Beyond the midterms: learnings and tips for advancing pro-democracy narratives and messaging

The 2026 midterm elections are behind us, and much of the conversation has focused on what the results mean for the balance of political power. But there is a bigger story to tell—one about the strength of our democracy, the freedoms we share, and the power of people to shape our country's future. For pro-democracy advocates, this is an opportunity to move beyond partisan interpretations of the results and reinforce a broader narrative about what democracy means and why it matters to everyone. It is also a time between elections to elevate democracy narratives to advance one of the evidence-based pillars of the pro-democracy narrative—*that democracy is about more than elections*.

The midterms offered a powerful reminder of democracy in action. Amid challenges to election procedures, voting rights, and government authority, citizens, civic organizations, election officials, and news organizations worked to protect free and fair elections. Our system of checks and balances and the distinct responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments played important roles. But these protections did not operate on their own. People organized, spoke out, defended voters' rights, and worked to ensure everyone played by the rules. Their actions demonstrated that democracy's strength comes from both its institutions and the people who hold them accountable.

Narratives played a major role in the midterms with many acknowledging challenges facing our country while focusing on vision and solutions. They appealed to deeply held values, connected democracy to daily life, and highlighted critical aspects of democracy beyond elections, including many of the freedoms and structures core to inclusive and participatory democracy.

The elections also reinforced that Americans care deeply about democracy and government integrity. According to an NBC News exit poll, 90% of voters said government corruption was a crucial or major factor in their congressional vote. Concerns about democracy ranked as a voter priority alongside the economy, health care, and education. In post-election interviews, voters across the political spectrum also elevated the clear desire to reduce division and fear. This offers an important lesson for pro-democracy communicators: Messages grounded in shared values like freedom, fairness, honesty, and opportunity can connect across differences. Rather than relying primarily on fear, we can make an affirmative case for how democracy protects our freedoms, strengthens communities, and improves people's lives.

The work of democracy does not end on Election Day. Elections are essential, but democracy also depends on protecting freedoms, treating everyone fairly, holding leaders accountable, and working together to solve problems. As we look toward 2027 and beyond, we must sustain civic participation and commitment between election cycles. This resource offers research-informed narrative and messaging guidance, along with practical responses to post-election conversations, to help pro-democracy advocates reach broader audiences, build support, and inspire continued participation in making our democracy stronger and more responsive to everyone.

Narrative and messaging guidance post-election

When writing post-election communications, these tips can be used to strengthen your communications and make them resonate more effectively with a diverse audience. Visit this link for more information on pro-democracy narrative and messaging considerations.

Lead with shared values. — Narrative Pillar 1

Values are the deeply held beliefs that ground any communication, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action. What we saw in the most successful midterm campaigns were strong appeals to shared values like freedom, fairness, fearlessness, honesty, representation, and prosperity. Continued use of these shared values post-election—and others like responsibility and belonging—will strengthen your communications by connecting with what matters most to people.

Define inclusive and participatory democracy beyond elections. — Narrative Pillar 2

With the 2026 midterm elections behind us, advocacy for a freer and fairer democracy must continue. Although voting is one of the most effective ways for people to participate in our democracy and have their voices heard, it is not the only one. Moving into 2027 and beyond—especially as we enter the 2028 election cycle—defining democracy as more than voting will be a critical way to keep advancing toward a stronger democracy. Lean into aspects of democracy that seemed to resonate with voters in the midterms, including checks and balances, 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 something that happens on election day.

Amplify the benefits of democracy and connect those benefits to people's everyday lives. — Narrative Pillars 3 and 4

Polling by Pew Research shows that the future of democracy was the second-most important concern of voters in the midterms. The other three concerns among the top four were the economy, health care, and education. At the end of the day, people vote in favor of or against candidates and ballot measures because they have a vision for the future. Too often, pro-democracy champions talk about the theory, principles, and institutions of democracy rather than connecting it to what people most value in a democracy—access to health care, education, and housing—and the benefits best provided in a working democracy like safe neighborhoods, fair workplaces, quality schools, and reliable services. When people understand democracy as the system that provides tangible benefits and helps solve real problems, they are more likely to value and support it.

Remind people that democracy is a shared responsibility and they have a role to play outside of elections. **Narrative Pillar 5**

Democracy is not something we passively inherit; it is something we actively maintain together. Framing that positions strengthening democracy as shared work resonates more strongly than messaging that puts the onus on elected leaders. Messaging should emphasize that citizens, communities, and leaders all have a role in upholding democratic norms, participating in civic life, and holding institutions accountable. This sense of shared responsibility reinforces both individual and collective agency.

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

Even when an election goes smoothly, as it did in 2026, there are still ways in which our democracy must improve to benefit all people. Acknowledge the gaps between the ideal and the reality of democracy in order to build trust and open the door to forward-looking messaging. Pair this acknowledgment with appeals to shared action and a statement of optimism that together we can meet these challenges and improve our democracy.

Example post-midterm core message

Democracy narratives and messaging are most effective when you apply the six Pro-Democracy Narrative Pillars using your own words and language that resonates with your specific audience. If communicating to a broad audience (across the political spectrum and demographics), here is an example of framing that uses bridging language and applies the pillars that you can use as a starting point.

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

Democracy doesn't begin and end on election day.

The midterm elections remind **us** that **our** democracy **belongs** to **all of us**—and that its future is shaped not by any single election, but by **what we do together** in the days and years before and those that follow. This **free**, **fair**, and peaceful election took the **work** and **courage** of people at all levels of government, of nonprofit advocates, and of countless volunteers and millions of voters. Whatever the results mean to **each of us**, **we share a stake** in **protecting** the **freedoms** that define **our country**: the **freedom** to have **our voices heard**, to **make our own choices**, to be **treated fairly**, and to **hold our government accountable to the people it serves**. **Our democracy has never been perfect**, and the challenges **we** face are real. But America is at its best when people **come together**, **across differences**, **to make our country better**. Elections are essential, but democracy doesn't begin or end at the ballot box. It grows **stronger** when **we participate** in **our communities**, **stand up** for **one another's rights**, **demand honesty and accountability from our leaders**, and **work together** to solve problems and create the **opportunity for everyone** to **thrive**. The work of **building** a **stronger**

democracy is never finished—and neither is **our** capacity to **make it better**. That is both **our shared responsibility** and **our** greatest source of hope.

Navigating post-election conversations

In the next few weeks and months, you might hear colleagues, partners, and community members making statements and asking questions along these lines. Here are some suggestions for how you might respond.

What you might hear	Challenge	Opportunity
"Democracy is saved!" "Democracy worked so why do we need to keep talking about it?"	Plays into the false idea that democracy begins and ends at the ballot box. It frames democracy as partisan as opposed to a set of shared freedoms, rights, and structures that protect them and limit power. This framing can also lead to disengagement until the next election cycle.	Frame this election as a step in the right direction. This election was free and fair, and the voice of the people was heard. It is up to all of us to continue strengthening democracy by holding our leaders accountable to their campaign promises and continuing to speak our mind on issues that impact our communities and country.
"This election proves democracy is in decline/is broken."	This deficit-framed argument provokes a sense of cynicism and can lead to loss of civic engagement.	Acknowledge that our democracy isn't perfect and emphasize that this election was fair, secure, and clear. Underscore that democracy is an ongoing system that requires active participation for everyone in order to represent the needs of all people fairly.
"This is just an example of switching power." "How do we still build a big tent?"	This frames government as a push and pull between two sides rather than a system meant to serve the people. It undermines the agency of the public and its ability to influence leaders and decision-making between election cycles.	We need to listen to communities, engage and do outreach, and invite more people into the conversation.
"Elections have consequences; the people have spoken."	This kind of rhetoric further ostracizes potential future allies and deepens existing divides.	Acknowledge the results, but emphasize that elected officials have a responsibility to serve the entire community, not just their voters. Encourage dialogue that focuses on shared values and local issues rather than winner-takes-all gloating.

“My side lost, so why bother?”	Leans into the false idea that democracy only works when the candidate or issue I support wins.	Validate the disappointment of the loss, and remind them that the power of democracy is that they have many ways to engage in democracy and have their voice heard beyond elections. Democracy means there is shared power and limits on power. It also means there are freedoms to engage other branches and levels of government, to speak their mind, and to advocate. All people, regardless of who wins an election, have the ability to weigh in.
“The election is over; what can I do now?”	There is no problem with this question as many of us are also asking it!	Reiterate that elections are just one way to be civically engaged. Encourage them to continue participating in our democracy after election day. This could look like attending city council or school board meetings, contacting their representatives to share views about specific policies, and volunteering with community groups on local or national issues.

For more information, visit us at ProDemocracyNarrativePlaybook.org.