PRO DEMOCRACY
narrative playbook

NARRATIVE + MESSAGE GUIDE

Civil and Human Rights + Democracy

A NEW NARRATIVE TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

AUGUST 2026

COORDINATING PARTNER
Metropolitan Group
the power of voice

CORE PARTNER
PACE
PHILANTHROPY FOR ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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children's defense fund
unleashing the joy in growing up

We work at the intersection of well-being and racial justice for children and youth. We work alongside and amplify the power of youth and families through advocacy, community organizing, direct service, and public policy.

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

We're building a world strengthened by diversity, where our laws and society treat everyone equally, including LGBTQ+ people and those who are marginalized.

FORUM

We bring together moderate and conservative faith, law enforcement and business leaders to weigh in with media and policy makers in support of practical and commonsense immigration, citizenship and integration policies.

UNIDOSUS

We empower Latinos to define and achieve their own American Dream. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social advancement is a reality for all Latinos, where all Hispanics thrive and our community's contributions are recognized.

INTRODUCTION

The assault on democratic principles and institutions—both 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 and mental health care, education, and religious liberty to economic opportunity, environmental justice, and human and civil rights, authoritarian narratives and policies are actively undermining and threatening to erase hard-won progress.

This narrative and message guide to advance human and civil rights and democracy was developed based on extensive research and in collaboration with practitioners from the field. It is part of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, a nonpartisan and collaborative initiative helping a broad coalition of organizations, associations, leaders, and communities advance an effective narrative to increase support for democratic principles. The initiative recognizes that powerful narratives aiming to delegitimize democratic norms—and intentionally seek to increase polarization—are an increasing trend both here in the United States and around the world.

To help advance a proactive democracy narrative and to better counter threats, the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook's partners have conducted extensive multimethodology 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. This research—and the Freedom Matters narrative arising out of it—has served as the foundation for the narrative and messaging described in this guide. As with the broader narrative and message resources created as part of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, we are openly sharing this guide (and similar guides focused on other issues) to help advocates across all sectors shift hearts, minds, and norms in support of democratic values. Narrative and messaging guides, research, tools, and resources are available at Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook.

CORE VALUES

Values are the deeply held beliefs that ground a narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action. These nine core values come from extensive pro-democracy narrative research and resonate across the political and ideological spectrum.

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

FREEDOM	Connects with the broad range of freedoms that are important to people and are core democratic principles. These include the right to think and speak freely without fear, to worship as you choose, to exercise self-determination, to pursue liberation, and to live free from preventable harm. Recognizing that freedom is not currently guaranteed for all people, this value also evokes the aspirational value of a free society for all people.
FAIRNESS	Embodies justice, equity, and dignity for all people so that everyone has a chance to live the life they choose. It reflects the principle that everyone should be subject to the same rules under the law, regardless of their race, identity, background, position, or power. It also recognizes that people start from different places and face different barriers that must be removed and addressed to make it possible for everyone to have a real chance to thrive. Fairness also demands that systems are held accountable when they fall short.
FEARLESSNESS/ STRENGTH	A reflection of the strength, courage, and bravery that people like to associate with the American spirit—acknowledging that not everyone can be fearless in every context. It acts as a direct refutation of the fear-based appeals that authoritarians employ in their narratives and messaging.
REPRESENTATION	Reflects a commitment to equal participation, inclusion, personal agency, informed consent, and the ability to actively participate and have a voice in governance. It also reflects the belief that those entrusted with power should represent the interests of the people, uphold democratic rules and norms, and remain accountable to those they serve.
RESPONSIBILITY	Connects with the idea that freedom is not just a right, but comes with the responsibility to respect and help protect the freedom of others. It also reflects the importance of being civically active, standing in solidarity with one's community, 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 security and safety, including security for individuals, their families, their community's economic security, and cultural/identity security.
HONESTY	Associated with truth, trust, trustworthiness, authenticity, openness, access to information, and transparency. This value is triggered in contrast to concerns about corruption, lack of accountability, and disinformation.
PROSPERITY	Conveys benefits for the individual and the community. It affirms that everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive, pursue well-being, and build a good life for themselves and their families. It also means we all share in the prosperity we create together—strong communities, accessible jobs, and shared resources like quality education, health care, clean air and water, and safe neighborhoods that make opportunity possible. This value can also be related to macroeconomic progress for a community or country, such as economic vitality and 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. It can also uplift feelings connected to compassion, love, respect, tradition, and interdependence.

Pro-Democracy Narrative Pillars

While you are welcome to use the message frame described in this guide verbatim, it is not the only way to articulate a human and civil rights and democracy narrative. This message guide is intended to provide pro-democracy advocates with grounding in a research-informed narrative and message framework so that you can make your own decisions about how to articulate the narrative and adapt the messaging to best meet your specific needs and to resonate with your audiences and stakeholders.

To help you do so, the Playbook team drew on research conducted globally and in the United States to identify a set of pillars that are essential to effective pro-democracy narrative articulation and supporting messaging. We used these pillars in the development of the framework described in this guide.

We invite you to use these pillars in crafting your own messaging.

1. Center core pro-democracy values that resonate across a broad audience, especially fairness and freedom to speak, worship, organize, vote, and help shape the decisions that affect our lives.
2. Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections.
3. Amplify benefits that are best advanced in a democracy.
4. Connect democracy to people's everyday lives.
5. Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility.
6. Acknowledge that democracy isn't perfect and we can improve it together.

NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

The core narrative, shown below, is the most concise statement of the big idea, weaving together vision, benefits, challenges, and solutions.

The narrative messages that accompany it—challenge, solution, benefits, and call to action—are the main ideas embedded in the narrative. You can use these messages as-is, but you don't have to; you can adapt them to your organization's voice, specific issues, and clear calls to action. You can mix and match them in any order. The aim is to align with the big ideas of the narrative so that your voice, and many other voices, contributes to a new way of seeing the world.

The core narrative and messages are color coded to align with the values described below.

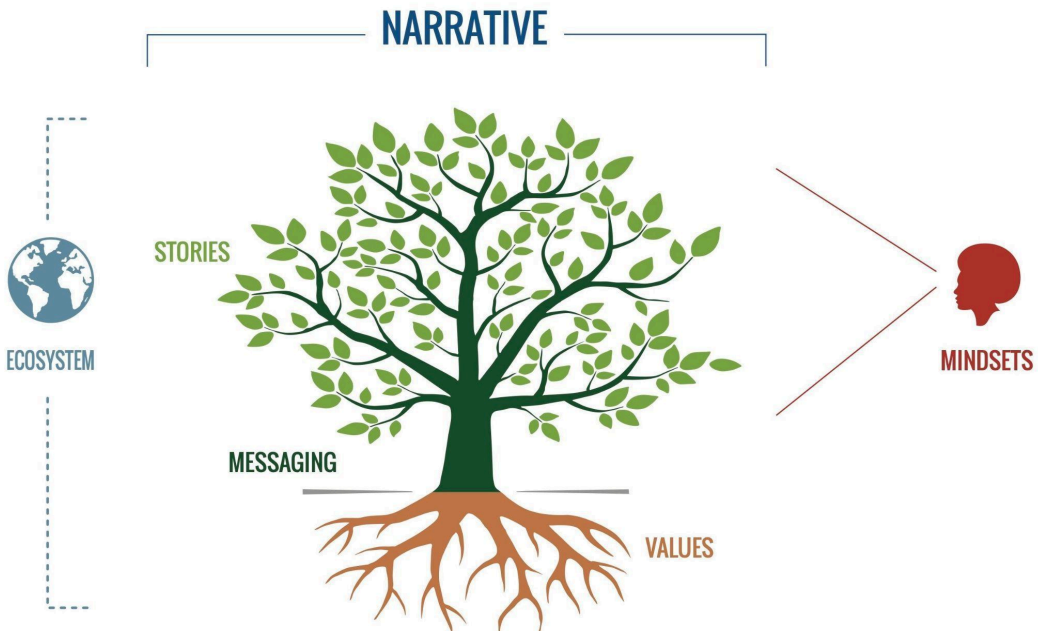
Human and Civil Rights strengthen lives, communities, and our democracy

CORE MESSAGES	Democracy is **strongest** when everyone can **participate**, **be heard**, contribute, and be treated with dignity and **fairness**. This requires **equal protection** under the law, **open and honest government**, **leadership** that is **accountable**, and the **freedom to speak**, **worship**, **organize**, **vote**, and help **shape the decisions** that affect our lives. Our **freedoms** are **interconnected**. When **fairness** is conditional or **laws are applied selectively**, **everyone** is **at risk**. When **some people are excluded**, **treated as less worthy** of **protection**, or **prevented** from **participating fully**, it **weakens** our democracy. Throughout our nation's history, **rights** have too often been denied—**concentrating power in the hands of a few**. Yet **communities** have continued to **fearlessly organize**, **sacrifice**, and expand **freedoms**. That is why democracy is something **we all have a role** in **protecting** and improving. **By participating**, **speaking up**, **and standing with one another**, we **strengthen** a society where **everyone is valued**, **everyone belongs**, and **everyone** can live with **safety**, **freedom**, **fairness**, **opportunity**, and dignity.
CHALLENGES	**Dignity denied puts everyone's rights—and freedoms—at risk.** When people aren't treated with **fairness** and respect, other **rights** are **more likely to be taken away**. If **rights** can be **denied to one group**, **they can be denied to anyone**. **When people are treated unfairly, trust in government breaks down.** When **laws aren't applied equally** or **barriers** prevent people from fully **participating**, **power becomes concentrated**, **accountability weakens**, and **people are shut out** of **decisions that affect their lives**. Over time, this erodes confidence that the system works. **Barriers that prevent people from fully participating make communities weaker.** Too many still face **obstacles** that limit **their ability to speak**, **be heard**, and **access opportunity**. When people are shut out, we all lose **voices**, **ideas**, **and leadership** that make **our communities stronger**—and **our freedom** more **secure**.

SOLUTIONS	**Communities are stronger when everyone is treated with dignity and has a voice.** When people are respected and can participate fully and without fear, communities are better able to solve challenges, make decisions, and strengthen democracy together. **Advancing justice helps remove barriers and expand opportunity.** We strengthen democracy by identifying and removing obstacles that limit people's voice, participation, and access to opportunity. Ensuring that laws, policies, and systems work fairly for everyone is a shared responsibility—so that one group's rights and freedoms never come at the expense of another. **Fair and equal protection of rights strengthens trust, safety, and freedom.** When everyone's rights are protected, people can speak, organize, vote, and participate without fear—building trust over time and strengthening our democracy.
BENEFITS	**More people can take part, use their voice, and feel they belong.** When people are treated with dignity and their rights are protected, they have the freedom to participate in their communities and in the decisions that shape their lives. That shared participation builds connection, belonging, and a stronger democracy where everyone has a voice. **Stronger trust, stability, and safety.** When everyone's rights are respected and protected, people can trust they will be treated fairly and have the freedom to live, work, and contribute. They trust that democracy represents them, even when they disagree with an outcome, because they know they still have voice, rights, and ways to seek change. That trust strengthens our communities and creates a greater sense of safety and stability. **More opportunity and stronger communities.** When unfair barriers are removed, more people have the freedom and opportunity to learn, work, and contribute their ideas and talents. This strengthens communities and helps build a society where everyone can thrive and shape their future.

APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative[1] is a powerful tool to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. Drawing on our decades of experience in 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, how we define problems and solutions, what we accept without challenge, and 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.



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

- **STORIES:** What people experience both literally (through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (through policy, built environments, etc.) that aggregates to create a 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 perspectives 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 their information echo chambers.

[1] This approach to narrative was created—and is deployed globally—by Metropolitan Group (MG) to build a just, healthy, and sustainable world. For more information about this approach, please visit Narrative: A Powerful Lever for Social Change.

APPENDIX B: NARRATIVE APPLICATION WORKSHEET

This worksheet is designed to help you create messages specific to your issue, audience, and call to action, aligned with the narrative.
Part 1 outlines your messaging goals, the audiences you want to engage, and what your audiences need. These questions are evergreen and can guide any of your communications.
Part 2 creates the message that is relevant to your context and audiences, layering in examples, stories, and data.

Part 1: Planning

Answer these questions before you develop messages. Then, after you draft messages, return to these questions to confirm or refine your communication.

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

1.2 Audiences: Who is in a position to take the actions necessary to accomplish this goal?

1.3 Communication channels/messengers: What communication channel(s) will be most effective for reaching your 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 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 audiences.

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

Part 2: Message development

This section helps you apply the Human and Civil Rights Pro-Democracy Narrative to build messages for your particular issue. **Refer to the core narrative below and the supporting messages on pages 5-6.**

Human and Civil Rights strengthen lives, communities, and our democracy

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Democracy is **strongest** when everyone can **participate**, **be heard**, contribute, and be treated with dignity and **fairness**. This requires **equal protection** under the law, **open and honest government**, **leadership** that is **accountable**, and the **freedom to speak**, **worship**, **organize**, **vote**, and help **shape the decisions** that affect our lives.

Our **freedoms** are **interconnected**. When **fairness** is conditional or **laws are applied selectively**, **everyone** is **at risk**. When **some people are excluded**, **treated as less worthy** of **protection**, or **prevented** from **participating fully**, it **weakens** our democracy. Throughout our nation's history, **rights** have too often been denied—**concentrating power in the hands of a few**. Yet **communities** have continued to **fearlessly organize**, **sacrifice**, and expand **freedoms**.

That is why democracy is something **we all have a role** in **protecting** and improving. **By participating**, **speaking up**, **and standing with one another**, we **strengthen** a society where **everyone is valued**, **everyone belongs**, and **everyone** can live with **safety**, **freedom**, **fairness**, **opportunity**, and dignity.

In crafting your message, **refer to the tips on pages 11-13** and remember the pillars:

- ☐ Center core pro-democracy values that resonate across a broad audience, especially fairness and freedom to speak, worship, organize, vote, and help shape the decisions that affect our lives.
- ☐ Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections.
- ☐ Amplify benefits that are best advanced in a democracy.
- ☐ Connect democracy to people's everyday lives.
- ☐ Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility.
- ☐ Acknowledge that democracy isn't perfect and we can improve it together.

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 (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 (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 from your audiences.

APPENDIX C: GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Decades of work in the development, dissemination, and evaluation of communication to create a more just, healthy, and sustainable world has led to the identification of six guidelines that make communication more effective. These guidelines are not unique or specific to pro-democracy communication; they can and should be considered "universally" applicable to all social purpose communication.

When used in alignment with the narrative and messaging pillars described above, however, they can help create stronger pro-democracy communication that is:

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

For more details on the Guidelines for Effective Communication, click here.

APPENDIX D: ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP

Metropolitan Group
the power of voice

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 12 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, 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.
- Shift narratives about individual wealth and economic growth to shared prosperity and collective well-being.

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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APPENDIX E: ABOUT PACE

PACE
PHILANTHROPY FOR ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) is a national core partner in the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook. PACE helps to disseminate learnings, make connections across philanthropy, and advance application of the Pro-Democracy
Narrative across diverse movements and philanthropies centering civic engagement.

PACE is a philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their individual and collective impact on democracy and civic life in America. The PACE community achieves this through learning, experimenting, collaborating, and modeling vibrant civic space. PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement) is a membercentric philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their impact on democracy and civic life in the United States. Our members share a belief that America will be healthier and more successful, resilient, and productive, if democracy is strong and the office of citizen is treated as central to how it functions.

PACE leads the Civic Language Perceptions Project that seeks to understand people's perceptions of the language associated with civic engagement and democracy work in the United States.

NOTES

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