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# Voicing Our
# VALUES

## A message guide for policymakers and advocates

FREEDOM FOR ALL!

I AM FOR JUSTICE!

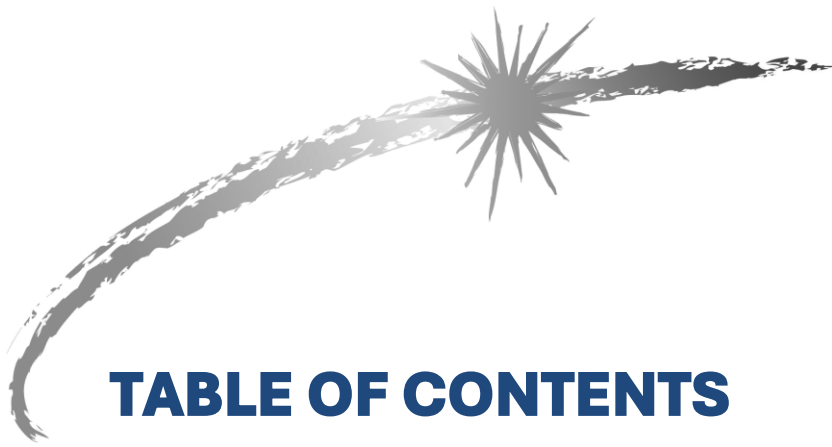BERNIE HORN AND GLORIA TOTTEN

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# Introduction – How and why to use this book

This year, American freedom, democracy and the rule of law hang in the balance. This year, our global environment and security are at stake. So far, progressives and Democrats have not won over most Americans, while a near-majority are ready to support racist, reactionary policies led by MAGA candidates who are willing to do the unthinkable to achieve and remain in power.

We face a turning point in American history. If we do our very best, we can keep the American dream alive. We can protect and expand the freedom, opportunity and security for which our predecessors struggled and fought, lived and died. And we must.

This is a how-to book for the current political crisis. It's about how to persuade.

As you will see, persuasion is hard. Facts and logical arguments, by themselves, are not especially persuasive. You need to be aware of your listeners' preconceptions and biases, start from a point of agreement, frame your argument with values, and show listeners how they benefit—all while using language that nonpolitical Americans are willing to hear.

Throughout this volume, we offer suggested language to demonstrate what you should and shouldn't say. We hope it makes the book easy to use. As long as you understand the reasoning behind our language, we encourage you to adapt the examples to your own voice. Make the language authentically yours, fully integrating it with your own knowledge and experience.

Messaging is not a silver bullet in politics. It's just one tool of many. But if we combine better messaging with problem-solving policies and bold advocacy, we can mobilize the majority of Americans who agree with us, win our electoral and policy campaigns, and save the world.

# 1. You can't persuade everyone!

The first thing you need to know about politics is, you can't persuade everyone. When people say that MAGA (Make America Great Again) voters are impossible to persuade, that they believe what they want to believe, it's mostly true. But it's also mostly irrelevant. We don't need their base; we can save this country by winning over persuadable Americans.

The MAGA movement has gained control of the Republican Party by convincing a majority of their primary election voters to believe outrageous lies and support extremist candidates. What's important to understand is, MAGA gets its strength from the psychological phenomenon of *social identity*.

Science tells us that a great deal of people's self-image comes from their social identity, that is, the group or groups that they see themselves as a part of. Social identity divides the world into us and them, the in-group and the out-group. The *us* can be something as inessential as which sports team a person favors. It can be about an individual's social class or family, college or country. Being part of the group makes people feel good inside. It enhances pride and self-esteem, and usually there's nothing wrong with that. But people also enhance their self-image by denigrating *them*, the out-group. Individuals can get an emotional thrill by blaming, discriminating against, or cheering the misfortunes of their out-group. Obviously, this kind of politics can turn ugly, and it has.

MAGA employs a myth of white victimhood, a supposed decline from a past greatness, caused by racial, ethnic, religious or gender minorities, and the *liberals* who support them. In this way, opponents become enemies, demonized so that MAGA supporters can feel justified in hating and repressing them. This goes beyond simple racism. It requires more than discrimination, it requires debasement. The MAGA system insists that the out-groups *deserve* punishment, and the in-group should feel the pleasure of inflicting humiliation. ("Ha, ha! Owning the libs!") MAGA leaders, in turn, praise

followers for that crudity, cruelty and even violence, releasing them from all constraints of law, reason and decency. (E.g., physically threatening opponents and hurling inane insults.)

Most people who support MAGA don't think they're racists, or that they're being unfair to others, or swallowing lies. They're just supporting their social group, their friends and family, their team. What could be wrong with that?

Well, plenty, and even many Republicans think so. By pushing away a slice of traditional conservative supporters, MAGA has (hopefully) planted the seeds of its own destruction, turning some of the party's loyal voters into persuadables.

Who is persuadable?

Polls consistently show that about 10-to-20 percent of Republicans are uncomfortable with MAGA and Trump. Most of them will probably hold their noses and vote for MAGA candidates anyway. But there is a serious chance that a significant percentage of Republicans, especially those who are college educated, older, female, and/or value abortion rights, will break away because they love freedom, democracy, and the rule of law more than they love an extremist version of their party.

Republican-leaning Independents are even more likely to change sides than registered Republicans. And there is, still, a small slice of swing voters who are so disengaged from politics that they have no idea of what's going on. They probably won't pay attention until the election is just weeks away.

Finally, there are plenty of registered Democrats who are upset with their party. Some are dismayed about Israel. Some are disappointed that Democrats haven't made bigger changes. And some are attracted by MAGA's swaggering authoritarianism. We need to empathize with and court our friends, of course. But ultimately, most will come to understand that they're the ones (people of color and "the left") that MAGA sees as "vermin," and "poisoning the blood

of our country." They would be the first ones harassed, persecuted and even imprisoned by MAGA. Let us kindly and patiently explain that, if they must see the election as a choice between two evils, it is obvious which is the lesser of them.

In sum, there is certainly a potential anti-MAGA majority. To capture it, we must craft our messages in a way that persuadable Americans will hear and understand.

# 2. Evade the trap of confirmation bias

Even when they are not driven by identity politics, people's political beliefs often run contrary to logic or evidence. In fact, psychology tells us, there are many cognitive biases that skew human reasoning.

*Confirmation bias,* one of the oldest-known and best-proven cognitive biases, is particularly important to understand. This is when people seek out information that conforms to what they already believe or want to believe, while—inside their minds—ignore or refute information that disproves those assumptions. It is a selective use of evidence through which people reinforce to themselves whatever they want to believe.

If people believe that violent crime keeps increasing, they will retain information about recent crimes and disbelieve or ignore the documented fact that crime rates are falling. If individuals think the Earth is thousands, instead of billions, of years old, they will not believe the truth even when shown fossils in a museum. For that matter, if people are convinced that Friday the 13th is unlucky, they will pay attention and remember when bad things happened on this date but will forget all the Friday the 13ths when no misfortune occurred.

In short, when faced with facts that contradict strongly felt beliefs, people will almost always reject the facts and hold on to their beliefs. That means, if we use language that seems to challenge our listeners' fundamental beliefs, they will stop listening. If a person thinks we are saying "you're wrong," a switch clicks in their brain turning off rational consideration and turning on negative emotions.

Why do people's brains work that way?

Humans have two main memory systems, one that reacts instantaneously, reflexively and emotionally and another that is deliberate, controls abstract thinking, and stores memories

such as facts and events. This second system is the one that's rational and reflective.

Because the first is a "fight or flight" system that operates in milliseconds, its reactions can override or redirect slower reasoning. So, if your listener's reflexive system determines that you are attacking an important belief, it will divert thinking away from the rational mechanisms in the brain to emotional ones. Simultaneously, the listener's mind will cherry-pick memories to reinforce the preexisting belief that seems to be under attack.

Let us imagine you are discussing *voter fraud* with a neighbor who believes it's a problem and you say, "There is no evidence of any significant voter fraud," which is unquestionably true. His brain will perceive your words as an attack, he will feel a strongly negative emotional reaction, he will then remember and focus on the very real-to-him fake news that supports his belief in voter fraud, and you will have no chance to persuade him of anything. Your effort has failed.

As political activists, we wish that we could reason with people and have calm, cool, dispassionate discussions about public policy. But instead, we tend to trigger in our listeners a negative emotional response, reminding them of memories that reinforce those negative emotions. We are arguing with ghosts from our listeners' pasts—and losing.

Clinical psychologist Drew Westen of Emory University used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine what was going on in the brains of political partisans. After engaging test subjects with a series of openly contradictory statements from their own favored candidates, the fMRIs—not too surprisingly—showed that the subjects had not engaged the logical parts of their brains. They had engaged their emotions instead. And then, after rationalizing away legitimate attacks on their favored candidates, the brain's pleasure center released the neurotransmitter dopamine. As Westen explained in his book *The Political Brain*:

Once partisans had found a way to reason to false conclusions, not only did neural circuits involved in negative emotions turn off, but circuits involved in positive emotions turned on. The partisan brain didn't seem satisfied in just feeling better. It worked overtime to feel good, activating reward circuits that give partisans a jolt of positive reinforcement for their biased reasoning. These reward circuits overlap substantially with those activated when drug addicts get their "fix," giving new meaning to the term political junkie.

This means that when you directly attack preexisting beliefs, not only are your arguments rejected, but you are also helping to emotionally reward partisans for their stubbornness, deepening their attachment to false ideas.

The leaders of the MAGA movement, or at least their funders, understand this. They know that their supporters are not searching for truth, so the truth doesn't really matter. MAGA supporters are, instead, consciously or unconsciously, seeking out information that conforms to their preexisting beliefs. That's why they watch Fox News! They believe what they want to because it quite literally feels bad to admit one is wrong and feels good to assert one is right.

So obviously, there are tremendous barriers in the path of persuasion. How do we work around those obstacles?

# 3. Use three rules of persuasion

What's different about persuadable Americans is that they hold in their minds both progressive and conservative political beliefs. They don't engage in politics with the emotional intensity of partisans, so they can be persuaded by either set of ideas. These persuadables have one overriding but vague question in their minds: "Who is on my side?"

The key to persuasion is rather simple: agree with your audience. This was explained nearly ninety years ago by Dale Carnegie in his classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*:

> In talking to people, don't begin by discussing the things on which you differ. Begin by emphasizing— and keep on emphasizing—the things on which you agree. Keep emphasizing, if possible, that you are both striving for the same end and that your only difference is one of method and not of purpose.

Because confirmation bias makes it difficult or impossible to change people's beliefs, you must use beliefs already in their minds to persuade them that you are on their side. Here are the three best ways to do that.

## First: Always begin in agreement.

Start every argument from a point of agreement and then give your audience a bridge from their preconceptions to your solutions.

Finding a point of agreement is not so difficult. The easiest way is to acknowledge a problem from your listeners' point of view. Average Americans struggle with inadequate wages, unfair job conditions, debt, illness, addiction, worries about their children, their quality of life, and their future. Nobody is going to believe you can address their problems if you don't make it clear that you understand what those problems are:
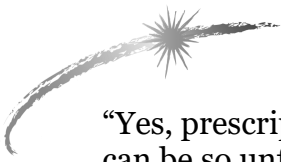
"Yes, prescription drugs cost too much." "I agree, landlords can be so unfair." "I know that our children are at risk."

When your listeners state a specific concern, empathize: "Yes, we've got to protect Social Security and Medicare." "You're right that we must get a handle on immigration." "Certainly, cars speed down your street much too fast."

Or you can agree by stating a policy ideal: "Our military needs to be the strongest in the world." "We must ensure that every highway bridge in our state is safe, now and in the future." "Every child in our city should have access to world-class public schools."

To be clear: we are not asking you to obfuscate or misrepresent your views. You never have to compromise your political principles to begin in agreement, you just need to consider a wider range of possibilities. For example:

> If someone is worried about crime (even in a low-crime community), agree that personal safety must be a top priority for government.

> If an individual thinks the neighborhood is going downhill (even if that's not the case), agree that we need to preserve the quality of life.

> If your audience is worried about government budgets (even if there's no budget problem), agree that our government has an obligation to be very careful in spending taxpayer money.

You may wonder, where do I take the discussion from there? What about facts and statistics? What about our progressive solutions? If you start in agreement, your listeners will be far more willing to listen to the rest. Just understand that persuadable Americans are much less likely than partisans to care about policy details. If they believe you're on their side, they will accept that your policies are sincerely intended to address their problems.

For example, let us say you are talking about making taxes more progressive. Start in agreement, like this:

> **Say...** *Our tax system is unfair. The tax burden on working families has increased while rich people and powerful corporations pocket more and more tax giveaways. And that's unjust.*

Almost nobody disagrees with that. Then you might provide a statistic or, better yet, tell a story that illustrates the issue and finish with a brief explanation of how your policy is consistent with those statements of shared belief and how it addresses the problem.

When you give a speech, find out ahead of time what concerns your listeners. If you don't know in advance, shorten your remarks and allow more time for Q&A. The questioners will tell you what they care about!

When you are in a conversation, listen carefully to what others say—they will provide you with opportunities to agree. Skip the parts where you flatly disagree and steer the discussion toward the elements where you're on the same side. To be clear, if someone makes five points and you agree with only one of them, talk about that one. Demonstrate over and over that you understand the problem, that you empathize with your audience, and that you share the same policy ideals.

Because of confirmation bias, never say—and try to avoid even implying—that your listeners are wrong. That will engage the emotional parts of their brains, and they will stop listening.

Similarly, never let your own emotions do the talking. When you are about to speak in anger, take a deep breath and shake it off. Voicing your emotions will make you feel good—you'll get a shot of dopamine in your brain—but it will almost certainly end your opportunity to persuade.

## Second: Use values to frame the debate.

What do we mean by framing?

We frame by focusing attention on some part of a political debate where our argument fits the audience's preexisting beliefs, and we insist that our way of looking at the particular issue or election is the key to understanding what it's about.

Imagine there is a mural painted on a wall which illustrates all the many aspects of a political question. We want to place a picture frame around one part of the mural, point at it, and declare that this is how to understand the issue.

In a panorama that describes inflation, we want to frame the corporations that raise prices to earn windfall profits, saying this is the problem. In the broad story about health care, we want to put a frame around unfair prices and tactics by insurance and prescription drug companies, saying they're to blame. In the debate about taxation and Social Security, we want to place a frame around billionaires who don't pay their fair share. MAGA, in contrast, frames political questions to blame people of color, immigrants and *woke* culture. Usually, the side with the more effective frame will win any given debate.

And what do we mean by values?

Values are words with positive meanings built into them. Words like trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous and kind are values that describe personal behavior. But more than that, they implicitly communicate that the behavior is admirable. You could describe the same conduct as *brave* or *foolhardy*; you could call a person *thrifty* or *penny-pinching*. If you use the personal values *brave* or *thrifty*, you are framing the behavior as positive.

In politics, values are ideals that describe the kind of society we are trying to build. Political values are frames. When you use values, you communicate two things. Because values are,

by definition, beliefs that we share with our listeners, you are in agreement with your audience. And values show that, whatever the specific policy you seek to frame, your overall goals are the same.

The stereotypical conservative values are small government, low taxes, free markets, strong military and traditional families. When conservative values are stated this way, our side too often has no effective response. Progressives usually want to answer the conservative approach, not with our own values, but with a laundry list of policies. Or, when we do use values, they tend to evoke negative stereotypes about bleeding-heart liberals: compassion, cooperation, and concern for our fellow citizens. These may appeal to our base, but they do not persuade undecided Americans.

There's another way. It is a set of political values that are poll-tested and proven to work.

When you're talking about an issue where government has no proper role—like free speech, privacy, religion, reproductive rights or equal protection under law—declare your commitment to *freedom* or use a similar value from the chart below. When you discuss an issue where government should act as a referee between competing interests—like court proceedings, wages, benefits, subsidies, taxes or education— explain that your position is based on *opportunity* or a value from that column. When you argue about an issue where government should act as a protector—like crime, retirement, health care, zoning or the environment—stand for *security* or a similar value.

*Freedom* or similar values: Liberty, Privacy, Basic rights, Fundamental rights, Freedom of religion, Equal protection

*Opportunity* or similar values: Equal opportunity, Justice, Fairness, Fair share, Level playing field, Every American

*Security* or similar values: Safety, Protection, Quality of life, Employment security, Retirement security, Health security

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In the 21st century, progressives have too often felt uncomfortable saying *freedom*. And yet, freedom is the strongest word in American politics and describes the most powerful attack on MAGA. Progressives have been fairly comfortable talking about *opportunity* and employing some of the *security* values. But our side rarely says the word *security*, even though it is nearly as persuasive a political battle-cry as freedom.

Moreover, you should put these values together to explain that you stand for ***freedom, opportunity and security for all***. This phrase polls better than conservative values, and even more important, it's an accurate description of what we stand for. The right wing favors these values, but only for some—the affluent, or perhaps, for white people. Progressives insist on providing freedom, opportunity and security to each and every American. This language often works even when you're talking to right-wingers; they don't know what to say in response. (See chapter 7 for a much deeper discussion of freedom, opportunity and security.)

How do you use values in a conversation?

Imagine you are a state legislator visiting constituents door-to-door and you are asked what you're going to do to clean up the stream that runs through a particular neighborhood. And cleaning up that stream is not really the state legislature's job. Typical progressives might launch into an explanation of the

clean water legislation they support. A particularly inept one might say the stream is the responsibility of the city or county and there's little the state can do. A good communicator would start in agreement:

> **Say...** *It's a terrible shame that our stream has deteriorated like that. It's unsafe, it's unhealthy, it's wrong for our community.*

Why? The only way to connect with this resident is to agree wholeheartedly. If you can, go on to say you remember when the stream was clean and beautiful. Then frame the issue with your values—which describe your goals:

> **Say...** *I believe we need to make it a top priority to ensure clean water and safe parklands. We need to protect the quality of life in our community.*

These are values that you share with every voter: *clean*, *safe*, and a better *quality of life,* which all fit into the category of *security*. At this point you are welcome to explain your clean water legislation but keep it simple; you have probably already won a friend. The average voter is only listening for one thing: Are you on my side? By using shared values to frame the debate, you demonstrate that you are.

Every time you have the chance to speak to a persuadable audience, don't forget to express your values. Even if listeners grumble about your policy solution, you might very well win their support if you have made clear that you share the same concerns and are trying to achieve the same goals.

### Third: Show listeners how they benefit.

Progressives favor policies that benefit society at large. We want to help the underdog. We wish that a majority of Americans were persuaded, as we are, by appeals to the common good. But they aren't.

In fact, it's quite difficult to convince average citizens to support a policy that appears to benefit people other than

themselves, their families and their friends. Celinda Lake, one of our movement's very best pollsters, explains that "our culture is very, very individualistic." When faced with a proposed government policy, "people look for themselves in the proposal. People want to know what the proposal will do for me and to me."

That means, whenever possible, you need to show voters that they personally benefit from your progressive policies. Usually that's not so hard. When talking about climate change, emphasize how it affects the listeners' children and grandchildren. When arguing for criminal justice reform, show how it makes their own community safer.

Sometimes it's more of a challenge. For example, if you're arguing for programs that benefit people in poverty, do not focus on the way your proposal directly helps the poor, instead explain how it indirectly benefits the middle class. Persuadable voters are rarely in poverty themselves and they will relate better to an argument aimed at them.

For example, when you argue for an increase in the minimum wage:

> **Say...** *Raising the minimum wage puts money in the pockets of hardworking Americans who will spend it on the things they need. This, in turn, generates business for the local economy and eases the burden on taxpayer-funded services. It's a win-win. Raising the minimum wage helps build a fair economy that works for everyone, not just the rich.*

Every progressive policy benefits the middle class, often directly but at least indirectly. In contrast, nearly every right-wing policy hurts the middle class, even if it more directly hurts the poor. Since persuadable voters are nearly always in the middle class and they want to know how policies affect them personally, you must tell them.

That does not mean you can explain your positions without mentioning program beneficiaries. In fact, the example above mentions them. The important thing is to connect with persuadables and frame the debate for their ears.

Americans are not very kind to the poor. Outside of the progressive base, a lot of voters assume that people in poverty failed to help themselves, don't take advantage of opportunities "given" to them, and should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Unfortunately, you cannot argue people out of these beliefs. So, when you refer to lower-income Americans, you need to go out of your way to describe them as deserving—"hardworking taxpayers" or "people who work hard and play by the rules," for example.

By telling average Americans how your policies directly or indirectly benefit them, you are once again staying in agreement and demonstrating that you are on their side.

# 4. Avoid three common mistakes in persuasion

## First: Don't repeat your opponent's frame.

To win any debate, you must proactively frame what the argument is about. A good frame is one where your language demonstrates, based upon your listeners' preexisting beliefs, that you are on their side. So, it is appalling when progressives accept an opponent's message frame—which happens all the time.

Right wing groups spend millions of dollars on polls, dial groups and focus groups testing words and phrases to frame policy debates. Then they communicate that language to candidates, interest groups and activists who flood it into broadcast and social media. In recent years, right-wingers have framed political debate with almost mindless attacks about "woke" policies, culture wars and the "deep state," while blaming people of color and progressive allies for every social ill. But the right wing also uses narrower issue-specific framing, like death tax, job creators, nanny state, pro-life, tax relief and union boss.

Don't repeat their language! When you repeat a frame, you confirm that is what the debate is about. Instead, you must firmly reject their frame and substitute your own.

*In political persuasion, don't say woke, Critical Race Theory or ESG.* They're all designed to trigger emotional reactions and deflect attention away from real, rational issues, like wages, benefits, debt, healthcare and the environment.

Over the past ten years or so, the right wing has abandoned all pretense of a political philosophy. It's not that they're flip-floppers, they are consistent—they're for whatever brings them political power. That means bigotry, xenophobia and a contempt for democracy, supported by Orwellian lies. Most right wing "dog whistles" are shortcuts which enable people to engage in bigotry. CRT and BLM are essentially substitutes for

the n-word. Globalist or Soros are codewords for antisemitism and, not coincidentally, QAnon is extremely similar to antisemitic lies employed by Hitler.

It is impractical to rebut these insults and lies one-by-one. Reframe instead.

> **Say...** *Americans want their government to make things better. Real goals, like freedom, opportunity and security for all of us—a fair economy, affordable healthcare, world-class schools, a better infrastructure, a better quality of life. Let us talk about how we get real things done for our community.*

In short, change the subject to issues that your listeners really care about. If you're talking to people who really care about what's "woke," then they are not persuadable. Don't waste your time.

*Don't say cancel culture or culture wars.* These phrases simply reframe bigotry. The right wing uses *cancel culture* to condemn people who fight against racism, sexism, antisemitism and other antisocial acts. And *culture war* is mostly used as a cover for anti-LGBTQ+ policies or a defense of Confederate leaders, the Confederate flag, or even slavery itself. Don't repeat that frame. Try to move from that nonsense to issues where you can show you're on their side.

*Don't say conspiracy theory or deep state.* MAGA is a cult of white victimhood. Since it's absurd to believe that Americans are victims because they are white, the cult must rely on convoluted lies to arouse fear of racial, religious or gender minorities. These big lies include child sex rings, "stolen" elections, COVID/vaccine denial, "false flags" when right-wingers commit terrorism, and a nefarious conspiracy of the "deep state."

We know that a conspiracy theorist is a nutcase, which ought to be shocking. But this phrase is not, because of the word
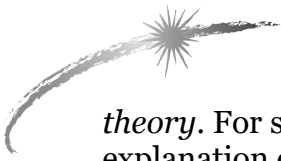
*theory*. For scientists, a theory is a well-substantiated explanation of an aspect of the natural world, based on facts that have been repeatedly confirmed. The theory of relativity, germ theory, big bang theory and theory of evolution—to name just a few—are not untested hunches. Saying *theory* suggests a hypothesis or conclusion is based on proven facts, which is the opposite of right-wing conspiracies. If necessary, refute the underlying claim and quickly move on to real issues.

*Don't say political persecution or witch hunt.* This one is easy. Start with something like: *"In America, no one is above the law. Anyone who commits a crime must be held accountable."* If you want to be rhetorical:

> **Say...** *America was founded on the principle that no one is above the law. The whole idea was that no kings, no lords, no wealthy aristocracy would be able to commit crimes and get away with it. Look above the door at the Supreme Court, it says that America stands for "equal justice under law." If our justice system treats people differently because of who they are, then we have lost our freedoms.*

Anyone who is prosecuted should get a fair trial. Period.

*Don't say nationalist, populist or authoritarian.* These are all euphemisms for something worse. MAGA leaders are glad to be labeled as *nationalists*. It sounds patriotic! Nationalist is a label that was popularized by the rise of ethnic divisions in Europe, especially before the Second World War. Different cultures and ethnicities clashed, creating German nationalism, French nationalism, Italian nationalism, and so forth. But the United States has no unifying culture or ethnicity. Rather, 98 percent of U.S. residents are immigrants or their descendants. There's no such thing as U.S. nationalism. What we have in the U.S. is white supremacists or simply racists.

The use of *populism* spiraled out of control in 2016 as a result of Trump's election and the approval of Brexit. (The Cambridge Dictionary chose it as their 2017 "Word of the

Year.") MAGA cannot be populist because it is funded and guided by billionaires. Real populists would tax these billionaires and regulate wealthy corporations just as the 1890's People's Party supported William Jennings Bryan and his economic program against the rich. Today's use of *populism* is just a euphemism for bigotry.

Academics and the media call MAGA *authoritarian*. An authoritarian seeks to consolidate power behind a single executive, putting aside democratic decision-making, checks and balances, and individuals' constitutional rights. Sure, it's accurate, but it's a technical term like "sternum" or "sprocket" or "cloture." Average people don't really know what it means. So, *authoritarian* loses its power to condemn. Let's use language that persuadable Americans understand: MAGA is *against* democracy, *against* the rule of law, *against* checks and balances, *against* honest government, and *against* fundamental freedom for every American. What MAGA represents is what our founding fathers *defeated* in the Revolutionary War and what our fathers and grandfathers *defeated* in the Second World War.

*Don't say liberal or conservative*. Our opponents want us called *liberals* because that term doesn't poll very well. In fact, hardly any left-of-center political organizations or leaders call themselves liberal. We pretty uniformly call ourselves *progressive* and have done so now for decades. Progressive is quite a popular label and, after all, there is no Liberal Caucus in Congress—it's the Progressive Caucus.

Our opponents want to call themselves *conservative* because that term polls well. But there are relatively few real *conservatives* in public office anymore. They can't win a contested Republican primary election against a MAGA candidate, so the rare *conservative* in public office simply hasn't been primaried yet. Call them MAGA, extremists, right wingers or the radical right.

## Second: Don't accept a both-sides or passive frame.

Both conservatives and the media talk about problems without accurately naming who is to blame. They do this in two ways, by using language that implies *both sides* are responsible, or by identifying the evil but, conspicuously, not the evildoers. Let's consider each.

Both-siderism is a rhetorical tactic that suggests both sides are equally to blame. In today's politics that is never true, and worse, it feeds public cynicism. It asserts that politics is inherently bad, our national institutions don't work, and it is time to burn down the whole system. That's the argument for MAGA.

*Don't blame partisanship, polarization, Congress or Washington.* There was a time when both Republicans and Democrats might be equally to blame for something. But that time is gone. It is now a fundamental falsehood to compare Democrats to Republicans or progressives to MAGA. Describing events in Congress, it is factually inaccurate to say *partisanship* instead of *Republican intransigence*. It is inaccurate to suggest that the parties are *polarized* because only the Republicans are controlled by extremists. Ideologically, Democrats are not much different than they were decades ago. *Congress* is not to blame; it is the Republicans. Similarly, *Washington* is a boogeyman term for big government, which our side, obviously, should not employ.

*Don't say bickering, squabbling or gridlock.* The media loves to demean disputes in Congress or state legislatures as bickering or squabbling. *Bickering* means to "argue about petty or trivial matters." It's the same implication when a political dispute is called a *spat* or *playing politics*. The subtext, which Americans fully understand, is that Americans should look down on the debate and its debaters. But there is virtually no political argument anymore that is trivial. MAGA extremists are trying to take health coverage from tens of millions, give trillions of dollars in tax giveaways to the rich, deny climate science, destroy the environment, wreck

consumer financial protections, and devastate all kinds of employment protections and social programs. Blocking this regressive agenda is crucial and heroic, not *bickering*.

*Don't blame policy on a generational divide.* It is nowhere near truthful to blame something on the *boomers*, or the *millennials*, or any other age group. Focusing on generations creates false conflicts that divert us from the real ones—the rich against the rest of us, the racists against advocates for equal opportunity, the authoritarians against democracy itself. Within any generation, there are rich and poor, the ideological left and right, whites and people of color, longtime residents and immigrants. Whatever policy you might complain about, there were at least 40 percent of that generation who were on the side you're on now. The real bad guys love it when they can get us fighting among ourselves. Stop it.

*Don't fail to blame the villain.* All too often, problems are presented as if nobody played a part, and they just happened. "Abortion rights were taken away," without mentioning the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court or the MAGA legislators who passed an antiabortion statute. "Inflation increased," without mentioning the corporations that raised prices. "RadioShack/Sports Authority/Payless Shoes went bankrupt," without mentioning that hedge funds destroyed them.

In fact, people mostly understand the world through stories. Stories are about heroes and/or villains. If you're talking about a problem and don't name the villain, people won't understand what happened. And that just leaves an opening for the right wing to sell its story that people of color and their "liberal" allies are to blame.

> **Don't say…** *5,000 people lost their jobs at Walmart.*
> **Say…** *Walmart fired 5,000 loyal, hardworking employees to increase profits for the owners.*

*Don't say… 100 demonstrators were arrested.*
*Say… At the mayor's direction, police illegally arrested 100 peaceful demonstrators.*

*Don't say… The new law ends health insurance for 50,000.*
*Say… The Republican governor and legislature took away healthcare coverage from 50,000 residents of our state.*

The passive voice avoids responsibility. E.g., "the deadline was missed," "the wrong email was sent," or as Richard Nixon famously said, "mistakes were made." Don't use the passive voice in a political debate and don't let your opponents use it either. Your audience wants and needs to know who is to blame.

### Third: Don't talk to persuadables the way we talk to our base.

If you are active in politics, then you are at least something of a policy wonk.

All too often, we—the wonks—assume the people we're talking to know what we know and think the way we do. So, we tend to use the same language to communicate with nonpolitical people that we use to talk with each other. Yet, persuadable Americans aren't like us. They're the least interested in politics and least aware of the facts behind public policy. Persuadables simply don't speak our language.

In talking to our less-politically aware fellow citizens, progressive policymakers and advocates tend to make three errors.

First, progressives use insider language instead of plain English. Policymakers and advocates tend to speak the technical language of lobbying and carry on a never-ending conversation about legislation from the past, measures under consideration, and current law. You probably realize that most

Americans don't know anything about CBO scoring, Third Reader or the Rules Committee. But average Americans also don't know an amendment from a filibuster. If you use language that your audience doesn't understand, you are not reaching them.

Second, progressives use ideological language even though persuadables are the opposite of ideologues. You should not complain of *corporate greed* because persuadable Americans don't have a problem with corporations. You should not say *capitalism* or *socialism* because persuadables don't relate to ideology. Like technical policy language, ideological language is a form of shorthand. To persuadable voters, it just sounds like the speaker is from a different planet.

Third, progressives tend to overdo their use of facts and statistics. Cold, hard facts are essential in governing but less effective in public persuasion. Advocates will pack a speech with alarming facts and figures. When you speak this way, you are assuming that listeners would be persuaded—and policy would change—if only everybody knew what you know. But that's not how it works. Politics is not a battle of information; it is a battle of ideas. Facts, by themselves, don't persuade. Statistics, especially, must be used sparingly or listeners will just go away confused. Your argument should be built upon ideas and values that the persuadable voters already hold dear. If you're addressing an audience, a few well-placed facts will help illustrate why the progressive solution is essential, while too many facts will diminish the effectiveness of your argument. If you're speaking one-on-one or in a small group, let your listeners ask for more facts. When people do that, they're helping you to persuade them.

# 5. How to talk about economic policy

Persuadable Americans care far more about economic issues than anything else. They want to know who is going to help them with wages, benefits, bills, debt, health insurance, college loans and the like. To them, such *kitchen table* issues are not about politics; they are about life.

This topic ought to be a slam-dunk for progressives and Democrats. But for at least ten years, most white Americans have believed that MAGA candidates would serve them better. That's astonishing, since MAGA economic policies only serve billionaires and wealthy corporations while progressives and Democrats have been the ones fighting for working people. On the crucial issue of economics, our side is failing.

## Current economic reality

Even though the American economy is strong, individual working families are barely getting by. About 60 percent of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck, more than 40 percent couldn't pay for an unexpected expense of $400, many credit card holders are carrying huge negative balances, and students are leaving college tens of thousands of dollars in debt. In short, only the top five-to-ten percent of Americans are economically secure. But why?

From the 1940s to the late 1970s, the long-term benefits of increased productivity were pretty evenly distributed across people of different incomes. But during the Reagan Administration, real compensation—working Americans' wages and benefits adjusted for inflation—stopped rising. While the economy continued to grow at a rapid pace, typical workers no longer received a fair share of the wealth they helped to create. Instead, nearly all of that money was, and still is, diverted to the rich. Since the end of the Reagan Administration, the richest 10 percent of Americans doubled their wealth, the next 40 percent gained only slightly, and the bottom half gained nothing.

This redirection of wealth to the wealthy was consciously accomplished in myriad ways, large and small. Management pay was exponentially increased, workers' benefits were minimized, key government regulations were amended or abolished, taxes were reduced or evaded, unions were destroyed, corporations sent factory jobs overseas, businesses cut costs by minimizing customer service, and Wall Street embraced money-making schemes that were little more than scams. The wealth that all Americans created together didn't just passively flow to the rich, the rich actively took it for themselves.

Without understanding any of the details, typical American workers know that they have been cheated. They know that, in important ways, their families are worse off than their parents and grandparents were some decades ago, and *somebody is to blame for it*.

Obviously, the right-wing media, owned by and operated for the rich, are not going to talk about this concentration of wealth. But neither will the mainstream media unless our side speaks out strongly. Since we don't, average Americans almost never hear the economic truth, which has enabled the right wing to successfully blame people of color, immigrants, low-income workers and their allies, rather than the real culprits, the rich and the right-wing politicians who made it all happen.

## The Progressive Narrative

For at least a decade, virtually every poll has shown that, if they hear the argument, persuadable voters will agree that the rich deserve blame. It absolutely works. And there are many ways to communicate it effectively. For example:

> *Say... For most working Americans, our economy is broken. To fix it, our policies must benefit all the people, of every race and ethnicity—not just the richest one percent. Our system works when everyone gets a fair shot, everyone gives their fair share, and everyone plays by the same rules.*

Persuadable voters believe in a series of stereotypes about Republicans and Democrats. In economic policy, persuadable voters like the *conservative* concepts of low taxes and free markets but they also believe that Republicans favor the rich rather than the middle class. At the same time, persuadable voters like a progressive who fights for economic fairness, but they also tend to believe that Democrats favor the poor over the middle class.

So, obviously, we need to emphasize that our opponents support the rich while we support the middle class. That does not mean we should lessen our commitment to fight poverty or move our policies to the right, it means we should focus attention on the fact that our economic policies benefit the middle class while our opponents' policies don't.

This is another version of the same theme:

> **Say...** *Our economy is upside down. Most Americans are struggling, while the rich are doing better than ever. We need an economy that works for Main Street, not Wall Street. Every hardworking American should have the opportunity to earn a decent living, receive high-quality affordable health care, get a great education for their children, and retire with security. [Their right-wing policy/candidate] favors the rich, [our progressive policy/candidate] sides with the rest of us.*

It is important to use language that explicitly blames the rich. But you also need to blame the right wing. For example:

> **Say...** *Working Americans need policies that support them. They need leaders who are on their side. Let's be frank. There are simply no MAGA plans to create jobs, increase wages, provide health care, relieve debt, or stand up against big corporations. MAGA policies are nothing but grandstanding and strategies to shovel more and more money to the rich. The billionaires who support MAGA are the*

*ones who broke the economy, and they have no intention of fixing it for you.*

And if you want to go there, especially on tough economic issues like inflation:

> **Say…** *You've got to know that my opponent isn't going to favor you over the rich. His side is controlled by the rich. They haven't even proposed anything that would help you. That's the real difference in this debate. I am on your side.*

Here are some additional phrases about the economy which work together or separately:

> **Say…** *Too often the system is rigged to favor the wealthy over ordinary Americans, or big corporations over small businesses…. It does not have to be that way—we can change the rules…. We need an economy that works for all of us, not just the wealthy few…. To build a strong economy, we need a strong middle-class for everyone, of every race…. It's time to rewrite the economic rules to benefit all Americans, not just the rich and powerful.*

These messages appeal to just about every persuadable American without sounding ideological. That's important because most of them think that "free enterprise has done more to lift people out of poverty, help build a strong middle class and make our lives better than all of the government's programs put together." So don't attack capitalism, condemn economic unfairness.

> **Don't say…** *Capitalism*
> **Say…** *The system isn't working for working families*
>
> **Don't say…** *Free markets, free enterprise, free trade*
> **Say…** *Fair markets, fair trade, level playing field,*

*rigging the rules, gaming the system, stacking the deck, an economy that works for all of us*

If you attack the market system, you marginalize yourself. And don't use the phrases *free markets* or *free enterprise* because, in this context, *free* triggers positive thoughts about conservative economics.

> ***Don't say…*** *Corporations/businesses are bad*
> ***Say…*** *The problem is unfair tax breaks and giveaways to Wall Street speculators, giant banks, and major corporations*

> ***Don't say…*** *anything negative about small businesses*
> ***Say…*** *anything positive about Main Street*

Voters feel good about corporations and businesses—most work for one. And Americans especially adore the concept of Main Street. As pollster Celinda Lake says, "Americans are in love with *small business*. It's a concept that voters see as almost synonymous with America." By small business, they mean family-run businesses with five or perhaps ten employees.

> ***Don't say…*** *Income inequality*
> ***Say…*** *Richest one percent, the super-rich, billionaires*

> ***Don't say…*** *Economic disparity*
> ***Say…*** *All the rest of us, economic injustice or unfairness, the disappearing middle class*

Understand that the rich and big corporations are not unpopular for who they are, but for what they've done. To be effective, you need to connect the bad guy to the bad deed, such as unfair tax breaks, moving jobs overseas, accepting bailouts, or paying outrageous CEO bonuses. Americans expect some people to earn more than others. It's not income

inequality that voters oppose, it is economic injustice, economic unfairness and people who cheat or rig the system.

In fact, conservatives relentlessly warp markets to benefit the rich and powerful. They use subsidies, loopholes, trade policy, labor law and economic complexity to corrupt markets. It is progressives who seek to build *fair markets*. Help voters visualize such a system.

> ***Say…*** *We need an economy that's fair to everyone. That means structuring a system that not only rewards people for hard work and innovation, but also discourages people from gaming the system or passing costs on to the community. We need rules of the road that make economic competition fair, open and honest. A fair market system energizes our economy, creates jobs, and allows every American to pursue the American dream.*

Finally, when talking about economics, don't limit the conversation to income inequality. In our country, the biggest inequalities involve assets.

> ***Say…*** *Our economic system should reward hard work and innovation. That's the American way. But right now, the richest one percent in America own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of Americans combined. The rich don't need more subsidies and loopholes. They need to pay their fair share.*

This is a great way to reframe the overall political narrative away from *culture war* nonsense and toward *kitchen table* economic issues which favor progressives—if only we talk about them.

# 6. How to talk about other key policies

## Civil rights and liberties

*Begin in agreement, for example: What makes America special is our commitment to fundamental rights and freedoms for all.*
*Use values, for example: Freedom, liberty, fundamental rights, fundamental fairness, basic rights, constitutional rights, personal privacy, equal opportunity, equal protection, fairness, stopping discrimination and government intrusion.*
*Show how they benefit, for example: If other Americans lose their rights, you may be next. The only way to guarantee your own rights and freedoms is to protect everyone's.*

Americans are losing their fundamental freedoms. MAGA is banning books, for heaven's sake! They are blocking teachers from talking about sexism, racism, and even slavery. They've enacted state and local laws to criminalize peaceful protests. They're using government power to discriminate against people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. They're banning abortion and curtailing both birth control and in vitro fertilization. And, of course, they're trying to overturn lawful elections and destroy democracy itself.

Freedom is our strongest argument, if only we would argue it. Here is how you might talk about it generally:

> *Say… What makes America special is our commitment to protect fundamental rights and freedoms. Our country was founded on freedom. Americans fought and died to preserve our freedoms. In a democracy, the only way for you to protect your own freedom is to protect everyone's. If someone else's favorite book can be banned, so can yours. If someone else's peaceful protest can be shut down, so can yours. That's why we must [explain your issue]…*

## Climate Change

*__Begin in agreement__, for example: We must protect our own health, safety and quality of life.*
*__Use values__, for example: Security, safety, health, protection, responsibility, quality of life.*
*__Show how they benefit__, for example: We need to act now to protect ourselves, our children and grandchildren.*

At least two-thirds of Americans understand that climate change is a real problem, including an overwhelming percentage of persuadable voters. Those who don't believe in climate change are part of the right-wing base; they are simply not persuadable.

This is an issue where, strangely, persuadable Americans know very little about the facts. Only about one-in-ten Americans understand that there is a strong scientific consensus on climate change, so a Yale study suggests that one fact is especially persuasive: Virtually all climate scientists agree that humans are causing climate change.

> *__Say...__ We must protect the health and safety of our children and grandchildren, and they face a deadly problem. As virtually all climate scientists agree, humans are causing climate change, bringing heat waves, wildfires, higher sea levels, and much more dangerous storms. But we know how to implement clean energy solutions, it just requires political will. MAGA Republicans will do nothing about climate change. If you want to protect your children's health and safety, our side is the only one that will do it.*

If the conversation continues, you might add that 19 of the 20 hottest years on record have occurred since 2000.

## Crime

*Begin in agreement*, for example: The most fundamental job of our city/county/state is to protect people from crime.
*Use values*, for example: Security, safety, protection, responsibility, justice.
*Show how they benefit*, for example: Our policies will make you and your community safer.

When you're talking about crime, don't begin with the ideas of fairness or equal opportunity; don't lead with the underlying causes of crime. Persuadable voters want to know, most of all, that you will *protect* them. In fact, it shouldn't be hard to explain since that's what all good progressive criminal justice policies accomplish—they prevent crime, reduce recidivism and improve the quality of life for everyone in the community.

> ***Don't say...*** *Rights of criminals*
> ***Say...*** *Security, safety, protection, responsibility, justice*

Conversely, right wing policies—like giving long prison sentences to nonviolent drug offenders—take hundreds of millions of dollars away from strategies that more effectively fight drug abuse and prevent crime.

> ***Say...*** *The most fundamental job of government is to protect you and your community from crime. That means arresting and prosecuting violent offenders. It also means preventing crimes from ever happening, changing tactics that often lead toward the wrong suspects, and using the best technology to identify the guilty while protecting the innocent. We need to make you and your community safer.*

Everyone wants safer communities. But what if the progressive policy is specifically about the rights of the accused? For example, what about policies to require electronic recording of interrogations, reform police procedures for lineups, or create commissions to research

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whether imprisoned people are actually innocent? Emphasize that for every wrongly convicted person there is an actual perpetrator who has escaped justice and remains a threat to our public safety. Point out that more modern police practices have been proven to work better than current ones. Say that we owe it to the victim, as well as the whole community, to find and punish the real criminal. For example:

> **Say...** *The whole point of this policy is to protect you from crime. A lot of other jurisdictions get better evidence from suspects and witnesses by requiring that all police questioning be electronically recorded. It protects the innocent and makes it easier to convict the guilty. Technology has rapidly changed, and we should take advantage of it.*

## Environmental protection

***Begin in agreement**, for example: We need to protect the quality of our environment.*
***Use values**, for example: Security, safety, health, protection, responsibility, quality of life.*
***Show how they benefit**, for example: When we protect the environment, we protect the quality of life, not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.*

Nearly all persuadable Americans are worried about the quality of our environment and believe "as a whole, [it] is getting worse." Still, whatever they may believe about national environmental issues, Americans are more concerned about how environmental issues affect them directly. They are worried about their own air quality and local parks, streams and wetlands. So, personalize your language—it's about the *air we breathe*, the *water we drink*; it's about health and safety *for our children.* Here is a generic message that you can adapt to fit issues in your community:

> ***Say...*** *We've got to protect our community's health and safety, and our quality of life. We understand that includes keeping our rivers and streams clean. The Big Bend Project would eliminate a great deal of our pollution problem. This is the time for our county to take the responsibility to preserve the quality of life here, not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.*

Of course, you need to explain how your specific solution delivers the quality of life that voters seek, and some audiences require more facts than others. But don't confuse your audience with too many facts; focus on staying in agreement, voicing your values, and helping your audience understand how they benefit.

## Government regulation

***Begin in agreement***, *for example: We need consumer and employment rules that are fair to everyone.*
***Use values***, *for example: Justice, equal justice, civil justice, equal opportunity, fairness, fair rules, fair markets, level playing field, security, safety, protection.*
***Show how they benefit***, *for example: When we have fair rules that are equally enforced in the marketplace, it provides safety and justice for you and your family.*

Persuadable Americans are cynical about government in the abstract. It is easy to bash *government* and *bureaucracy.* And yet, people favor the benefits of regulation. They strongly favor *enforcing the rules*, *creating a level playing field*, and ensuring that *everyone plays by the same fair rules.* They like the idea that government agencies act as *referees* or a *watchdogs.*

People know that wealthy individuals and huge corporations have corrupted the process. They aren't playing fair and, as a result, small businesses and consumers are being cheated. In short, they want to enforce rules that restrain *Wall Street* without harming *Main Street*. In fact, Americans overwhelmingly agree with the following:

> ***Say...*** *The economic system is too often rigged to favor the wealthy and powerful over ordinary Americans, or big corporations over small businesses. That's an argument for fairer rules and better enforcement. Whether prohibiting big banks from charging hidden fees, stopping polluters, keeping highways safe, or preventing the wealthiest one percent from hiding billions of tax dollars in offshore tax havens—we need fairer and stronger enforcement of our laws and regulations to ensure that everyone plays by the same rules.*

## Government spending

***Begin in agreement****, for example: I support a balanced budget and believe we need to be careful to avoid wasting taxpayer dollars.*
***Use values****, for example: Justice, equal justice, civil justice, equal opportunity, fairness, fair rules, fair markets, level playing field, security, safety, protection.*
***Show how they benefit****, for example: These programs will strengthen our community and, directly or indirectly, they will benefit all of us.*

Most persuadable Americans believe that a large percentage of tax dollars go to waste, although they could not explain what they would cut. In our own way, we—the progressives—agree. We know that a great deal of government money is wasted on direct and indirect subsidies for the rich. Don't be defensive about government spending, explain that you agree that tax dollars are being misspent and that you will fight against waste.

> ***Say...*** *I support a balanced budget for our state/city/county and believe we should not waste a penny. Right now, some government contractors get excessive subsidies and sweetheart contracts, and we've got to crack down against it. We ought to pay fair wages and benefits to workers, and fair prices for projects and equipment. The smarter our spending, the more all of us receive from it.*

Of course, progressive policies often involve the delivery of social services. Arguing for these can be a challenge because we must navigate a minefield of negative stereotypes and preconceptions. When talking about social services:

> ***Don't say...*** *Welfare, safety net, entitlements*
> ***Say...*** *Basic needs, basic living standards, necessities, assistance, support, can't make ends meet*

As you surely know, there is a strong stigma attached to the word *welfare*, so don't use the term. The stigma is connected to the idea that recipients of government assistance are lazy and/or cheaters. Whenever possible, avoid phrases like *safety net* and *entitlements*, and instead talk about *basics* or *necessities*.

Even more important than the way you describe a social services program is how you describe the people who receive services.

> **Don't say…** *Beneficiaries, the poor, people in poverty, welfare recipients, seniors*
> **Say…** *Children, the elderly, people with disabilities, families, workers trying to provide for their families, people in need of temporary assistance*

Outside of the progressive base, it is difficult to convince Americans to support a policy that appears to benefit people other than themselves, their families and their friends. So whenever possible, show voters that they personally benefit from your policy, even when that benefit is indirect. Argue that the policy is for *us*, not *them*.

Also, when you talk about aiding other people, make sure to describe them as deserving. You can explain they are children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. When the recipients are adults, say that they are *hardworking* or *want to work*. And because the programs you support undoubtedly benefit them, freely use the word *families*. We are pro-family; the right wing is not.

Persuadable voters are more strongly moved by a plea framed as protecting people from being *denied* needs, necessities or protections than one framed as *giving* the exact same public service, especially when it's called a right or benefit. So don't talk about *giving* rights or benefits.
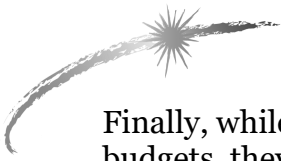
Finally, while Americans usually favor cutting government budgets, they also usually oppose cutting specific programs. They don't want to cut health, education, libraries, parks and recreation, roads and sidewalks, criminal justice or anything else that might benefit them personally. If you're in a back-and-forth discussion about budgets, talk about specific programs and show that the cost of wasteful corporate subsidies far exceeds some particular social policy.

## Gun violence

*Begin in agreement, for example: The most fundamental job of our city/county/state is to protect people from violent crime.*
*Use values, for example: Security, safety, protection, justice.*
*Show how they benefit, for example: A simple, commonsense change in the law would make you and your community safer.*

Persuadable Americans know almost nothing about gun laws and have little idea how easy it is for dangerous people to obtain firearms. They overwhelmingly support background checks and other modest gun laws, and always have.

> **Say...** *The most fundamental purpose of government is to keep our communities safe from violence. But every day, dozens of Americans are murdered, hundreds of others are shot, and about one thousand are robbed or assaulted with a gun. It's not just a horror and shame when little children are murdered in school, gun violence threatens you and your loved ones every single day.*

Then link the problem to whatever solution you're debating. For example, for requiring background checks for all gun sales, say:

> **Say...** *Our communities can't be safe if we allow guns to be sold to felons or the dangerously mentally ill. That's why current law requires that no gun can be sold by a* licensed gun dealer *without a criminal background check. But millions of guns are sold by* unlicensed *sellers at gun shows and through Internet sites with no background check. We need a simple commonsense change in the law in order to cover all gun sales.*

You don't have to argue too hard for this. Americans already agree with us. Pro-gun advocates know that they lose the argument on the merits, so their tactic is to sidetrack the discussion, talking about the Second Amendment, the

technical definition of certain guns, their misperception of what a law does, their bizarre ideas about how other countries' laws work, or proposing an entirely different policy that they claim will solve the problem. So, when you argue with pro-gun people, you must concentrate on steering the conversation back to the specific proposal at hand. Here are a couple of examples:

Pro-gun argument: The solution is to arm schoolteachers.

> **Say...** *You are arguing for the mythical "good guy with a gun." Remember, there were 19 armed police officers in the elementary school in Uvalde, Texas who failed to save the lives of the students and teachers. Both Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Columbine High School had armed deputy sheriffs on duty when their massacres happened. Virginia Tech had an entire police force, including a SWAT team. There were many armed police officers at the Las Vegas massacre. And President Reagan was surrounded by armed police and Secret Service agents when he was shot. Arming somebody simply does not stop the shooting. Let's get back to the real debate over the gun violence legislation that's on the table.*

Pro-gun argument: We should do something about mental health/make parents take responsibility/ban violent video games instead.

> **Say...** *We should make our communities safer. If you've got a good proposal, that's fine. But this is not an either-or debate; one policy does not exclude another. Can we get back to the legislation on the table: why should we sell these guns to any adult, without any background check, no questions asked?*

## Health care

*Begin in agreement*, for example: For decades, our healthcare system has been overpriced and unfair.
*Use values*, for example: Health, health security, safety, protection, quality of life.
*Show how they benefit*, for example: When uninsured people get routine health care at hospital emergency rooms, that high cost is added onto our insurance premiums. So, getting them covered saves money for all of us.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA), otherwise known as Obamacare, has been a huge success. Persuadable voters clearly do not want a change in policy where they would lose their health insurance coverage or any coverage guarantee, pay more in premiums or deductibles, or see a cut in government funding for their healthcare programs.

The key to defending existing healthcare programs is to focus on what Americans will or may lose.

> *Say... For decades, our healthcare system has been overpriced and unfair. Our goal must be to get you—and everyone else—the health care you need, when you need it, at a price you can afford. The [MAGA proposal] would hand our healthcare system back to the big insurance companies, allowing them to deny coverage for essential medical care, jack up premiums for women and older Americans, and make insurance completely unaffordable for anyone with a wide range of preexisting conditions. For the security and health of your family and mine, we cannot allow it.*

Personalize the debate. Say that millions will lose health insurance, but don't reference Medicaid. Focus on aspects of any right-wing policy that would directly or indirectly affect families that get health insurance through an employer. Emphasize over and over that each and every one of their families will likely be harmed if such a proposal is enacted.

When the conversation turns to the uninsured, avoid language about poverty because it evokes negative ideas about welfare. Use the terms *hardworking, families, children*, and *people with disabilities* because these suggest the recipients need and deserve basic medical coverage. And as we have explained elsewhere, it's more effective to say *don't deny them health security* instead of *give them health security*.

Use similar tactics for proactive progressive legislation designed to strengthen the healthcare system. For example:

> **Say...** *For decades, our healthcare system has been overpriced and unfair. Our goal must be to get you— and everyone else—the health care you need, when you need it, at a price you can afford. One crucial step is to minimize uncompensated care. That's when uninsured people get healthcare in the most expensive way, at hospital emergency rooms, and then that cost is added onto our insurance premiums. Getting them covered saves you money.*

Or when progressives address prescription drugs, for example:

> **Say...** *Prescription drug prices are skyrocketing. To protect our health, all of our families need access to medicines that are affordable. No one should ever have to choose between buying medicine or paying their rent. A proposal in our state legislature would [insert].... The bill helps all of us, and for someone you know, it may be a matter of life and death.*

You are welcome to cite facts and figures, and there are a lot of them on this topic. But average Americans are already convinced of the need, you just have to connect their preexisting beliefs about health care and prescription drug prices to specific legislation that requires their support.

## LGBTQ+

**Begin in agreement**, *for example: All Americans should be treated fairly.*
**Use values**, *for example: Freedom, liberty, fundamental rights, fundamental fairness, basic rights, constitutional rights, personal privacy, equal opportunity, fairness, stopping discrimination and government intrusion.*
**Show how they benefit**, *for example: Our communities are stronger, our quality of life better, when everyone treats everyone else with fairness and respect.*

As recently as 2011, a majority of Americans opposed marriage between same-sex couples. Today, more than 70 percent support marriage equality. By a similar margin, Americans reject discrimination against gay and transgender people. Nevertheless, MAGA Republicans are promoting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in nearly every state. They are advocating for discrimination and, in red states, enacting discriminatory laws. In opposing this movement, progressives should use inclusive language.

> **Say...** *This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, be safe in their communities, and take care of the ones they love.*

Persuadable Americans are not aware that, other than same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ people can legally be subjected to discrimination. You must tell them.

> **Say...** *All hardworking people in our community should have the chance to earn a living, provide for their families, and live like everyone else. But in our state/city, it's currently legal to fire employees or refuse to rent an apartment to people just because they are gay or transgender. Nobody should have to live in fear that they can be fired or evicted just because of who they are.*

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Avoid talking about *giving* or *granting* any *rights*, which implies special treatment. Instead, say that we should not *deny* protections, which implies these rights are inherent to everyone.

Finally, we may be sorely tempted to take some swings at our political opponents, to brand them negatively. But it is better to let them negatively brand themselves.

> **Don't say...** *Hate, haters, bigots, bigotry, prejudice, religious extremists, anti-gay Christians*
> **Say...** *Love, standing for love, exclusion, rejection and intolerance, anti-gay activists, radical right activists*

When we make clear that we're on the side of love, our opponents are against love. The implication is enough. Your audience will understand that you believe everyone deserves the same chance at happiness and stability, while our opponents simply do not. For example:

> **Say...** *If America stands for anything, it's equal opportunity for all. If you have two children or grandchildren, and one is straight and the other gay, you still love them equally. You know the government should treat them fairly and equally. That is why [explain your policy solution here...]*

## Public schools

***Begin in agreement****, for example: The public schools serving our families and our communities need to provide each and every child the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential in life.*
***Use values****, for example: Opportunity, equal opportunity, fairness, fair share, level playing field, opportunity for each and every child*
***Show how they benefit****, for example: That's why we need to provide your children and grandchildren, your nieces and nephews, and all the kids in our communities, the very best schools.*

Public education is under attack from conservatives who are, in essence, promoting a corporate takeover of public schools. To push back, you need to understand what Americans think about K-12 education issues.

*On standardized testing:* Most Americans believe there is too much emphasis on standardized testing in schools. *On charter schools and vouchers:* The public is pretty equally divided over charters and vouchers, but Americans overwhelmingly believe "the focus should be on reforming the existing public school system rather than finding an alternative." *On trust in teachers:* Teachers are among the most trusted of all professionals, substantially more trusted than police, judges and clergy, and three times more trusted than lawyers, business executives and stockbrokers. *On the quality of schools:* When asked to grade schools "A, B, C, D or Fail," few say that public schools nationally deserve an A or B, but more than two-thirds of parents would give their local public schools an A or B.

Because Americans like and trust their local schools and teachers, and because voters generally care more about how policies affect their own communities, you should lean heavily on arguments based on how an education policy will impact local schoolchildren.

> *Say… Public schools serving our families and our communities must provide each and every child the opportunity to reach their fullest potential in life. There are no standardized children; every child has different strengths and weaknesses. That's why we need to offer a complete curriculum provided by professional teachers who have the training to give the individualized attention that every child needs.*

The narrative above uses four strategies: (1) Focus on the listener's own children and neighborhood schools rather than education in the abstract. (2) Indirectly push back against the overuse of standardized tests and teaching-to-the-test by explicitly pointing out something that every parent knows: every child is different and requires individualized attention. (3) Change the narrative about school quality measured by average test scores to a narrative about how well our schools provide each and every student the opportunity to learn and excel. (4) Insist that only professional teachers, rather than amateurs or computer programs, have the knowledge and skills to do the job right.

> *Don't say… The nation's schools, high-poverty schools, failing schools, failing teachers, soft bigotry of low expectations, student achievement*
> *Say… Our children, local schools, schools in our community, opportunity to learn, to succeed, teaching-to-the-test, one-size-fits-all, each and every child is different, unique, an individual, professional teacher, teaching profession*

The right wing appeals to Americans' belief in the market system and urges that parents be treated as consumers and schools be run like corporations. But schools are not businesses, teachers are not factory workers, and students are most certainly not products for sale. After two decades of right-wing education policy, there is still no evidence that any of their proposals actually benefit schoolchildren.

Whatever your progressive solution—whether it's smaller class sizes, programs to attract and retain excellent teachers, or a broader and richer curriculum—emphasize the underlying value of equal opportunity and focus on what's best for *each and every child*, which our listeners visualize as their own child or grandchild. If your solution is more resources, specify how you'd use the money: *for art, music, science labs, technology...what every child needs to succeed.* For example, if you are arguing against larger class sizes:

> **Say...** *Each and every child in our community deserves the opportunity to grow up to live a successful life. So every child needs excellent schools and professional teachers. Smaller class sizes help children learn because they allow teachers to spend more one-on-one time with each student, providing the individualized instruction they need.*

Similarly, if you are opposing legislation that would drain resources from local public schools, emphasize that. For example, if you are speaking against spending taxpayer dollars for private school vouchers.

> **Say...** *Each and every child in our community deserves access to an excellent neighborhood public school so that child has the opportunity to grow up and be successful in life. There is a proposal to spend your tax dollars on vouchers for private schools, which would mean less money spent on public schools. There is no credible study that shows vouchers improve student performance. So vouchers are neither wise nor fair.*

Finally, don't repeat the anti-teacher and anti-child message frames. They do not support progressive arguments.

> **Don't say...** *School reform, education reform, run schools like businesses, achievement gap*
> **Say...** *Each child deserves an excellent education, personalized instruction, opportunity gap*

## Reproductive rights

***Begin in agreement**, for example: We need to protect our fundamental rights and freedoms.*
***Use values**, for example: Freedom, liberty, fundamental rights, privacy, dignity, respect.*
***Show how they benefit**, for example: The only way to guarantee our own rights and freedoms is to protect everyone's.*

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson* overturned *Roe v. Wade* and drastically changed the political narrative on abortion rights. MAGA Republicans are now compelled to defend highly restrictive bans on abortion, which are supported by only a minority of Americans. When the issue is positioned as freedom versus extremism, nearly all persuadable Americans side with abortion rights.

Perhaps even more important in political campaigns, single-issue voters now heavily favor abortion rights. Three times as many Americans will *only* vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights than will *only* vote for a candidate who is against abortion. At this point in history, every Democratic candidate should prioritize abortion rights.

The basic message is simple: Abortion rights is a fight for *freedom.*

> ***Say...** We need to protect our fundamental rights and freedoms. In particular, we must have the freedom to make our own personal health care decisions without interference from politicians. So, when someone is considering the very private question of whether to have an abortion, it is the patient, consulting their own doctor, who should decide. And once that patient has made a decision, the government should not intrude.*

Don't back down on freedom as your message frame. Freedom is the most powerful political concept in America. The right wing has made an enormous political mistake by taking away a constitutional freedom that Americans counted on for nearly 50 years. Talk about it!

> **Say…** *The right-wing majority on the Supreme Court revoked the constitutional freedom of Americans to make their own decisions about abortion which was guaranteed by Roe v. Wade a half-century ago. In more than 20 red states, MAGA Republicans have passed laws to eliminate that freedom, punish patients, and threaten doctors and nurses with prison time, even in cases of rape or incest. MAGA has deprived millions of Americans of their fundamental rights. The only way to guarantee our own rights and freedoms is to protect everyone's.*

Here are some other good phrases to use:

> **Say…** *All Americans deserve the freedom to make personal medical decisions, free of government intrusion… We must ensure that Americans can make the decisions that are best for them and their families, free from government interference… We must put these decisions back in the hands of families and their doctors, not politicians… These private and personal decisions belong in the hands of patients, their family and their provider, not politicians.*

When talking about abortion rights, don't repeat the other side's framing, lean on freedom and fundamental rights, and insist that abortion is a medical decision:

> **Don't say…** *Pro-choice, pro-life*
> **Say…** *Freedom, fundamental right, personal decision, medical decision, patient*

Your next step is to raise issues where the MAGA position is even less popular.

> **Say...** *Reversing Roe v. Wade was just the opening act of a larger strategy. MAGA leaders are now targeting in vitro fertilization; their assertion that a frozen embryo is a person would make the entire IVF process impractical. They are also working to limit access to birth control. Our fundamental freedoms are at risk and the only way to preserve them is to defeat MAGA.*

If you are engaged in a debate where persuadable Americans are watching, then push your opponent into their most extreme position. Make it clear to your audience if your opponent favors no exceptions for rape or incest (which is a wildly unpopular position), if they believe that an embryo is a person (which not only wrecks the IVF process but also raises questions about tax law and other laws), and if they oppose emergency contraception (now available over-the-counter) as a supposed form of abortion.

Finally, if you feel like you must try to persuade someone who thinks abortion is immoral or against their religion, try to personalize the conversation.

> **Say...** *Each of us has strong feelings about abortion. We're both trying to do the right thing. I believe that we cannot know all the personal and medical circumstances behind someone's decision. Everyone's situation is different. I believe we should respect every healthcare patient's dignity, allowing them to consult with their own family and act in accordance with their own faith. And once someone has made this very personal and private decision, government should not interfere.*

## Taxes

*__Begin in agreement__, for example: Our tax system is unfair because wealthy individuals and big corporations don't pay their fair share.*
*__Use values__, for example: Fairness, fair share, justice, equal opportunity, level playing field.*
*__Show how they benefit__, for example: It's average Americans who need tax breaks, not rich individuals and huge corporations.*

Americans think that taxes are unfair. By a three-to-one margin, they believe that upper-income people and big corporations are paying too little. You should explicitly declare that tax laws have been engineered to unfairly benefit the rich and special interests. In short, don't defend taxes, defend tax fairness.

> *__Say...__ Our tax system is unfair. The tax burden on working families has increased while rich people and huge corporations have been given tax giveaways and loopholes. That's wrong—everyone should pay their fair share. We need to change the rules to create a tax system that works for all of us, not just the wealthy few. One step is [describe your specific proposal]...*

Don't say *tax relief* because it frames taxes as an affliction in need of a remedy. The problem is not the existence of taxes, it is that federal, state and local taxes are riddled with giveaways and loopholes for the politically powerful. Whatever you do, don't defend the unpopular tax system. And don't begin with a raft of statistics either. Start by agreeing with voters.

> *__Don't say__... Tax relief, taxes are a necessary evil*
> *__Say...__ Tax fairness, tax giveaways and tax loopholes, private tax subsidies, unfair tax system*

No one likes to pay taxes, and persuadable voters don't want to hear a lecture that taxes are the dues we pay for a civilized

society. But people generally accept that they should pay their fair share.

Interestingly, a progressive monologue about taxes becomes less popular if it begins with unfairness and then goes on to say what government could do with more money. This is because persuadable voters don't really believe the government needs more money; they believe one-third to one-half of tax dollars are wasted. Talking about the good things government can do with the taxes it collects also evokes voters' biases against tax-and-spend politicians. So, stick with your plea that the powerful need to pay their fair share.

Here are a couple of claims you may have to deal with:

Right wing argument: Forty-seven percent of Americans pay no federal income taxes.

> **Say...** *Everyone needs to pay their fair share of taxes. And in fact, everyone who earns a salary pays taxes for Social Security and Medicare. Everyone who buys products at a store, or owns a home, pays taxes. Everyone who has a phone or online service pays taxes. When all the federal, state and local taxes and fees are added together, almost everybody except the rich pays about 20 to 30 percent of their income. The richest individuals and largest companies in America do not pay anywhere near their fair share.*

Right wing argument: We're all hurt by the "death tax."

> **Say...** *Everyone should pay their fair share of taxes. If we repealed the tax on inheritance, the system would be far more tilted to benefit the rich. It only applies to the very wealthiest people, and they already have more than their fair share of tax breaks. If you're for tax fairness, you're for keeping the inheritance tax.*

## Voting

*Begin in agreement*, for example: In a democracy, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom.
*Use values*, for example: Freedom, liberty, fundamental rights, basic rights, democracy.
*Show how they benefit*, for example: A modern voting system that is free, fair and accessible makes it quicker and simpler for you to vote.

In general, progressives seek to make voter registration simpler and more accurate and voting more convenient. Right wingers try to make it harder for eligible Americans to register and vote. Your argument is based on freedom, patriotism and the modernization of our outmoded voting systems. Their argument is based on the unfounded fear of voter fraud, often imagined as fraudulent voting by African Americans and immigrants.

Whether you are arguing for a progressive reform or against a right-wing restriction, begin with a statement of your values.

> *Say...* In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. And because we are the leading democracy in the world, our election system ought to be completely free, fair and accessible.

Put the conversation in context. When talking about voting, progressives have two great advantages that are too-rarely used by our side:

First, the most popular and powerful value in political debate is *freedom*. Use it in debating this issue. If voting is understood as a basic right like freedom of speech, then it must be protected. None of our freedoms should be limited without an overriding reason and, in this case, none exists. If you can win the frame that voting is a fundamental freedom, you'll ultimately win the argument.

Second, Americans are proud of American democracy and an appeal to that feeling of patriotism helps to persuade them. For example, here's a narrative that opposes voting restrictions generally:

> **Say...** *In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. And because we are the leading democracy in the world, our election system must be free, fair and accessible for every qualified voter. As we protect election integrity, we cannot infringe on freedom. When the government puts up barriers, it creates long lines for everyone, increases taxpayer costs, and denies the vote to millions of senior citizens and military veterans. Let's stick to efficient and effective ways to keep our elections honest.*

How do we deal with lies about voter fraud?

In the real world, if someone tries to cast a ballot by impersonating an eligible voter or tries to manipulate voting numbers, that's a crime punishable by years in prison. Because the penalty is so severe, this crime almost never happens.

The problem is, the right-wing media has convinced many Americans that voter fraud exists. The best messaging advice is—acknowledge the importance of protecting the integrity of our elections, argue that voting is the most basic right in a democracy, and try to push the debate toward the goal of making elections *free, fair and accessible.* For example, when arguing against voter ID legislation, appeal to freedom and patriotism, and then:

> **Say...** *Protecting the integrity of our elections is absolutely essential. In the process, we cannot infringe on freedom; we cannot deny voters an election that is free, fair and accessible. If we require Election Day precinct officials to scrutinize each and every voter's identification and limit the types of qualified ID to just a few, it will create long lines for*

*everyone, increase election costs by millions of dollars, and make it much harder for Americans who don't have a driver's license to vote—including senior citizens and military veterans. There are more effective ways to keep our elections honest without making it harder for us to exercise our fundamental freedom to vote.*

The narrative makes three points:

1. *Long lines*—In considering any policy, people first want to know how it affects them personally. Voter ID will increase everyone's waiting time at the polls, perhaps by a lot. Let voters understand they will be personally inconvenienced by this law.

2. *Taxpayer costs*—Right now, any unnecessary government spending is unpopular. A photo ID requirement means the government will have to pay to educate voters about the new rules, educate precinct officials, and perhaps pay for staff or machinery in order to speed up the delays it will cause. This may sound like a small point, but it played a big role in winning a Minnesota referendum on voter ID.

3. *Making it harder to vote*—This is the most important argument but, to be effective, limit your examples to the most sympathetic victims. Average Americans can be persuaded by focusing on seniors and veterans who are lifelong voters; often they no longer have valid driver's licenses and they would have a hard time getting substitute ID. Swing voters are less likely to be persuaded by hearing about people in poverty who lack identification.

Do not underestimate the difficulty of the progressive argument. Be mindful of Americans' beliefs and use the best-informed messaging to win them over.

# 7. Freedom, Opportunity and Security

The overall purpose of our Voicing Our Values series of books and materials is to show you—a policymaker, activist, advocate, campaigner or candidate—how to persuade others. Our focus on political *values* is practical—it works.

But that does not mean that progressives should choose their values randomly. Let us take a few steps back and see how a values-based worldview operates, and why it is persuasive.

Consider the *American dream*. Our almost mythical ideal is *not* about a society where government secures the greatest good for the greatest number. Our dream is personal. It's about a poor child delivering newspapers and one day ending up as the publisher. It's about an unskilled worker attending night school and becoming a successful manager. It's about individuals and families practicing their religion without interference, getting ahead through hard work, and being able to retire in security and comfort.

The American dream is the vision of a nation where every individual is given a fair chance to build a successful life. This common vision is both about money—individuals and their families getting ahead, and about self-determination—individuals and their families deciding what to think and how to live. Our dream celebrates the individual.

American individualism goes way back. Benjamin Franklin—the quintessential self-made man—reflected the thinking of his era, "The U.S. Constitution doesn't guarantee happiness, only the pursuit of it. You have to catch up with it yourself." Thomas Jefferson initially made individualism an explicit part of the Declaration of Independence. His first draft stated that "all men are created equal and independent." And throughout the history of our nation, despite great hardships, immigrants traveled here (those who came voluntarily), settlers moved across the plains, and farmers migrated to cities, all to find a

better life for themselves and their families. America has been shaped by this common quest of individual Americans.

Individualism is our nation's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. It drives innovation and progress, but it also consigns millions of Americans to lives spent in poverty. The system doesn't work for many because of our national culture of competition.

Competition is the very bedrock of our governmental, economic, and social systems. Elections and court cases are competitions. School and college are competitions. Our economy is a gigantic, complex competition. Even our ideas of style—attractive clothes, jewelry, furniture, houses—are based on how they compare with others. Obviously, where there is competition there are both winners and losers.

The point is, we can't force a communalistic philosophy on an individualistic nation. Progressives wish that American culture was more oriented toward altruism and community. But it isn't. A realistic progressive philosophy is one that accepts our national culture of individualism and competition and—nevertheless—seeks to make the American dream accessible to all. How can we envision such a philosophy?

## Balance is justice

Imagine a balance scale—the old-fashioned kind with two pans, one suspended from each end of a bar. It's the kind of scale that symbolizes equal justice under law. In a progressive world, the role of government is to help balance the scale when powerful individuals or organizations compete against weaker ones. Government should function as a counterweight on the scale of justice. The greater the disparity of power between competing interests, the greater weight the government must provide to the weaker side.

It is not government's job to ensure that everyone wins every competition—that would be a logical impossibility. Instead, government must ensure that, whenever possible, competition

is both fair and humane. In other words, *justice* is the purpose of government, and in an individualistic society, *balance* is the means of achieving justice.

A system in balance rewards hard work, efficiency and innovation—which benefit all of society, and discourages crime, corruption and schemes to game the system—which rob all of society. As a practical matter, despite all efforts, our system will never be in balance. Justice is a journey not a destination. But we can switch this mighty country onto the right track and open up the throttle to increase its speed.

You may be thinking: Isn't balance an awfully broad principle? How do we apply it?

Here is how. We break down public policy into three situations, where: (1) government has no proper role, (2) government acts as a referee, and (3) government acts as a protector.

## Freedom

Where government has no proper role, because public action would violate individual rights, progressive policy should be based on freedom. By *freedom,* we mean the absence of legal interference with our fundamental rights—freedom of speech, religion and association; the right to privacy; the rights of the accused; the right of all citizens to vote; and the right to equal protection under the law. Compared to an individual, government wields tremendous power, so a progressive policy adds great weight—in the form of strong legal rights—to the individual's side of the scale. For example, freedom of speech is absolutely sacrosanct unless it immediately and directly puts others in danger—"falsely shouting fire in a theater" as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it.

Freedom should be fairly easy to understand—it's a defense of our basic constitutional rights and civil liberties. We include the right to vote because the very definition of *democracy*—rule by the people—requires the unrestricted right to vote. So,

laws that keep American citizens from casting ballots should be eliminated on the grounds that they violate our most fundamental democratic freedom.

(For the purpose of describing a political philosophy, we intentionally adopt a limited definition of freedom, often called "negative freedom." But for the purpose of messaging, you are welcome to use "freedom" more broadly as President Franklin Roosevelt did in describing his Four Freedoms.)

Pollster Celinda Lake explains that, right now, "freedom has been testing very, very strongly.... The strongest critique of MAGA Republicans is that they are taking away our freedom. That message [is also] very strong for mobilization. It mobilizes young voters, African Americans who associate freedom with voting rights and civil rights, and it really motivates women, and younger women, around the abortion issue, and medication abortion."

There is no doubt that progressives believe in freedom. The problem is, until very recently, we have barely talked about it, probably because we thought the right wing claimed it. But they claimed it wrongfully.

For more than 20 years, conservatives have insisted that both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the "war on terror," were in defense of our freedom. But it's not true. Our freedom was never in jeopardy—the Iraqis, the Taliban, ISIS and al-Qaeda, none of them attempted to invade America and control our government. U.S. military and police actions might be said to protect our security, but not our freedom. So don't use the word *freedom* when discussing military adventures—it just provides a false justification for war.

Similarly, conservatives have equated freedom with capitalism. But that's not valid. Our nation's market economy is not free from government control—actually, it is dominated by government. Markets are based on a dense web of laws enforced by multiple layers of federal, state and local agencies. Businesses are not free to sell diseased meat, make insider

stock trades, pollute our air and water, or discriminate on the basis of race, gender or ethnicity. So don't be fooled by the terms *free market, free enterprise* or *free trade,* because they all twist the idea of freedom to support right-wing policies.

Most astonishing is the way religious extremists have employed the word *freedom* to mean the very opposite. They argue that freedom gives them the right to use the power of government to impose their religious views on the rest of us. But when they use government power to ban abortion, discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, ban books, and overturn elections, that is precisely an attack on freedom. Freedom is the *absence* of government intervention where we, as Americans, have fundamental rights.

The right-wing overthrow of *Roe v. Wade* changed the political dynamic on freedom. Persuadable voters are well on their way to understanding that the MAGA movement diminishes freedom, and using this new understanding is excellent politics. Besides, we have a solemn responsibility to guard our rights to freedom. We must shout from the rooftops that freedom is one of our most cherished values. We must remind Americans that Clarence Darrow was right when he said, "You can protect your liberties in this world only by protecting the other man's freedom. You can be free only if I am free."

## Opportunity

Where government acts as a referee between private, unequal interests, progressive policy should be based on opportunity. By *opportunity,* we mean a level playing field in social and economic affairs—fair dealings between the powerful and the less powerful, the elimination of discrimination, and a quality education for all. Competing interests usually hold unequal power, so progressive policy adds weight—guarantees of specific protections—to the weaker interest. For example, unskilled low-wage workers have no leverage to bargain for higher pay. That's why it is up to the government to impose a reasonable minimum wage. Quite simply, when social and

market forces do not naturally promote equal opportunity, government must step in.

Opportunity means, more than anything, a fair marketplace. Although progressives tend to stress the rights of consumers and employees against businesses, opportunity also means fairness between businesses—especially helping small enterprises against large ones—and fairness for stockholders against corporate officers. Individual ambition, innovation, and effort—harnessed by the market system—are supposed to benefit society as a whole. But that can happen only when the competition is fair.

Opportunity also means fair economic transactions with the government. Government should use the scale of justice when determining taxes—obviously a sliding scale where those who have the least pay the least. And when it is the government that is making payments—for contracts, subsidies, public education, and the like—the principle of opportunity dictates that all individuals and companies should have equal access, unless the balance of justice demands a measure of affirmative action.

The concept of opportunity is an easy sell to progressives. And yet, since the Reagan years, we've been losing the struggle to the right wingers who flatly oppose opportunity.

Conservatives have fought against ending discrimination, even though equal treatment is a precondition for equal opportunity. They don't even pretend to support equal opportunity in commerce; instead, conservatives lobby for government favors, no-bid contracts, and economic development giveaways. And right-wingers seek to destroy anything that allows individuals to stand up to larger economic forces, with labor unions, consumer protections, and antimonopoly policies under constant attack.

Our mission is clear. It is to guarantee that all Americans can realize their goals through education, hard work, and fair pay. We must provide every person, not just the privileged few,
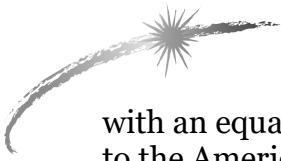
with an equal opportunity to pursue a better life—equal access to the American dream.

## Security

Where government acts to protect those who cannot reasonably protect themselves, including future generations, progressive policy should be based on security. By *security,* we mean protecting Americans from domestic criminals and foreign terrorists, of course, but also insuring the sick and the vulnerable, safeguarding the food we eat and products we use, and preserving our environment.

There is always a threat that larger or unexpected forces will attack any one of us, so progressive policy adds weight, in the form of government institutions and programs, that helps protect us from harm. For example, society has a responsibility to protect the elderly, the disabled, widows and orphans and that's why an aptly named federal program has functioned in that role for more than a half-century—Social Security.

Security can be divided into three categories. First, government should secure our personal safety and health. That includes military and police protection, firefighting, health insurance, medical research, and protection from impurities, pollutants and hazardous waste. Second, government should perform its fiduciary duty to protect individuals who cannot reasonably protect themselves. That includes people who are children, elderly, disabled or mentally ill—as well as future generations. Of course, the weaker the individual, the greater the protection required. Third, government should protect our common future as a nation. That includes building and maintaining infrastructure, using zoning powers to enhance quality of life, and safeguarding the environment.

Progressives support the concept of security, of course. But we usually detour around the word when talking about law

enforcement or national security. Like *freedom,* the word *security* seems to stick in our throats.

Progressives want to jump immediately to collaboration and cooperation, rehabilitation and reeducation. That line of thinking is both destructive and unrealistic. Crime and terrorism are issues of security. Yes, we believe that our policies are the best means to ensure security, but we need to talk about the ends as well. The proper role of government in these matters, and the top priority of officeholders, is to provide security for our communities. To ignore security is to lose the argument.

## America's founding principles

Now that you think about it, don't the principles of freedom, opportunity and security sound kind of familiar?

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

This famous line from the Declaration of Independence is more than a set of high-sounding platitudes—it is an assertion of American political philosophy.

By "Life," Thomas Jefferson and the signers of the Declaration did not mean simply the right to survival, which would suggest that being beaten *almost* to death is okay. They meant a right to personal *security.* By "Liberty," they were referring to the kinds of *freedoms* that were ultimately written into federal and state Bills of Rights, blocking the government from infringing upon speech, religion, the press, and trial by jury, as well as protecting individuals from wrongful criminal prosecutions.

And how do we translate "pursuit of Happiness?" It cannot mean that everyone has the God-given right to do whatever makes them happy. Read "happiness" together with the earlier

part of the same sentence, "all men are created equal." The Declaration of Independence is not saying that people have an unbridled right to pursue happiness; it is saying we have an *equal right* to pursue happiness. In today's language, we'd call that *equal opportunity*.

These are the principles that served as the foundation for American independence and self-government. They are ideals that we learned in school and relearn throughout life.

The whole project of America revolves around eliminating barriers to individual success. In revolutionary times, the monarchy and aristocracy controlled what people could do economically, socially and religiously. All those barriers needed to be toppled so that individuals could live successful and happy lives. Two hundred fifty years ago, eliminating barriers was simpler—just get rid of unjust restrictions. But today, eliminating the barriers to freedom, opportunity and security is more complicated because modern life is more complicated. No one lives self-sufficiently on a farm anymore—everyone relies on everyone else. So today, protecting our rights as Americans requires a more proactive government. But progressives are still pursuing the spirit of the American Revolution.

Put another way, government must employ the historic American concept of checks and balances. When social and market forces do not naturally promote freedom, opportunity and security, we must achieve them through checks and balances supplied by our government. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*: "It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part."

We progressives haven't forgotten the principles that inspired America. But we have misplaced them. And worse, we've allowed right-wing extremists to hijack our ideals and wave them like a flag, rallying Americans to their distinctly un-American cause. It is time to right that wrong.

## Freedom, opportunity and security for all

Let's raise the banner of freedom, opportunity and security for all.

That means we believe society should step into an unfair competition, balancing the scale to help the weaker interest get a fair deal. It means that where government has no proper role, we demand freedom; where government acts as a referee between economic interests, we champion opportunity; and where government should protect those who cannot protect themselves, we call for security.

Every issue of public policy is described by at least one of our three ideals. Abortion, racial profiling and voting rights are about freedom. Equal pay, mortgage assistance and improving public schools are about opportunity. Terrorism, sentencing reform and health care are about security.

Moreover, some issues can be framed by more than one of these ideals. Unemployment insurance is about opportunity (pay displaced workers fair compensation) and about security (protect hardworking people who need temporary assistance). IVF treatment is about freedom (don't let religion dictate to science) and about security (access to modern health care). LGBTQ+ rights are about freedom (don't let religion dictate how people are treated) and about opportunity (prevent discrimination in employment and housing) and about security (protect individuals and families, as well as the children of same-sex couples).

To dig a little deeper, realize that one frame is often a more persuasive argument than another. Generally, *freedom* is the strongest argument, closely followed by *security*, with *opportunity* sometimes a poor third. Let us say that two candidates talk about the issue of crime, one framing it with opportunity (e.g., addressing inequality among the causes of crime) and the other framing it with security (e.g., cracking down on violent criminals). Even in a Democratic primary, all else being equal, the security frame will win.

Now it should be easy to understand why conservatives have called so many of their issues a matter of *freedom* or *security*. The question is, why did we let them get away with it? The war in Iraq, for example, was launched under the banner of freedom and security, but, in fact, the war diminished both. Voter ID laws are promoted as security, but all they do is erode freedom. And the Trump Administration's border wall, offered as security, provided nothing at all.

In sum, here is the political distinction between the left and right. We seek to extend freedom, opportunity and security to all Americans. They work to limit freedom, opportunity and security—to redistribute wealth toward the wealthy, power toward the powerful, and privilege toward the privileged.

Our values are the principles that fueled the flame of the American Revolution. The same torch of American ideals was passed from Jefferson to Lincoln, and from TR to FDR to JFK. So let us stop hiding our glorious light under a bushel.

## About the Authors

**Bernie Horn** is the Senior Director for Policy and Communications at the Public Leadership Institute. He has worked in politics for more than 30 years as a lawyer, lobbyist, political consultant, policy director, and communications trainer.

Bernie is the author of *Framing the Future: How Progressive Values Can Win Elections and Influence People*, published in 2008 by Berrett-Koehler. He was previously a Senior Fellow at the Campaign for America's Future, working on domestic policy and message framing. Between 2000 and 2008, Bernie was Senior Director for Policy and Communications at the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA). Among other things, he wrote CPA's flagship policy books: eight editions of the *Progressive Agenda for the States* and two editions of the *Progressive Platform for the States*.

From 1994 to 2000, Bernie was President of Strategic Campaign Initiatives, Inc., a political consulting firm that helped elect and reelect hundreds of federal, state and local officials. Additionally, he helped win issue campaigns for increased gun control, tobacco taxes, and health care, and against casino gambling and restrictions on abortion.

Between 1988 and 1994, Bernie directed legislative strategy in all state legislatures for Handgun Control, Inc. (now the Brady Campaign), and served as one of the chief lobbyists for the Brady Bill, drafted and lobbied for the federal ban on semiautomatic assault weapons, and conceived the federal ban on handgun sales to minors. Earlier, he was a campaign manager and issues director for congressional campaigns. Bernie is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins University and the Georgetown University Law Center.

**Gloria Totten** is the President and Founder of the Public Leadership Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy and leadership center organized to raise public awareness on key issues of equity and justice and to develop public leaders who will improve the economic and social conditions of all Americans.

Gloria has directed nonprofit organizations and led advocacy and electoral campaigns on the federal, state and local levels for 30 years. From 2001-2015, Gloria formed and ran Progressive Majority with the distinct mission to identify, recruit and elect progressive champions at the state and local levels.

Gloria served as Political Director for NARAL from 1996-2001 and Executive Director for Maryland NARAL from 1993-1996. In her home state of Minnesota, Gloria worked on a number of electoral and issue campaigns, as the Education Director for Pro-Choice Resources, President and Lobbyist for the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Media Chair for It's Time Minnesota!, a campaign that expanded anti-discrimination protections to LGBT individuals under the Minnesota Human Rights Code.

Gloria is chair of the board of directors for Brave New Films, a board member for the New American Leaders Initiative and PowerPAC+ and a steering committee member for the Partnership for the Future of Learning. She is an advisory committee member for Oakland Rising Lead East Bay, ProgressNow, re:Power, and the Women's Information Network.

Gloria was named a "Rising Star of Politics" by Campaigns & Elections magazine and was awarded the "Progressive Champion Award" by Campaign for America's Future and the "Progressive Leadership Award" by Midwest Academy. Gloria is the co-author of *Voicing Our Values: A Message Guide for Policymakers* and *Preparing to Win: An Advocacy Handbook*.

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