended values for the narrative.

# Recommendations | *Across all messaging*

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1. **Lean into the freedom value** as the driving frame for the narrative (*refine and use the “Freedom Matters” frame*).
2. Elevate content in the messaging to create a **shared understanding of democracy** that defines it beyond voting/elections and resonates with people whether they’re on the winning or losing side of any particular election.
3. Increase **understanding of the core elements of liberal democracy** (e.g., separation of powers) and elevate the level of relevance and priority that people place on those elements.
4. Meet the urgency of the current moment but not be restricted in its **longer-term view** of the state of democracy and democratic objectives.
5. Acknowledge that democracy isn’t perfect (**utilize the shortcomings frame that tested strongly**), while still being **asset-framed** and conveying an optimistic sense that it is **possible to improve and strengthen it**.

# Recommendations | Across all messaging

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6. Advance a version of the challenge statement that can **connect the deep concerns about polarization and lack of mutual respect** people are experiencing directly with the challenges in finding common ground in a democracy (*utilize Option #3 and incorporate the “forces working to erode/weaken for their own interests” content that tested very strongly from Option #2*).
7. Maintain the **more general benefits content** and tailor references to specific benefits based on the audience to be reached (see key benefits chart on slide 24).
8. Retain the solution statement but add **concrete examples from the recent past about how Americans have come together and/or found compromise** in ways that resonate across the political spectrum.
9. **Utilize the call to action as framed**, as it does what a narrative CTA is meant to do, by inspiring audiences to lean in and ask for specifics. **Include a list of potential calls to action** to select from when applying the narrative to specific campaigns and invite users **to identify relevant and tangible calls to action**.

# Roadmap for final revisions

# Recap of key takeaways

## Across the full body of research

- 80% of Americans say it's important to them to live in a country that is democratically governed<sup>1</sup>
- But there is a no shared definition of liberal democracy and the fundamentals of it (beyond voting and elections)
- Americans tend to view democracy more favorably when their party wins or holds power, and more negatively when they do not (see below)<sup>2</sup>

### 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

<sup>1</sup>Open Society Foundation, *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2023), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Jones, Jeffrey M. *Satisfaction with U.S. Democracy Edges Up from Record Low: Republicans Mostly Responsible for Increased Satisfaction*. (Gallup: January 22, 2025).

# Recap of key takeaways

## Across the full body of research

- The concept of democracy is disconnected from the everyday lives of too many Americans
- To the extent Americans DO think about democracy, they're not happy with what they see
  - 77% of Americans say the country is moving in the wrong direction<sup>1</sup>
  - 67% think the U.S. is not a well-functioning democracy or not a democracy at all<sup>2</sup>
- Support for authoritarian leadership in the US is higher than we might think
  - 57% of Americans think their country's leader should have total, unchecked authority<sup>3</sup>
  - 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”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 2.

<sup>2</sup>AP-NORC, *The March 2024 AP-NORC Center Poll*, (Chicago, IL: The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2024), 15.

<sup>3</sup>Davis, Jr., Elliott. *A Leader With 'Unchecked Authority'? Americans Might Not Mind*, (US News Decision Points, September 11, 2024).

<sup>4</sup>PRRI, *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election: Findings from the 2023 American Values Survey*, (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2023), 5.

# Recap of key takeaways

Across the full body of research

- Decades of declining social cohesion, increasing distrust of institutions, and deepening political, social, and cultural polarization have taken a serious toll
- The core values of **freedom**, **fairness**, and **fearlessness** remain deeply embedded, are important to people, and are more generally associated with the concepts of liberal democracy
- These core values provide a strong foundation for re-engagement and education on the subject of American democracy

# Roadmap for final revisions

- 1. Lean into the freedom value** (refine and use the “Freedom Matters” frame).
- 2. Define democracy** beyond voting/elections.
- 3. Increase understanding of the core elements of liberal democracy** (e.g., separation of powers).
- 4. Meet the urgency of the current moment** but not be restricted in its longer-term view of the state of democracy and democratic objectives.
- 5. Acknowledge that democracy isn’t perfect**, while still being asset-framed.

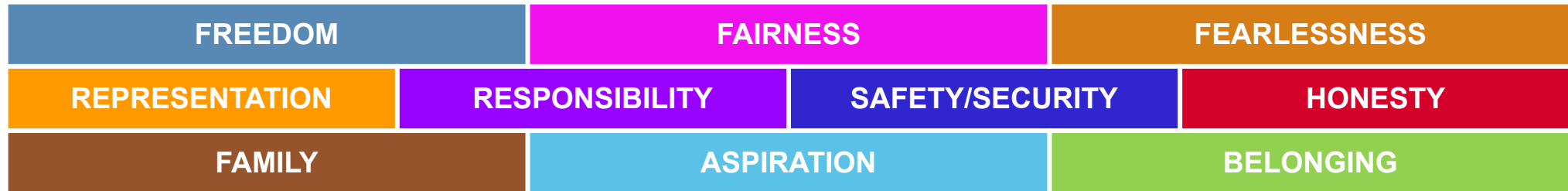


# Roadmap for final revisions

6. **Connect the deep concerns about polarization** and lack of mutual respect with the challenges in finding common ground in a democracy.
7. **Maintain the more general benefits content** and tailor references to specific benefits based on the audience to be reached.
8. **Retain the solution statement.**
9. **Utilize the call to action as framed.**

# Values

Retain as tested



1. The values previously identified were validated through both rounds of testing.
2. The elevation of the top three values (freedom, fairness, and fearlessness) was also validated in R2 testing and are elevated in the message framework.

# Refinements to align with inputs

We have **made only essential revisions** to the narrative and message framework, as tested, to respond to insights from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews and to maximize alignment with the Pluralytics ValuesFinder bipartisan benchmark.

As presented here, the narrative and message framework **in its entirety is fully aligned** with the bipartisan benchmark.

The **Core Message, Solution, Benefits, and Call to Action sections are fully aligned**. The **Challenge section of the framework is mostly aligned**. The lean-conservative audience segment (“Hearth”) falls just a few points short of full alignment, but the changes necessary to achieve full alignment would be too damaging to the content and risk alignment with the lean-progressive (“Global Me”) and lean independent (“Ladder”) audiences.

# Considerations for future messaging

In underlying messaging, when developed, **add examples about how Americans have come together/found compromise that resonate across the political spectrum** to use in support of the solution statement.\*

In specific applications of the narrative to issues, campaigns, social behavior change, and activation-oriented initiatives, **utilize specific calls to action relevant to the need.**\*

\*Development and testing of underlying messaging and creation of a message has not yet been funded. MG is engaging with other funders to seek funding both for the quantitative testing poll and the development of the messaging guide with exemplars.

# Recommended final narrative and message framework

# Narrative/Core Message

As revised and recommended

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**.

# Narrative/Core Message

As revised and recommended

*Lean into the freedom value.*

*Create a shared definition  
of democracy.*

*Increase understanding of core  
elements of democracy.*

*Acknowledged that democracy isn't  
perfect...*

*...but stay asset-framed and  
aspirational.*

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**.



# Narrative/Core Message

As revised and recommended

*Lean into the freedom value.*

*Create a shared definition*

Revised from “speak our minds” since it suggests the combative and confrontational discourse that troubles people.

*elements of democracy.*

*Acknowledged that dem*

*...but stay as*

Added to evoke the safety/security value democracy in the core message.

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** and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** **help** to these **freedoms**. But, a **strong** **afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.





# Challenge

As revised and recommended

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**.

# Challenge

As revised and recommended

*Connect with deep concerns  
about polarization*

*Increase understanding of core elements  
of democracy and asset frame the need  
for improvement and debate.*

*Meet the urgency of the moment  
and the recognition across groups  
that this is not “just happening”.*

*Create a shared definition  
of democracy and directly  
counter polarization as  
normative.*

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**.



# Challenge

As revised and recommended

Connect with deep concerns  
about polarization

Increase understanding of core elements

Revised from “respect for the views of others” since it was not a believable concept. “Healthy debate” also further defines a core element of democracy.

Revised from “fighting for our freedoms” since two references to fighting in this sentence troubled focus groups and “defending” tests more strongly with both the Global Me and Hearth segments.

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 be **either/or**. Instead, **we** need to find a way



# Solution

Retained and recommended

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.

# Solution

## Retained and recommended

*Define democracy beyond voting and highlight collective responsibility.*

*Increase understanding of core elements of democracy.*

*...but stay asset-framed and aspirational.*

**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**.

# Solution

## Retained and recommended



# Benefits

Retained and recommended

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.**

# Benefits

## Retained and recommended

*Retain the benefits statement and tailor references to specific benefits based on the audience to be reached*

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**.

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



# Benefits

## Retained and recommended

*Retain the benefits statement and tailor references to specific benefits based on the audience to be reached*

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**.

Moved from the Solution section to reduce repetition and provide more detail beyond the more general reference to “making a difference in people’s lives” that had previously been referenced here.

business to **provide for your family**.

FOR INDEPENDENTS	FOR CONSERVATIVES
justice system everyone can trust.	
using, and opportunities needs and <b>deserves</b> .	
ing in communities <b>safe from violence</b> .	Increasing <b>trust</b> in <b>each other</b> and in <b>our</b> government.

# Call to action

Retained and recommended

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 it again.**

# Call to action

## Retained and recommended

*Meet the urgency of the moment and  
communicate shared responsibility.*

*...but stay asset-framed and aspirational.*

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 it**  
**again.**

# Call to action

## Retained and recommended

*Meet the urgency of the moment.*

*...but stay asset-framed.*

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 it**

Revised from “to expand and protect”  
since focus groups found the  
references to “expand” confusing and  
unnecessary given their expansive  
understanding of “protect.”



# For more information

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<https://www.metgroup.com/ideas/democracy-narratives-in-action/>



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