

A new narrative to advance democracy

WORKBOOK FOR THE OREGON AND SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON INITIATIVE



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INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, in the United States, and right here in the Pacific Northwest, the majority of people believe democracy is the best form of governance and at the same time many are disappointed with how our system does not always live up to its promise nor provide all people with the freedoms, fairness, and opportunity we expect in a democracy. Powerful narratives can advance or undermine democratic values, norms, and freedoms. They can also decrease or increase polarization. To effectively advance democracy and increase a shared sense of belonging, we need a better narrative.

The [Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook](#) is a nonpartisan, collaborative initiative made up of nonprofit organizations, associations, philanthropic partners, and local public sector leaders working to advance an effective narrative to increase support for democratic principles and actions. The Playbook provides free access to research, tested narratives and messages, training, and technical assistance. It is grounded in research conducted in 12 countries on five continents, including the United States, and provides a powerful evidence base of values, framing pillars, and tested messages that increase understanding of and support for an inclusive and participatory democracy.



Thanks to the generosity of several Pacific Northwest foundations, this free workshop will provide you with a deeper understanding of what narrative is and its relevance as a tool for social change, a shared understanding of the democracy narrative and how to apply it for social change, and opportunities for you to meet and collaborate with peers across the region.

CORE VALUES OF THE PRO-DEMOCRACY NARRATIVE

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. The nine core values below—summarized in the graphic and defined in the table—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

Value	Definition
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 be 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 public 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 and 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 and their families, and 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 through such means 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

1. Center pro-democracy values that resonate across a broad audience, especially freedom.

By leading with shared values, communicators can broaden appeal and ground the conversation in what people already care about. The nine core values our research shows are most closely and authentically associated with democracy are freedom, fairness, fearlessness/strength, representation, responsibility, safety/security, honesty, prosperity, and family/belonging.

2. Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections.

Many people default to thinking about democracy only in terms of voting and elections. Our research shows that the five elements broadly seen as the most important to democracy include free and fair elections; checks, balances, and limits on power; freedom of speech and assembly; a justice system that treats everyone fairly no matter who they are; and open and honest government that is held to account by the people. Democracy works best when people see it as an ongoing, participatory system where everyone belongs and has a role—not just on election day.

3. Amplify benefits that are best advanced in a democracy.

Research shows that the benefits people recognize and value most in a democracy are a justice system they can trust; access to health care, education, and housing; control over their own lives; increased opportunities for themselves and their communities; and increasing trust in each other and our government. When people understand democracy as the system that delivers tangible benefits and helps solve real problems, they are more likely to value and support it.

4. Connect democracy to people's everyday lives.

Democracy should be made concrete and relatable by linking it to daily experiences—safe neighborhoods, fair workplaces, quality schools, opportunity to ask questions and debate ideas, and reliable services.

5. Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility.

Messaging should emphasize that people, communities, and leaders all have a role in upholding democratic norms, participating in civic life, and holding institutions accountable. This sense of shared responsibility and mutual benefit reinforces both agency and collective ownership.

6. Acknowledge that democracy isn't perfect and we can improve it together.

To be credible, pro-democracy messaging must recognize that the system is not perfect, has at times fallen short of its ideals, and has not always included or treated everyone fairly. That said, dwelling on the deficiencies of democracy risks reinforcing the sense of futility and loss of agency people already feel. Acknowledging the gaps between the ideal and the reality of democracy builds trust and opens the door to a forward-looking message.

PRO-DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

The core narrative and supporting messages use the research findings, data, and narrative pillars. They were refined based on testing with six focus groups and a survey of more than 2,000 participants. Color coding shows how the narrative and messages align with the values.

CORE NARRATIVE

Freedom Matters.

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 a 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 MESSAGE

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 MESSAGE

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 a **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 MESSAGE

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 **increased opportunities for prosperity** for ourselves, our **families, our community**, and **our country**.

CALL TO ACTION MESSAGE

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**.

REFLECTION ON THE NARRATIVE

Where are you seeing this narrative in your work and community?

EXERCISE 1: VALUES

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

Individual work time

How well do these values resonate with your organization's mission and the audiences or stakeholders you engage? Which feel the most relevant, and why?

Value	Definition	YOUR NOTES
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 be 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 public 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 and 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 and their families, as well as 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 through such means 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.	

EXERCISE 2: CORE NARRATIVE

Individual work time

Select an issue, initiative, campaign, or organizational goal you are working on that is relevant to connecting with democratic principles. It can be proactive or in response to a challenge.

Check off the pillars that you think are most important to include.

- ☐ 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.

Circle the core values you prioritized in Exercise 1.

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

Outline the core narrative you might use.

- Consider the core pro-democracy narrative. You can use the main version, the Oregon and Southwest Washington version, or any of the subject-specific versions in the appendix as starting inspiration.
- Now, adapt the narrative to address your organization or issue, in your voice, to your primary audience, using the narrative pillars.

APPENDIX: ISSUE-SPECIFIC CORE NARRATIVES

The following section presents the core narratives developed in partnership with practitioners in sectors ranging from public health and local government to higher education and civil rights. Feel free to use these in the messages you write for your issue.

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Color coding in all core narratives aligns with the narrative values. See page 2 for the color key.

PRO-DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE — ENGLISH AND SPANISH

Freedom Matters

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**.

Libertad Para Construir El País Que Merecemos

Este país se construyó sobre el **derecho** que tenemos a que **se escuchen nuestras voces**, a tomar **nuestras propias decisiones**, a **que nos traten de manera justa** por el sistema judicial y a **votar** en elecciones libres y **justas**. Estas **libertades** están en el centro de nuestra vida, la democracia y de **nuestra seguridad**. Pero requieren un sistema de controles y contrapesos al poder, y un **gobierno abierto**, **honesto** y **que responde a la gente**. **Nuestro país** no ha estado a la altura de estas **libertades**, pero una **democracia fuerte** no teme admitirlo ni hacer el **trabajo arduo para tener un mejor mañana de lo que es hoy**.

OREGON AND SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON CORE NARRATIVE

In the Pacific Northwest we value **freedom, **fairness**, and the ability to **work together to make life better**.**

Freedom thrives when people **have a voice**, are **treated fairly**, and can help **shape the decisions that affect their lives**. Across Oregon and Washington, people value **independence**, **responsibility**, and the **freedom to chart their own future**. We care deeply about our **families**, **our neighbors**, and the **lands and waters that sustain us**. We want **safe** communities, **opportunities to build a good life**, and **confidence that our voices matter**.

Those **freedoms** depend on a government that is **accountable** to the people, **checks and balances that protect against the abuse of power**, and opportunities for **everyone** to **contribute and help shape our shared future**.

We have not always lived up to these ideals. At times, laws, policies, and institutions have **failed to treat people fairly** or make sure they had a **meaningful say**. A **healthy democracy** is **honest** about those shortcomings and **committed to doing better**.

Throughout the history of the Pacific Northwest, **ordinary people have stepped forward to solve problems together, stand up for their values, and help build a better future for the next generation.** That spirit continues today.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE

Local government improves our lives, our communities, and our democracy.

Working in partnership, people and **their** local governments can **advance a shared goal**: making it possible for **everyone** to live **freely** and **safely** in **communities** that are **vibrant, welcoming, and fair**. Across the country, cities and towns putting democracy into action create **safer** streets and parks, reliable services, and shared spaces where **people can connect**.

Because local government is **close to our daily lives**, it offers a **powerful** opportunity to build **trust** and **solve problems together**. Cities are where people can **have the most voice, shape decisions, and hold leaders accountable**. When people take part, they **can see real change**—and know their **voices matter** in shaping **their community**.

Communities face **real challenges**, and local governments **have not always lived up to their promise**. But **people from all backgrounds** can **come together, find common ground, and do the hard work** of making change—ensuring that the government **reflects the needs** of the **people it serves**.

Through **community engagement, active participation, and open and responsive** government we can **make lives better for all people and families, our cities safer, and our democracy stronger**.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE

Advancing the public's health is part of creating a free and fair society. And it depends on all of us.

The public's health is **stronger** in a democracy **firmly** grounded in **freedom, fairness, and shared responsibility to one another**. This means that leaders are **accountable to the people** and decisions are **made openly**, guided by both **science** and **community wisdom**. It also means we see how **our lives are connected** and acknowledge that our **freedom to make choices about our own health should not cause preventable harm to others**. **Together we can make sure everyone** lives in **communities** that prioritize the **public's health**—including **clean air and water, safe foods, and protection from disease, injury, and violence**. That's what democracy looks like in daily life.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE

Higher education **strengthens lives, communities, and our democracy.**

Colleges and universities **prepare people for good jobs, power local economies, and bring Americans together from all walks of life.** They help **communities tackle real challenges**—from improving health care to **strengthening small businesses**—while **driving research and innovation** that **makes us all more secure** and shapes **our shared future.** They also give people the knowledge and confidence to **speak freely, engage in their communities, and take part in the decisions** that **affect their lives.** That is how our **democracy works in everyday life.** **Higher education isn't perfect**—**cost** and **access** are real challenges that **deserve practical solutions.** But when **we strengthen** higher education, **we expand freedom, opportunity, and shared prosperity,** helping **communities** across the country **thrive** and keeping **our** democracy **strong.**

LIMITS ON POWER AND DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE

Play by the rules.

What has set **our country** apart is the simple but **powerful** idea that **everyone** should **play by the same rules,** that **anyone** is treated **fairly** and **can pursue their own version** of the **American Dream.** That's why **checks and balances** matter—**when they are used,** they keep any one party, person, or part of government from **calling all the shots** or using **power** to **unfairly benefit themselves.** Sometimes rules need to change, and there are rules for that, too. At the end of the day, **our freedoms,** basic **fairness,** and the **strength** of **our democracy** depend on all of **our leaders respecting the rules,** no matter who they are and whether they win or lose.

HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY CORE NARRATIVE

Human and civil rights **strengthen lives, communities, and our democracy.**

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.

CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND (SPECIFIC MESSAGING APPLICATION FROM HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS)

One of the organizations participating in the human and civil rights cohort of the pro-democracy initiative is the Children's Defense Fund. They created messages aligning their top policy issue this year—children's mental health and well-being—with the narrative.

A Healthy Democracy Starts with Healthy Children.

Democracy is **strongest** when **everyone** can **participate**, **be heard**, and be treated **fairly**. That promise depends on **all** young people having the support they need to grow up **safe** and **healthy**—so they can learn, **build relationships**, and **take part** in school, **community**, and **civic life**, now and into the future.

No child grows up in isolation from the conditions around them. For many Black and Brown children and **families**, generations of **discrimination**, **disinvestment**, and **unequal treatment** have created added **stress**, **trauma**, and **barriers** to support. These **inequities** continue to affect **mental health and emotional well-being**, in ways that impact **families**, **communities**, and **our society** as a whole.

Today, too many young people are facing increased mental health **challenges** without the mental health support they need. When they can't access support—whether in school or in their **communities**—it limits their ability to learn, **connect**, and **participate** as they grow. And when **some young people can participate** and **others can't**, it **violates the basic fairness** at the heart of democracy.

Our **freedoms** are **interconnected**. When **families** face **barriers** to getting care for their children—whether because of cost, availability, or stigma—it affects not only those **families** but the **strength** and **well-being** of entire **communities**. A **healthy** democracy **works to remove** those **barriers** by **strengthening** schools, expanding access to mental health care, and supporting the **community** programs **families** rely on—so **all** young people **can thrive**.

Supporting young people's mental health and emotional **well-being** is part of **protecting** and **strengthening** our democracy. It's how we **build a future** where **every** young person is **valued** and **can contribute**—and where **families**, schools, **community** organizations, and leaders **all play a role** in helping the next generation **thrive** and shape our **shared future**.

MORE INFORMATION AND CONTACT US

Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook Website

Access information on narrative change, as well as all of the pro-democracy research, resources, and tools (including the narrative in both English and Spanish, and for specific issue areas) at prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org.



Workshop Feedback Survey

We would appreciate your feedback on the workshop and how we can improve it for future sessions. Please consider taking the survey [here](#):



Request Free Technical Assistance

If your organization is a 501(c)(3) and would like to request technical assistance to help you use the narrative please complete [this form](#). Once we receive it, a member of our team will reach out to you to schedule and coordinate support.



Contact Us

If you have any follow up questions about the workshop or the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, would like information about becoming a trainer, or have other needs please email us at orwa@ProDemocracyNarrativePlaybook.org