

Democracy and Democratic Participation Messaging Brief



The Colorado Health Foundation™

This brief helps you talk to people who aren't sure about supporting your cause. It offers tips on how to frame your message so it resonates with them and makes them more likely to help. Think of it as a toolbox of ideas, not a complete instruction manual. It's based on what we already know about effective communication. If you want a more in-depth look at crafting your message, check out the ["Heartwired Strategy Guide"](#).

Purpose

- Counter authoritarianism
- Strengthen democracy
- Create a broader "we"
- Calm concerns and increase support
- Construct a vision for transforming democracy in the US

Messaging Principles

- Lead with shared values
 - » Prioritize a human connection before a civil rights connection
- Use terms like community, liberty and service instead of civic (e.g., civic engagement, civic society). Don't assume everyone shares the same definitions of democracy, civic engagement, authoritarianism, or fascism. Appeal to the ideal of electing leaders who represent people accurately and effectively
- Highlight forms of democratic participation beyond voting to expand people's understanding of democracy
- Discuss root causes of why and how people's voices are often excluded from political processes, such as gerrymandering and voter suppression
- Offer concrete solutions
 - » Fixing a broken system can feel overwhelming yet we are already making progress on many issues - racial justice, disability justice, LGBTQ+ justice – that contribute to the broader goal of strengthening our democracy. Make those explicit connections

Current Common Narratives

- Democracy is often perceived as solely focused on individual liberty
 - » This narrow view frames democracy as merely protecting basic civil and political rights
 - » It obscures broader ideas like collective self-government, political equality, and popular sovereignty government based on consent and power of the people
- Democracy is conflated with the U.S. system of government
 - » Critiquing the U.S. is often seen as undemocratic
 - » Problems in the U.S. are understood to be weaknesses of democracy itself
 - » Yes, many people believe the “system is rigged”
- Democracy is primarily understood as the act of voting
 - » While addressing voter suppression is critical, this perspective minimizes other forms of democratic participation and civic engagement, such as mass demonstrations and community care
- Democracy reflects what “the people” want
 - » This overlooks how people’s voices are actually heard—or excluded—from decision-making.
 - » The definition of “the people” is often exclusionary
 - » It elevates strong leaders as those who can speak on behalf of the people, which can lead to authoritarianism
- Democracy is the representation of the people by elected leaders
 - » Problems of US democracy are a result of politicians and wealthy people, and regular citizens are powerless to change it
 - » The government is perceived as “they” or “them” and not “we” or “us”
 - » Depends on whether elected leaders “actually” represent their constituents
 - Do they act in their constituents’ best interest?
 - Do they uphold the will of those they represent?
 - Do they follow through on election promises?
 - Do they reflect the experiences and identities of the people they serve?

Change the Narrative: Show Don’t Tell

- Show how America would be better if all of us did our part for the well-being of our communities and country
- Show how taxes are our contributions to our communities and country to help build our roads, educate our children and keep our country safe
- Show why corporations should pay their fair share of taxes to support infrastructure, education, and economic stability
- Show how businesses have responsibilities beyond profit—to their employees, customers and communities.
- Show how as Americans, we can change the system just like Americans won better wages, safer workplaces and civil rights in the past
- Ask people what democracy means to them

Common Shared Values

- Community
- Service
- Fairness
- Liberty
- Freedom and Autonomy
- Accountability
- Government by the people

Sample Messages

- No matter where we come from or the color of our skin, most of us believe that our elected leaders should reflect the very best of every kind of American and govern for all of us, no exceptions. But today, certain politicians and the greedy few have rigged the system to silence our voices and hold onto power. They stoke division, hoping we'll blame new immigrants, transgender people, or those struggling to make ends meet for the harm caused by their own policies. We can stop their attempts to undo the will of the people. By uniting as voters to [name desired reform], we can protect the will of the people and build a democracy that truly works for all of us.
- No matter our race, gender or zip code, most of us believe that our elected leaders should reflect our values and govern for all of us, no exceptions. But today, too many of those in power serve only the wealthy and well-connected while they divide us based on what we look like or where we live. Leaders who come from and work for our communities almost never break through the political system because running for office today requires having or raising a fortune. Only with [name desired reform, e.g. ranked choice voting, public financing, etc.] can we elect officials who have walked in our shoes and govern in our name. We shape the future, and by joining together to [repeat desired reform], we can build a democracy where our leaders serve “we the people,” not just the wealthiest few.
- No matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us pitch in for each other and hope to leave things better for future generations. But today, a handful of corporations undermine us all. They fuel division, hoping we'll look the other way as they profit from our contributions while refusing to pay their fair share. When we advocate for all of us, we can make America a place we're proud to call home - one with world-class schools, affordable healthcare and community services for our families. When we join together across racial differences to rewrite the rules, we shape the future.

Acknowledgements:

- [American Aspirations by Hattaway Communications](#)
- [How to Talk Bridgey by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#)
- [Framing Democracy: A Quick-Start Guide by FrameWorks](#)
- [By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System by FrameWorks Institute](#)
- [We Make the Future Messaging Guide](#)

About The Colorado Health Foundation:

The Colorado Health Foundation is bringing health in reach for all Coloradans by engaging closely with communities across the state through investing, policy and advocacy, learning and capacity building. For more information, please visit www.coloradohealth.org.



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