

Voicing Our **VALUES**

A message guide
for policymakers

2026 EDITION





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by Bernie Horn and Gloria Totten

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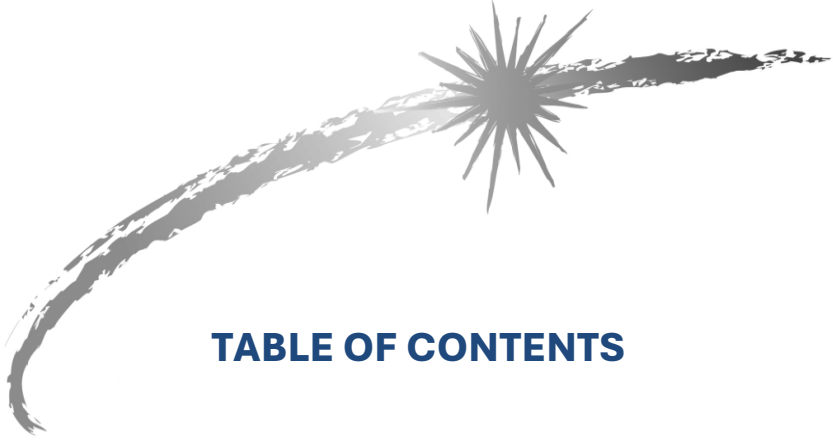


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INTRODUCTION

We are at a turning point in American history. American freedom, democracy, and the rule of law hang in the balance, and our global environment and national security are at stake. If we do our 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.

Politics is the art of persuasion. But, 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 in terms of values, and show listeners how they benefit. At the same time, use language that nonpolitical Americans are willing to hear.

Messaging can be a powerful tool in advocacy and policymaking. A strong message can mobilize voters, influence lawmakers, shape media narratives, and build public will for change. In contrast, a weak or unclear message can lead to confusion, resistance, or inaction. In today's political climate, where misinformation spreads quickly and attention spans are short, you need messages that break through to your audience, the kind that are values-based and memorable.

Throughout this guide, we offer suggested messages to demonstrate what you should and shouldn't say. As you better understand the reasoning behind our language, we encourage you to adapt each example to your own voice. Make it your own. Weave it into your own knowledge and experience. To make that easier, we have posted a Word document on our website containing all the proposed narratives in this book. Feel free to use them as-is or edit them as you like.



Whether you're setting strategy for a policy or public visibility campaign, preparing for a press interview, town hall, or legislative hearing, creating ads, or developing a social media campaign, the advice in this book will help you deliver your messages more effectively.



SECTION ONE

HOW TO PERSUADE



1. You Can't Persuade Everyone

The first thing you need to know about politics is: you can't persuade everyone. Most people have a series of political and policy beliefs they will not abandon, no matter the circumstances.

Political beliefs are strongly shaped and reinforced by two fundamental psychological forces: social identity and confirmation bias.

Social identity is the psychology of dividing the world into us-versus-them, the in-group and the out-group. In our nonpolitical lives, the *us* can be as simple as which sports team a person favors. It can be about an individual's family, college, or country. Being part of a group makes people feel good. It enhances pride and self-esteem, and usually there's nothing wrong with that.

But the far right weaponizes racial, ethnic, and religious social identity. They encourage people to see their in-group as superior while casting the so-called out-group as a threat. This dynamic can become emotionally rewarding; blaming, excluding, discriminating, or even taking satisfaction in the misfortunes of an out-group can feel good. Using fear, division, and misinformation to mobilize the masses is as old as human civilization. Unfortunately, it works.

Confirmation bias, one of the oldest-known and best-proven cognitive biases, is the tendency for people to seek out information that confirms what they already believe or want to believe, while simultaneously ignoring or rejecting information that challenges those assumptions. Through this selective use of evidence, people reinforce their own views and can end up misleading themselves.

Conservatives have always provided selective information to trigger people's preexisting right-leaning beliefs. But in recent years, far-right and MAGA communicators — lawmakers and advisors, influencers and anonymous bots — have reinforced confirmation bias with a firehose of falsehoods. It's deliberate

disinformation that certain people want to believe. Like social identity, they are thrilled to accept lies that support preexisting beliefs. They get a shot of dopamine that literally makes them feel good. (Read more about social identity and confirmation bias in Chapter 22.)

If people hold onto false beliefs no matter the facts, then who is persuadable? The people who pay little attention to politics or have lightly held beliefs.

Persuadable audiences have one overriding but vague political question in mind: “Who is on my side?”

For years, nationwide polls have found that about 40 percent of Americans steadfastly support the MAGA movement, led by President Trump, and their policies. At least 40-45 percent steadfastly oppose MAGA.¹ So, in nationwide policy and electoral campaigns, only about 15-20 percent are persuadable. But in raw numbers, that’s as many as 50 million Americans.

Each state and locality has a different situation, of course. But wherever you are, create messages that appeal to persuadable people, while holding the progressive base.

As a practical matter, this means if you are talking to someone who is not persuadable, end the conversation and move on to someone else. If you are deciding how to reach voters, use all available data

¹ A note about language: When we refer to “MAGA,” we are describing a set of political attitudes and priorities—not a political party or all conservatives. While many MAGA supporters identify as conservative and Republican, the term is widely used in polling and political analysis to describe a distinct subset of views within the broader conservative movement. Our use of the term is intended for clarity and analytical precision, not to characterize or generalize about any party or group.



to target the persuadable ones. In any campaign, time and money are limited, so don't waste them on people who aren't persuadable.

Finally, understand that persuadable Americans cannot really be labeled as "moderates" or "independents." They are not thinking in ideological terms. Rather, they are ordinary people who hold both progressive and conservative beliefs. They support both free markets and regulation, both freedom and strong personal restrictions, both strict and compassionate justice. They don't engage in politics with the emotional intensity of partisans, so they can be persuaded by either set of ideas. Persuadable audiences have one overriding but vague political question in mind: "Who is on my side?" Craft your theme and messages so they appeal to them.

2. Top Three Rules of Persuasion

The key to persuasion is rather simple: agree with your audience. This was explained 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.

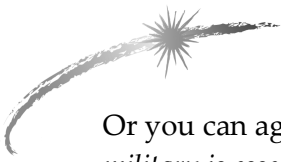
Because confirmation bias makes it difficult or impossible to change people's beliefs, you must use beliefs already in their minds to persuade them that you are on their side. Here are the three best ways to do that.

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 unfair." "I know our children are at risk; I feel that too."*

When your listeners state a specific concern, empathize: *"Yes, we've got to protect Social Security and Medicare." "You're right, the immigration system is broken." "Certainly, cars speed down that street too fast."*



Or you can agree by stating a policy ideal: *“A strong, well-trained military is essential to maintaining our security and stability.” “We must ensure that every highway bridge 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 among the government’s highest priorities.

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 careful with every dollar of 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 hear the rest. Just understand that the people you are trying to persuade are much less likely to care about policy details. If they believe you’re on their side, they are more likely to 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 the rich and powerful pocket more and more tax giveaways. And that’s unjust.*

Almost nobody disagrees with that. Then you might provide a statistic or, far more persuasive, tell a story that illustrates the problem. Finish with a brief explanation of how your policy addresses the problem while staying true to shared beliefs.

When you give a talk, shorten your prepared remarks to allow more time for questions. Listeners will tell you what they care about, and then you will know where to start.

When you are in a direct conversation, listen carefully to what others say. Skip the parts where you disagree and steer the discussion toward the elements where you're on the same side. If someone makes five points and you agree with only one of them, talk about that one. Demonstrate that you understand the problem they are concerned about, that you empathize, and that you share the same policy ideals.

Because of confirmation bias—and the reality that people are often drawing from very different sources of information—avoid telling people they are wrong or that their facts are incorrect. That can trigger a defensive reaction and shut down engagement. (See Chapter 22.) Instead of saying “you’re wrong,” acknowledge their perspective and offer additional context: “There’s more information on this that might be helpful,” or “Here’s what I’ve been seeing from other sources.” A more effective approach is to suggest that, even if their understanding made sense once, new information or changing circumstances may lead to a different conclusion.

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.

Framing is a messaging strategy that directs attention to the part of a political debate where our argument aligns with the audience's preexisting beliefs. It encourages people to view and understand the issue through a particular lens that supports your perspective.

Imagine a mural painted on a wall that illustrates every aspect of a political issue. Framing is the act of placing a picture frame around one section of the mural, pointing to it, and saying, "This is the most important way to view the issue."

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

One of the most powerful ways to frame is by using values.

In politics, values are ideals that describe the kind of society we are trying to build. When you use values, you communicate two things. Because values are, by definition, beliefs that we share with our listeners, you agree with your audience. And values show that, whatever the specific policy you seek to frame, your overall goals are the same.

Despite how deeply progressive policies, positions, and ideology are rooted in widely popular societal values, those connections are not always emphasized in public debate. Here's a brief guide to communicating them more effectively.

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 the 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.

FAMILY OF PROGRESSIVE VALUES

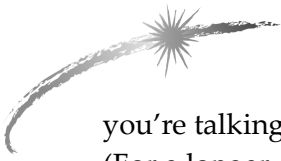
Freedom or similar values: *Liberty, Privacy, Basic rights, Fundamental rights, Freedom of religion, Equal protection*

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*

Polls consistently show that freedom is the strongest word in American politics, and today, more than ever, we need to use it. Progressives have always been comfortable talking about *opportunity*, but our side rarely says the word *security*, even though it is nearly as persuasive as freedom.

Moreover, you can combine these values to convey 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 far right favors these values, but only for some—the affluent, or perhaps, for white people. Progressives insist on providing freedom, opportunity, and security to every American. This language may work even when



you're talking to conservatives; they appreciate the same values. (For a longer discussion, read Chapter 21.)

How do you use values in a conversation?

Imagine you are a 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. But cleaning up that stream isn't really the state legislature's job. Some progressives might launch into an explanation of the clean water legislation they support. A less practiced legislator might say the stream is the responsibility of the city or county, not the legislature. A strong communicator would start by agreeing:

Say... *It's a terrible shame what happened to our stream. It's unsafe. It's unhealthy. It's wrong. And we all deserve better.*

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... *Clean water and safe parklands must be a top priority to protect the quality of life in our community.*

These are values you share with every voter: *clean, safe*, and a better *quality of life*, all of which fall under the category of *security*. At this point, you are welcome to explain your position on clean water policy, but keep it short, as you have probably already won a friend. Persuadable Americans are only listening for one thing: Are you on my side? By using shared values to frame the debate, you demonstrate that you are.

Or imagine you are an advocate promoting a package of social services intended to engage at-risk youth and divert them from crime. Obviously, start in agreement:

Say... We all want to feel safe in our own neighborhood.

Don't start by talking about the needs of these young people, because that can be misconstrued. Demonstrate empathy. Address what concerns the listener—the value of safety. Then you can explain:

Say... *There are promising strategies that protect communities by engaging at-risk young people and diverting them away from becoming offenders. Let's provide security and prevent crime.*

Protection, prevention, and security are all values. You share these goals with every listener. Use them!

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. They'll feel you are on their side, and as [Maya Angelou](#) said, "people will forget what you said...but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Third: Show listeners how they benefit.

Progressives favor policies that benefit society. We want to help the underdog. We wish that most 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 best pollsters, explains that "our culture is very, very individualistic." When faced with a proposed government policy, she says, "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 discussing climate change, emphasize how it affects listeners' children and grandchildren. When arguing for any kind of 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 place the focus on the way your proposal directly helps people experiencing poverty; 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 a higher minimum wage:

Say... *Raising the minimum wage puts money back into our local economy. It eases the burden on taxpayer-funded services. It's a win-win. And it 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 far-right policy hurts the middle class, even if it more directly hurts people with low incomes. Since persuadable voters are nearly always middle-class and want to know how policies affect them personally, you must tell them. In doing so, you are once again staying in agreement and demonstrating that you are on their side.

3. Frame the Choice with a Clear, Consistent Theme

Every campaign requires a clear, repeated central theme to succeed. This strategic theme is fundamental to everything you do. You are choosing the terms of debate, and those terms should highlight both your side's strength and your opposition's weakness.

Don't frame the matter as if you're asking for a favor; show that your campaign or cause is on their side.

A very common mistake is to misunderstand the people you are trying to persuade. Too often, our side offers arguments that appeal to us, the well-informed members of the progressive base. We're persuaded by a heavy dose of facts and statistics. But persuadable people are, by definition, not like us. They haven't paid attention to the situation as we have. They don't care about the question as much as we

do. And they're a lot more concerned about how the matter affects them personally than how it promotes the common good.

Therefore, the most important rule for constructing a theme for persuadable audiences is to show how it fits with their preexisting values and benefits their families, friends, and communities. Put another way, don't frame the matter as if you're asking for a favor; show that your campaign or cause is *on their side*.

Once you have a theme, it should undergird all communications. Shorten it into a slogan for signs and logos. Make it the basis of a stump speech. Prove the theme with a wide variety of messages, both positive and negative. Every message—oral, written, or electronic—should convey that theme.

A theme has three key components:



1. **Core Message** ("What") – *This is the most important takeaway in one sentence.*
2. **Supporting Points** ("Why") – *Only two or three key reasons that reinforce the core.*
3. **Call to Action** ("How") – *A clear, actionable step people can take.*

Here's a policy example. Let us say you're advocating for a state Prescription Drug Affordability Board that sets price limits on essential but expensive medicines.

The Core Message might be:

Medicine that's out of reach doesn't heal anyone.

Supporting Points:

Drugs cost too much, and prices continue to rise... The system isn't fair; people need their prescriptions to survive... There's a system already adopted in five states which works to drive down drug prices.

Call to Action:

Call your state legislators and urge them to support HB 123.

Here's a campaign example for a candidate for city council who is running on affordability and other "kitchen table" issues.

The Core Message might be:

Our city should work for the people, not just the powerful.

Supporting Points:

Too many residents are barely holding on because prices have risen faster than paychecks... There are solutions to make the city more affordable, but instead, our government has regularly paid to favor the wealthy and powerful rather than average

citizens... We need to change the way things are done; we need the city on our side.

Call to Action:

Make sure you get out and vote on [date].

A well-crafted theme ensures that every communication stays focused on your core message, with supporting points and a clear call to action. It gives your campaign consistency, informing your messages across different platforms, including speeches, social media, interviews, and legislative testimony.

We're not asking you to repeat the same words. Use a range of messages, facts, and language, but consistently reinforce the same core theme. You may get tired of saying it, but repetition is what makes a message stick. It's how your ideas break through to the people you are trying to persuade. Practice your core messages until they feel so natural that you no longer need notes.



4. Avoid Common Mistakes in Persuasion

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

As explained earlier, a political debate is usually won by the side with the better frame. So, it is frustrating when progressives accept an opponent's message frame without challenge—but it happens all the time.

Far-right and MAGA groups spend millions of dollars on polls and focus groups testing words and phrases to frame policy debates, then systematically distribute that language to candidates, interest groups, and activists who amplify it across broadcast and social media. In recent years, this machinery has produced broad attack frames—woke, cancel culture, deep state, culture wars—that blame people of color and progressives for the country's problems. But the far right also deploys narrower frames where the words themselves do the arguing, slipping in a conclusion before any case has been made: pro-life, remigration, border security, parental rights, gender ideology, America First, energy independence, death tax, tax relief.

A key pattern worth noting is that many of these frames work by inverting victim and aggressor (minorities are threats, majorities are victims), laundering extremist ideas through bureaucratic or neutral-sounding language ("remigration," "election integrity"), or appropriating progressive values like free speech and parental rights to attack inclusive policies.

Don't repeat their language. When you repeat a frame, you confirm it. Instead, you must reject their frame and replace it with your own.

Today's far-right and MAGA movements are defined less by a consistent governing philosophy than by political strategies aimed at gaining and maintaining power. That explains the bigotry, the xenophobia, and the contempt for democratic norms—not as accidents, but as tools. Most right-wing "dog whistles" work as

shortcuts that let people engage in prejudice while maintaining deniability. "CRT" and "BLM" function as socially acceptable substitutes for older slurs. "Globalist" and "Soros" are acceptable expressions of antisemitism. And QAnon recycles antisemitic conspiracy frameworks that powered their historical predecessors.

Rebutting these one by one is a trap—it accepts their terms. Reframe instead.

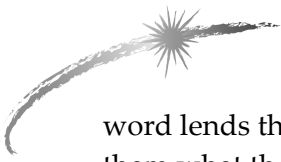
Say... *Americans want their government to make things better. Real goals, like freedom, opportunity, and security for all of us—a fair economy, affordable healthcare, world-class schools, a better infrastructure, a better quality of life. Let's talk about how we get real things done for our community.*

In short, change the subject to issues 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 far right 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. Move to issues where you can show you're on their side.

Don't say conspiracy theory or deep state. MAGA operates as a cult of white victimhood—and since white Americans are not actually an oppressed group, the movement depends on fabricated fears of racial, religious, and gender minorities to sustain itself. Those fabrications include "stolen" elections, COVID/vaccine denial, and "false flags" whenever right-wing violence becomes undeniable.

Resist using the term "conspiracy theory." For scientists, a theory is a well-substantiated explanation built on repeatedly confirmed facts—theories of relativity, germ theory, and evolution. Using the



word lends these fabrications a credibility they haven't earned. Call them what they are: lies, fabrications, or hoaxes. When one surfaces, briefly correct the record and return to real issues—because engaging them at length is itself a victory for the people spreading them.

Don't say nationalist, populist, or authoritarian. These labels flatter by obscuring their real intent. MAGA leaders are glad to be labeled as *nationalists* because it sounds like patriotism. But nationalism as a political movement grew from ethnic and cultural homogeneity—the idea that a nation belongs to one people. That has never described the United States, where 98 percent of residents are immigrants or their descendants. When someone claims to be an American nationalist, what they mean is that the country belongs to white people. Call it what it is: white supremacy, or simply racism.

The use of *populism* spiraled out of control in 2016 following 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*. It's accurate—but "authoritarian" is a technical term like "sternum" or "cloture." Most people don't know exactly what it means, so it loses its power to condemn. Use language persuadable Americans actually feel: MAGA is against democracy, against the rule of law, against checks and balances, against the Constitution, and against the basic freedoms every American is guaranteed. This is not a new fight. What MAGA represents is what the founding generation defeated in the Revolutionary War, and what the Greatest Generation defeated in the Second World War. MAGA isn't patriotism. It's what Americans have always fought against.

Move away from the terms liberal and conservative. Our opponents want us to be called *liberals* because that term doesn't poll very well. In fact, hardly any left-of-center political organizations or leaders call themselves liberal. They mostly call themselves *progressive* and have done so now for decades.

Political leaders in the far-right and MAGA movements call themselves *conservative* because that term polls well. But there are hardly any authentic *conservatives* in public office anymore because the MAGA movement has overrun them. Call them MAGA, far right, hard-right, or the radical right.

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

Leaders along the conservative–MAGA spectrum, as well as 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. It supports the destruction of government and democracy.

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 it's a different world today. When describing events in Congress, it is inaccurate to say *partisanship* rather than *far-right intransigence*. It is inaccurate to suggest that the parties are *polarized* because only one is controlled by extremists. Ideologically, Democrats are not much different from how they were decades ago. 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 simply not factual 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 someone might complain about, at least 40 percent of every generation is already on their side. The people who oppose the policies we support love it when they can get us fighting among ourselves, so we should stop.

Don't fail to blame the villain. All too often, problems are presented as if no one played a part and they just happened. “Abortion rights were taken away,” without mentioning the conservative majority on the Supreme Court or the MAGA legislators who passed an antiabortion statute. “Inflation increased,” without mentioning war or tariffs, or that corporations raised those prices. “RadioShack/Sports Authority/Payless Shoes went bankrupt,” without mentioning that the wealthy, represented by hedge funds, destroyed them.

In fact, people mostly understand the world through stories about

**Name the villain.
Your audience
wants and needs
to know who is to
blame.**

heroes and 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 far right to sell its story that people of color, immigrants, women, and "woke liberals" 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 coverage for 500,000 people.*

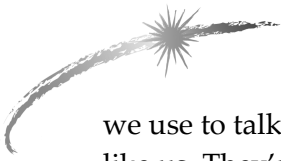
Say... *The Republican governor and legislature took away healthcare coverage from 500,000 residents of our state.*

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 opponent use it either. Your audience wants and needs to know who is to blame.

Third: Don't talk to persuadable people the way we talk to our base.

If you are active in politics, 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 non-political 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. They 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 past legislation, measures under consideration, and current law. You probably realize that most Americans don't know anything about CBO scoring, the Rules Committee, or almost any political acronym. But average Americans also don't know the difference between an amendment and a filibuster. If you use language that your audience doesn't understand, you can't reach them.

Second, progressives use ideological language even though persuadable constituents are the opposite of ideologues. You should not complain of *corporate greed* because persuadable Americans don't have a problem with most corporations. You should not say *capitalism* because persuadable Americans 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 overdo the use of facts and statistics when storytelling is more persuasive. Cold, hard facts are essential for governing but less effective for public persuasion. When you pack a speech with alarming facts and figures, 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 and emotions.

Stories are simply more persuasive than facts. They create connections and encourage action with urgency. Here's an example about [unregulated pregnancy clinics \(UPCs\)](#):

Say... *“When Maria found out she was pregnant, she went to what she thought was a medical clinic. Instead, the staff pressured her, shamed her, and then collected her private information—without even telling her they weren’t licensed medical professionals. No one should have to go through that.”*

Isn't that more compelling than a list of statistics? Besides, if you're speaking one-on-one or with a small group, your listeners will ask for more facts and figures if they want them. When people do that, they're helping you to persuade them.



SECTION TWO

**HOW TO TALK ABOUT
PROGRESSIVE POLICIES**

5. Affordability and Economic Policy

Begin in agreement, for example: *For too many of us, the economic system is broken.*

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: *We need an economy that works for Main Street, not Wall Street.*

Democrats (and many Republicans) are emphasizing “affordability.” That makes sense because the cost of child care has increased by 40 percent, rents by 50 percent, and home sale prices by 80 percent since 2017. Grocery prices have increased 30 percent, and overall inflation has risen 26 percent since the start of the pandemic. Some families with ACA health insurance have seen their prices quadruple.

About 60 percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck, more than 40 percent couldn’t pay an unexpected \$400 expense, many credit card holders are carrying huge negative balances, and students are leaving college tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

Of course, Americans have always been most concerned about economic issues that impact them personally, the so-called “kitchen table issues.” Americans have always wanted to know who will help them with wages, benefits, bills, debt, health insurance, college loans, and the like. To them, these are not about politics; they are about life. (For more depth about economics, read Chapter 23.)

Without understanding any details, typical American workers know that they have been cheated in two ways. In the short term, prices have skyrocketed while wages have remained stagnant. Over the long term, workers and their families are worse off than their parents and grandparents were. And they know that somebody is to blame for it.



Short term: More than 70 percent of voters believe that Trump's tariffs on imports have increased how much they pay. And 90 percent are concerned about high gas and fuel prices caused by the war. So, you don't have to convince Americans; you need to remind them:

Say... *Through his trade tariffs and his war on Iran, Donald Trump has increased the prices you pay for almost everything. And who has stopped him? All the conservative federal, state, and local officials who have refused to push back against these unprecedented tariffs and this ill-conceived war share responsibility for driving up the cost of living.*

While Trump is the current leader of the MAGA movement, many others are now lining up to take his place. So don't simply blame Trump—you need to lay the blame for bad policies at the feet of the movement and all the leaders who drive it. In addition, Americans need to understand that the MAGA foreign policy strategy drives up all prices, not just gasoline and imported electronics. People will quickly understand if you explain:

Say... *Trump's tariffs and the war's effect on oil are driving up all the prices you pay. Tariffs are, in effect, federal taxes that you end up paying. A shortage of petroleum products drives up the prices you pay. But the war has also driven up fertilizer costs, which in turn raise food prices. And every product must be transported, which now costs more, and you will pay for it. Quite simply, to protect all our families, the Trump/MAGA foreign policy must be stopped.*

Long term: This ought to be a slam-dunk for our side, but most Democrats have been unwilling to criticize wealthy individuals and big corporations. We need to say something like this:

Say... *The corporate owners and operators are the ones who raised your prices. They fund the far-right conservatives in office. Far-right policies make them richer. If you care about*

affordability, you must understand that the ultra-rich and their friends in elective office are not on your side.

The far right and MAGA understand that people are hurting and want someone to blame. So they have, quite successfully, blamed people of color, immigrants, low-income workers, and their “woke” allies. Not coincidentally, this diversion of responsibility away from the rich is funded by the rich.

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

Say... *For most working Americans, our economy is broken. To fix it, our policies must benefit all people, not just the richest 1%. Our system works when everyone gets a fair shot, everyone gives their fair share, and everyone plays by the same rules.*

Persuadable voters will agree that the billionaires and wealthy corporations deserve blame.

Persuadable voters believe in a series of stereotypes about Republicans and Democrats. In economic policy, persuadable voters favor conservative ideas of low taxes and free markets, but they also believe that Republicans favor the rich over the middle class. At the same time, persuadable voters like progressives who fight for economic fairness, but they also tend to believe that Democrats favor people

experiencing poverty over the middle class.

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 fighting poverty or shift our policies to the right; it means we should focus on the fact that our



economic policies benefit the middle class while our opponents' policies don't. It's a matter of framing.

This is another version of the same theme:

Say... *Our economy is upside down. Most Americans are barely getting by, while the rich have never had it better. We need an economy that works for Main Street. Not Wall Street.*

For average Americans to understand the story, it is essential to use language that explicitly calls out the rich, MAGA, and the far right:

Say... *Virtually everything that Trump and MAGA have done or plan to do is a giveaway to billionaires. They've cut taxes, provided subsidies, reversed rules, and eliminated government staff expressly for the benefit of billionaires. We should all be worried about this.*

And:

Say... *Americans need leaders who are on their side. Let's be honest about something: MAGA and far-right leaders do not have plans to create jobs, raise wages, expand health care, relieve debt, or rein in big corporations. 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... *My opponent is not going to favor you over the rich. Billionaires like Elon Musk control their side. They haven't even proposed anything that would actually help you. That's the real difference in this debate. I am on your side.*

Gallup rated Musk the least popular prominent figure in the U.S., and he's not going to become popular. How do you add facts or

statistics to this argument without losing your audience? Here's an example:

Say... *Our economic system is rigged to favor the rich over all the rest of us. At the same time that Trump and MAGA cut the Affordable Care Act and multiplied healthcare costs for middle-class families, they also gave ten times as much money to the rich in tax breaks. The problem is not a lack of money; it is unfair priorities. They put the rich first, while I put you first.*

That narrative sandwiched a fact between two expressions of values. Here are some additional phrases about the economy that 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.... It's time to rewrite the economic rules to benefit all Americans, not just the rich and powerful.*

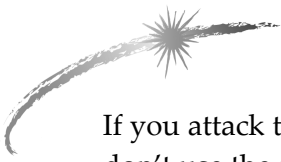
These messages appeal to just about every persuadable American without sounding ideological. That's important because most of them think that "free enterprise has done more to lift people out of poverty, help build a strong middle class and make our lives better than all of the government's programs 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 they frame economics in our opponents' favor.

Don't say... *Corporations/businesses are bad*

Say... *The problem is unfair tax breaks and giveaways to Wall Street and Silicon Valley speculators, giant banks, and huge corporations*

Don't say... *anything negative about small businesses*

Say... *anything positive about Main Street*

Voters feel good about corporations and businesses—they work for them, use their products, and they are ubiquitous in their lives. But 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."

Don't say... *Income inequality*

Say... *The 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 billionaires 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 financial gains, exploiting workers, accepting bailouts, data mining, 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 rewards hard work and innovation—and holds accountable those who cheat the system or pass their costs onto the rest of us. A fair market system energizes our economy, creates jobs, and allows everyone the opportunity to pursue the American dream.*

Finally, when talking about economics, don't limit the conversation to income inequality. In America, 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 1% in America own about 10 times more wealth than the bottom half 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 wars* toward *kitchen-table* economic issues, which favor progressives—if we talk about them.



6. 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. Focusing on [how Independents feel](#) about federal taxes, 63 percent say lower-income people are paying too much, 55 percent say middle-income people pay too much, 57 percent believe that upper-income people pay too little, and 70 percent say corporations pay too little. Interestingly, one-third of Republicans also think upper-income people pay too little, and nearly half of Republicans say corporations pay too little in taxes.

A [different poll](#) found that 86 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of Independents, and 32 percent of Republicans believe that taxes on billionaires are too low. Overall, nearly two-thirds of Americans, including nearly all persuadable citizens, favor “increasing income tax rates for [upper-income Americans](#).”

So don't be shy in discussing taxes. Declare that tax laws have been engineered to unfairly benefit the rich, who should pay their fair share. 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 are getting 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 the 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 the government can do with the taxes it collects also evokes voters' biases against so-called 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 percent of Americans pay no federal income taxes.

Say... Everyone should pay their fair share in taxes. And in fact, everyone who earns a salary pays Social Security and Medicare taxes. 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 got rid of the inheritance tax, the system would tilt even further toward the wealthiest. This tax only applies to the very richest families in America—people who already have every tax advantage available. It's not fair to you and your family.*

7. Government Regulation

Begin in agreement, for example: *We need economic 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: *Fair rules that are equally enforced in the marketplace provide you and your family with both safety and justice.*

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 *watchdogs*.

Lake Research Partners asked Americans, “Do you think that increased enforcement of our national laws and regulations is a good thing or a bad thing?” They answered that it is a “good thing” by a margin of 71 to 14. And state regulation is even more popular than federal enforcement. More than two-thirds dislike it when laws and regulations are not “equally” or “fairly” applied.

Lake Research gave respondents a choice between two narratives. The conservative narrative was:

Protecting consumers is important, but government regulation has gone too far, leading some politicians to think government is the answer to every problem. Increased regulation, bureaucratic red tape, mandates, and uneven enforcement hold back economic growth and destroy jobs. America was built on the free market and free enterprise. Forcing entrepreneurs, small business owners, and citizens to submit to arbitrary government regulations puts all the power in the hands of out-of-touch bureaucrats. It raises the costs of goods and services at a time when we can’t afford higher prices.



That's a generous description of their message. The progressive narrative was this:

Say... *We need to ensure that everyone plays by the same fair set of rules. But today, the system is often rigged to favor the wealthy and powerful over ordinary Americans. Whether it's stopping prescription drug companies from overcharging patients, prohibiting hidden credit card fees, or eliminating tax loopholes for special interests—we need stronger enforcement to ensure that you and I are treated fairly.*

Given this choice, Americans agreed with the progressive narrative by a margin of 80 to 16. That's a landslide. It means this is a powerful way to frame our arguments.

Persuadable people...want to enforce rules that restrain Wall Street without harming Main Street.

There's no doubt that persuadable people believe that the rich and powerful have corrupted the system. 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*. Here's another way to state the progressive position:

Say... *The economic system has been rigged to favor the rich and powerful over ordinary Americans, or big corporations over small businesses. That's why we need fair rules and strong enforcement.*

8. Government Services

Begin in agreement, for example: We have a responsibility to protect innocent children in our communities.

Use values, for example: *Justice, equal justice, civil justice, equal opportunity, fairness, fair rules, fair markets, level playing field, security, safety, protection, quality of life, responsibility.*

Show how they benefit, for example: *This program will strengthen our community and benefit all of us.*

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, can't make ends meet*

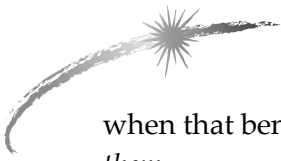
As you know, there is a strong stigma attached to the word *welfare*, so don't use the term. The stigma is connected to the trope that recipients of government assistance are lazy, cheaters, or both. Whenever possible, avoid phrases like *safety net* and *entitlements*, and instead talk about *basics*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

Say... *America is a great nation. Part of what makes us great is that we look out for each other—for children, older adults, people with disabilities, families hit by disaster, and hardworking people who need a hand up, not a handout. Providing a little security to people in need benefits all of us by strengthening our economy and our society.*

When you talk about helping others, make sure to describe them as deserving of help. You can explain that they are children, older people, or people with disabilities. When the recipients are adults, say that they are *hardworking* or *want to work*, because they are. And because the programs you support undoubtedly benefit them, use the word *families* freely.

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 same public service, especially when it's called a right or benefit. So don't talk about *giving* rights or benefits.

Finally, if you are talking about federal government services, turn around and go on the offensive. Americans agree that the current Administration is wasting enormous amounts of taxpayer money. For example, **Americans strongly oppose:** \$3.3 trillion in new tax cuts for the rich; giving Argentina a \$40 billion bailout; tripling ICE's budget to nearly \$30 billion; building a new White House ballroom; and buying private jets for the Secretary of Homeland Security. Pick three of your favorite examples and use them.

9. 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.*

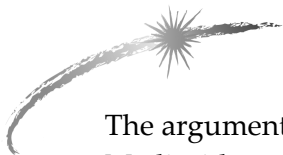
Show how they benefit, for example: *When uninsured people get routine health care at hospital emergency rooms, that high cost is added onto our insurance premiums. So, getting them covered saves money for all of us.*

As the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has come under attack by the Trump Administration, it **has become more popular than ever**. Similarly, Americans overwhelmingly support Medicare, and **about 75 percent**, including 60 percent of Trump voters, support Medicaid. Persuadable voters do not want to lose their health insurance coverage or any guarantee of coverage, pay more in premiums or deductibles, or see a cut in government funding for their health care programs.

The key to persuasion is to focus on what they will or may lose.

Say... *For decades, our healthcare system has been overpriced and unfair. Our goal is to keep you and your family safe: the health care you need, when you need it, at a price you can afford. They 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.*

You must personalize this debate. You can say that millions will lose health insurance, but focus on any conservative or far-right policy that would directly or indirectly affect middle-class families. Emphasize repeatedly that members of their families will likely be harmed if such a proposal is enacted.



The argument is even easier when it focuses on Medicare and Medicaid.

Say... *Medicare and Medicaid are essential to our families and our nation. We need the security that health insurance provides. And yet, the MAGA “Big Beautiful Bill” triggers massive cuts in both Medicare and Medicaid. We need to stop cutting programs that are crucial to our families and our communities.*

When the conversation turns to the uninsured, avoid language about poverty because it evokes negative tropes 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* rather than *give them health security*.

Don’t say... *Them, the poor, people in poverty, give health insurance*

Say... *You and your family, children, people with disabilities, hardworking Americans, don’t deny the security of health care*

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 most expensively, 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:

Say... *Prescription drug prices are out of control. And a drug that's out of reach doesn't heal anyone. Every family deserves access to the medicines they need. No one should have to choose between filling a prescription and paying the rent.*

You are welcome to cite facts and figures; there are many 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 policies that require their support.



10. Public Schools

Begin in agreement, for example: *Our public schools need to provide 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 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.

Americans overwhelmingly support increasing teacher pay, addressing teacher shortages, banning cellphone use in classrooms, expanding career and technical education programs, and implementing security measures to keep teachers and students safe.

On other issues with a sharp partisan divide, we must look to Independents to gauge what persuadable Americans believe. Two-thirds of Independents oppose Donald Trump's plan to eliminate the Department of Education, while 23 percent support it. By a two-to-one margin, Independents think DEI programs are important in public education. Almost three-fourths of Independents are satisfied with their own child's education. And when asked to grade schools on a scale of "A, B, C, D, or Fail," Independents rate schools in their own community 30 points higher than schools nationwide.

Because Americans like their local schools and teachers, and because voters 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 must provide every child the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. There are no standardized children; every child has different strengths and weaknesses. That's why we need to offer a comprehensive curriculum delivered by professional teachers trained to provide the individualized attention every child needs.*

You should lean heavily on arguments based on how an education policy will impact local schoolchildren.

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: each 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 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. Another version:

Say... *Public schools serving our families must give every child real access to an excellent education—an accurate, comprehensive, and relevant curriculum delivered by professional teachers who are trained to meet each student where they are. There are no standardized children. Every child has different strengths and different ways of learning. Only skilled, trained teachers have the knowledge to provide the individualized attention every child deserves to grow and reach their full potential.*

This keeps the focus on students rather than systems and concludes with values.



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, every child is different, unique, an individual, professional teacher, teaching profession*

Conservatives appeal to Americans' belief in the market system and urge that parents be treated as consumers and that 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 conservative education policy, there is still no evidence that any of their proposals benefit students.

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 *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... *Every child in our community deserves the opportunity to grow up and live a successful life. Every child needs excellent schools and professional teachers. Smaller class sizes help children learn by allowing 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 on private school vouchers.

Say... *Every child in our community deserves an excellent neighborhood school—fully staffed, well-resourced, and ready to help them succeed. Voucher programs drain money from those schools to subsidize private institutions that aren't accountable to taxpayers, don't have to follow the same rules, and can turn families away. There's no credible evidence that vouchers improve student outcomes. What they do is weaken the public schools that serve most of our kids. Let's invest in schools that belong to all of us.*

This narrative opens with shared values, names harm, discusses accountability, and ends affirmatively.

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*



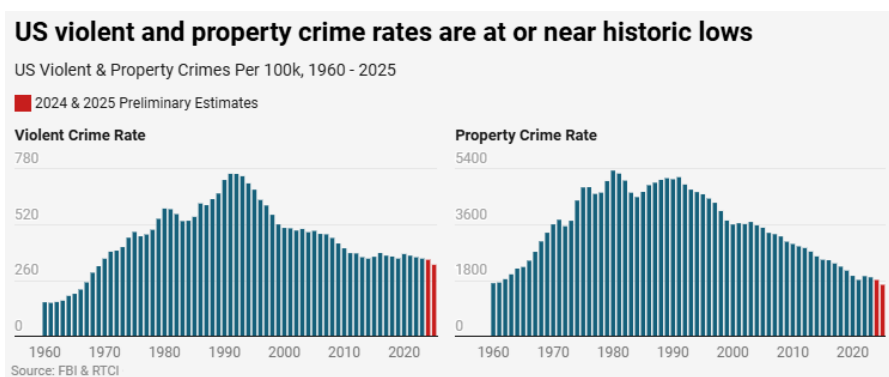
11. Crime

Begin in agreement, for example: *Our city/county/state needs to keep you safe 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.*

Let's begin by understanding the truth about crime. U.S. violent and property crime rates have fallen to levels not seen since the 1960s. ("Violent crime" means murder, aggravated assault, rape, and robbery. "Property crime" means burglary, general theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.)



"2025 likely had the lowest reported murder and property crime rates ever recorded by the FBI and the lowest violent crime rate since the late 1960s," according to [an analysis of FBI data](#).

Unfortunately, you can't persuade with that clear crime data because many Americans are constantly exposed to alarming crime stories on their local news, political rhetoric, and misleading information that make crime feel more widespread than the numbers actually show.

Nevertheless, please check the data for your state or locality, because your crime rates are probably about half what they were 30

years ago. Just [looking at homicide](#), all these cities had historically low murder rates in 2025: Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, Oakland, Philadelphia, and San Francisco; New York City had the fewest shooting victims ever recorded. So, there's a good chance you can say:

Say... *Our police department reports that the rate of violent crime is now lower than it has been in the past three decades. That's a public safety victory that we should build on, not discredit.*

If you don't bring up low crime as a reason to defund the police and instead use it to praise law enforcement, persuadable residents might be willing to believe the facts.

Nationally, about [half of Americans believe](#) that "there is more crime in the U.S. than a year ago," which is false. And that same half still considered crime an "extremely" or "very" serious problem in 2025, but at least that is down from 77 percent who said the same thing in 2023. It's fair to say that hysteria about crime has diminished, but it remains a major issue.

Whenever you're talking about crime, do not begin with ideas of fairness or equal opportunity, and don't lead with the underlying causes of crime. Persuadable voters want to know, most of all, that you will *protect* them. And 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 basic job of government is to protect you from crime. That means arresting and prosecuting violent offenders. It also means preventing crimes from ever happening, changing tactics that lead toward the wrong suspects, and using the best technology to identify the guilty while protecting the innocent. My overriding goal is to make you 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 whether imprisoned people are 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 traditional ones. Say that we owe it to the victim and to the whole community to find and punish the real criminal. For example:

Say... *The whole point of this policy is to protect you. Other cities and states have found that electronically recording all police questioning leads to better evidence—and more convictions. Technology has rapidly changed, and we need to take advantage of it to make you safer.*

12. Gun Violence

Begin in agreement, for example: *Too many communities have been hurt by gun violence.*

Use values, for example: *Security, safety, protection, justice.*

Show how they benefit, for example: *A commonsense change in policy 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. Yet, **they overwhelmingly support** background checks for all guns, prohibiting dangerous people from buying guns, waiting periods for purchasers, holding parents responsible if their children commit crimes with the parents' guns, and other modest gun laws. And they always have.

Say... *The most fundamental purpose of government is to keep our communities safe from violence. But every day, communities and families across [state/city] are devastated by gun violence. And that means we are all at risk.*

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

Say... *Our communities can't be safe if we allow guns to be sold to felons or people with recent histories of violence. Right now, millions of guns are sold by unlicensed sellers at gun shows and through Internet sites with no background checks. A simple commonsense change in the law would cover all gun sales and make us all safer.*

You don't have to argue too hard for this legislation because Americans are already on our side. Because pro-gun advocates know that they lose on the merits, they spend much of their time trying to sidetrack the discussion. So, when you argue with gun



advocates, you must concentrate on steering the conversation back to the specific proposal at hand. Here are a few examples:

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

Say... *We all want to keep schoolchildren safe. But your “good guy with a gun” is a myth. There were armed police or security guards at many of the school and university massacres. There were six police officers and a swarm of security guards protecting Charlie Kirk when he was shot and killed. President Reagan was shot when police and Secret Service agents surrounded him. Arming somebody does not stop the shooting. Let’s focus on the best way to decrease gun violence.*

Pro-gun argument: We should do something about mental health or violent video games instead.

Say... *We all want to make our communities safer. If you have a strong proposal on mental health or other factors, that’s worth discussing. But this isn’t an either-or choice—one approach doesn’t exclude another. The real question is: if we know that setting a minimum purchase age of 18 would help reduce suicides—the leading cause of gun deaths—why wouldn’t we take that step?*

Pro-gun argument: The Second Amendment forbids the proposed gun law.

Say... *I support the Second Amendment—and the entire Constitution. The Supreme Court has been clear: reasonable gun laws are constitutional. That settles the legal question. Now let’s talk about saving lives.*

Pro-gun argument: This proposed gun control law wouldn’t have stopped [a particular crime or massacre], so it’s not worth enacting.

Say... *The priority is to make residents safer. As we all know, no law is 100 percent effective. The law against murder doesn't stop all murders. The laws that lowered blood alcohol levels for driving didn't stop all drunk driving. This policy will not stop every gun crime, but it will save lives in the future. Let's get back to talking about saving lives.*



13. Immigration

Begin in agreement, for example: *What makes America special is our commitment to freedom and justice for all.*

Our 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: *The millions of immigrants who have lived in our country for many years, who work hard and play by the rules—they make our economy stronger, which benefits all of us.*

First, understand that immigration is probably the most partisan issue in America. **Almost half of Republicans** would deport all unauthorized immigrants—more than ten million people who overwhelmingly have jobs, pay taxes, obey laws, and have lived in the U.S. for decades. Almost no Democrats would deport them.

So **polling “all Americans”** sheds very little light on the persuadable universe. Our best clue is to see what “Independents” believe. Only one in five Independents would deport all unauthorized immigrants. Only 18 percent of Independents think diversity makes our country a worse place, while 52 percent think it makes our country better. And in early 2026, more than 70 percent of Independents said that the tactics used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (**ICE**) **had gone too far**. This was *before* some of ICE’s worst abuses.

Our base is justifiably livid over ICE and the militarization of cities under the guise of immigration enforcement. You must speak out or risk losing our base.

Say... *ICE is out of control—and it’s endangering all of us. They have killed immigrants and American citizens alike, people of color and whites. They are violating the Constitution, federal and state laws, and the most basic rules of policing. None of us should live in fear of our own government. We must stop it.*

In fact, in any immigration debate, you should probably turn it into a debate about ICE. Persuadable people are **nearly as disapproving of ICE** as our base is.

Say... *In our country, law enforcement officers need to follow the rules. But ICE doesn't. ICE is targeting people who have committed no crime at all; they're arresting children, even toddlers; they're arresting law-abiding U.S. citizens; and they're using excessive force because they're unqualified and untrained. ICE is a threat to all our freedoms. If we don't stop them now, your family and your friends could be their next victims.*

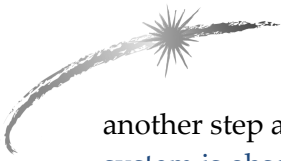
Focus on what Americans already see, that is, violence and rule-breaking by ICE. You don't need to explain policy solutions here, but you are welcome to connect the militarization of our cities to Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, and the like.

When you're talking about the broader issue of immigration, emphasize people who work hard and play by the rules:

Say... *America is a nation of values, founded on the idea that every one of us has the right to freedom, justice, and fair treatment under our Constitution. The millions of immigrants who have lived in our country for years—who work hard and play by the rules—they strengthen our economy, benefiting all of us. That's why [the solution you advocate]...*

Right-wing advocates want to make this debate about crime, saying or implying that unauthorized immigrants are, by definition, criminals. Don't help ingrain those ideas by repeating them, and don't use the word *illegal* even to make the entirely truthful statement that "no human is illegal."

Nothing you say is going to sway the MAGA or far-right base. In a one-on-one conversation, it is futile to keep arguing with an anti-immigrant stalwart. But, for persuadable voters, you can take



another step and address the real problem: that **our immigration system is obsolete.**

Say... *Our immigration system is a mess. It should be fair. It should embody justice. We need an immigration process that recognizes the value of people who have lived here for years, worked hard, and played by the rules. We need a system that keeps families together, creates a roadmap for those who aspire to become citizens, and strengthens our economy for decades to come.*

Move the conversation away from individual immigrants who are portrayed as bad people, to the real problem: a bad immigration system. The word choices in these short examples require some explanation.

Don't say... *Illegal aliens, undocumented immigrants, migrants*

Say... *Unauthorized immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, new American immigrants, aspiring citizens*

Don't say *aliens* because that implies they are different from *us*, which is inaccurate, dehumanizing, and offensive. Don't say *illegal* because it suggests that they are criminals deserving of punishment, which is false. *Undocumented* has been tested and, unfortunately, does not work. If you need to be more specific, you can say *unauthorized immigrants*. On the positive side, polling *new American immigrants* and people who *aspire to citizenship* moves the conversation in a productive direction.

If you are talking about asylum seekers from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (known as the Northern Triangle, one of the most dangerous places on earth), Venezuela, Afghanistan, or Somalia, don't call them "migrants." They are "refugees." Refugees have rights under both U.S. and international law. They are in no way "illegal" — rather, their asylum applications comply with the law.

No matter their legal status, Americans are not inclined to *give* anything to immigrants, but at the same time, persuadable Americans generally don't want to *deny* rights or necessities. So, frame your arguments accordingly. For example, if you are arguing for "Dreamers," children who have lived almost their whole lives in the U.S.:

Say... *We should reward hard work and responsibility. When young, aspiring Americans graduate from a local high school after living here for years and staying out of trouble, we should not deny them access to opportunity.*



14. 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 our families.*

More than 80 percent of Americans believe in climate change, although less than two-thirds say it's the result of human activity. Only six percent say the world's climate is not changing.

At the same time, when asked about their most important issues, Americans name inflation/prices first, followed by jobs/economy and health care. Climate change/environment is ranked 12th.

Americans don't have to be convinced that climate change exists; they need to believe the issue is crucial.

So, Americans don't have to be convinced that climate change exists; they need to believe the issue is crucial. At the same time, many of our side's leaders seem to have decided that climate change is too controversial a topic—it was **hardly mentioned** in the last national elections.

Persuadable Americans' views on climate change are closer to those of Democrats than to those of

Republicans. But, like so many issues, persuadable people know very little about the facts. A Yale study suggests that there is one especially persuasive fact: **Virtually all climate scientists agree that humans are causing climate change.**

Say... *We have a responsibility to protect our families—and right now, they face a real threat. Virtually all climate scientists agree that humans are causing climate change. That means more heat waves, more wildfires, rising seas,*

and more dangerous storms. We know how to respond. Clean energy solutions exist, and they work. But it takes political will—and far-right leaders have none. If you want your family to be safe, we are the only ones who will fight for it.

In this debate, Americans need to know who is to blame. It is the corporations that put profits ahead of our survival.

Say... *Governments are not doing enough to stop climate change because corporations don't want to diminish their profits, even a little. But we've got to put our families' safety and security ahead of profits.*

A conservative might argue that we need to “drill baby drill” for the American economy. Here is the answer:

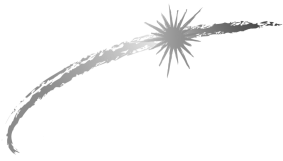
Say... *An over-reliance on fossil fuels endangers our nation's economy and its national security. Renewable energy is the future. If America is to remain strong, then we cannot allow China and other countries to dominate the renewable energy market as they do now.*

This is both truthful and it appeals to patriotism. Overall:

Don't say... *Them [other people's communities]*

Say... *Us, our families, our safety, our security and health, our quality of life*

Climate change is one of the two or three greatest threats in the world. It's up to us to persuade people of its importance.



15. 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.*

Environmental protection is under attack from the Trump Administration and the big energy companies. The Trump Administration is weakening EPA regulations on clean air and water, permitting the destruction of wild lands by mining, oil, and timber companies, firing federal employees who regulate pollution and manage federal lands, and much more.

The Trump Administration can do this because [three-quarters of Republicans](#) believe that “stricter environmental laws and regulations are not worth the costs.” Before the 1990s, environmental protection was a top priority for Republicans — conservation was conservative. But times have changed.

Yet, [persuadable voters](#) still tend to think the environment is “getting worse” and support stronger environmental protections. Nearly all Americans are concerned about environmental issues when they believe they affect them directly. They worry 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 our quality of life. That starts with clean water—clean rivers and streams we can actually use. And we need to do it now to preserve our quality of life, not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.*

Of course, you need to explain your solution, and some audiences will ask for more facts than others. But start on common ground, voice your values (health, safety, clean water, quality of life), and help your audience understand how they benefit.



16. 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, justice, 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: *When other Americans lose their rights, you may be next. The only way to guarantee your own rights and freedoms is to protect everyone's.*

Civil rights ensure that all people are treated equally and protected under the law, regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristic. Civil liberties guarantee that our Constitution protects fundamental human rights.

The individual circumstances that require protecting civil rights and liberties tend to be unpopular. It's unpopular to defend the rights of criminals, and it's often unpopular to defend minorities.

On the other hand, Americans favor the values behind civil rights and liberties. Freedom is the most popular political idea in America. But also very popular are equal protection, fundamental fairness, justice, and other foundational concepts that we learned as children.

Right now, Americans are losing their fundamental freedoms. Trump is criminalizing the right to protest. His Administration has arrested reporters doing their jobs. He penalizes individuals because of their race, religion, or national origin. In the states, the MAGA movement has been banning books, censoring teachers, and discriminating against people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. And, of course, they're trying to overturn lawful elections and destroy democracy itself.

This is happening because Republican base voters have been deluged with lies, and now they believe them. On the issue of race, only about **half of Republicans** say Black, Latino, and/or Asian people experience discrimination, while about 90 percent of Democrats think so. In contrast, 55 percent of Republicans think that white people suffer discrimination, while only 21 percent of Democrats think so. In other words—incredibly—Republicans are more likely to say that white people face discrimination than Blacks, Latinos, or Asians face discrimination.

On religion, **70 percent of Republicans** believe “religious chaplains providing support services in public schools should be allowed,” 60 percent of Republicans say “teachers leading a class in prayer should be allowed,” and almost 50 percent of them say “a mandatory period during school for private prayer and religious reading should be allowed.” 40 percent of Republicans favor “religious exemptions for childhood vaccines that are required for students to attend public schools.” While 86 percent say, “freedom of speech is important,” and 81 percent think “freedom of religion is important,” only 55 percent of Republicans think “the separation of church and state is important.”

Freedom is our strongest argument:

Say... *What makes America special is freedom. Our country was founded on it. Americans fought and died for it. 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]...*

This softer opportunity-based argument may work better with some audiences:

Say... This is about fundamental fairness. It's 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. That's why we must...

In talking about rights, don't make it sound like you're giving any group special benefits.

Don't say... *Granting rights or special benefits*

Say... *Freedom, following the Constitution, fairness, equal opportunity, due process*

Use inclusive language that applies to everyone. Here is a narrative that flips the far-right narrative on its head:

Say... *We all work hard for our families, no matter where we come from or what color we are. Many of us are struggling to make ends meet. Now, some politicians want to blame immigrants and people of color when it's the rich and powerful who control our corrupt economic system. We need to join together—all of us—to fight for our future. That's how we won better wages, safer workplaces, and rights for everyone. That's how we can elect new leaders who work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.*

This isn't going to change MAGA minds. But it can move persuadable Americans who already have some understanding that they're being manipulated by racially charged language or policies. Perhaps more importantly, it energizes people in the progressive base who are organizing to hold elected officials accountable and to create a better country.

17. 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, about [68 percent support marriage equality](#), but that figure masks a gigantic partisan gap. While 88 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of Independents support marriage equality, only 41 percent of Republicans do.

Worse, [only 34 percent](#) of Republicans “oppose allowing a small business owner in their state to refuse to provide products or services to gay or lesbian people, if doing so violates their religious beliefs.” So, most Republicans believe it’s okay to refuse service in a store or restaurant because of the customer’s sexual orientation. That’s heartbreaking.

In opposing the movement toward overt discrimination, 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, despite marriage equality, LGBTQ+ people can still be legally subjected to discrimination. So, tell them:



Say... *Every hardworking person in our community deserves the chance to earn a living, raise a family, and live like everyone else. But in our state, you can still be fired—or denied a home—just because of who you are. That’s not right.*

Say that we should not deny protections, which implies these rights are inherent to everyone.

Avoid talking about *granting* or *giving* any *rights*, as this 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 want your family, doctor, and babysitter to treat them fairly and equally—you deserve to be able to count on your government for the same.*

18. 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. The entire right is now bound 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, persuadable Americans side with abortion rights.

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

Say... *We need to protect our fundamental rights and freedoms—including the freedom to make our own personal health care decisions without politicians interfering. When someone faces the deeply private question of whether to have an abortion, that decision belongs to the patient, and the government should not interfere.*

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

Say... *The far-right 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* more than 50 years ago. In more than 20 red*



states, conservatives have passed laws to eliminate that freedom, punish patients, and threaten doctors and nurses with prison time, even in cases of rape or incest. The far right 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.*

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 conservative position is even less popular.

Say... *Reversing Roe v. Wade was just the opening act of a larger strategy. Extreme conservative leaders are now going after in vitro fertilization (IVF). Their claim that a frozen embryo is a legal person would effectively end access to IVF for millions of families trying to have children.*

If you are engaged in a debate where persuadable Americans are watching, then push your opponent into disclosing their most extreme position. Make it clear to your audience if your opponent favors no exceptions for rape or incest (which is a highly 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... *We both have strong feelings about abortion. We're both trying to do what's best for families. 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 patient's dignity, allowing them to consult with their own family and act in accordance with their own beliefs. And once someone has made this personal and private decision, the government should not interfere.*



19. 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 simplify and improve the accuracy of voter registration and to make voting more convenient. Leaders on the far right try to make it harder for eligible Americans to register and vote. Your argument is based on freedom, patriotism, and modernizing our outdated voting systems. Their argument is based on an imagined fear of voter fraud.

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

Say... *In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. And because we are the world's leading democracy, 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 for 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 (mostly) proud of American democracy, and an appeal to that patriotism helps persuade them. For example, here's a narrative that opposes voting restrictions generally:

Say... *In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. We are the world's leading democracy—and our election system should reflect that. It must be free, fair, and open to every qualified voter. As we protect election integrity, we cannot infringe on freedom.*

How do we deal with lies about voter fraud?

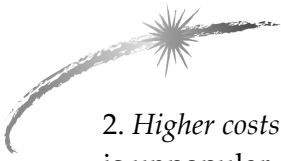
In the real world, if someone tries to cast a ballot by impersonating an eligible voter or tries to manipulate voting numbers, that's a [crime punishable by years in prison](#). Because the penalty is so severe, [this crime rarely happens](#).

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

Say... *Protecting election integrity is essential – no question. But we cannot protect elections by taking away the freedom to vote. Every barrier the government puts up creates longer lines and higher costs for you and me. That's not protecting democracy. That's undermining it.*

The narrative makes two points:

1. *Long lines* – In considering any policy, people first want to know how it affects them personally. Voter ID and limiting early or mail-in voting will increase everyone's waiting time at the polls, perhaps by a lot. Let voters understand this law will personally inconvenience them.



2. *Higher 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 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](#).

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

20. Democracy and the Rule of Law

Begin in agreement, for example: *In America, no one is above the law.*

Use values, for example: *Freedom, liberty, basic rights, fundamental rights, equal opportunity, equal protection, justice, fairness, every American.*

Show how they benefit, for example: *When we honor and follow our nation's fundamental rules, every one of us has rights, opportunities, and protections.*

The [polling here is unambiguous](#). More than 90 percent of Americans in both parties — an unheard-of polling number — believe preserving the rule of law is important or essential, according to the World Justice Project. Americans don't believe press coverage critical of the president should be illegal; they don't believe judges should be impeached for disagreeing with the administration; and they prefer policies to change through legislation rather than through unilateral executive orders. Americans don't need to be persuaded to support the rule of law and democratic norms. They already do. Often, they just want to be reminded of what's normal and what's not.

The far right is dismantling the separation of powers, attacking the free press and an independent judiciary, replacing political discourse with lies and threats of violence, and treating the law as something that applies to other people. This is without precedent in American history — a wholesale rejection of the system itself, driven by the conviction that power is the only thing that matters.

How do we talk about democracy to people who don't know much about our nation's history or politics? Simplify your language. Don't rebut their lies one by one — that accepts their terms. Say instead:



Say... *In America, no one is above the law. Everyone has the same rights and responsibilities. If one person or group had the power to ignore our laws and do whatever they want, we wouldn't be the same America. You and I are the beneficiaries of these fundamental rules; they give us rights, opportunities, and protections.*



SECTION THREE

**HOW TO PRESENT
AND REFUTE**



21. How to Understand and Use Values

The overall purpose of our message framing 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 progressives should choose their values at random. Let us look at the big picture 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 an underprivileged child who delivers newspapers and, one day, ends up as the publisher. It's about an unskilled worker who attends night school and becomes a successful manager. It's about individuals and families practicing their religion without interference, getting ahead through hard work, and retiring 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 about both money—individuals and their families getting ahead—and 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, saying, “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.” 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. This common quest of individual Americans has shaped the nation.

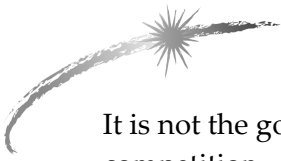
Individualism is our nation's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. It drives innovation and progress, but it also consigns millions of Americans to lives spent in poverty. The system doesn't work for many because of our national culture of competition.

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 were more oriented toward altruism and community. But it isn't. A realistic progressive philosophy 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 scales when powerful individuals or organizations compete against weaker ones. The 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 the government's job to ensure that everyone wins every competition—that would be a logical impossibility. Instead, the 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 to achieve it.

Justice is the purpose of government and, in an individualistic society, balance is the means to achieve it.

A system in balance rewards hard work, efficiency, and innovation, which benefit society, and discourages crime, corruption, and schemes to game the system, which rob society. As a practical matter, despite all efforts, our system will never be in balance. Justice is a journey, not a destination.

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 the 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 sacrosanct unless it immediately and

directly puts others in danger — “falsely shouting fire in a theater,” as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it.

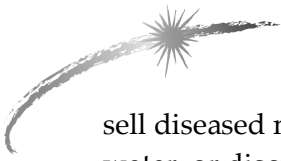
Freedom should be easy to understand — it’s a defense of our basic constitutional rights and civil liberties. We include the right to vote because the very definition of *democracy* — rule by the people — requires the unrestricted exercise of that right. So, laws that prevent American citizens from voting should be eliminated because they violate our most fundamental democratic freedom.

Pollster Celinda Lake explains that “[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 that, until very recently, we barely talked about it, probably because we thought conservatives claimed it. But they claimed it wrongfully.

For more than 25 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 ventures — 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 — in fact, it is dominated by the 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 based on 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 far-right 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 government power 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 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—in the form of guarantees of specific protections—to the weaker interest, like the right of workers to form unions. Or consider that unskilled low-wage workers have no

leverage to bargain for higher pay, and 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, above all, 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. 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 far right, which flatly opposes opportunity.

Conservatives have fought in favor of 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 conservative movement leaders 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 and 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 older adults, people with disabilities, surviving spouses, and parentless children, and that's why an aptly named federal program has functioned in that role for more than 90 years—Social Security.

Security can be divided into three categories. First, the 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, the government should perform its fiduciary duty to protect individuals who cannot reasonably protect themselves. That includes children, seniors, and people with physical or mental disabilities—as well as future generations. Of course, the more vulnerable the individual, the greater the protection required. Third, the 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 foreign policy. 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 security issues. Yes, we believe our policies are the best way to ensure security, but we also need to talk about the ends. 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.

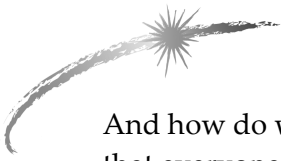
America's founding principles

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 meant the *freedoms* ultimately enshrined in federal and state Bills of Rights, barring the government from infringing on speech, religion, the press, and the right to 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 innate 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 does not say that people have an unbridled right to pursue happiness; it says we have an *equal right* to pursue happiness. In today’s language, we call that *equal opportunity*.

These principles 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.

Put another way, the 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

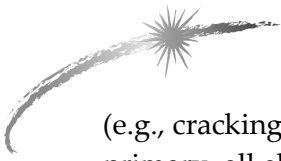
Let's raise the banner of freedom, opportunity, and security for all.

That means we believe society should step in to address unfair competition, balancing the scales to help weaker interests 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 public policy issue 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 (paying displaced workers fair compensation) and about security (protecting 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 discuss crime, one framing it in terms of opportunity (e.g., addressing inequality as a cause of crime) and the other in terms of 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 measures, but they do nothing more than erode freedom. And the first Trump Administration's border wall, touted as a security measure, provided nothing.

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

Our values are the principles that fueled 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.

22. How to Understand Social Identity and Confirmation Bias

For most of the 20th century, political science and economics relied on the premise that people base their opinions and choices on facts and logical reasoning. More recently, though, thousands of studies have shown that people rely on emotion and ingrained beliefs far more than they do on objective facts or logic.

To understand persuasion, we must grasp two key psychological principles that are driving political beliefs in democracies around the world: social identity and confirmation bias.

Social identity is the psychology of dividing the world into us versus them, the in-group and the out-group. Science tells us that a great deal of people's self-image comes from their **social identity**.

Two key psychological principles are driving political beliefs...social identity and confirmation bias.

An *in-group* can be something as uncomplicated as which sports team a person supports. It can be an individual's family, college, or country. Being part of the group makes people feel good. It enhances pride and self-esteem, and usually there's nothing wrong with that. But MAGA supporters also enhance their self-image by denigrating *them*, the out-group. Individuals get an emotional thrill by blaming, discriminating

against, or cheering the **misfortunes of their out-group**.

MAGA is a movement of grievance against non-whites. It employs a **myth of white victimhood**, an imagined decline from a past greatness supposedly 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 justify policies that repress and harm 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! Owing the libs!”) MAGA leaders, in turn, praise followers for that crudity, cruelty, and violence, releasing them from all constraints of law, reason, and decency – from hurling inane insults to physically assaulting opponents. No matter who is attacked or who dies, Trump and MAGA never admit wrongdoing or apologize.

We need to understand the thrill MAGA supporters feel. When they celebrate being in the MAGA world, they get a shot of dopamine, the feel-good hormone, in their brains. And when they denigrate MAGA’s opposition, that gives them an even bigger dose. It is like a gambling addict; one thrill makes them want another and another.

A different, but related, way people ignore facts and logic is through cognitive biases that skew human reasoning.

Confirmation bias, one of the oldest-known and **best-proven cognitive biases**, is the tendency for people to seek out information that confirms what they already believe or want to believe, while simultaneously ignoring or rejecting information that challenges those assumptions.² Through this selective use of evidence, people reinforce their own views and can end up misleading themselves.

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 have fallen to historic lows. (See Chapter 11.) 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

² We use this term generically, as others do, to encompass associated labels which describe how people irrationally confirm and defend their beliefs and desires, such as *motivated reasoning*, *desirability bias*, and *disconfirmation bias*.

that Friday the 13th is unlucky, they will pay attention and remember when bad things happened on that date, but will forget all the Friday the 13ths when no misfortune occurred.

In short, when faced with facts that strongly contradict their 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.

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. Their brain will perceive your words as an attack, they will feel a strongly negative emotional reaction, they will then remember and focus on the very real-to-them fake news that supports their belief in voter fraud, and you will have no chance to persuade them 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 negative emotional responses in our listeners, reminding them of memories that reinforce those emotions. We are arguing with ghosts from our listeners' pasts — and often losing.

Clinical psychologist Drew Westen of Emory University used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine brain activity in 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 also help emotionally reward partisans for their stubbornness, deepening their attachment to false ideas.

The leaders of the MAGA movement understand this. They know their supporters aren't seeking the truth, so the truth doesn't really matter. MAGA supporters are, instead, consciously or unconsciously seeking out information that conforms to their

preexisting beliefs. They believe what they want to believe because it literally feels bad to admit one is wrong and feels good to assert one is right.

In sum, MAGA-style social identity and confirmation bias are real psychological processes, similar to addiction. And like a drug or gambling addict or an alcoholic or smoker, supporting Trump and MAGA is a form of self-harm. MAGA policies—like tariffs, cutting the social safety net, and eliminating employment and environmental protections—directly hurt MAGA supporters and their families. MAGA policies drive up costs and drive down incomes. But like people with an addiction, they keep supporting MAGA because it feels good. And they need to feel good because, for some of them, reality can be bleak.

The far right will keep doing what works: using social identity to stoke bigotry—through overt racism, sexism, and religious intolerance, and through coded language designed to appeal to audiences already primed to believe them. And they will keep manufacturing false narratives to audiences they have already convinced that the other side cannot be trusted.



23. How To Argue Against Conservative Economics

The MAGA/Trump economic message, directed mostly at non-college-educated whites, is that MAGA sides with them while progressives side only with people of color. We must take back the economic narrative by asserting that progressives stand with middle-class and low-income Americans of all backgrounds, including communities of color, while conservatives and the far right side with the wealthy.

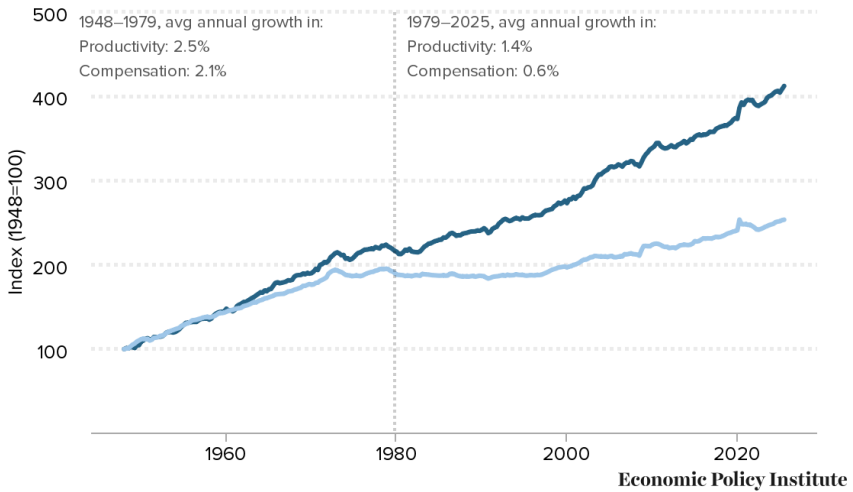
Let us first understand some economic realities.

Even in times when the overall U.S. economy seems good and the stock market is strong, average American families barely get by. About 60 percent of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck; more than 40 percent couldn't pay for an unexpected expense of \$400; on average, credit card holders are carrying negative balances of more than \$8,000; and students are leaving college tens of thousands of dollars in debt. In short, only the richest Americans are economically secure. But why?

From the post-war period into the Nixon Administration, workers got a fair share of the wealth they created through increased productivity.

The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2025



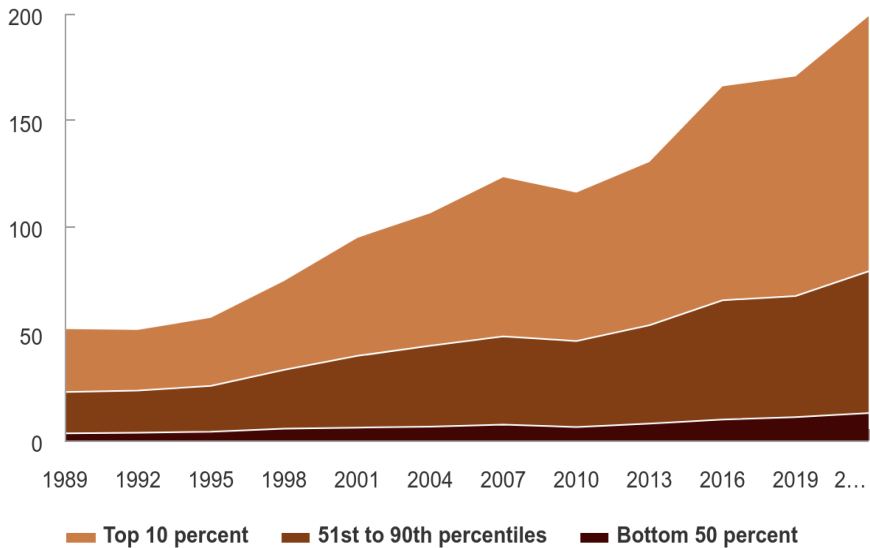
But starting in the 1970s and accelerating further during the Reagan Administration, real compensation (that is, wages and benefits adjusted for inflation) stopped rising. From 1980 to 2025, while productivity doubled, workers received only one-fourth of the new wealth while the rich skimmed off the other three-fourths.

This can also be seen another way. The chart below demonstrates that since the end of the Reagan Administration, the richest 10 percent of Americans tripled their wealth and now own 60 percent of all assets in the U.S. Of this, the top 1 percent—about 3.5 million people—owns 27 percent of all wealth, while the other families within the top 10 percent own 33 percent. The bottom half of Americans—about 170 million people—own only three percent of all wealth, mostly in home equity.



Total Family Wealth, by Wealth Group

Trillions of 2022 dollars



Source: Congressional Budget Office, *Trends in the Distribution of Family Wealth (2024)*

This concentration of wealth was not a normal function of “the market.” The redistribution of wealth to the wealthy was intentionally carried out in myriad ways, large and small. Monopolies were built, management pay was exponentially increased, workers’ benefits were minimized, key government regulations were amended or abolished, taxes were evaded, unions were destroyed, corporations sent factory jobs overseas, businesses cut costs by minimizing customer service and instead making their customers do part of the work, and most recently, the wealthy embraced money-making schemes that are little more than scams. The wealth that all Americans created together didn’t just passively flow to the rich; they actively took it for themselves.

This economic shift is what underlies the popularity of both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Without knowing any of the details of these charts and statistics, typical American workers feel that they

have been treated unfairly, that their families are worse off than they were decades ago, and *somebody is to blame for it*.

A [Hart Research poll](#) demonstrated the importance of explicit language by asking persuadable voters which candidate they would support in two circumstances. When given a choice between a Republican who “will grow the economy” and a Democrat who “will make the economy work for all of us,” these voters chose the Republican by 55 to 45 percent. But when given the choice between a Republican who “will grow the economy” and a Democrat who “will make the economy work for all of us, *not just the wealthy*,” they chose the Democrat by 61 to 39 percent. By explicitly indicting the wealthy, the Democrat gained 16 points.

American markets are not, and never were, free of government influence.

So, there are two keys to winning the economic debate. One is to point out that Americans are being victimized by the rich, and we’ve provided many ways to do that in Chapter 5. The other key is to insist that economics is about “fairness” and other values in the “opportunity” family, rather than about “freedom.”

For more than 50 years, conservative philosophy has used the language of *free-market* economics, a fairy tale about a place that does not exist. American markets are not, and never were, free of government influence.

We’re all familiar with some of the laws that police markets to protect employees, consumers, stockholders, and competing businesses. The government inspects food and drugs, keeps unsafe consumer products off the market, regulates air and water pollution, requires minimum safety and health standards for employees, prevents monopolies, protects consumer privacy, insures bank deposits, and so on.



Americans are less familiar with how governments warp markets on behalf of the rich and powerful. To name just a few: direct subsidies (like farm subsidies), indirect subsidies (like loan guarantees), tax abatements (for construction), tax credits (for many special interests), and tax loopholes. Governments may overpay favored firms or industries for construction, products, or service contracts, or allow unconscionable cost overruns; governments set up markets with only a few privileged owners (like the gambling industry).

Now more than ever, wealthy interests that fund the far right want markets distorted to their advantage. The question is not whether the government should be involved in the marketplace. It is. The question is, what principles should guide the government's involvement?

We suggest that progressives favor "fair markets." By fair, we mean markets that are balanced — with government as a counterweight when necessary — so that weaker individuals and organizations compete on a reasonably equal basis against more powerful ones. In many cases, balancing markets doesn't require more government involvement. It requires less: removing the subsidies, loopholes, and other unfair advantages that some individuals and businesses enjoy over others.

It is fair markets that would do the most to lower prices, spur innovations, and encourage the kind of hard work that benefits all of society. In contrast, society does not benefit — instead, everyone loses — when people get rich by gaming the system, exploiting tax or regulatory loopholes, dismantling viable companies, or creating scams that aren't technically illegal but should be. (Chapter 5 provides narratives to help explain an economy that's fair to everyone.)

24. How You Say It Matters as Much as What You Say

You may have the best political ideas in the world and employ the best messaging, but still communicate ineffectively because of a failure in non-verbal communication.

In face-to-face communication—whether you are giving a speech, making a fundraising pitch, or talking to neighbors at their doors—*what you say* can be overridden by *how you say it*. That's because your listeners rely on non-verbal information, like body language and verbal tone, to determine what you *really* mean.

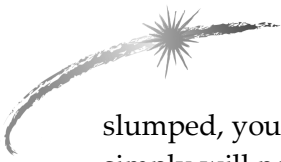
A famous study by Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA, found that an audience interprets a speaker's message:

- from visual clues (facial expression and body language) about 55 percent of the time;
- from tone of voice about 38 percent of the time; and
- from the speaker's actual words only about 7 percent of the time.

Mehrabian's work also demonstrated that when a speaker's words and non-verbal messages conflict, the audience consistently defaults to the non-verbal. There are several common situations where this research is important to you.

First, when people are trying to decide whether they *like* you, they will pay most attention to your non-verbal expression. Politics is a popularity contest of sorts, and whether you win or lose often depends on whether people like you enough to listen.

Second, when people are deciding whether to *trust* you, they will again pay most attention to non-verbal cues. For example, if you use strong words about a policy problem but your shoulders are



slumped, your hand gestures are weak, and your voice is high, they simply will not trust what you are saying.

Third, when people are trying to decide whether to *believe* what you are telling them—because they aren't familiar with the facts of the matter—they focus on non-verbal “proof” of the matter. This is particularly important when communicating with persuadable Americans, as they pay the least attention to the nuances of politics or policy.

Fourth, if people *disagree* with your position on an issue, they will still use non-verbal cues to make up their minds about you. For example, they may disagree with particular facts or ideas but decide to support your side anyway because you come across, non-verbally, as a stable and trustworthy person.

We all use our emotions to help us decide what to think. Often, we first form an opinion based on our emotions and then look for facts to support it. When there is a verbal and non-verbal conflict, people trust the non-verbal. So, it is essential to make your best possible non-verbal presentation.

A note on gender: Women face a particular double-bind in politics. Leadership is still culturally coded as masculine—aggressive, ambitious, dominant, and independent. But women who project those qualities are often seen as competent but unlikable. In contrast, women who lean into more feminine societal expectations, such as warmth, empathy, and collaboration, can be seen as likable but not up to the job. Unfortunately, people judge women for this more than they judge men. The same bias shapes how we hear women's voices. Deeper tones and measured speech read as authoritative. Higher pitch or a faster cadence—qualities more common in women's speech—are more likely to be dismissed, regardless of what is being said.

The Fundamentals

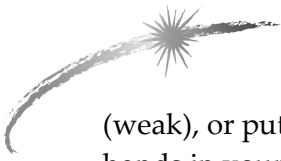
Posture: You don't want to give the appearance of weakness or insecurity. So don't stand with your feet too far apart, or locked side by side. Don't sway forward, slouch, crouch over, or put all your weight on one hip. Don't let your arms hang limply at your sides, droop your shoulders, or look down. Don't cross your arms, clasp your hands in front of you, or put your hands on your waist or in your pockets.

Instead, adopt a posture that projects confidence. Stand up straight, with your feet shoulder-width apart, and balance your weight over the balls of your feet. Keep knees and hips in line with the middle of your feet (not forward or back). Relax your shoulders, keep your chest up, and stomach in. Hold your head upright and straight, with your chin slightly elevated. Hold your arms at your sides, in a controlled manner, with your fingers slightly curled (this takes a little getting used to, but it is a very open posture). Overall, stay alert, but relaxed.

Movement and use of space: Don't move just for the sake of moving; don't rock, sway, pace, or race back and forth across the stage. Don't move forward toward the audience too suddenly (aggressively), and don't lean on the podium.

Instead, own your space; give the appearance of control and purpose in a natural manner. Use gestures as you move, then re-establish good posture when you stop. Scale your gestures to the size of the audience/room. Step forward to establish a connection with an audience member, or to signal you are about to make an important point. Step backward as you conclude an important point, or to create a verbal and physical pause. Move laterally to strengthen a transition between thoughts.

Gestures: Don't over-gesture. Don't use gestures that don't feel natural to you; in other words, don't try to "play" politician. Don't cross your arms (cold, closed), or clasp your hands in front of you



(weak), or put your hands on your waist (too parental), or put your hands in your pockets (nervous). Don't touch your hair, face, or neck (nervous), or put your hands behind your back (what are you hiding?), or use gestures that are much wider than your body (out of control), or use too many large gestures (chaotic).

Instead, use gestures that match your presentation. Incorporate natural gestures that you do spontaneously when practicing your remarks. Film yourself if that helps. You can use hands open to express honesty and openness; hands open, palms down, to express certainty; and hands open, palms perpendicular to express measurement or movement. Use gestures that go somewhat wider than your body (for a large concept or idea), but "stay in the frame" even if there's no camera. Be sensitive to cultural differences; use gestures that mean the same thing to the audience as they do to you.

Regarding your facial expressions: avoid looking nervous, harsh, or wooden. Don't smile constantly, lick or bite your lips, or tighten your jaw. Don't scowl, sneer, or shake your head "no" when you mean "yes" (you'd be surprised how many people do this).

Instead, use facial expressions purposefully. Smile, but make sure your expressions match your points. Practice in front of a mirror, especially if you are naturally prone to having a "poker face." Arch your eyebrows to indicate skepticism.

Eye contact: Don't scan the room generally, look only at one area, dart your eyes around, try to look at everyone, or methodically work through it section by section. Don't look at your notes or slides more than you look at people. Don't bore down on people, or look at the top of people's heads, or just at the back row.

Instead, try to maintain eye contact 90 percent of the time—natural eye contact. Make eye contact with individuals in the room, connect with people who are nodding *and* frowning, and connect with people who help humanize your points (e.g., look at a parent with

her child when making a point about education). In a large room, focus on the sections about two-thirds of the way back from the front. Be sensitive to cultural and gender differences; gently look away if someone seems uncomfortable with you looking at them.

Breathing: Don't forget to breathe, or forget that shallow breathing will make your voice sound more shrill (louder, maybe, but not more powerful).

Instead, practice deep breathing and slow exhalation. Take a breath before you start speaking; use deep breathing to form a natural, powerful sound; breathe during pauses; and breathe through verbal tics (i.e., "um," "ah").

Voice: Don't speak in a monotone, speak too quickly, or mumble. Don't use words you can't say (i.e., avoid "s" words if you have a lisp, and don't use words you routinely stumble over).

Instead, practice an even but slightly varied tone. Employ breathing exercises if your voice is squeaky or high-pitched (more common in women). Pause just before and after an important word or concept to signal to your audience that you are making an important point, and speak in an appropriate voice (i.e., conversational at a house party, authoritative in a debate).

Volume: Don't raise and lower your volume too many times (erratic). Don't try to use volume to convey power; a powerful voice comes from proper breathing. And don't speak over applause, laughter, etc.

Instead, project your voice and articulate clearly. Use volume purposefully; make sure it conveys the proper tone. Raise the volume to convey excitement, anger, indignation, and energy, and lower it to convey seriousness and draw people in. Learn how to use a microphone properly and practice raising your volume if you are soft-spoken and generally hard to hear. Conversely, lower your volume if you are naturally loud. Minimize noise distractions (i.e., ask for lunch to be served before your speech, and close windows).



Pitch: Don't keep your pitch high (unless you want to be perceived as weak, nervous, and less truthful), and don't vary your pitch too frequently.

Instead, lower your pitch to convey authority and credibility (women naturally have a higher pitch than men, but both genders usually benefit from lowering their pitch somewhat). Relax and take deep breaths, and vary your pitch (higher to convey excitement, lower to convey seriousness). Practice your inflection.

Tempo: Don't lift the end of your sentences unless you are, in fact, asking a question, and don't lose the audience with long, run-on sentences.

Instead, vary the tempo, or pace, of your speech. Practice speaking 150-160 words per minute (a slow speaker speaks 120/minute and a fast speaker 190; planning 150-160 will allow you to vary your tempo). Use a faster tempo to convey excitement, importance, and a slower pace to convey seriousness. Use appropriate sentence length to match your speaking style and to allow the audience to absorb what you are saying. And use pauses to transition between ideas, call attention to an important thought, and capture attention.

Public speakers should think carefully about how they prepare for a speech. Many policymakers focus almost entirely on the words themselves, but effective communication also depends on nonverbal delivery. Practice your posture, facial expressions, eye contact, pacing, and tone—not just the script. That's what trusted friends, colleagues, and even mirrors are for.

25. How To Respond to Attacks and Disinformation

In politics, it is common to be attacked verbally or in writing for either policy positions or personal behavior. It is natural for people to be defensive when attacked. In fact, our instincts may make us want to respond in detail. But often, the best response is to downplay or ignore it.

Policymakers are generally subject to attack in three situations: in person, in traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, mailers, signs), and online. The general rules apply in all situations. First, assess two things:

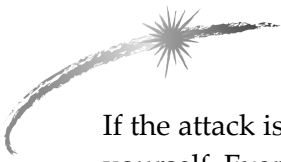
Our instincts may make us want to respond in detail. But often, the best response is to downplay or ignore it.

Reach: Who is seeing or hearing this—and how many? Is it confined to an audience that already opposes you, or is it reaching persuadable constituents in your district?

Impact: Will this affect your reputation, support, or real-world outcomes? Is it likely to spread beyond a single platform or news cycle?

If the attack is low-reach and low-impact, then do not respond. Engaging will only expand the audience for those negative allegations. Example: A local radio host criticizes your vote using misleading claims. The audience is limited to a niche group already opposed to you. Action: Monitor but do not respond.

If the attack is high-reach or high-impact, a response may be warranted. But do not engage the attack directly. Example: Allegations appear in a local newspaper op-ed and begin circulating among constituents and small business owners. Action: Respond with your values and/or record on the topic, without referencing the attack.



If the attack is high-reach and high-impact, you must defend yourself. Example: Allegations appear in a news story. Action: Respond directly, but whenever possible, let a credible third-party refute the attack.

Attacks in person: First, consider who is in the room. Is there anyone persuadable or a reporter who could spread your answer? If you're talking to one or more political opponents, then just politely disagree. Don't give them anything more to use against you. But if there are persuadable people in attendance, as when a hostile question is asked at a town hall, speak to them rather than the questioner. A little humor might go a long way.

Attacks in traditional media: Respond conventionally. The attack may give you the chance to present your side through an interview, a column, or a letter to the editor.

Attacks online: In today's digital environment, the best strategy is often not responding at all. At its core, social media rewards outrage: extreme or misleading content drives engagement, which in turn drives profit. That means platforms often amplify harmful content and have no incentive to moderate it.

Because of this, responding to such attacks can unintentionally amplify harmful content rather than contain it. The goal is to protect your credibility, avoid spreading misinformation, and keep the focus on your values and record. For marginalized communities, this impact is even more extreme because the online environment amplifies long-standing narratives of misogyny and racism. Not only do these communities see attacks at a higher rate than their white, male counterparts, but the attacks appear differently qualitatively. For women, for example, they are much more likely to focus on character instead of policy.

Anyone who is the target of hate feels an instinct to respond, defend, and set the record straight. However, because of the cycle

outlined above, responding to attacks can unintentionally spread them further.

When you encounter online attacks or disinformation, resist the urge to respond immediately. First, assess **reach** and **impact**. Then, if you must respond:

Don't say... *"X said ___ and that's wrong."*

Say... *the opposite, without referencing the attack, or shift the conversation to your values and record. Lead with your values, not their claims.*

Remember: (1) reinforce what you stand for, (2) highlight your story and track record, and (3) elevate trusted third-party voices and validators when possible.

For example, perhaps a conservative radio host has been attacking you on his show for a vote you cast. His facts are off. He's using a bill that you voted against for a very technical reason to try to say that you are harmful to small businesses in the district. On his social media, he's posting clips of the same soundbites from his show. Still, the attack is predominantly remaining among his niche audience of far-right voters. At this point, you should continue to monitor, but a response from you would simply cause his attack line to spread further.

However, the next week, there is an op-ed in the local paper arguing that you are bad for small businesses. They're making the same points he did, but this time the audience is reaching a wider swath of your constituents. Local shop owners begin expressing concern in neighborhood Facebook groups.

At this point, a response from you may be warranted, but you still don't want to respond to the attack directly. Instead, you want to say the opposite. Lean into messaging around your support for local businesses and your strong record of leading policy to support them. You could even have local business owners post for you about why they believe in your leadership.



Finally, no matter what, do not repeat the attack! Never respond “X said ___ and that’s wrong.” That kind of response provides oxygen for the charges and invites another repetition from your opponents.

26. How To Answer 25 Tough Questions

The following are phrased from a hostile point of view using right-wing framing of the issue. Whether the questioner is hostile or just curious, your best answer always starts from a point of agreement and uses values.

1. How are you going to fix inflation/the cost of living?

Say... *People are hurting because they can't afford the cost of living. We can do better by supporting higher wages and more generous benefits, lowering health care costs, especially prescription drug costs, helping provide childcare, and addressing the housing crisis. You know, the corporate owners and operators who raised your prices by 25 or 30 percent are overwhelmingly ideological conservatives. They fund far-right politicians to make themselves richer. If you care about affordability, you must understand that the wealthy and their elected helpers are not on your side.*

Note: Obviously, you can't "fix" the economy. The most important thing you can do is empathize. Most people are hurting, or they are just one misfortune away from disaster.

2. How are you going to fix the economy?

Say... *For most working Americans, our economy is broken. To fix it, our policies must benefit all people, 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.*

Note: You've got to blame the rich. It's both politically powerful and it's the truth.

3. Are you a tax-and-spend liberal?

Say... *I am a pragmatic and commonsense progressive. I support a balanced budget for our city/county/state. And I*



support tax fairness. We need to identify and eliminate tax breaks and loopholes that benefit the wealthy few at the expense of the rest of us. Our overall goal should be to maintain and improve the quality of life here in [location], not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.

Note: Don't get defensive. Smack this softball out of the park.

4. Doesn't an increased minimum wage hurt small businesses and cost jobs?

Say... *Our economy depends on small businesses. We should encourage them. But all the evidence shows that increasing the minimum wage puts money in the pockets of people who will spend it almost immediately, which quickly generates business for the local economy. When we do it right, raising the minimum wage is a win-win.*

Note: Americans almost worship small businesses. Embrace them! At the same time, voters overwhelmingly support a substantial raise in the minimum wage, so this is not a difficult sell. To appeal to persuadable voters, focus on how the minimum wage benefits everyone, not just low-income workers.

5. Shouldn't we lock up repeat criminals and throw away the key?

Say... *We certainly should lock up repeat violent offenders because that makes us safer. At the same time, we are safer if we prevent juveniles and petty criminals from becoming violent career criminals. We can lower the rate of repeat crimes if we send nonviolent drug offenders to addiction treatment instead of putting them in prison. Let's focus on what works to make our communities safer.*

Note: Progressives tend to talk about helping criminals. We're right, of course, but that won't work with persuadable voters. Focus on public safety, not the criminal.

6. Do you want to defund the police?

Say... I want your neighborhood to be safe, and I want the people who protect it to be accountable. Police are important—and precisely because of that, we need them focused on what they do best: preventing and solving crime. Right now, we ask officers to respond to mental health crises, homelessness, and domestic situations that may need a different kind of expertise. Modernizing how we deploy public safety resources—getting the right people to the right situations—means less crime, faster response, and officers who can do their jobs better. Every reform I look at has one test: does it make your family safer? The answer has to be yes.

Note: People just want to hear your priorities. You want to protect them. Then, if you discuss specific policies, show how they directly or indirectly diminish crime.

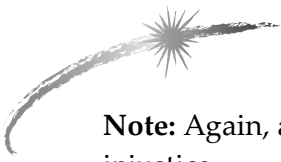
7. Do you oppose gun ownership and/or the Second Amendment?

Say... *I support the Second Amendment. But like most Americans, I also support reasonable laws that help keep guns out of the hands of convicted felons or people with recent histories of violence. We need modest, commonsense measures to protect our public safety.*

Note: Persuadable voters support both the Second Amendment and reasonable gun restrictions. By all means, appeal to common sense.

8. Do you support the death penalty?

Say... *Our criminal justice system should be designed to make all of us safer. Since there is no evidence that the death penalty deters murder, we shouldn't spend the enormous amounts of time and money needed to implement it. Give them life without parole and insist that our courts, prosecutors, and police divert all those wasted resources toward catching criminals and reducing crime.*



Note: Again, as much as possible, focus on public safety instead of injustice.

9. What are you going to do about illegal immigrants?

Say... *America's immigration system is broken. Everyone agrees that unauthorized immigrants should be deported if they are dangerous criminals. But ICE has unleashed chaos by targeting law-abiding, taxpaying families who have lived in the United States for decades. We've got to stop the scare tactics and fix the immigration system so that it's fair to everyone. This will make our nation and our society stronger.*

Note: Nobody disputes the first sentence, and persuadable Americans would agree with the entire narrative.

10. Do you want to defund ICE?

Say... *I want immigration enforcement that is lawful, professional, and accountable—the same standard we should hold every law enforcement agency to. ICE has crossed a line. They are detaining American citizens. They are operating without warrants. They are ignoring court orders. These aren't immigration policy disagreements—they are violations of the Constitution and basic law enforcement standards that no agency in the country is allowed to ignore. No one is above the law.*

Note: Some argue that we should abolish and restructure the agency's duties. But the process is not the point. What matters is that ICE obeys the law, respects the Constitution, and operates in accordance with established standards.

11. Do you believe in global warming?

Say... *Climate change is real and, as virtually all climate scientists agree, humans are causing it. Climate change causes severe heat waves, wildfires, higher sea levels, and much more dangerous storms. We need to act now. We know*

how to implement clean energy solutions. We know that reducing fossil fuel dependence will make America stronger and our kids safer. It's time to step up and get it done...our children are counting on us.

Note: Say *climate change* rather than *global warming*. It polls a little better, and it more accurately describes the impact of excessive greenhouse gases. The one key fact that most persuadable people don't know is that there is a strong scientific consensus that climate change is real and humans are causing it. Tie that to the security of your listeners' children and grandchildren.

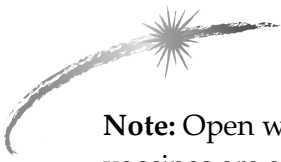
12. Doesn't environmental regulation lead to higher energy prices?

Say... *None of us likes it when prices rise. We should only support new rules that provide more benefit than cost. Environmental rules protect our air, water, forests, and parks from abuse by a few people. When companies pollute for profit, it is at our joint expense. We need fair and transparent rules to make sure environmental costs aren't dumped on all of us.*

Note: Make the environment real to listeners.

13. Do you support a vaccine mandate?

Say... Vaccines have saved millions of lives over the past two centuries—smallpox, polio, measles—diseases that once killed thousands of infants, young children, pregnant women, and immunocompromised individuals in the U.S. For most vaccines, the choice is yours. But a handful of diseases are so contagious that one unvaccinated child can put an entire classroom at risk. That's why schools have required vaccination for certain diseases for more than 50 years—not as a political statement, but as basic protection for kids. Doctors, pediatricians, and public health experts across the political spectrum support these requirements. So do I.



Note: Open with concrete historical proof, clarify that most vaccines are a personal choice, and explain why the exceptions exist.

14. Aren't public employees like teachers, firefighters, and police getting too many health and pension benefits that taxpayers just can't afford?

Say... *Our state/city/county should not waste a penny. We should pay fair wages and benefits, nothing more and nothing less. Based on what I've seen, I do not believe that the teachers, police officers, and firefighters in our community are overpaid. But there are some government contractors with excessive subsidies or sweetheart contracts, and we've got to crack down on those to save taxpayer dollars.*

Note: Die-hard conservatives may think public employees are overpaid, but persuadable voters generally don't feel that way. Refer to teachers and other public employees *in our community* because voters are more supportive of public employees they know, especially schoolteachers, than faceless bureaucrats. Then move the discussion to the related issue of overpaid government contractors. This works best if you can show an example of corporations being overpaid in your jurisdiction. It shouldn't be hard to find one.

15. Aren't we spending too much on welfare and social services?

Say... *The United States is a great and powerful nation. I think we all agree that we have a responsibility to protect at least some people in need, like children, older people, people with disabilities, or the victims of a natural disaster. We also need programs that help people in need who work hard and play by the rules. It benefits all of us by strengthening our economy and our society.*

Note: Americans are not very kind to people experiencing poverty. Outside of the progressive base, a lot of Americans 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, describe people in need as deserving: "hardworking taxpayers" or "people who work hard and play by the rules."

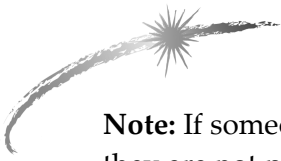
16. Should we give special rights to LGBTQ+ people?

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. LGBTQ+ people should be treated like everybody else, and the law should ensure they're not the victims of discrimination just because of who they are.*

Note: The equal opportunity frame usually works best. Appeal to love and finish with the anti-discrimination position that Americans overwhelmingly support.

17. Are you supporting transgender people?

Say... *America was founded on the idea that all of us are created equal—all of us. Transgender Americans are our neighbors, our coworkers, our family members. They deserve the same safety, dignity, and freedom as the rest of us. Some people have made it their mission to strip rights away from a small group of people who aren't hurting anyone—not because it solves a real problem, but because it's a useful distraction. While they're focused on policing bathrooms, working families are being crushed by the cost of housing, groceries, and transportation. We can stand up for every American's dignity and fight for the things that affect all of our daily lives. Abandoning one group for another isn't a value—it's a political calculation.*



Note: If someone wants to discriminate against transgender people, they are not persuadable, so don't engage. Affirm every person's value and refuse the false choice.

18. Do you support DEI?

Say... *I believe every American deserves opportunity and a fair shot—a good education, a good job, a home, a family, and a secure retirement. That's what I fight for. Diversity, equity, and inclusion mean exactly that: fair treatment for every person to achieve their best in life. All of you. That's not a political position—it's an American one.*

Note: Don't be defensive, treat this as an opportunity.

19. Shouldn't we stop the construction of a mosque in our neighborhood? They're terrorists!

Say... *Freedom of religion isn't just a founding principle—it's a personal guarantee. Your right to worship as you choose is only as secure as everyone else's right to do the same. Here's how it works in practice: If a town can block construction of a mosque just because some people don't like it, then it can block a Mormon church, a Seventh Day Adventist congregation, a Methodist or Catholic parish—or your own. The freedom that protects your neighbor's house of worship is the same freedom that protects yours. None of us is free unless all of us are free.*

Note: Most people feel strongly about freedom but have never had to think carefully about what it requires. Explain it to them.

20. Do you favor vouchers for private schools?

Say... *We all want the best education for our children because we want the best for them. If parents decide private school is best for their child, that's great. But taxpayer dollars should not be diverted from our public schools to fund private schools. We need to focus our scarce tax dollars on providing top-quality*

public schools so that every child has the opportunity to succeed, achieve, and pursue the American Dream.

Note: Americans are more likely to oppose vouchers if they take money from the public schools. Shift the debate away from *failing schools* and toward the importance of providing *opportunity for all*.

21. Do you favor posting the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms?

Say... *I support freedom of religion. Politicians should never tell you or me how to practice our own faiths. In fact, state-sponsored religion was one of the main reasons that the U.S. broke away from Great Britain. Of the Ten Commandments, the first four are purely religious. That is why the U.S. Supreme Court ruled more than 40 years ago that posting the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional. The Court was right because the only way to protect your freedom of religion is to protect everyone's freedom of religion.*

Note: Freedom is the most powerful word in the American political lexicon, so use it.

22. Do you favor abortion “up to birth”? (Remember, these are far-right frames.)

Say... *I support reproductive freedom—the freedom for every person to make their own private health care decisions with their doctor, their family, and their own conscience. Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the federal right to abortion, women have been denied care for miscarriages, doctors are afraid to treat their patients, and people are forced to travel across state lines for basic medical care. The whole point of freedom is to let individuals make their own decisions without government interference.*

Note: Explicitly make this an issue of freedom, which is the most powerful political value in America. When we say, “their own conscience,” we are pointing out that people have different beliefs



about abortion, some based on faith, some not. “Interference” gets to the crux of the matter; government should stay out.

23. Are you “woke”?

Say... *I am fighting to make our community better. To do that, I support freedom, opportunity, and security for all, including a fair economy, affordable healthcare, world-class schools, a stronger economic infrastructure, and a better quality of life. You can call it what you like, but I call it leadership.*

Note: When they throw a stupid question at you, turn it into a home run.

24. Are you trying to knock down the free enterprise system?

Say... *I favor equal opportunity for everyone. That requires a system with rules of the road that make economic competition fair, open, and honest. I believe the market works best when everyone can participate in it—when workers are paid fairly, when families aren't one medical bill away from bankruptcy, and when a kid's zip code doesn't determine their future. That's opportunity. That's freedom. That's America at its best.*

Note: Americans oppose economic unfairness. This harsh question allows you to lay out your basic progressive economic theme.

25. Are you a Socialist?

Say... *I support freedom, opportunity, and security for all. I call that a Progressive. I support an economy that works for everybody—not just those at the top. I want every American to have access to a good education, a good job, health care, and a secure retirement—because that's what a strong middle class looks like. Social Security isn't socialism. Medicare isn't socialism. Roads, bridges, public schools, and a fire department aren't socialism. They are what Americans have always built together because some things work better when we're all in.*

Note: If you're in a crowd, smile. That person just did you a favor.

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

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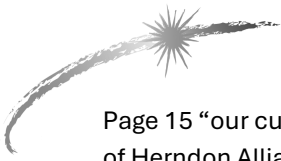
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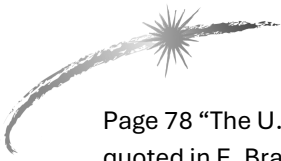
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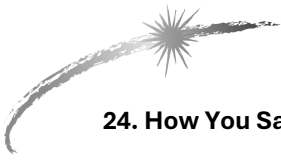
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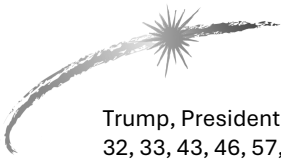
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