



**PRO
DEMOCRACY**
narrative playbook

NARRATIVE + MESSAGE GUIDE

Environmental and Climate Justice + Democracy

A NEW NARRATIVE TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES



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COORDINATING PARTNER



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Development of the core Pro-Democracy Narrative was supported in part by:



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The development of the Environmental and Climate Justice + Pro Democracy Narrative and Message Guide was supported in part by the following ECJ cohort members:



CJA works with communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis to organize, build power, confront root causes, repair harm, and create community controlled solutions. CJA acts as a convener, strategist, and doula of a Just Transition from an extractive economy to one based in regeneration and restoration.



We provide resources to frontline advocates and organizations. We seek to benefit communities that experience and struggle against the first and worst impacts of environmental harms and climate change.



A national network rooted in the knowledge, leadership, and power of frontline and fenceline communities that bear the negative impacts of the global freight transportation system.



Indigenous-led organization dedicated to building Indigenous power. Through organizing, activism, philanthropy, grantmaking, capacity-building and narrative change, we are creating sustainable solutions on Indigenous terms.



A grassroots, people of color-led coalition that builds power with systemically marginalized communities to resist climate, environmental, racial, and social injustice.



We build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices.



We are dedicated to community coalition building and to the provision of resources that inform, train and mobilize the citizens of Detroit and beyond to improve their quality of life.

Dissemination Partner:



We bring fenceline residents, decision-makers, and researchers into shared work through the Communiversity Model, supporting lived experience with data strong enough to change policy, protect public health, and secure every community's right to a safer, more equitable future.

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 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. Those advocating for environmental and climate justice have been at the forefront of safeguarding democratic norms and institutions; the work to protect the safety and freedom of communities is central to a healthy, functioning democracy.

This narrative and message guide to advance environmental and climate justice and democracy was developed based upon extensive research and in collaboration with practitioners from the field. It is part of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, a non-partisan 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 shape and advance a proactive democracy narrative and to better counter threats, 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. 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 core values were identified by environmental justice practitioners who worked to co-create this application of the narrative. Many of them align with the [nine recommended values](#) identified through extensive pro-democracy narrative research and that resonate across the political and ideological spectrum. and are connected to environmental and climate justice.

LIBERATION, SELF-DETERMINATION FREEDOM	JUSTICE, REPARATIONS FAIRNESS	COURAGE FEARLESSNESS/ STRENGTH	EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION, INFORMED CONSENT REPRESENTATION	SOLIDARITY RESPONSIBILITY
SAFETY SECURITY	ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY HONESTY	WELLNESS PROSPERITY	COMMUNITY FAMILY/ BELONGING	RESPECT

LIBERATION, SELF-DETERMINATION, 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 of retribution, 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 to all people, this value also evokes the aspirational value of a free society for all people.
JUSTICE, REPARATIONS, 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, economic status, 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 are designed inequitably, and efforts are made to restore that which has been denied. Note: Based on your local social and political climate, the term “reparations” can be viewed positively or negatively. Another way to come at this is the term “restorative justice.”
COURAGE, 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.

EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION, INFORMED CONSENT, 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 public power should represent the interests of the people, uphold democratic rules and norms, and remain accountable to those they serve.
SOLIDARITY, 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, and their community's economic security, and cultural/identity security. This is especially important during times of increased use of military force and violence by authoritarian leaders and those aligned with them.
ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY, 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.
WELLBEING, 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 security, stability, vitality and growth.
COMMUNITY, 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.
RESPECT	Following the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing, which recognizes the essential need to treat each other with respect, on both an individual and organizational level - including letting each individual and organization define what respect means, feels and looks like to them.

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 an environmental and climate justice and democracy narrative. This message guide is intended to provide advocates with grounding in a research informed narrative and message framework so that you can make your own decisions about how to deploy the narrative and adapt the messaging to best meet your specific needs and circumstances, 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 freedom.
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 a concise statement of the big overarching idea, weaving together vision, benefits, challenges, and solutions.

The narrative messages that accompany it—benefits, challenge, solution, 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/circumstances, 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, contribute to a new way of seeing the world.

Additionally, the message framework can be “dialed up” or “dialed down” depending on your audience and your goals. Think of this as part of audience segmentation where you would remain steadfast about your values and objectives, but might use different messaging for different audiences. For example, if you are speaking to your core audience you may want to have a harder hitting message for them. Or if you are aiming to do coalition-building with non-traditional partners, you may want a message that is more “bridging” to invite them into the conversation. Both approaches are valid, and even necessary, depending on what outcomes you are aiming for.

To demonstrate how the message framework can be adjusted for different audiences, we have provided two examples of the Core Message—one that is more “bridging” in its ability to resonate across a broad spectrum of audiences and one that is less focused on bridging and may resonate more with core ECJ stakeholders. You’ll notice that both versions of the core message draw on the same values that are core to Environmental and Climate Justice work and both have the same core message about democracy and safety for communities.

The core narrative and messages are color coded to align with the values described on pages 3-4.

Core Message: Example 1

Moderately bridgey - may resonate most with core ECJ stakeholders

Democracy means true safety for our communities.

Everyone deserves clean air, safe water, healthy neighborhoods, and freedom from toxic threats. Our communities are truly safe when our voices are respected, there is accessibility, consent, solidarity, and self-determination, and our concerns and solutions are heard and are central to policy and decision-making. This can only be achieved in a democracy with real accountability and transparency.

For decades, people, communities, and workers have pressed institutions at every level to ensure that these protections include everyone, demanding equal protection under the law, meaningful representation, fair treatment, and accountability to improve our democracy.

Those advocating for environmental and climate justice have been at the forefront of safeguarding democratic norms and institutions; our work to protect the safety and freedom of communities is central to a healthy, functioning democracy.

We want to build a country where the vision, expertise and wisdom of workers and communities are centered, where we practice living in right relationship with the earth and each other, and all of us have a safe, clean and healthy environment to nurture joy, find belonging, and cultivate thriving futures. A place where environmental and climate justice is a reality. Let's build it together.

Core Message: Example 2

Tests highly on bridging multiple demographics - may be best for reaching new partners or non-traditional potential allies

Democracy means true safety for our communities.

A strong democracy ensures that everyone—no matter who they are or where they live—is treated with respect and has the basic conditions needed to live, work, and participate fully in society. Clean air, safe water, healthy neighborhoods, and freedom from toxic threats and preventable harm are not privileges. They are essential to both personal freedom and our collective well-being.

For decades, people across the country have worked to make sure these protections reach every community, not just those with the most power or influence. This work reflects a core democratic principle: when any group is left more exposed to harm or excluded from decision-making, the strength and legitimacy of our democracy is diminished for everyone.

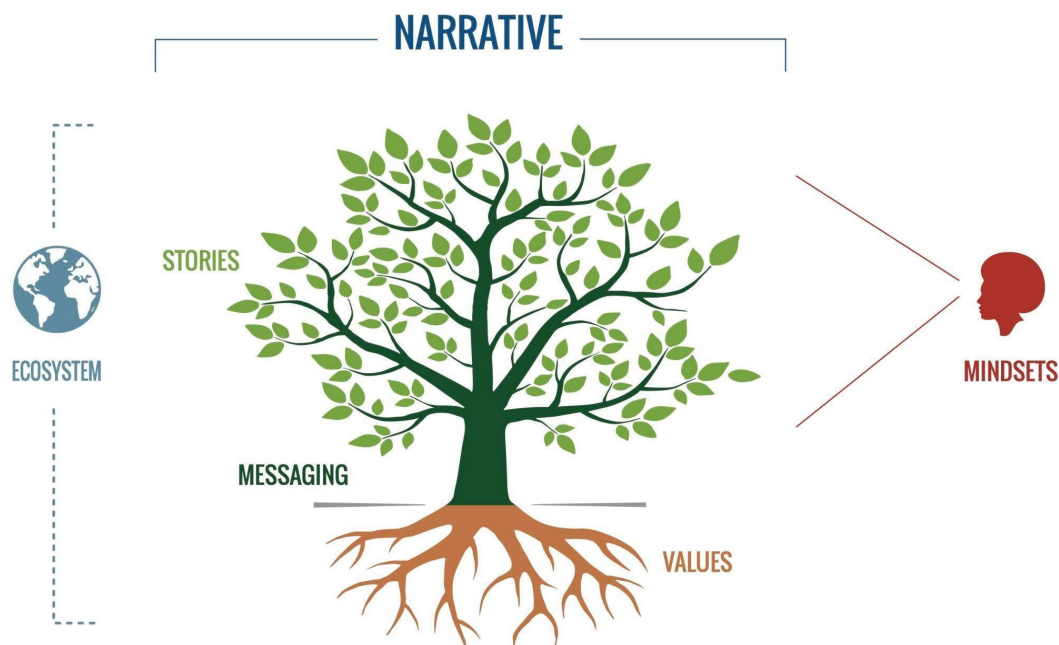
Our communities are truly safe when people are heard, when decisions are made transparently and with consent, and when everyone has a meaningful voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

CHALLENGES	Our democracy's promise of freedom and fairness isn't fully realized when some communities are more exposed to pollution and climate harm while having limited influence in the decisions that affect them. Many people in this country have worked for centuries to create a society where all peoples have the right to have their voices heard and valued. But for too long, gaps in accountability have allowed powerful interests to put short-term profits ahead of people's health and the stability of our environment. At the same time, barriers to participation have made it harder for many Americans to be seen and heard.
SOLUTIONS	Strengthening democracy means ensuring accountability, transparency, equal protection under the law, and a meaningful voice for every community. We are working to build a country where safety, health, and opportunity are not determined by circumstance, but protected for all. That means taking responsibility for one another's well-being, making decisions that reflect the needs and experiences of the people they affect, and holding those who cause harm accountable. It means every community has a real voice, everyone can live in a safe and healthy environment, and freedom is not conditional, but guaranteed—grounded in fairness, equal protection, and shared responsibility, including a commitment to environmental and climate justice.
BENEFITS	Environmental and climate justice is about making our democracy work better for everyone—so that all people can live safely, be heard, and have a fair chance to thrive. When we get this right, it strengthens our communities, protects our health, and ensures that the places we live—urban and rural alike—are sustainable for generations to come. It connects freedom and fairness to everyday life, demonstrating that when people have a real voice and systems are accountable, we can build a future that is healthier, more secure, and more resilient for all of us.
CALL TO ACTION	Together, we can call on institutions, decision-makers, and policymakers at every level to be more transparent, more accountable, and more responsive to the people they serve. That is how we build a democracy that works for all of us—and it is work we can and must do together.

APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative¹ 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, behavior, 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, presentation, sermon, or public comments)? 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
	LIBERATION, SELF-DETERMINATION, FREEDOM		SAFETY/SECURITY
	JUSTICE, REPARATIONS, FAIRNESS		ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY, HONESTY
	COURAGE, FEARLESSNESS, STRENGTH		WELLBEING, PROSPERITY
	EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION, INFORMED CONSENT, REPRESENTATION		COMMUNITY, FAMILY, BELONGING
	SOLIDARITY, RESPONSIBILITY		RESPECT

Part 2: Message development

This section helps you apply the Environmental and Climate Justice pro-democracy narrative to build messages for your particular issue. **Refer to the core narrative below and the supporting messages on pages 3-4.**

Democracy means true **safety** for our **communities**.

Everyone deserves clean air, safe water, healthy neighborhoods, and freedom from toxic threats. Our **communities** are **truly safe** when **our voices** are **respected**, there is **accessibility, consent, solidarity, and self-determination**, and **our concerns and solutions are heard and are central to policy and decision-making**. This can only be achieved in a democracy with **real accountability and transparency**.

For decades, **people, communities, and workers have pressed institutions** at every level to ensure that these **protections include everyone, demanding equal protection under the law, meaningful representation, fair treatment, and accountability** to improve our democracy.

Those advocating for environmental and climate **justice** have been at the forefront of **safeguarding** democratic norms and institutions; **our work to protect the safety and freedom of communities** is central to a healthy, functioning democracy.

We want to build a country where the **vision, expertise and wisdom of workers and communities** are centered, where **we practice living in right relationship with the earth and each other**, and **all of us** have a **safe, clean and healthy environment to nurture joy, find belonging, and cultivate thriving futures**. A place where **environmental and climate justice** is a reality. Let's build it **together**.

In crafting your message, **refer to the Pro-Democracy Narrative Pillars on page 5:**

- ☐ Center core pro-democracy values that resonate across a broad audience, especially freedom.
- ☐ 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)
<i>What is the most important idea you want your audience to remember?</i> <i>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.</i>	

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

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

TIPS	BENEFITS
<i>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.).</i> <i>Think about ways people would benefit both individually and collectively.</i>	

TIPS	CALLS TO ACTION
<i>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?</i> <i>Consider actions that can be taken both individually and collectively.</i>	

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 F:
ABOUT PACE**

[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.

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