

Roadmap To Victory

HOW WE WILL CHANGE THE CONVERSATION AROUND VOTING RIGHTS

The Challenge

We're Fighting On Their Turf And Their Terms

While advocates have seen success in the courtroom, the state legislature, and the ballot box, we have had less success shifting public opinion and engagement. For the past several years, the movement has been playing defense and delivering our messages on the opposition's terrain. A ReThink analysis found that discussion of vote fraud, voter ID, and efforts to limit and make voting more difficult made up about 40% of news coverage in 2016 and 2017—far more than discussion of pro-voter policies. And because Voting Rights advocates are used to fighting legal and legislative battles to defend rights, our messaging is too often defensive. We also spend a lot of time refuting our opponents' disinformation and the resulting negative public perceptions, which leads to adopting our opposition's language and repeating and reinforcing their negative frames.

The Solution

Pivot To Our Turf, Our Terms, And Our Agenda

Let's change the conversation about voting from one about protecting and defending rights to one about realizing the promise of democracy and giving all Americans a voice. Defense is necessary, but insufficient to make progress: in order to make the change we want to see in our country, we have to advance a pro-voter agenda. We must start having the conversation we want to have. The following page offers a more in-depth look at the challenges we face, along with solutions to rise above these challenges—to change the conversation.

Phrases & Pivots

Below are some phrases and pivots you can use and adapt when talking to the media:

Our democracy is better when more eligible voters show up and participate

The real question is...

We all care about the integrity and fairness of our elections

There are better ways to safeguard our elections and achieve a more representative democracy in the process

We have a choice between a democracy that includes all eligible voters and a system that excludes people based on their circumstances or backgrounds

No. 1

VISION

The Challenge

We're playing defense. In media coverage of voting rights issues, most big stories are "defense" stories. Even when we're winning, these are victories against our opposition's agenda, rarely advancing our own.

The Solution

Articulate an aspirational VISION. Being *for* something is more inspiring and energizing than being *against* something. We are advocates because we believe our democracy can be better: we should share that vision with our audience, and invite them to join us in fighting for it.

No. 2

PATH

The Challenge

We're not advancing an agenda. When we spend all our time fighting policies that make voting less accessible, we have little energy left to push for changes that will make our democracy work better for everyone.

The Solution

Show our audience an achievable PATH to the vision. A vision is no good if it will never happen. When we paint a picture of how our democracy should look, we must also paint the path to get there, through pro-voter policies that answer their hopes and concerns.

No. 3a

SYSTEM

The Challenge

We talk about a voting system, but most people see voting as an individual act. Advocates invariably identify problems in the voting process and election system, while people tend to think the decision not to vote is entirely based on a personal preference or character.

The Solution

Show our audience the SYSTEM by demonstrating that the rules make a difference. While voters think registering and voting is relatively "easy," they do not generally know that election rules vary widely from state to state, with wide variation in participation. Shifting to this perspective allows our audience to better see a solution.

No. 3b

INTEGRITY

The Challenge

Many Americans have concerns about fraud in our elections. When we talk about the fact that fraud is exceedingly rare, our message fails to assuage their concerns.

The Solution

Remind our audience that INTEGRITY includes both security and fairness. Safeguarding the integrity of our elections protects them from tampering and hacking as well as making sure all eligible Americans can participate.

No. 4

VALUES

The Challenge

Facts don't connect to emotions. Between the legal arena, where facts work hand-in-hand with legal philosophy, and fighting disinformation, Voting Rights advocates have become accustomed to talking about facts.

The Solution

Talk about our shared VALUES around voting. Values are broad containers of meaning—they speak in an emotional language, not a factual one. Shared values motivate people to take action.

Strong Messaging Tells A Story

Tell a story. Use the familiar elements of every story—hero, villain, journey—to make your message flow naturally, and help that message land with your audience. Some members of your audience may even be able to retell the story to others in their circle. Read through the following examples to spark your imagination.

Values

What values does your audience hold? Use messaging that connects to these shared values:

free & fair elections
having a voice

accessibility
integrity

freedom
equality

responsibility
democracy

Quests

What outcomes do we seek?

a better/healthier democracy
everyone's voice is heard
a government of, by, and for the people
realize the promise of the Founding Fathers
realize the dream of the Civil Rights Movement
realize the dreams of our parents and families

Threats

What calls our heroes to action?

long lines at polling places
registration rules are unnecessarily complicated
voter purges dump eligible voters from the rolls
communities not reflected in government
people's voices are not heard
people's concerns are not addressed

Heroes

Who is at the heart of the story?

hard-working parents with limited time
patriotic military families facing deployment
seniors or community elders
people living with a disability or limited mobility
young people who move frequently
rural Americans who live far from polling places

Villains

Who do we hold accountable for the threat?

leaders trying to choose their own voters
elected officials who put up barriers to voting
elected officials who make it harder to register
powerful special interests rewriting voting laws

Tools

What will help our hero complete their quest?

expand early voting and same-day registration
enact vote-by-mail
pass automatic voter registration (AVR)
restore voting rights
make Election Day a holiday
allow future voters to pre-register to vote

Attacks

How do we talk about the villains' actions?

purge eligible voters from the rolls
demand documentary proof of citizenship
set up complicated registration processes
use strict voter ID to create barriers to participate
use money and power to write their own rules

DO

DON'T

Lead with values.

Free and fair, voice, accessibility, integrity, freedom, equality, responsibility

Lead with policy technicalities or voter suppression.

Talk about pro-voter ideas, which offer the best ways to ensure a healthy democracy.

“Democracy works best when all eligible voters participate.”

Focus on fraud, suppression, or other anti-voter frames.

Offer pro-voter solutions that will help us achieve a representative democracy.

AVR, same-day registration, early voting, vote by mail

Talk about voting problems without offering any solutions.

Put policies and updates to the system in context.

“Different voting rules in different states make a difference to how many people participate. When updates to the election system make voting more accessible, our elections are more representative of what the people want.”

Talk about policies without establishing why we need policy change;

Assume your audience is already on board with updating our election system.

Empathize with your audience’s concerns and talk about better solutions.

“We all want an election system with integrity. To strengthen our democracy, we should be modernizing voter registration so it’s protected against threats [like tampering and hacking] and more accessible to eligible voters.”

“Educate” your audience about how fraud doesn’t exist, and/or how suppression is a far greater threat.

Connect voting to specific issues, tailored to your audience.

“We can’t expect progress on making health care affordable for every American if some voters face barriers to participating.”

Talk about voting as a siloed issue.

Frame a choice.

“We should adopt policies that are about including more eligible voters, not about excluding people.”

Focus only on your opposition’s solutions or on problems.

Use inclusive and personal language.

our democracy, we the people, my country

Use distancing or impersonal language.
their system, your state, Americans (implying “others”)

Emphasize the ideal qualities of people in power and that they are accountable to the people.

elected officials; leaders

Say “politicians” (as it often has a negative/pejorative connotation).