



SUMMARY: Global Democracy Narratives and Message Framework

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Metropolitan Group

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Overview

Data and evidence from around the world make it clear that authoritarian governments and their allies are dominating the information ecosystem. They are using orchestrated, well-resourced, and weaponized narratives to justify repression and delegitimize liberal democracy. These autocrats are watching and learning from each other, borrowing from a shared authoritarian playbook, and using narratives as a powerful tool to advance their authoritarian policies. The impact is that democratic norms, institutions, and basic freedoms are under attack in nearly every part of the world.

In striving to defend and advance democratic principles and institutions around the world and to combat disinformation, narrative change can be a powerful tool. Narratives are critical because they are an upstream element of the information ecosystem that impacts mindsets, how people see and experience issues, and what people pay attention to, believe, and do. The data and evidence summarized in this document are based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Metropolitan Group (MG) and research partners (2022 – 2024) through a global research scan and in-depth case studies in 11 countries across Latin America; Central Europe; East, West, and North Africa; and East Asia. This work involved extensive analysis of the current narrative landscape, identification of the core values associated with governance and considered to be important in people's lives, and engagement with people and organizations working to advance democracy around the world. It represents a \$4 million investment into narrative scanning, identification, analysis, and testing.



Overview (continued)

This document provides an actionable set of tools that can be used to advance a new upstream pro-democracy narrative that can be customized for specific sectors, issues, and stakeholders. It includes:

Values

Closely held values are a key element in narratives that impact mindsets, social norms, expectations, and actions. Values help determine which stories, data points, and “facts” people see, believe, and find motivating. Ensuring that closely held values are incorporated into narratives and messaging is critical to effective messaging.

Recommended Values

The ten evidence-based recommended core values below (of the many values identified in the research scan) reflect those identified in quantitative and qualitative research across both the narrative scan and testing phases of our work as being most important to evoke in pro-democratic narratives and messaging. This document shares the **10 recommended evidence-based values** to advance pro-democracy narratives and messaging.

Recommended Narrative

This document contains a recommended global pro-democracy **evidence-based narrative and message framework** developed and refined based upon formative research and tested with qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It is color-coded to shadow the values it triggers. The global narrative can be used as source material and

customized to align with context.

Existing Narrative Landscape

The global and country scans on five continents identified the seven most dominant and salient pro-authoritarian narratives and the five most dominant and salient pro-democracy narratives in the current information ecosystem. Each narrative is included in this document and color-coded to show the values they trigger.

Effective Communication Guidelines

Based upon analysis of the existing narrative landscape and learnings from formative research and testing of new narratives, a set of five **evidence-based guidelines for effective communication** is included in this document.

Accessible Language

The comparative analysis showed that pro-democratic narratives tend to use more technical language and terms that do not connect with intended stakeholders. This document includes suggestions for language to consider when communicating key concepts of liberal democracy to a wide array of stakeholders.

Evidence-Based Recommended Values

The ten evidence-based recommended **core values** shown below (of the many values identified in the research scan) reflect those identified in quantitative and qualitative research across both the narrative scan and testing phases of our work as being most important to evoke in pro-democratic narratives and messaging.

Core Value	Definition
Freedom	Connects with the broad range of democratic principles and freedoms, including including freedom of expression and thought, freedom of religion, and freedom to express views 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, where everyone receives the same benefits or opportunities and is treated fairly under the law regardless of position, power, or identity.
Safety/Security	Defined in a broad sense in terms of personal security and safety, economic security, and cultural/identity security. It is often associated with a threat, fear, or insecurity over losing something.
Honesty	Associated with truth, trust, trustworthiness, openness, and transparency, and often triggered in contrast to concerns about corruption, accountability, and disinformation.
Representation	Conveys a sense of inclusion (political and communal), having personal agency or a voice, and actively participating in their governance.

Core Value	Definition
Prosperity	Captures both individual benefits (e.g., jobs, increased family income, and access to opportunity and services) and collective benefits (e.g., development, progress, and economic growth for a community or country).
Strength/ Fearlessness	Closely connected to stability, action, decisiveness, and effectiveness; this value also aligns with people's desire for stable and resilient communities and nations.
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.
Family/ Belonging	Connects people to their most important relationships, including family, kinship, and community; what they want for their children; and their sense of connection to, and responsibility for, each other.
Tradition	A multifaceted core value associated with family, culture, and heritage, as well as national, religious, and ethnic identity.

Evidence-Based Narrative and Message Framework

The recommended pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework below were developed by applying research findings, data, and the five evidence-based guidelines. They were refined based on testing in three countries using qualitative and quantitative methods. The narrative and message framework evoke priority core values (see color key below), are primarily asset-framed, prioritize relatable (non-technical) language, and are informed by cultural, historical, and political context.

Narrative	Freedom and democracy live in all of us .
Core Message (summary)	All people deserve to be both free and secure . True security is only possible when we all can live and speak freely , honor our traditions , and provide for our families . Freedom is both our right and a responsibility we share to participate and to respect the freedom of others. Freedom and democracy live in all of us . We expect and deserve an honest and open government that answers to the people and treats everyone fairly . When we stand together for freedom and democracy, we build strong communities and a safer world .
Problem Statement	Denying the rights and freedom of anyone puts at risk the rights and freedom of everyone . Too often, we are told that security is only possible if we sacrifice some of our freedom , or that democracy undermines traditional family values . Both are untrue and are used to deny our rights and protect those in power, paving the way for corruption and disinformation . This limits our ability to solve our collective challenges and promote shared prosperity , while also limiting people's access to education, healthcare, and jobs that make it possible to support themselves and their families .
Solution Statement	To be a truly democratic society, we must demand a government that is honest and open , treats people fairly , and provides opportunities for all people . That is only possible if we do our part to actively participate , defend freedom for ourselves and others , and hold our government accountable to the people .
Benefits	When people are free to live and speak their minds without fear and are treated fairly , they can provide for themselves and their families , and fully participate and contribute to their communities . This combination of freedom , fairness , and fearlessness is also why democracies can best find innovative solutions to our shared challenges and build strong communities and a safer world .
Call to Action	Freedom and democracy live in all of us . To best ensure strong communities and a safer world , we need to stand together for honest and open government , treat all people fairly , and protect our freedom .

Core Values Color Key	Freedom	Fairness	Safety/Security	Honesty	Representation
	Prosperity	Strength/Fearlessness	Responsibility	Family/Belonging	Tradition

Existing Dominant and Salient Narratives

Research in 11 countries identified a set of salient and dominant global narratives that occur across very different country contexts, political cultures, and social-historical experiences. These narrative connections suggest that, even in vastly different political contexts, people grapple with similar questions pertaining to governance and face similar challenges related to security, prosperity, corruption, and other endemic questions.

These narratives are framed by aggregating key messages, themes, calls to action, and value triggers from numerous messaging examples and stories collected through the research methodologies. They were vetted by local partners, in key informant interviews, and through triangulating data sources.

The research identified seven dominant pro-authoritarian narratives and five dominant pro-democracy narratives that are highlighted on the following two pages.



Pro-Authoritarian Narratives

Pro-authoritarian narratives generally have an explicit call to action delegitimizing democracy, democratic institutions, and democratic values, and legitimizing authoritarian practices or agendas. Across the narrative landscape, authoritarian narratives triggered closely held values, used simple and emotive language, and were more salient and dominant.

Democracy Appropriation

There has never been as much democracy as there is now. We have **ensured** that the **voice of the people** will be heard and **acted upon** to increase **safety** and **prosperity**.

Values:

Safety/Security

Representation

Prosperity

Strength/Fearlessness

Democracy Does Not Deliver

Democracy has not and does not deliver the benefits it promised. It slows **economic development**, **protects criminals**, chips away at **traditional values**, and **fosters chaos**. We are **losing jobs**, **living in fear**, and plagued by **dishonest and corrupt elites**.

Values:

Safety/Security

Tradition

Prosperity

Honesty

Democratic Institutions are Corrupt

Corrupt elites created systems and "democratic" institutions that are **corrupt** and benefit the few at the expense of **honest, hardworking people**. **Corruption** gets in the way of **progress**, **protects criminals and terrorists**, and **weakens our nation**. To solve our problems, we **must take action** without interference from **illegitimate** institutions.

Values:

Safety/Security

Representation

Prosperity

Honesty

Strength/Fearlessness

Security Justifies All

Our **security** is under constant **threat**—from our borders and **physical safety**, to **our economic stability** and **our traditions, culture, and values**. Democratic institutions are **not up to the task** of **keeping us safe**.

Values:

Safety/Security

Tradition

Prosperity

Strength/Fearlessness

Democracy Has Gone Too Far

Democracy and its supporters among the press, human rights advocates, and social media influencers are creating **conflict, disunity, and instability** in our country and must be stopped. Only **stability** and **order** can **create jobs**, provide **security**, and maintain unity for our people and our country.

Values:

Safety/Security

Prosperity

Enemies, Outsiders, and Others

The opposition and pro-democracy forces are enemies of the state who serve foreign interests and hate our country. They **foster unrest** and **put our lives, families, livelihoods, values, and even national security in danger**.

Values:

Safety/Security

Tradition

Prosperity

Family/Belonging

Strong Leadership

Only **strong leadership with the will to act** can provide the **stability** and **order** the country needs to **defend against threats** and provide dignity, **prosperity**, and **development**.

Values:

Safety/Security

Prosperity

Strength/Fearlessness

Pro-Democracy Narratives

Pro-democracy narratives generally include a call to action that promotes democracy, democratic values, or democratic institutions. Across the narrative landscape, the research found that pro-democracy narratives were less salient and dominant; made assumptions about people's beliefs and inherent support for democracy; and often used technical language. Two of the most dominant narratives (Democracy is a Work in Progress and Democracy is in Decline) are deficit-framed regarding democracy.

Democracy Is in Decline

Democracy is **under threat** around the world. Democratic backsliding is being advanced by **propaganda efforts** from authoritarian actors, resulting in decreased and diminished **freedoms, security, and opportunity** for **people** everywhere.

Values:

Freedom
Safety/Security
Representation
Prosperity
Honesty

Authoritarianism Is Harmful

Authoritarian states are **weaker**, more **unstable**, and less able to deliver **prosperity, security, or growth** to their **people** than democratic states can.

Values:

Safety/Security
Representation
Prosperity
Strength/Fearlessness

Democracy Delivers

Democracy delivers **economic growth and stability, strength, and security, and the means for a prosperous and healthy society.**

Values:

Safety/Security
Prosperity
Strength/Fearlessness

Democracy Promotes Equity and Fair Treatment

Democracy promotes **equity and fair treatment.** Democratic systems are more **inclusive** and provide greater **security and benefits** for the most vulnerable populations.

Values:

Fairness
Safety/Security
Representation
Prosperity

Democracy Is a Work in Progress

Democracy is a **work in progress** and an ongoing struggle toward building a better society. Democracies are **not perfect and can be messy**, but democratic systems are the most **prosperous, stable**, and best way to ensure **freedom and opportunity for all citizens.**

Values:

Freedom
Fairness
Safety/Security
Prosperity
Honesty
Strength/Fearlessness

Evidence-Based Guidelines for Effective Communication

Narrative research identified five key evidence-based guidelines for more effective narrative and messaging application. Following these guidelines when creating communication tools (talking points, speeches, and presentations; preparation for interviews; social media content; and development of pro-democracy communications generally) will help create more effective, relevant, and activating messaging.

VALUES-BASED:

Center or highlight core values in all messaging.

People make decisions about what to believe and what (if anything) to do based on the extent to which they connect what they're hearing (including facts and data) with their deeply held values and perceptions about how the world works. So, it's important that communication be designed to evoke core values that are widely held and authentic in terms of their connection to priority values for governance (e.g., security and prosperity), the idea and practice of democracy (e.g., freedom and fairness), and those that are important in people's personal lives (e.g., family).

TIPS: Recommended pro-democracy core values to evoke are: Freedom; Fairness; Security; Honesty; Representation; Prosperity; Strength; Responsibility; Family; and Tradition.

ASSET-FRAMED:

Focus on opportunity and benefits (assets) instead of challenges and shortfalls (deficits).

Deficit framing for broad audiences can reinforce authoritarian narratives about democracy not meeting people's needs and can be demoralizing. At the same time, acknowledging the challenges confronting democracies maintains credibility, demonstrates awareness of current realities, and offers solutions that are only possible in democracies. People want and need to understand what democracy means in the context of their lives. For most audiences, communication should focus on filling that gap while also drawing a contrast between democracy and authoritarianism.

TIPS: Avoid using deficit-based language, like "Democracy is in decline." Instead, lead with the strengths of democracies—for example, "The combination of freedom, fairness, and fearlessness is why democracies can best solve our shared challenges and build strong communities and a safer world."

RELATIONAL, NOT TRANSACTIONAL:

Use language that focuses on what matters to people.

Utilize language that is relational (focusing on what matters to people) and avoid language that is transactional (focusing either on broad language that can trigger unrelated or delegitimizing quantifiable comparisons, or immediate-term “What has democracy done for me lately” comparisons). For example, the broad narrative “Democracy has led to increased stability and economic growth” implies outcomes or impacts on people’s lives that might not have been fully manifested. It can also create open space for authoritarians to selectively compare economic growth rates, changes in security, and other ways in which they provide benefits that people expect or associate with democracy.

TIPS: Talk about the ways in which democracies create opportunities to make a difference in people’s lives—for example, “When people are free to live and speak their minds without fear and are treated fairly, they can pursue an education, access health care, and provide for themselves and their families.”

ACCESSIBLE:

Use everyday, easy-to-understand language.

Use everyday, easy-to-understand language with tangible references that connect the idea and practice of democracy with what matters to people, instead of relying on jargon or technical terminology that can easily be misunderstood and can be off-putting. Communication should describe what democracies look like in practice and how they help to manifest what people care about in order to bolster support for democracy.

TIPS: When possible, avoid using words or expressions that might be unclear or confusing, like “transparent” or “accountability.” Instead, use words that are more clear, like “honest and open,” “answers to the people,” or “treats everyone fairly.” See Accessible Language on page 4 for more examples.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT:

Use a cultural context lens when applying narrative and messaging, and in crafting stories.

To be effective in reaching and engaging audiences, narrative and messaging must be tailored to specific communities or populations and grounded in cultural relevance, reflecting both the cultural heritage and the contemporary lived experience of your audiences. Messaging that fails to be grounded in cultural context or disregards current realities will raise concerns about credibility and is bound to be rejected.

TIPS: Incorporate localized, culturally rooted metaphors and imagery to connect with audiences and establish relevance. For example, in Zambia, democracy was described as being “like logs on the fire to cook the pot,” suggesting the critical importance of participation in a democracy to enable it to function. Determining when to use or not use metaphors is also an important part of respecting cultural context. When communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, some metaphors may not have relevance or could feel exclusionary.

Accessible Language

Below are suggestions for language to replace frequently used phrases that are more technical. They are not hard rules because there are audiences and use cases for which the specific language in the “instead of this” column may be the right framing. For example, when communicating with counterparts in partner governments or democracy professionals, more technical and precise language may be more appropriate. However, when communicating with broad audiences, using more relatable language can increase the relevance, understanding, and impact of your messaging.

The preferred language shown here is appropriate for developing any messaging or communication materials about democracy.

Instead of this ...	Consider this ...
“democracy delivers.”	“Democracies are better able to solve global challenges and improve people’s lives.”
	“Democracies help build strong communities and a safer world.”
“democracy is in decline.”	“Democracies are rising to the moment, which is why authoritarians are on the attack.”
	“Freedom and fearlessness are why democracies are stronger and better able to rise to the moment in finding innovative solutions to the challenges we face.”
“democracy is messy,” or “democracy is a work in progress.”	“Democracies aren’t afraid to question themselves and welcome new ideas.”
	“Democracies are committed to doing the work to improve themselves.”
“supporting free and independent media”	“supporting freedom of the press”
“transparent” or “transparency”	“honest and open”
	“open to everyone”
“accountable government,” “accountable governance,” or “accountability”	“government that is responsive to the needs of the people”
	“government that answers to the people”
“fighting corruption”	“fighting for (or creating) honest and open government”

Instead of this ...	Consider this ...
"bolstering democratic reformers"	"supporting people fighting for democracy"
	"supporting people fighting for your rights"
"advancing technology for democracy"	"using technology to bring us together and help make democracy work better for everyone"
	"using technology to make democracy more accessible to us all"
"rule of law"	"everyone treated fairly"
	"a justice system that treats everyone fairly, no matter who they are"
	"justice you can trust"
"equitable" or "equity"	"fair"
"participatory electoral systems"	"free and fair elections"
	"honest elections"
	"elections where every vote counts"
"participatory democracy" or "democracy giving voice to all"	"everyone matters"
	"making sure everyone is heard"
	"every vote counts"
"economic inequity"	"gap between rich and poor"
	"economic unfairness"
	"unequal access and opportunity"
"good governance"	"government that works for everyone"
	"honest and responsive government"
"historically marginalized" or "vulnerable populations"	"people (or communities) that are left out and left behind"

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