

Building an Inclusive and Effective Democracy Narrative Metropolitan Group

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OVERVIEW

Building on work Metropolitan Group (MG) has been doing globally since 2022, the Hewlett Foundation engaged MG to map dominant and salient narratives that advance the principles of liberal democracy (as well as those that seek to undermine it or to explicitly promote authoritarianism) in the United States. Based on findings from the scan, narrative frames to increase understanding of, and support for, liberal democracy were developed and tested.

Our methodology included:

1. Examination of narratives showing up in political discourse (e.g., social & legacy media).
2. A literature review on democracy messaging and narratives.
3. Development of narrative and messaging concepts.
4. Testing via focus groups with moderate Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans), held in October 2024 and January 2025.
5. Interviews with thought leaders, researchers and practitioners.

KEY FINDINGS

1. While 80% of Americans say it's important to them to live in a country that is democratically governed, **there is a lack of a shared definition of democracy beyond elections** and many only see democracy working if their side wins. Building understanding of key elements of liberal democracy as fundamental to democracy is important to counter legitimizing autocratic actions.
2. **Existing dominant pro-democracy narratives include:** Democracy is Worth Fighting For; Democracy is Under Threat; and Democracy Promotes Equity and Fairness. Dominant anti-democracy narratives include: Democratic Institutions are Corrupt; Enemies, Outsiders and Others; and Security Justifies All. Both pro- and anti-democracy messaging includes a variation on a Freedom Matters narrative.
3. Ten **core values** are most powerfully and authentically associated with liberal democracy, as shown in the graphic below:

CORE VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH DEMOCRACY



4. As had been found in other research previously conducted by MG, the **Freedom Matters** narrative and message framework (see page 2) was most resonant across both rounds of focus groups and with participants including moderate Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans.

Building an Inclusive and Reliable Democracy Narrative

5. Essential elements of this narrative frame include evoking top values (see color coding), defining democracy beyond elections, and acknowledging our democracy's challenges.
6. Reminding people that protecting freedom has always been a responsibility we share, and expressing hope that we can find solutions that make our lives better and our democracy stronger resonated.
7. All groups believe that a functioning liberal democracy is "better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity, and justice for every one of us and our families."

RECOMMENDATIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

1. Application of the Freedom Matters narrative can advance deeper understanding of and support for liberal democracy across the "movable middle" of the American populace.
2. Identification of the benefits associated with a functioning liberal democracy should be audience-specific. For example, "a justice system everyone can trust" resonates across the ideological spectrum. By contrast, "access to the health care, education, housing, and opportunities every person and every family needs and deserves" is important to moderate Democrats and Independents, while "increasing trust in each other and in our government" is effective with moderate Republicans.
3. Calls to action beyond voting are an important component of effective messaging and should be tailored to reflect the audience and the opportunities available to it.
4. Quantitative testing and field application and observations are recommended to refine the evidence-based narrative and supporting message framework.

LINKS

- [Building an Inclusive and Effective Democracy Narrative: Link to Additional Materials](#)
- [Link to Additional Insights on Narrative as a Tool of Social Change](#)

DEMOCRACY NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

(NARRATIVE FRAME) In America, **our freedoms** matter. This country was built on the **right to have our voices heard**, to **make our own decisions**, to be **treated fairly** by the justice system, and **to vote** in **free** and **fair** elections. These **freedoms** are at the heart of democracy and our **security**. But, they require **checks and balances** on power and government that is **open, honest**, and **responsive to the people**. **Our country** hasn't fully lived up to these **freedoms**. But, a **strong democracy isn't afraid** to admit that and **do the hard work** of **being better tomorrow than it is today**.

(CHALLENGE) These days, it can feel like Americans can't find **common ground** on anything. **Healthy debate** and **working toward compromise** are **a good thing** in a **strong democracy**. But, there are some who are **working every day to weaken American democracy** and further **divide us** to serve their own interests. **Defending freedom** and **fairness**—and **finding solutions** to the challenges we face—doesn't have to mean **fighting each other**. Instead, **we** need to find a way to **work together**.

(SOLUTION) **Protecting our freedoms** has always been **up to all of us**, not just **our elected representatives**. But, democracy is about more than **voting**. It's about **securing freedom** and **fairness** for **all Americans**, **ensuring all voices are heard**, and **demanding** a government that is **honest, open**, and **responsive to the people**. **Fearless** and **free people working together** can **find solutions** that **make our lives better** and **our democracy stronger**.

(BENEFITS) A democracy where **freedoms are protected**, **fairness** is something **everyone** can expect, and government is **open** and **accountable to the people** is **better able to advance freedom, safety, opportunity**, and **justice for every one of us and our families**.

(CALL TO ACTION) None of this will happen on its own. It will take **all of us working together** to **protect** our **freedoms and improve our** democracy **so it works better** for **everyone**. It won't be easy. But **we've done hard things before and we can do them again**.

