



MOVING AMERICANS TO ACTION

DEMOCRACY MESSAGING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATES



rethink

Media for Security, Rights, and Democracy



INTRODUCTION

As more and more environmental advocates echo calls from the democracy movement to reduce the power of wealthy special interests, and as more and more democracy advocates join the movement to protect our planet and future, it is critical that we deploy resonant messages that will grow and strengthen both movements.

This supplement to *Moving Americans to Action: A Message Guide for Democracy Advocates* presents the most effective ways to communicate the connections between money in politics and the fight for our environment.

The bases of the environmental and democracy movements often overlap organically. In many ways, the broad contours of the issues these movements face look very similar.

They share an urgent need for comprehensive institutional change away from systems wherein a small number of Americans wield disproportionate power relative to the population as a whole—in one case undermining the core proposition of democracy, while in the other undermining environmental protection and sustainability.

What's more, the public debate about the problem of climate change has largely been won—much like the debate around money in our elections. Large majorities accept and agree upon the nature of both problems. The challenge, then, for both movements is energizing a broader coalition of motivated supporters to advocate for common-sense solutions.

This message guide was produced with two primary objectives:

Identify where existing environmental supporters stand in their understanding of the connections between protecting the environment and money in politics.

Present the most effective messages for environmental and democracy advocates to talk about the impact of our out-of-balance democracy on enacting common-sense environmental policies.

DEMOCRACY MESSAGE FRAMES

THE BASICS

Major message research projects in recent years concluded that shifting from problem-oriented to aspirational message frames is critical to convert widespread support for campaign finance reform into effective and optimistic advocacy. The environmental movement faces the opportunity for a similar message shift.

ReThink Media synthesized the findings from these reports into four recommended frames: *System Out of Balance*, *Equal Voice and Equal Say*, *Barriers to Running*, and *Price We Pay*. These frames also form the basis for resonant messages connecting concerns about the environment with concerns about our democracy.

A SYSTEM OUT OF BALANCE

Our out of balance system produces an unrepresentative selection of wealthy elites running for office and keeps regular people from running. Critically, the description of a system that is “out of balance” has embedded within it the positive, aspirational perspective that we can move it to balance. It does not state a goal that many believe is unachievable, such as “getting money out of politics,” but rather sets the bar at achieving a system that works.

EQUAL VOICE & EQUAL SAY

Irrespective of party affiliation, Americans value the simple principle of fairness—that every American should have an equal voice and equal say, and that every voice should be heard. A system dominated by wealthy special interests precludes many of us from having a seat at the table and a stake in the process.

PRICE WE PAY

The price we pay frame is rooted in connecting the issue of money in politics to the range of other issues people also care about. It follows a formula to take the voter from the abstract issue to an issue of personal and local importance. The formula: When [specific wealthy special interest] makes large political contributions, we all pay the price with [negative personal outcome/cost].

BARRIERS TO RUNNING

People understand that running for office has become so expensive that it is nearly impossible for a regular person to run and get elected. As a result, they don’t believe their representatives are like them, understand their lives, or possess the values necessary to govern. This organic understanding among voters also makes it easy to build support for a range of democracy reforms such as public financing, spending limits, and redistricting reform.

OUR AUDIENCE

From the survey conducted to inform this supplement, the overall audience of “environmental protectors”—those indicating they view climate change as at least somewhat of a threat—was divided into “base” and “persuadable” groups. The base represents the group of respondents who felt most strongly about the threat of climate change at the outset. Those who felt it was a threat, but less strongly, were grouped into the persuadables category.

Demographics	Total (%)	Base	Pers.
Men	39	40	38
Women	61	60	62
Under 30	20	20	20
30-44	29	27	30
45-59	31	28	33
Over 60	20	25	16
White	77	79	74
Non-white	23	21	26
Democrat	39	48	23
Independent	32	32	32
Republican	16	7	30
Other	14	13	15

Demographically, the base skewed slightly whiter and slightly older than the persuadables. While the base was heavily Democratic (only 7% Republican), self-identifying independents were well represented in both the base and persuadables. Republican respondents made up 30% of the persuadable group. When appropriate, our messages should take care to not alienate potential Republican allies, as they are a key constituency that could be moved from the persuadable to the base category.

A clear majority in both the persuadable and base groups identified the influence of money in our politics as a key obstacle to preventing progress on environmental issues. We can expect that links between these two issues, when explicitly stated, will be readily understood. With good messaging, our environmental audience can be motivated to support comprehensive fixes to our democracy as key element of the movement toward a more sustainable future.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

To assess the best messaging toward building a growing and interconnected movement, ReThink Media surveyed 1,516 respondents self-identifying as sympathetic to environmental issues. The views of those who thought climate change is not a significant threat or not at all a threat were not included in our research. The survey was structured to measure baseline affinity to environmental and democracy issues, test 14 messages linking democracy and environmental issues, retest the baseline questions, and collect demographic data.

The recommendations found in this guide are a result of this research, conducted by ReThink Media on December 7-9, 2016.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Environmental policy encompasses many issues, and consequently, our supporters have many different concerns. This can add an extra challenge to messaging on the environment. Our survey asked respondents which aspect of environmental issues they most identified with and we did not identify a clear favorite.

Conservation was the top concern among both base and persuadables, with environmental justice coming in a close second. More divisive were clean energy concerns, which alienated a number of Republicans; a broad conception of climate change, which performed relatively weakly among persuadables; and food sustainability, which performed relatively weakly overall, though somewhat better among Republicans.

Not unexpectedly, our respondents reacted most positively to messages that had an aspirational element or clear call-to-action, stated the problem specifically and in understandable terms, and made a clear connection between environmental and money in politics concerns.

Maintaining an aspirational element in a message on both environmental and money in politics issues is key to ensuring that the audience doesn't fall into the trap of disempowerment—the “vortex of despair” identified by Topos Partnership in our earlier research. Without a positive vision, people may recognize that there are problems with the status quo, but feel that those problems are insurmountable or inevitable.

Climate change communications researchers reinforce the need to state the problem specifically and in understandable terms, explaining that “the human brain privileges experience over analysis.” They identify the importance of “emphasiz[ing] the present and mak[ing] climate change impacts and solutions locally-relevant” (van der Linden, Maibach and Leiserowitz, 2015).

Given the diverse array of concerns identified by our respondents, the following examples provide some ideas for making connections between various environmental and democracy issues.

6 6 TOP PERFORMING MESSAGE:

For every \$1 the fossil fuel industry spends on campaign contributions and lobbying in Washington, they get back \$59 in subsidies. We must end this vicious cycle with strict limits on money in our elections so our representatives stop putting taxpayer money into polluters' pockets and do what we want: invest in clean energy.

Climate Change

BEST FRAMES

System Out of Balance, Equal Voice, Price We Pay

THREAT

Extreme weather—superstorms, wildfires, droughts, and flooding.

CONNECTION

Profit motives of the fossil-fuel industry at the expense of everyone else.

ASPIRATION

Safer, long-term sustainable communities.

EXAMPLE

Too often, fossil-fuel companies pollute and profit against the interests of everyday Americans. The imbalance in our democracy toward these wealthy special interests is fueling the global imbalance in our climate. Instead of simply limiting carbon, people across the country are faced with drought, fire, and floods that threaten their livelihoods. Through common-sense limits on big-money in our elections, we can ensure that our democracy shifts toward the needs of average Americans and a sustainable future.

Environmental Justice

BEST FRAMES

System Out of Balance, Equal Voice, Barriers to Running

THREAT

Polluted communities—a future with no clean air, land, or water.

CONNECTION

Lack of reflective representation in our democracy.

ASPIRATION

Clean air, land, and water achieved through equal democratic representation.

EXAMPLE

Every voice should count equally, but this is not the case in our broken political system. Wealthy special interests representing big polluters get the most say, leaving all of us—but especially, people of color, native people, immigrants, and the poor—to bear the brunt of superstorms, polluted water, and poor health. We need to make “one person, one vote” a reality in our democracy so we make better decisions for all of us.

Clean Energy

BEST FRAMES

System Out of Balance, Equal Voice, Price We Pay, Barriers to Running

THREAT

Lack of high paying clean energy jobs.

CONNECTION

Congress is controlled by fossil-fuel industry, not everyday Americans who need jobs.

ASPIRATION

A cleaner future where our voices are heard.

EXAMPLE

With recent innovations in technology, renewable energy is more achievable than ever, but fossil fuel companies have tried to block this future at every turn. These polluting special interests are using their big-money influence in our democracy to give themselves billions in unfair subsidies while preventing investment and innovation toward an economy with good clean-energy jobs, cheaper energy prices, and healthier communities. With public financing of our elections, everyday Americans can have their voices heard and move us forward toward a clean energy future.

Conservation

BEST FRAMES

System Out of Balance, Equal Voice, Price We Pay

THREAT

Destruction of habitat and resources.

CONNECTION

Big money politics exacerbates influence of special interests who profit off wreaking havoc on the planet.

ASPIRATION

A democracy that favors conservation—aligning with the values of everyday Americans.

EXAMPLE

America has some of the most beautiful natural spaces on Earth. Rather than prioritizing good-paying jobs for everyday people, Congress is rewarding wealthy special interests by removing critical protections for our pristine land, clean water, and endangered species. That's why we need to make sure all of us have equal voice and equal say in our elections. Then, we will be able to preserve America's natural treasures for many generations to come.

EXPANDING OUR BASE

The results of our survey indicate that environmental justice holds promise for connecting democracy and environmental advocacy while helping to expand the base of support overall. Not only did a large number of respondents choose environmental justice as a top concern—across race and party divides—but two of our environmental justice messages were top performing messages overall.

Environmental justice is a movement that has existed for decades, albeit one which is only now gaining influence in mainstream environmentalism. Simply put, Americans—and particularly the wealthy special interests that have influence over our government—dump toxic waste, locate the most polluting industries, and remove even the most basic environmental protections in the areas where people of color, native people, and immigrants live and work. The environmental justice movement aims to draw attention to this imbalance and to amplify the voices of those most adversely affected by environmental destruction.

This focus offers both environmental and democracy movements an opportunity to talk about specific harms done to communities of color by special interests who put profits above people. For example, frames recommended in this supplement could help make connections between Native American communities, whose environmental health is threatened by oil pipelines like Keystone XL and the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the dominance of oil and gas interests in the donor pool—a clear affront to the principle of a just democracy that counts all voices equally.

In part due to the prevalence of big money in our elections, vulnerable communities often lack a meaningful voice in our out-of-balance democracy. We will not be able to protect the environment until we build a more representative democracy. Environmental justice narratives speak to concerns of the communities of color and younger Americans in ways that will expand the constituencies of both movements and help us build a better world.

“ TOP PERFORMING MESSAGE:

The voices of communities facing environmental injustices are ignored by a government in the hands of big polluters and the fossil fuel industry. In order to protect our communities and our environment, we need to ensure every voice is heard in our democracy, not just the wealthy special interests funding political campaigns.

THE MESSAGE SANDWICH

The order in which you structure your argument is critically important. Voters respond better to frames that begin and end with a strong, empowering aspirational message—with the problem discussed in the middle. This approach makes voters feel more empowered and hopeful that change is possible.

When considering your message, whether writing an op-ed or developing talking points for an interview, the following “message sandwich” will provide a consistently useful outline. Voters are compelled by messages that meet them where they are, characterize problems, offer a positive aspirational agenda, and describe actionable solutions.

EXAMPLE:

Meet people where they are

“We can all agree that our system isn’t working as well as it should for ordinary Americans.”

Begin with the aspirational

“All Americans deserve access to clean air, safe drinking water, and all of our country’s naturally beautiful land.” or “Good paying jobs and clean renewable energy aren’t in opposition, in fact, they are two sides of the same coin.”

Establish the villain

“But too often polluting wealthy special interests have more say than everyday Americans, using their influence to block common-sense protections for our environment and investments in good-paying clean-energy jobs.”

Describe the problem

“Our endangered species are threatened more than ever by an unbalanced democracy where fossil fuel and mining special interests use their influence in our government to exploit our natural resources with no protection for the critical biodiversity that makes our country special,” or,

“Running for office is so expensive that everyday people like you and me can’t afford to have our voices in government. Only the already rich, powerful, and well-connected can run and so continue to benefit their wealthy special interest donors.”

Describe solutions

“Through practical solutions like empowering small donors in our elections over the voices of fossil fuel companies, we can enact smart protections for our endangered species, put science-based limits on carbon pollution, and ensure everyone has access to clean water.”

Tell the story of a growing movement

“More people than ever are coming together to take action to solve these important problems. Voters from red states like South Dakota to blue cities like Seattle all voted for reforms to address the role big money is playing in our politics. Similarly, the most rural counties and the biggest cities are waking up to the need to move away from fossil fuels. The movement to rebalance our democracy and environment toward the interests and needs of everyday Americans is gaining momentum.”

Close with the aspirational

“Through these reforms, we can come closer to the American ideal of “one person, one vote”, in which we can achieve a better, more sustainable future for all.

Americans understand the benefits of a renewable energy economy and know the value of our natural treasures. When everyone has equal voice and equal say in our democracy, these values will become reality.”

CRAFTING A STRONG MESSAGE

THE BREAD

Begin and end with a strong, empowering aspirational message, with the problem in the middle.

Talking about the future and next generation makes voters more hopeful and motivated to take action.

MAYO

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ensure that your problem statement makes the connections between our out-of-balance democracy and the environmental issues that are stymied as a result. Running for office requires personal wealth or support from wealthy people, which prevents regular people from representing their communities.

LETTUCE

ESTABLISH THE VILLAIN

Use “wealthy special interests” as the villain—not politicians or the government.

Having a clear villain—polluters, wealthy special interests, the fossil fuel industry, big coal/oil/agriculture—means that the problems are not inevitable, that they are the product of actors and decisions that we can have influence over. Further, blaming politicians is problematic because they are key players in putting many solutions into play.

MEAT/VEGETABLES

SOLUTIONS

Elevate solutions and moving forward over problems. Focus on the need for common-sense reforms to our elections, ensuring everyone has equal voice and equal say, that average Americans like themselves can run for office so that the values of everyday Americans for a better sustainable future can be put into practice.

- Spending and Contribution Limits
- Public Financing

Messages focused on solutions and moving forward test better than messages focused on the problem. People readily recognize the way in which campaign finance reforms could reduce the burden of modern campaigning and enable a broader diversity of candidates to run and win.

CHEESE

SUCCESS STORIES

Tell the story of a growing and successful movement.

Give examples of solutions already working in other states.

Describing examples of solutions already working in other states appears to be an important tool to help potential supporters overcome inertia and bring about change.

THE BREAD

Begin and end with a strong, empowering aspirational message, with the problem in the middle.



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BUILDING DEMOCRACY FOR A BETTER PLANET

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