

PROGRESSIVE MESSAGE GUIDANCE

OVERVIEW

After an extensive survey process combining focus group surveys with traditional polling and online opinion research into the mood of the American electorate during the 2018 midterm elections, the Progressive Narrative Project has zeroed in on key findings as messaging recommendations for organizers, communicators, and other allies working on 2018 elections. In essence, this research has revealed a deep sense of anxiety among all voters over the deeply divided state of American politics, and intense frustration at a political and economic system stacked against everyday Americans strictly for the benefit of the wealthy and powerful, as well as the constant attacks on our communities and freedoms by Trump and Republicans. In response to growing chaos and division voters have expressed a desire for change, namely new leadership that will protect our communities and freedoms and work to unrig the economic system.

To address this sense directly, and motivate voters to show up in November to place a check on the Trump administration's power, we identified three specific messages as most resonant and effective, out of any that we tested. By infusing these messages concretely into our public communications, we can ensure our outreach is maximally effective in motivating and mobilizing our audience to vote.

Top Messages

Unrig the System: America Should Work for All of Us

We need a country that works for the middle class and working families, not just the wealthy and big corporations. Though unemployment may be low, the cost of living is high, and too many people are living paycheck to paycheck. Trump and Republicans in Congress are making it more difficult for working people to negotiate better wages and benefits. We need to get out and vote to elect leaders who will boldly rewrite the rules of the economy so it works for working families and the middle class again.

Our Communities Are Under Attack

As President, Donald Trump has relentlessly attacked Americans of all stripes -- including women, people of color, Muslims, immigrants, and LGBTQ people. Americans are under attack, yet the Republicans in Congress do nothing. We need to get out and vote this year to put new leaders in Congress who will stand up to Trump's attacks and protect our communities.

Protect Our Freedom

America values freedom. That should mean freedom for all, not just for some. Whether it's the freedom to love who you want, the freedom of religion, the freedom to make decisions about our bodies, or the freedom to walk down the street without fear of harassment, discrimination, or even violence -- we need to get out and vote to protect these freedoms for all Americans.

Concrete Communications

The Progressive Narrative Project consciously did not attempt to rank which issues matter most to voters, but instead tried to find broad themes that resonate with the electorate across issue lanes. In order for our movement to be successful in communicating these themes, it is essential for each messenger carrying them to tailor them to suit specific purposes and issues.

For example, a health care advocacy organization speaking specifically to voters who care about health care might want to tailor the basic idea of the "America Should Work for All of Us" message, while speaking more directly to their issue. A sample might look like this:

"Our health care system is designed for the wealthy and big corporations, who are raking in record profits, while too many ordinary Americans rely on crowdfunding to pay necessary medical bills. While the number of uninsured has declined in recent years, still too many are paying too much for needed medical treatment -- all while pharmaceutical executives rake in more money than ever before. We've got to stand up to Trump and his allies in the insurance industry by electing Democrats and ensuring every single American has access to quality and affordable health care."

The idea is to preserve the basic frame, while tailoring the specifics to suit each issue. An organization focused on mobilizing voters around racial justice issues could take our second message, "Communities Under Attack," and again tailor it for a specific purpose:

"President Trump didn't invent racism, but he's perfected it. By espousing an openly white nationalist agenda that demands impunity for all police officers, investing in growing our mass incarceration system, and enacting cruel policies that treat immigrants as sub-human, President Trump is attacking our communities across the country. We can't rely on Republicans in Congress to stand up to him as voices for racial justice, because they never have and they never will. We need to get out and vote this year to put new leaders in Congress who will stand up to Trump's attacks and protect our communities."

Organizations and candidates should feel free not to repeat our findings verbatim, but to take the broad findings and apply them onto context-specific issues that ensure our entire movement is maximally effective in reaching and mobilizing voters. One final example, on the issue of climate change, using our "Freedom" message:

"Freedom isn't just about guns. Americans must be free from air that suffocates our children, from water that poisons our families, and from a changing climate that threatens all our future. It's on all of us to make our voices heard and force elected officials to stand up to the oil industry, to protect essential freedoms all of us are entitled to."