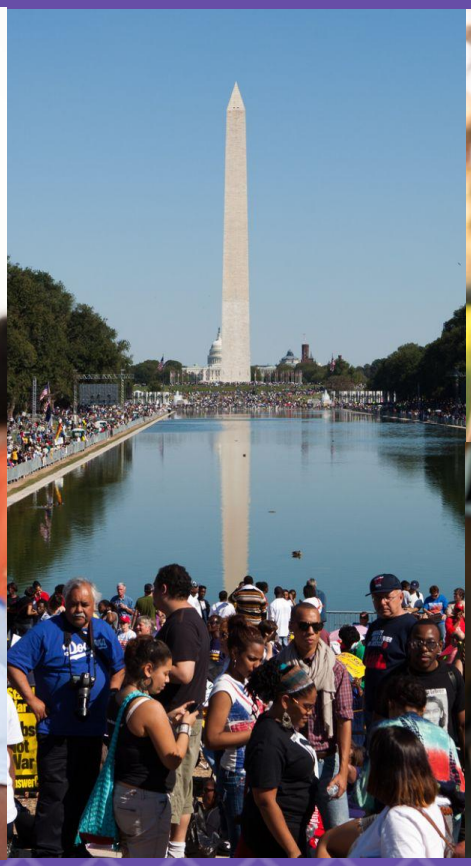
PRO DEMOCRACY
narrative playbook

Narrative + Message Guide

A NEW NARRATIVE TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES



Metropolitan Group
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The Pro-Democracy Narrative and Message Guide was developed by Metropolitan Group (MG) and made possible from **Charles F. Kettering Foundation**, which works to inspire and connect individuals and organizations to advance thriving and inclusive democracies around the globe. They believe that all people belong and that they have the right to engage in and shape a democracy that serves them.

CHARLES F. Kettering FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

Data and evidence from around the world make 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.

Mirroring this global trend, the United States is experiencing its own assault on the principles and practice of democracy, and on the institutions essential to its survival. Leaders and movements with authoritarian agendas are utilizing a vast and well-funded dissemination infrastructure to deploy a set of carefully orchestrated narratives designed to undermine faith and trust in, and support for, democratic principles and institutions. At the same time, they are appropriating and seeking to re-define the term "democracy" to be exclusionary and to justify concentrated and unaccountable power.

The assault on democratic principles and institutions—both here in the United States and around the world—is not just a threat to freedom, it also threatens the successful advancement of every social issue.

The assault on democratic principles and institutions—both here in the United States and around the world—is not just a threat to freedom, it also threatens the successful advancement of every social issue. From health care, education, and religious liberty to economic opportunity, environmental justice, and racial equity, authoritarian narratives and policies are actively undermining and threatening to erase hard-won progress. No sector of society is safe from the coordinated authoritarian playbook. Authoritarians know that the upstream narratives (or meta-stories) people believe impact social norms, create fertile ground for mis/dis/malinformation, and legitimize autocratic action while decreasing trust in democratic principles and institutions.

The Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook invites diverse communities to create a shared narrative infrastructure to defend and advance democracy. Narratives are critical, because they shape social norms and community expectations. They are the meta-stories through which people make sense of the world around them, process information, and make decisions about what to do or not do. Narratives can either inoculate against or create a fertile environment for mis/dis/malinformation. Narrative can be one of the most important tools that change agents have in advancing democracy and countering authoritarianism.

The Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook is for anyone, anywhere, who cares about protecting, promoting, or strengthening the principles, norms, and institutions that advance freedom and democracy. We believe it will have particular value to the leaders of—and to the program,

communication, policy, advocacy, and movement building officers at—NGOs/CSOs, foundations, state and local governments, and private sector organizations across issue areas (such as environment, education, religious liberty, civil rights, public health, equal justice, arts, etc.).

Now is the time to both counter weaponized attacks on democratic institutions and proactively champion a compelling vision of democracy grounded in freedom, fairness, and fearlessness.

This guide introduces an evidence-based pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework grounded in high-frequency values that are intended to accomplish the following:

- Build currency for an upstream pro-democracy narrative that broadens support for liberal democracy and increases its value to stakeholders
- Strengthen the work of pro-democracy stakeholders in deploying more effective messaging
- Increase support for democratic governance and the democratic institutions and principles critical to it
- Increase resistance to—or inoculate against—pro-authoritarian narratives and help to counter disinformation and misinformation

The Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook's partners have conducted extensive multi-methodology scans, and analysis of the most dominant and salient pro-democracy and pro-authoritarian narratives in 12 countries on five continents, including the United States. Based on this formative research, we developed, tested, and refined a set of effective pro-democracy narratives, grounded in core values and complete with supporting message frameworks. We are openly sharing the research findings, narratives, and resources to help advocates across all sectors shift hearts, minds, and norms in support of democratic values. Now is the time to both counter weaponized attacks on democratic institutions and proactively champion a compelling vision of democracy grounded in freedom, fairness, and fearlessness.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In striving to advance and bolster democracy in the U.S. and around the world, narrative change can be a powerful tool. The development of this guide involved extensive research and 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 and in the U.S. This guide includes seven evidence-based guidelines for more effective messaging, a recommended narrative and message framework, and a set of evidence-based recommended core values that are most important to trigger in pro-democratic communication and messaging.

Guidelines for Effective Communication

Narrative research identified seven key evidence-based guidelines for more effective narrative and messaging application. Following these guidelines when creating talking points, speeches, and presentations, preparing for interviews, posting on social media, and writing pro-democracy communications generally, will help create more effective messaging. The more detailed guidelines can be found on page 15. The guidelines include:

1. **VALUES-BASED:** Center or highlight core values in all communications.
2. **ASSET-FRAMED:** Focus on opportunity and benefits (assets) instead of challenges and shortfalls (deficits).
3. **RELATIONAL, NOT TRANSACTIONAL:** Use language that focuses on what matters to people.
4. **ACCESSIBLE:** Use everyday, easy-to-understand language.
5. **CULTURALLY RELEVANT:** Use a cultural context lens when applying narrative and messaging, and in crafting stories.
6. **ACTION-ORIENTED:** In your call to action, provide the specific actions that you would like your audience to take.
7. **DEFINE DEMOCRACY:** Make sure that your pro-democracy communications define democracy beyond elections.

Narrative and Message Framework

The recommended pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework below were developed by applying research findings, data, and the seven evidence-based guidelines (see page 15). The narrative was refined based on testing with six focus groups (before and after the 2024 election) and a survey with more than 2,000 participants. The narrative and message framework evoke the core values (see color key below), are primarily asset-framed, utilize relatable (non-technical) language, define democracy beyond elections, and are informed by cultural, historical, and political context.

CORE VALUES TO EVOKE IN U.S. PRO-DEMOCRACY MESSAGING

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY	PROSPERITY	FAMILY / BELONGING

FREEDOM MATTERS

NARRATIVE FRAME

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 **our** democracy and **our security.** But they require **checks and balances** on power and government that is **open**, **honest**, and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** hasn't fully lived up to these **freedoms**, but a **strong democracy isn't afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.

CHALLENGE

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

SOLUTION

Protecting our freedoms has always been **up to all of us**, not just **our elected representatives**. But democracy is about more than **voting**. It's about **checks and balances** on power, **speaking your mind** without fear, and **government that is accountable to the people**. **Fearless** and **free people working together** can **find solutions** that **make our lives better** and **our** democracy **stronger**.

BENEFITS

Freedom isn't an abstract concept. A democracy where **freedoms are protected** is better able to provide **every one of us** with a justice system we can **trust** and access to **health care, education, and housing**. It gives us more **control over our own lives** and **increases opportunities for prosperity** for ourselves, our **families**, **our community**, and **our country**.

CALL TO ACTION

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

OVERVIEW OF U.S. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Since 2022, the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook partners have worked on projects domestically and internationally on behalf of public agencies, nonprofits, and foundations that work directly on promoting democracy. Through our work in the U.S. and 11 countries across Latin America, Central Europe, East Africa, West Africa, North Africa, and East Asia, we have developed pro-democracy narratives and message frameworks that are grounded in a methodology that uses narrative analysis, assessment, development and testing, implementation and iteration, and monitoring and evaluation.

The methods behind the research include:

- A literature review of approximately 800 bibliographic sources
- Approximately 140 key informant interviews
- A robust scan and analysis of over 1,000 search terms used on the most popular social media platforms to scan and analyze over one million messages and posts
- Review of nearly 5,000 articles and posts from more than 80 media outlets
- Consultation of over 25 national and international indices that track democratic institutions, rule of law, press freedom, and corruption
- Review of approximately 27 national, regional, and international surveys on elections, democracy and democratic values, national issue priorities, social norms, and closely held values
- Political discourse analysis of speeches and social media posts from almost 60 key figures, including politicians, government officials, opposition leaders, and presidents
- A total of 34 focus groups, including six in the United States
- Surveys with more than 3,700 participants around the world and an online survey (n=2,021) conducted in July 2025 in the United States with a sample drawn from a large multi-million volunteer research panel (Dynata). The sample was constructed and weighted to represent the most recent United States Census in terms of gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, education, and geography. The sample was also weighted to match Gallup's Q2 2025 tracking survey of party affiliation, which identified the following: Republicans 28%; Democrats 27%; and independents 45%

The findings below focus on the United States, but also reflect learnings identified across the full body of work conducted by Metropolitan Group globally since 2022. Findings drawn from our assessment of the narrative landscape—including the existing ecosystem and current mindsets—are presented first. These findings include insights from both domestic and global research about democracy narratives. Then, we present findings from the testing of the narrative and messaging concepts developed as part of our U.S.-focused narrative work.

The following are key findings that arose from this research. More detail about each of these findings can be found in the initiative's U.S. Findings and Recommendations Report.

Assessing the narrative landscape: The existing ecosystem

1. The majority of pro-democracy narratives and messaging are either critical, deficit-framed, or defensive in their framing (e.g., "democracy is messy"); far fewer narratives make a compelling positive case for democracy.
2. The concept of "democracy" is frequently appropriated by authoritarians, who recognize its power and appeal.
3. Democracy narratives take understanding of democracy for granted, rarely defining it. When they do, democracy is primarily defined as the holding of elections. This plays into the hands of many authoritarians who can claim that anything they do is democratic since they were elected.
4. Authoritarians use emotive and relatable language, often including fear-based appeals, while pro-democracy narratives are often theoretical or technical, using complex or legal terms that are less resonant in the context of people's day-to-day lives.
5. Of the core values currently deployed in pro-democracy narratives, freedom is the most dominant, authentic, and compelling.
6. Trust of institutions has been declining for years, particularly with regard to the federal government and Congress specifically; the public tends to have higher levels of trust in local government.
7. The dominance of social media—along with the use of bots and other means to spread mis-, dis-, and malinformation—is worsening the negative impact of echo chambers and deepening existing political divides.

Assessing the narrative landscape: dominant mindsets

8. Most people—across the political spectrum—prefer to live in a democracy and care about its future.
9. Support for authoritarianism is alarmingly high, especially among younger people.
10. Disappointment in democracy is prevalent, with a profound gap between the ideal and the reality.
11. The bedrock principles of democracy are valued and seen as central to the U.S. identity, though not always associated with the definition of democracy.
12. Most Americans are disengaged from the political process in a traditional sense.
13. Lack of social cohesion and respect are seen as major obstacles to democracy in the U.S., but the majority believe debate and compromise are signs of a strong democracy.
14. Context matters, and satisfaction with democracy can be influenced by whether your side wins or loses.
15. Supporters of democracy reflect the demographics of the general population. But when factoring in levels of engagement there are key differences demographically across three sub-segments of Supporters and between Very Engaged Democracy Supporters and Democracy Opposition.

16. Very Engaged Democracy Supporters in the United States are a diverse group that, in many ways, defies partisan stereotypes.

Findings from testing of new narratives and messaging to promote democracy in the U.S.

17. Focus groups conducted by MG in late 2024 and early 2025 found the Freedom Matters narrative to be strong, and found that it increased participants' support for and belief in the importance of inclusive democracy and connecting people to it.
18. The core message communicating the Freedom Matters narrative generates high levels of agreement (89%), perceived relevance to what's happening in the country right now (84%), and likelihood to share (69%) in a national survey.
19. The shorthand summary of the narrative ("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 our democracy and our security.") was found in a survey to be the strongest reason for Americans to work together to support and improve our democracy, AND was found to be the most persuasive.
20. The recommended core values tested well with focus groups and in a nationwide online survey.
21. Exposure to the Freedom Matters narrative and messaging results in positive shifts in preference for democracy or agreement with the core elements of democracy captured in the narrative's core message.
22. The most important elements of a democracy are free and fair elections; checks, balances, and limits on power; freedom of speech and assembly; and a justice system that treats everyone fairly no matter who they are.
23. The narrative and supporting messaging successfully reminds people that protecting freedom is a shared responsibility, and that working toward compromise is a sign of a strong democracy and is key to the solution to the challenges our democracy faces.
24. A strong democracy that protects freedom is seen as better able to provide: a system we can trust; access to health care, education, and housing; control over our own lives; and increased opportunities for prosperity for ourselves, our community, and our country.
25. Conveying a sense of optimism that together we can improve our democracy is key to inspiring action.

AUDIENCES

For a narrative and message framework to be effective, it is important to identify the stakeholders and audiences they are intended to reach, engage, and motivate to action since they have the most to gain (or lose), and their needs and interests need to be centered in every respect.

It is also important to remember that no narrative or messaging initiative will (or should even try to) reach and motivate everyone. On any issue, including—and perhaps especially—governance, some segments of the population will already agree with you, presenting the opportunity to make their advocacy more effective with evidence-based narratives. Other segments of the population will never agree with you no matter what you say or do. In these cases, your goal is to mitigate their influence and to not leave a narrative vacuum for them to fill. Between these two polar opposites (in this case, Very Engaged Democracy Supporters and Opposition) are segments of the population that are potentially "movable."

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In the context of governance, narrative and messaging can provide those segments of the population who already believe in democracy with the tools and resources to communicate more effectively, to be more motivated to take civic action in support of this belief, and to help motivate others. By focusing the narrative strategy on the 67% of the population in the Democracy Supporter audience segments, we have high potential to shift social norms and perhaps soften the ground for members of the Lean Supporter segment to become late adopters.

OPPOSITION (5%)	LEAN OPPOSITION (7%)	LEAN SUPPORTER (21%)	SUPPORTER (67%)		
			Disengaged (36%)	Somewhat Engaged (22%)	Very Engaged (9%)

The audience segments shown above (and described in detail below) are based on data from an online survey (n=2,021) conducted by Prime Group on behalf of Metropolitan Group in July 2025. The sample was constructed and weighted to represent the most recent United States Census in terms of gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, education, and geography. The sample was also weighted to match Gallup's Q2 2025 tracking survey of party affiliation, which identified the following: Republicans 28%; Democrats 27%; and independents 45%.

Segmentation was determined based on responses to a question about the form of governance survey respondents would prefer for the United States on a scale of 1 to 4 between authoritarianism (1) at one end and democracy (4) at the other. System A was defined (without labeling it in any way) as "a political system in which a leader has decision-making power without limits or accountability to the people, Congress, or the courts." System B was defined (also without labeling) as "a political system in which leaders are accountable to the people, no one is above the law, and no branch of government has too much power."

Supporters (67% of the population)

This audience segment expresses strong preference (on a scale of 1 to 4) for a political system in which leaders are accountable to the people, no one is above the law, and no branch of government has too much power.

A narrative strategy should focus on activating these Supporters by providing them with the tools, resources, and support to be more effective in carrying the new narrative and messaging in their formal and informal advocacy efforts.

Due to its vast size, this audience reflects the general population in many respects in terms of demographics. While individuals in the Supporter segment lean slightly older (55+) than the general population, there are no statistically significant differences between this segment and the general population in terms of gender identity, race or ethnicity, education, or household income.

This segment also includes people across the political spectrum, although the segment overall leans slightly more Democrat and somewhat liberal than the general population. In the survey, 31% identify as Democrat; 25% identify as Republican; and 36% identify as Independent. While 32% of individuals in the Supporter segment say they are liberal, 28% say they are conservative.

While those in the Supporter segment are more likely than the general population to think the country is on the wrong track (by 7 points), nearly one-third of this segment think the country is going in the right direction. Similarly, while 64% of Supporters (compared with 57% of the survey sample) don't agree very much or at all with the leadership of the United States right now (i.e., the president, Congress, and the courts), 34% agree somewhat or to a great extent with that leadership.

Thus, while this segment leans slightly more than the general public toward dissatisfaction with current leadership and the direction of the country, approximately one-third are both strong supporters of democracy AND supporters of the country's current leadership and direction.

To better understand this large and diverse segment, MG examined the extent to which Supporters of democracy are engaged in the political process and staying abreast of news

about politics and government. This led to the identification of three sub-segments of Supporters:

- **Very Engaged Supporters** (14% of Supporters): Those who actively seek out news about politics and government, and report they have voted in every nonpresidential election.
- **Somewhat Engaged Supporters** (33% of Supporters): Those who lean toward actively seeking out news about politics and government, and have voted in at least some nonpresidential elections.
- **Disengaged Supporters** (54% of Supporters): Those who lean toward active avoidance of news about politics or the government and have either voted in no more than "some" nonpresidential elections or say they are not registered to vote.

In terms of the impact of exposure to the narrative and messaging in the course of taking the July 2025 survey, it is important to note that the Democracy Supporter segment was virtually "all in" on democracy as a preferred system of government for the U.S. (100% expressed the strongest possible preference—4 on a scale of 1 to 4—for a democratic form of government. They also expressed agreement with the Freedom Matters narrative from the outset of the survey. Upon reading the narrative's core message paragraph at the beginning of the survey, 92% said they agreed and an overwhelming 61% strongly agreed. Although we observed modest (6 point) net negative movement in their system preference and agreement with the narrative at the end of the survey, this pattern is consistent with the ceiling effect commonly observed in social and communication research among audiences who already exhibit the highest levels of endorsement at baseline.

For more detailed data describing this audience segment, please refer to the appendix in the U.S. Findings and Recommendations Report.

Lean Supporters (21% of the population)

This audience segment leans toward a preference for the principles of liberal democracy (3 on a scale of 1 to 4). Like the Supporter segment, this segment largely reflects the demographic diversity of the United States, although individuals are more likely than the general population to be white, to have household income between $75,000 and $99,999 per year, and to be single.

This segment is more likely to identify as Republican and to say they are somewhat conservative or middle of the road (i.e., center or center-right). This segment is more likely than the general population to think the country is moving in the right direction (53% versus 38% for the overall survey sample). A majority of this segment (57% compared to 41% of the survey sample) agree at least somewhat with current U.S. leadership.

The vast majority of this segment (69%) would be considered part of the "Disengaged Middle" that runs across all of the audience segments (with the exception of Very Engaged Democracy Supporters) by virtue of the fact that they lean towards active avoidance of news about politics

or the government and they have either voted in no more than “some” non-presidential elections or say they are not registered to vote.
Exposure to the narrative and messaging in the course of taking the survey results in a net positive shift of 8 points toward preferring democracy as a system of government and/or agreement with the Freedom Matters narrative. More significantly, while 100% of this audience segment had, at the beginning of the survey, leaned (3 on a scale of 1 to 4) toward preferring democracy as the system of government for the United States, one-in-five individuals in this segment expressed a strong preference for democracy (4 on a scale of 1 to 4) at the end of the survey.

For more detailed data describing this audience segment, please refer to the appendix in the U.S. Findings and Recommendations Report.

Lean Opposition (7% of the population)

This segment leans toward preferring an authoritarian system of government for the United States (3 on a scale of 1 to 4). This segment is more likely to be 35-44 years old (Millennial) with a household income of $50,000 to $74,999 per year. They are also more likely to attend religious services weekly. In other respects, they mirror the demographics of the survey sample.

As with the Lean Supporter segment, this segment leans more Republican (36%) than Democrat (23%) with 35% reporting that they are Independent (mirroring the survey sample). This segment is more likely than the survey sample to say they are conservative (39% versus 31% for the overall sample) and to say they are very conservative (19% compared to 13%).

Like the Supporter segment, the majority (53%) of the Lean Opposition segment says the country is on the wrong track, but this segment is virtually evenly split between those who agree with current U.S. leadership (48%) and those who do not (49%). The small size of this audience as a proportion (7%) of the overall survey sample suggests caution in reading too much into this positive swing, although it is clear that, at the very least, exposure to the narrative and messaging does not result in pushback.

Similar to the Lean Supporter segment, the vast majority of this segment (66%) would be considered part of the “Disengaged Middle” referenced above by virtue of the fact that they lean towards active avoidance of news about politics or the government and they have either voted in no more than “some” non-presidential elections or say they are not registered to vote.

Exposure to the narrative and messaging in the course of taking the survey results in a net positive shift of 39 points toward preferring democracy as a system of government and/or agreement with the Freedom Matters narrative. In addition, while 100% of the individuals in this segment leaned toward a preference for an authoritarian system of government for the United States (2 on a scale of 1 to 4) at the beginning of the survey, one-in-four had shifted toward a preference for democracy (3 out of 4) and 16% expressed a strong preference for democracy (4 out of 4) after exposure to the narrative and messaging.

The relatively small size of this audience as a proportion (7%) of the overall survey sample suggests caution in reading too much into the positive swings. Nevertheless, while this would not necessarily be a priority audience segment initially, it appears that at the very least, exposure to the narrative and messaging does not result in pushback.

For more detailed data describing this audience segment, please refer to the appendix in the U.S. Findings and Recommendations Report.

Opposition (5% of the population)

The Opposition audience segment strongly prefers an authoritarian system of government for the United States, which was defined in the survey (without labeling it as such) as a system in which a leader has decision-making power without limits or accountability to the people, Congress, or the courts.

This segment is more likely than the general population to be 25-34 or 45-54 years old, to identify as female, to have household income less than $50,000 per year and less than four years of college. Politically, this group leans toward identifying as Republican (42% compared to 28% of the survey sample) and conservative (40% versus 31% of the survey sample). Of all the segments described above, this segment is much more likely to say they are very conservative (24% compared to 13% of the survey sample).

This segment is far more likely than the other segments or the general survey sample to say the country is headed in the right direction (59% compared to 38% of the survey sample). Like the Lean Supporter segment, 57% of the Opposition segment agree at least somewhat with the current leadership of the United States, although their level of intensity of agreement is far higher. While 19% of Lean Supporters agree to a great extent with current leadership, 34% of the Opposition segment say the same thing.

The survey conducted for MG suggests respondents in this audience segment moved dramatically in a positive direction either in support of democracy as a preferred system of government or agreement with the Freedom Matters narrative (net positive of +55 points) in the course of taking the survey. Similarly, while 100% of the individuals in this segment expressed a strong preference for an authoritarian system of government (1 on a scale of 1 to 4) for the United States at the start of the survey, 42% expressed the opposite preference for democracy (4 out of 4) after exposure to the narrative and messaging in the course of the survey.

As with the Lean Opposition segment, the small size of this audience as a proportion (5%) of the overall survey sample suggests the same caution in reading too much into the positive swings. Nevertheless, while this would not be a priority audience segment, it appears that at the very least, exposure to the narrative and messaging does not result in opposition pushback.

For more detailed data describing this audience segment, please refer to the appendix in the U.S. Findings and Recommendations Report.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The research and testing phases of our work identified seven key guidelines for narrative and messaging. Following these guidelines when developing pro-democracy communications will help create more effective messaging that is:

VALUES-BASED
Center or highlight core values in all communications.

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 representation), the idea and practice of democracy (e.g., freedom and fairness/strength), and those that are important in people's personal lives (e.g., family/belonging).

TIP: Recommended pro-democracy core values to evoke are: freedom; fairness; fearlessness/strength; representation; responsibility; safety/security; honesty; prosperity; and family/belonging.

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

Deficit framing for broad audiences can reinforce pro-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.

TIP: 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 on quantifiable or immediate-term comparisons). For example, the phrase "Democracy delivers" implies outcomes or impacts on people's lives that might not have been fully manifested, inviting identification of all the ways in which democracies have not yet delivered for the people they serve. As a result, one of the most dominant and salient pro-authoritarian narratives is "Democracy doesn't deliver."

TIP: 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.

TIP: When possible, avoid using words or expressions that might be unclear or confusing, like "transparent," "accountability," or "rule of law." Instead, use words that are more clear, like "honest and open," "answers to the people," or "treats everyone fairly." See the Accessible Language section below 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.

TIP: Incorporate localized, culturally rooted metaphors and imagery to connect with audiences and establish relevance. 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.

ACTION-ORIENTED
In your call to action, provide the specific actions that you would like your audience to take.

The call to action in the message framework should not be used verbatim. Without stating specifically which actions you want people to take, your audience can be left feeling motivated, but unsure of what to do next.

TIP: Based on your organization's or movement's work, augment the call to action with specific opportunities ranging from signing up for more information, to participating in a town hall or public meeting, to sharing this information with family and friends, to supporting and advocating for specific policies or practices.

DEFINE DEMOCRACY
Make sure that your pro-democracy communications define democracy beyond elections.

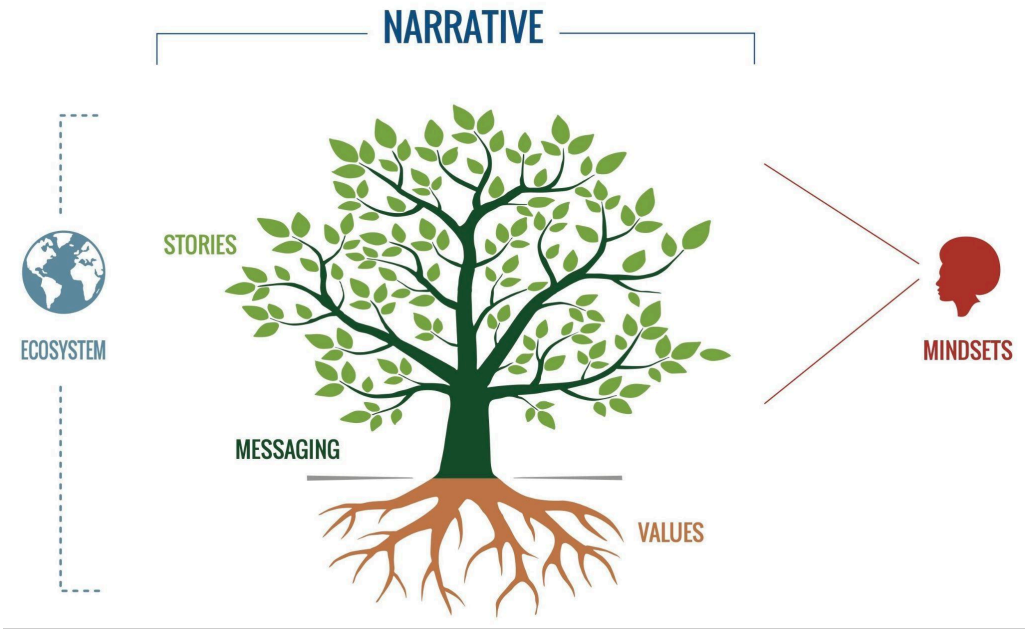
The majority of Americans define democracy as elections, which can readily be manipulated by autocratic actors who frame: "I was elected, so everything I do is democratic." Including several principles of democracy, inclusive of but not limited to elections, helps build support for democratic principles and institutions.

TIP: Most people only consider elections when thinking about the characteristics of a working democracy. When defining the term, include at least two additional elements beyond elections. The other attributes that test highly across the political spectrum include a justice system you can trust, freedom of speech, access to education, etc. And depending on the work of your organization or movement and the specific issue you are working on, you should include principles relevant to your specific cause (e.g., freedom of the press if you are advancing independent journalism, freedom of religion if you are advancing religious liberty, etc.).

NARRATIVE AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative can be one of the most important tools change agents have in advancing a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. But what is narrative?[1] Drawing on our decades of experience in using strategic communication to advance social change, MG defines **NARRATIVE** as the articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do. Narrative informs our experiences, what we see as normative, how we filter what we believe and the meaning we assign, how we define problems and solutions, what we accept without challenge, and what we tolerate (or actively promote and protect), or what we seek to change in systems, policies, and practices.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For more information on narrative, download the Narrative: a Powerful Lever for Social Change model.

CORE VALUES WHEN COMMUNICATING ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.

The most effective narratives, which precipitate action and spark decision-making, utilize closely held values. The narrative and message framework described here were intentionally designed to evoke these core values, and this guide recommends incorporating these core values when creating pro-democracy communication materials.

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

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

The recommended pro-democracy narrative and supporting message framework below were developed by applying research findings, data, and the seven evidence-based guidelines. They were refined based on testing with six focus groups and on a survey with more than 2,000 participants. The narrative and message framework evoke the core values (see color key below), are primarily asset-framed, utilize relatable (non-technical) language, define democracy beyond elections, and are informed by cultural, historical, and political context.

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY	PROSPERITY	FAMILY / BELONGING

FREEDOM MATTERS

NARRATIVE FRAME

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 **our** democracy and **our security.** But they require **checks and balances** on power and government that is **open**, **honest**, and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** hasn't fully lived up to these **freedoms**, but a **strong democracy isn't afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.

CHALLENGE

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

SOLUTION

Protecting our freedoms has always been **up to all of us**, not just **our elected representatives**. But democracy is about more than **voting**. It's about **checks and balances** on power, **speaking your mind** without fear, and **government that is accountable to the people**. **Fearless** and **free people working together** can **find solutions** that **make our lives better** and **our** democracy **stronger**.

BENEFITS

Freedom isn't an abstract concept. A democracy where **freedoms** **are protected** is better able to provide **every one of us** with a justice system we can **trust** and access to **health care, education, and housing**. It gives us more **control over our own lives** and **increases opportunities for prosperity** for ourselves, our **families**, **our community**, and **our country**.

CALL TO ACTION

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

***NOTE:** The call to action statement shown here is a general statement appropriate to an overarching narrative message framework. When used for specific issues, goals, efforts or campaigns, it should be customized for audiences and key issues in ways that identify specific actions they can take (e.g., speaking out, contacting their elected representatives, voting, etc.).

THE DEMOCRACY NARRATIVE IN ACTION

This message guide provides practical direction on using the core narrative and message framework, offering illustrative examples (in the form of social posts) that demonstrate their application across nationally relevant issues. The framework's language is meant to provide guidance and inspiration for creating various communication content—such as social posts, policy papers, and talking points. While the language used in this guide has tested well and can be utilized where desired, it is not primarily intended for strict, verbatim use. Users are encouraged to frame the core ideas of the narrative and to evoke the recommended values with language choices and framing that is relevant to your audiences and stakeholders and is authentic for your organization.

These examples, along with the narrative worksheet, can help you adapt the framework's communications guidance regarding democratic principles to numerous issues you are working on to effectively bolster democracy and counter pro-authoritarian messaging and disinformation.

Issue 1: Public health

A strong democracy isn't just about elections. It's about making sure everyone has the freedom and opportunity to live a healthy, secure life.

Public health is where democracy shows up in our daily lives—clean water, safe food, access to care, honest information we can trust, and systems that look out for the whole community.

Rooted in the needs and wisdom of communities—informed by the experience of dedicated public servants and grounded in the best available science—public health helps prevent problems before they start. It makes our communities healthier places and provides us with the information we need to make informed choices. But, it also brings us together to protect one another, especially when the stakes are high or to protect those who are most vulnerable.

A fair public health system is part of the hard work of building a better tomorrow: one where your ZIP code doesn't determine your chances of staying healthy, where no one is left behind during a crisis, and where leaders are accountable to the people they serve.

We may not agree on everything, but we can agree that everyone deserves the chance to live a healthy life. Protecting that freedom—and strengthening the public health system that makes it possible — depends on all of us. We've done hard things before. We can do this too. Together, we can build a healthier, fairer democracy for everyone.

#PublicHealth #FreedomAndFairness #HealthCareAccess #WorkTogether
#DemocracyFreeFairFearless #TowardAHealthierDemocracy

Issue 2: Religious liberty

Our country was built on the right to have our voices heard, to be treated fairly, and to worship freely without fear. The freedom to believe—or not to believe—lies at the heart of American democracy. While our country hasn't fully lived up to the promise of protecting all faiths, a strong democracy isn't afraid to do the hard work of being better tomorrow than it is today.

Today, some are working to weaken this fundamental freedom to serve their own interests and further divide us. But defending religious liberty is about finding common ground and protecting everyone's freedoms—not fighting each other or excluding people with beliefs different from our own. Protecting this right creates a democracy where everyone is respected, and each of us has more control over our lives and a deeper sense of belonging.

It will take all of us working together to protect religious freedom and improve our democracy so it works better for everyone.

#DemocracyFreeFairFearless #Democracy #ReligiousLiberty

Issue 3: Environmental justice

Every person deserves the right to breathe clean air, drink clean water, and live free from the threat of environmental hazards. These aren't just environmental issues—they're basic human rights and core to the promise of our democracy.

Today, some are working to weaken protections for communities most at risk, exposing them to pollution, toxic substances, and harm. Environmental justice isn't just about policy—it's about fairness, accountability, public safety, and working together to protect our communities.

Freedom and environmental justice go hand in hand. A democracy that safeguards both ensures every community has a voice, a say in policies and actions that affect their health and well-being, and the ability to hold decision-makers accountable.

We can act now—by speaking out, demanding accountability, and protecting the rights of communities to live in a safe, healthy environment. It won't be easy. But together, if we remain vigilant, we can meet this challenge.

#EnvironmentalJustice #CleanAirCleanWater #CommunityRights #DemocracyInAction #FairnessForAll #ProtectOurPlanet #CivicEngagement #HealthAndJustice #Accountability #WeThePeople #DemocracyFreeFairFearless

Issue 4: Freedom of speech

Our country was built on the right to have our voices heard and to speak our minds without fear. This right—promised to us in our constitution—is essential to a government that is open, honest, and responsive to the people.

Freedom of speech isn't an abstract concept. It gives each of us the opportunity and the responsibility to have a say on the issues that matter to us. It also ensures the checks and balances on power that are essential to a functioning democracy and a justice system we can trust. This freedom gives us more control over our own lives, our community, and our country.

While healthy debate is a good thing in a strong democracy, there are some who are working every day to silence people with different views and further divide us to serve their own interests. Protecting our right to speak is up to all of us—not just our elected representatives. It will take all of us working together to protect our most important freedoms and make our democracy stronger.

#FreedomOfSpeech #DemocracyFreeFairFearless #Democracy

Issue 5: Due process

This country was built on the idea that every American deserves a fair shot—the chance to speak freely, make their own choices, and be treated fairly by their government. These aren't just ideals. They're the foundation of our freedom and our security.

At the heart of that promise is due process: the guarantee that government must follow the rules and respect all of our rights.

Defending our liberties has always been the responsibility of the people, not just our elected officials. A healthy democracy depends on transparency, accountability, and citizens who know and defend their rights.

When our rights are protected and government is held to the same standards as the people it serves, we're all better off—with stronger communities, more opportunity, and a country that lives up to its promise.

If we work together to protect fairness and due process for everyone, we can strengthen our democracy for the next generation.

#DueProcess #JusticeForAll #RuleOfLaw #DemocracyStrong #FreedomAndFairness #CivicAction #ChecksAndBalances #HumanRights #Accountability #WeThePeople #DemocracyFreeFairFearless

DEMOCRACY NARRATIVE + MESSAGING APPLICATION WORKSHEET

This worksheet is designed to help create customized communications tools and resources that effectively persuade and inspire your stakeholders and audiences to take desired actions. **Part 1** will guide you in considering your messaging goals, the stakeholders and audiences who can best accelerate progress toward those goals, and your audiences' context(s) before developing messages and communications. These questions are evergreen and can guide any of your communications. In Part I, you may find that there are questions that you do not have the answers to. That's okay. Just detail what you know, or seek input from someone who might have insights into those questions.

Part 2 offers a guide for developing a message framework that is relevant to your context and audiences, and provides opportunities for layering in the local examples, stories, and data that will bring the message framework to life.

PART 1: Planning

The questions below can and should be utilized before developing any communication that leverages your messaging.

Once you have developed the first draft of your messaging (as outlined further in Part 2), you will want to review your answers to these questions and confirm that the draft reflects them — or refine the communication so that it will be more effective.

1.1 Goal for your messaging: What do you want your messaging to help accomplish, e.g., what changes in understanding and/or actions? (Your responses will inform the call(s) to action you will craft in Part 2.)

1.2 Stakeholders and audiences: Who is in a position to take the actions necessary to accomplish this goal? For a speech or conference, think about who will be in the audience.

1.3 Communication channels/messengers: What communication channel(s) will be most effective for reaching your intended stakeholders and audience? Who is the most effective (i.e., trusted) messenger for this communication? Or, who is the person already identified as the messenger (e.g., the person delivering a speech or presentation)? What are the strengths and limitations of the communication channel?

Communication Channels	Messengers

1.4 Stakeholders' and audiences' values: Based on what you know from research — or can surmise from experience — identify which of the following core values are likely to be most motivating to your prioritized stakeholders and audiences.

✓	CORE VALUES	✓	CORE VALUES
	FREEDOM		SAFETY/SECURITY
	FAIRNESS		HONESTY
	FEARLESSNESS/STRENGTH		PROSPERITY
	REPRESENTATION		FAMILY/BELONGING
	RESPONSIBILITY		

PART 2: Message Development

This worksheet is designed as an example of how to apply the narrative and message framework to a particular issue or communication you are crafting. In completing this worksheet, refer to the core message below:

> 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 **our** 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**.

Using this core message for inspiration, use the tips below to craft a draft message framework for your use. You might wish to use color coding for your draft text to highlight the words and phrases that evoke the core values you identified in Section 1.4 above.

This worksheet can be used both generally and to address specific issues, including those at a local level. As you use this worksheet, think about stories and examples you can reference throughout that relate to people's lives. Also, consider what language(s) or dialect(s) are most relevant to your audience.

In crafting your message framework, be sure to refer to the Guidelines for Effective Communication found on page 15 of this guide.

TIPS	CORE MESSAGE (the summary)
What is the most important idea you want your audience to remember? *Include it here, trying to be as clear and direct as possible, making sure to frame the issue in ways that are relevant to your audience.*	

TIPS	CHALLENGE
How would you define the problem or challenge you seek to address? Think of the tangible ways this problem impacts your stakeholders and audiences. *Describe the situation here in ways that would be relevant to your audience. Consider references to local examples, if relevant.*	

TIPS	SOLUTION
How can this problem or challenge be resolved in ways that reflect the identified core values (e.g., freedom, fairness, honesty, etc.)? *Think about describing the solution in ways that would be perceived as relevant by your audience.* *Be sure to reference things the government can/should do, as well as actions that people might take to be part of the solution.*	

TIPS	BENEFITS
How would your stakeholders and audiences benefit from your proposed solution? Identify benefits that are both tangible (e.g., access to health care or housing) and intangible (e.g., promoting freedom or fairness, access to opportunity, etc.). *Think about ways people would benefit both individually and collectively.*	

TIPS	CALLS TO ACTION
What specific, tangible, and realistic actions can your stakeholders and audiences take, and/or what can they demand of their government to help manifest the solution described above? *Consider actions that can be taken both individually and collectively.*	

Once you have completed your message framework, use it to inspire the content of your communication. You might find it useful to periodically review this worksheet and make adjustments or refinements over time, based on your use of it and response to it from your audiences.

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.

Instead of this…	Consider this…
"accountable government," "accountable governance," or "accountability"	"government that is responsive to the needs of the people"
	"government that answers to the people"
"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"
"bolstering democratic reformers"	"supporting people fighting for democracy"
	"supporting people fighting for your rights"
"co-equal branches of government"	"No one person, party, or part of government has too much power"
	"separation of powers"
	"checks and balances"
"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."

Instead of this…	Consider this…
“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.”
“economic inequity”	“gap between rich and poor”
	“economic unfairness”
	“unequal access and opportunity”
“equitable” or “equity”	“fair”
“fighting corruption”	“fighting for (or creating) honest and open government”
“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”
“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”
“rule of law”	“everyone treated fairly”
	“a justice system that treats everyone fairly, no matter who they are"
	“justice you can trust”
	“no one is above the law”
“supporting free and independent media”	“supporting freedom of the press”
“transparent” or “transparency”	“honest and open”
	“open to everyone”

ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP

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

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

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

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

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