



How to talk about Democracy

WHAT WE KNOW (AND DON'T KNOW)

Research Brief



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This Research Brief is part of a [three-part series of research](#) produced for the Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) as an initial step toward coordination and consolidation of narrative change efforts.

The series consists of:

1. Systematic Literature Review: *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?* (2026)
2. Research Brief: *How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know)* (2026)
3. Behavioral Change Brief: *From Narrative to Action: Fostering Democratic Engagement and Engaged Citizens through Behavior Change* (2026)

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THE DEMOCRACY NARRATIVES ALLIANCE (DNA)

There is a growing consensus that narratives are key to promoting, protecting, and preserving democracy in a time of rising authoritarianism. Dozens of organizations, researchers, funders, and strategists have already invested significant time and resources to identify salient narratives that can encourage or discourage support for democracy as a system and practice. Yet, these efforts remain siloed without a clear strategy for coordination, consolidation, or knowledge sharing for the broader field.

The Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) is an initial step toward coordination and consolidation of narrative change efforts in the democracy field. It brings together more than 35 organizations, research institutions, and funders working on democracy and communications with the goals to:

1. **Compile and develop new democracy narratives, messaging, and framing strategies** to increase engagement and support for democracy.
2. **Generate more aligned and strategic communications** by democracy organizations and advocates, using shared narratives and tools.
3. **Build support and resources for further development, testing, and application** of new narratives and framing strategies at the global, national, and local levels.

The DNA was born of a conviction that the stories we tell each other and ourselves about the way the world works greatly influence how we act, what we believe, and what we value. To change democratic attitudes, norms, behaviors and systems, we need to better understand the impacts of democracy narratives and narrative messaging - and then apply this understanding in practice. We believe in a more democratic and empowered world, and believe that collective action is necessary to realize this better future. The fight for democracy is in our D.N.A.

Learn more about the Democracy Narratives Alliance at globaldemocracycoalition.org/democracy-narratives-alliance

Alliance Members: Asia Centre; Asuntos del Sur; Busara; Council of Europe; D-Hub; Dakila; Democracy Reporting International (DRI); Demos Helsinki; Enrique Bravo; Exstituto de Política Abierta; Ford Foundation; Frameworks Institute; Fundación Avina; Fundación Corona; German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ); Latin American Open Data Initiative (ILDA); Institute of Public Finance (IPF); International IDEA; Janaagraha; Kettering Foundation; Kota Kita; Luminate; Metropolitan Group; National Democratic Institute (NDI); Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD); One Project; Open Government Partnership (OGP); Outright International; Oxfam Novib; People Powered; Political Watch; Puentes; SNF Agora Institute; Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs; Third Plateau; Trust, Accountability, Inclusion (TAI) Collaborative; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); VélezReyes+; Westminster Foundation for Democracy; Yiaga Africa.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE

Across the world, people say they believe in democracy, but many no longer feel it works for them. While large majorities support democratic government in principle, only a small share feel they have a real voice, and global dissatisfaction with democracy is now at a record high, even though the evidence consistently shows that democracies outperform alternatives in delivering public goods, protecting rights, and limiting corruption. In this gap between democratic ideals and lived experience, authoritarian and populist leaders have advanced simple, emotionally resonant stories that frame democracy as broken, corrupted, and beyond repair. These narratives, grounded in real frustrations but built on flawed logic, have spread faster and farther than facts, weakening public trust, participation, and support for democracy worldwide. Yet this crisis reveals a powerful truth for democracy's defenders: narratives are not fixed and working together pro-democracy actors can reshape them.

HOW WAS THIS BRIEF CREATED?

This brief brings together research and practice to support that effort. It draws on a systematic review of nearly 400 academic and practitioner publications, synthesizing the evidence from over 150 studies on the power of democratic narratives to influence participation and beliefs. It also reflects the collective insights of more than 30 organizations, researchers, and funders from around the world who gathered in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain in October 2025 at the first meeting of the Democracy Narratives Alliance to share their insights from years of experience in the field.

WHAT'S IN THIS BRIEF?

The aim of this brief is to help translate that knowledge and experience into action. It maps the dominant narratives that shape how people understand democracy, explains how messaging interacts with deeper mental models, and identifies strategies that can help rebuild support, engagement, and participation. The core argument is optimistic but clear-eyed: coordinated, strategic narrative work among democracy's defenders is not an afterthought, it is an imperative; a necessary condition for rebuilding belief in democracy and motivating people to participate in it through the daily practices necessary to sustain it.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY NARRATIVES?

We use the Sortition Foundation’s definition of narratives: “beliefs about how the world works.”¹

Though narratives are often associated with stories, they are not the same in this context. The Narrative Initiative uses this metaphor: “What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning.”² Table 1 - created by Just Labs - helps clarify the difference between frames, stories, narratives, and meta-narratives³ (also called mental models).

FRAMES, STORIES, NARRATIVES AND META-NARRATIVES

Concept	Definition	Example
Frames	Words, images, metaphors or other triggers that make the audience interpret a story through a certain narrative.	Angry protestors take the fight to the street (frame of violence).
Stories	How a specific moment or event is recounted. If repeated, stories start to form a consistent narrative.	At noon today, protestors who were throwing bricks injured a police officer.
Narrative	The way events or stories are connected and presented to form a new belief, a “common sense” understanding of what is happening.	The protest movement in the streets this month is violent, extremist and divisive.
Meta-narratives	Narratives that become ingrained in our thinking, not just about that issue but in other areas of life and how the world works.	People who challenge the state are a fundamentally violent threat and sometimes need to be treated forcefully to preserve law and order.

Table 1: Frames, Stories, Narratives and Meta-narratives (Source: (Gomez and Coombes 2019))

Mental models are an inherent feature of human cognition. To help process an endless stream of complex sensory input our brains rely on mental models to explain the world around us and make predictions about how it works. A mental model is “the go-to interpretation of why things are the way they are and how things function; it is the story we tell ourselves about who we are and why we do what we do.”⁴

Mental models are causal stories.⁵ For instance, “hard work always leads to success” is a widely held mental model in which hard work is the cause and success is the effect. Though seemingly simple, holding this mental model can profoundly influence perceptions of self and others, inform values, and motivate behavior.

On the positive, belief in this mental model can be empowering. It can contribute to a sense of personal agency leading to perseverance, ambition, and self-discipline even in the face of adversity. On the negative, it may contribute to blaming others for their material circumstances, contributing to a perception that poverty is due to personal failings or not working hard enough, leading to a lack of empathy and ignoring or discounting systemic issues that create an uneven economic playing field. As this example illustrates, the effects of mental models on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, can be far reaching.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DEMOCRACY?

For the purpose of this brief, we use a broad definition of democracy as a system of government in which the people decide how to govern.

However, democracy is an expansive term laden with diverse meanings. Surveys from around the world find enormous variation in responses when people are asked to define the term themselves. However, consistent trends emerge that are useful when communicating about democracy. Table 2 shows the four most common concepts of democracy identified through surveys, the key features people highlight when describing their understanding of democracy, and the relative prevalence of each concept of democracy across regions.

CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY IDENTIFIED BY SURVEY EVIDENCE

Conception Type	Key Features	Prevalence across Regions
Liberal/Rights-based	Freedoms, liberties, civil rights	Most common concept all regions (Europe, Americas, Africa, Asia)
Electoral/Procedural	Elections, choosing leaders, delegation	Second most common, especially in Europe, North America, Latin America
Direct/Participatory	Citizen involvement in decisions	Less common, but identified by subgroups in Europe and Latin America
Social/Redistributive	Social equality, prosperity, welfare	Minor theme, mentioned only by some in Western Europe and Latin America

Table 2: Concepts of Democracy Identified by Survey Evidence, compiled from (Chapman et al. 2024; Heyne 2019; Canache 2012; Dalton, Jou, Shin 2007)

Rights-based understandings of democracy are the most prominent and universal, followed by more procedural definitions of democracy that focus on elections and delegation of authority to representatives. While activists might rely on the term democracy to invoke ideas of citizen participation and empowerment, the provision of social services, or a redistribution of resources, evidence suggests that a majority of people default to a narrower definition of democracy when they hear the word.

The main takeaway: do not assume that others hold the same understanding of democracy that you do. Instead of relying on the word alone to convey the intended meaning, specify how you are using the term democracy in each instance. Even subtle framing can significantly shift the associations people form upon hearing a meaning-laden word like democracy.⁶ For a message intended to motivate participation, it can be helpful to invoke this concept as in the following example: “Democracy means empowering people to influence decisions that affect their lives. Come make your voice heard at this week’s town council meeting.”

SUSTAINING LONG-TERM NARRATIVE CHANGE

The remainder of this brief focuses on how to harness the power of narratives in messaging and communications. However, it is important to acknowledge that meta-narratives cannot be changed simply through messaging. We form mental models through a combination of lived experience, observation, and story, all of which are powerfully shaped by our social and cultural context. The most deeply entrenched mental models are often supported by and intertwined with many other social and cultural narratives.

The “hard work always leads to success” meta-narrative, for instance, is so deeply ingrained in the United States that it has its own term: the American Dream. This mental model is interwoven with other foundational meta-narratives that together form and uphold deep cultural values and social institutions like individualism, self-determination, and capitalism. Narratives that are repeated often, such as the American Dream, are likely to become so widely accepted that they are perceived as “common sense,” representing a universal truth about the way the world works, even if they are factually incorrect.⁷

Changing this type of meta-narrative is not just a matter of improved messaging. If a new piece of information contradicts or does not fit within an existing meta-narrative that we hold, we are much more likely to reject that new information.⁸ When filtered through the meta-narrative that “hard work always leads to success,” messaging about systemic causes of poverty are more likely to be rejected or dismissed.

However, sustained and coordinated messaging from diverse sources that targets the causal story underlying even well-established mental models can shift the way people interpret and act on them. “Causal stories move situations intellectually from the realm of fate to the realm of human agency.”⁹ Coordinated efforts to influence the causal story behind meta-narratives can inspire action and change perceptions. When this type of sustained and consistent messaging is combined with real improvements and reforms to make democracy more responsive, representative, and reliable in its promise to produce good outcomes, then narrative work can be truly transformative.

THE POWER OF CAUSAL STORIES

While mental models may be sticky and hard to change, the causal stories underlying them are more malleable. By making the causal story of mental models explicit it is possible to influence how they are directed and to what end.

For example, Frameworks Institute has found one of the most persistent meta-narratives of democracy in the United States to be: “the system is rigged.”¹⁰ There is an implicit causal story in this narrative (someone is responsible for rigging the system), but their research shows that while this general sense of a rigged or unfair political system is pervasive, most people have only a vague sense of the who, how, and why.¹¹ The details of this causal story can dramatically affect how people understand the problem and what can (or cannot) be done to fix it.

If people think political elites have rigged the system in their favor in such a way that reform is impossible, they might react with apathy, choosing not to vote or engage in democratic practices because they view such actions as pointless. The same meta-narrative can also create intense anger and resentment motivating people to violence or to support populists and authoritarians who style themselves as outsiders that can reform (or in extreme cases dismantle) the existing system.¹²

By changing the causal story, the same meta-narrative can be harnessed to direct people’s energies toward positive democratic reforms. For example, Bernie Sanders’ 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns embraced the “the system is rigged” narrative but presented a clear causal story that directed energy toward actionable reforms. His campaign identified a clear Who (billionaires), a Why (rigging the system in their favor to maximize wealth extraction), and a How (by using their wealth to buy favor and influence in the political system). When combined with a clear, actionable, and proportionate set of solutions that would address the problem – reforming the tax system to more fairly redistribute wealth and reducing the opportunities to translate extreme wealth into political influence – a narrative that might encourage apathy became a motivating force for democratic reform.

DEMOCRACY NARRATIVES

This section presents the most common narratives about democracy that emerged from the literature and through consultation with practitioners and researchers from around the world. The meta-narratives highlighted below capture some of the most prevalent perceptions of democracy, though this does not mean that narratives always manifest as these phrases verbatim, rather they represent themes that appear repeatedly in research and communications about democracy.

Each section presents two contrasting meta-narratives with opposing orientations toward democracy: one that tends to encourage constructive engagement, and one that is more likely to undermine it. While these pairings are not strict binaries, the weight of evidence suggests that one version consistently aligns with greater democratic support, while the other tends to motivate apathy, disengagement, or even hostility toward democracy. We cluster related narratives based on whether they are outcomes-oriented, emphasize intrinsic values, appeal to collectivist or individualistic understandings of democracy, or are more process-oriented. This categorization approach was developed in consultation with DNA members and reflects one of many possible ways to organize these narratives.

For each meta-narrative, we offer a short explanation of the core ideas underlying it and two alternative variations that capture the same theme. We then summarize key findings from the research related to this category of narrative, offer considerations when relying on each category of narrative, and provide guidance on how they might be used to activate more pro-democratic attitudes. We also include real-world examples of each category of narrative being used effectively to promote greater democratic engagement.

1. OUTCOMES ORIENTED NARRATIVES

 **DEMOCRACY SHOWS RESULTS**

TO COUNTER →

 **DEMOCRACY DOESN'T DELIVER**

2. INTRINSIC VALUE NARRATIVES

 **DEMOCRACY IS THE BEST CHOICE**

TO COUNTER →

 **DEMOCRACY IS BROKEN**

3. COLLECTIVIST NARRATIVES

 **IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSE VOICES**

TO COUNTER →

 **THE OTHER SIDE IS HORRIBLE**

4. INDIVIDUALIST NARRATIVES

 **DEMOCRACY IS EMPOWERING**

TO COUNTER →

 **DEMOCRACY DOESN'T REPRESENT ME**

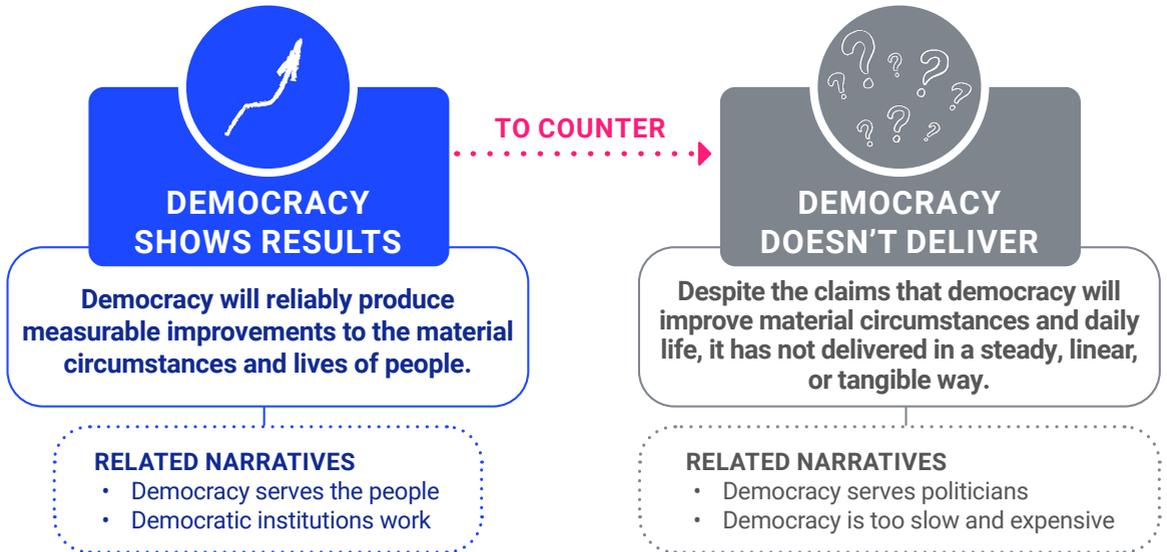
5. PROCESS ORIENTED NARRATIVES

 **DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS WORK**

TO COUNTER →

 **DEMOCRACY IS TOO SLOW AND EXPENSIVE**

1. OUTCOMES ORIENTED NARRATIVES



KEY FINDINGS

- Long-term economic performance is one of the most important drivers of trust in democratic governments. Economic downturns increase support for anti-establishment political parties.¹³
- A key driver of trust in democratic institutions is whether they are perceived as being capable of handling complex, long-term challenges like climate change or digital transformation.¹⁴
- Media coverage focused on political campaigns and electoral debates alienates the public and creates apathy by giving the impression that politics is merely a competition between elites.¹⁵
- Policy preferences often outweigh democratic values in voter decision-making. In some cases, voters willingly accept the erosion of democratic norms and institutions if it means achieving their policy preferences on salient topics like same-sex marriage, immigration, and taxation.¹⁶

1. OUTCOMES ORIENTED NARRATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RELYING ON OUTCOMES ORIENTED NARRATIVES

- Economic and other performance indicators are not always neutral tools and can be misleadingly presented to manipulate and influence the narrative.¹⁷
- Individuals perceive the state of the national economy through their direct experience with their local economy, including job opportunities, wages, and prices.¹⁸
- Reliance on outcomes-oriented narratives can inadvertently feed the perception that democracy is only worthwhile in good times.¹⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVATING THE MORE PRO-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

- Communications centered on economic performance should accurately reflect the experience at the local level and not rely exclusively on national-level indicators.²⁰
- Share stories of success highlighting the positive effects of democratic policies and processes, especially those that are highly participatory to build trust in institutions.²¹
- Take control of the causal story by being clear and explicit about the who, what, and why of perceived failures of democracy.²²
- Acknowledge real frustrations with democracy and propose proportional and actionable solutions.²³

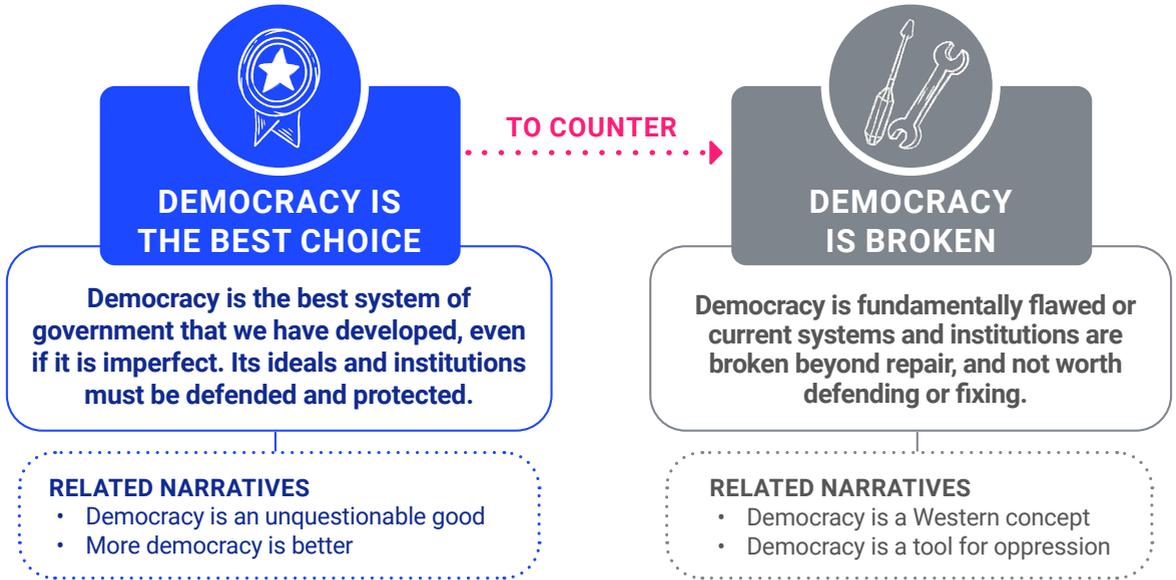
EXAMPLES

- The #FixTheCountry campaign in Ghana was prompted by poor economic conditions including rising taxes and fuel prices. The 2021 youth-led, largely online campaign tied poor governance and lack of democratic accountability to persistent economic hardships.

“We are suffering. Do something for us.”
- Both the campaign and presidency of José Mujica in Uruguay repeatedly linked democracy to economic stability and well-being. He focused on the power of democratic institutions to improve the lives of the people and successfully reduced poverty rates from 14% to 6%.

“Strong institutions mean predictable rules, and predictable rules mean jobs.”

2. INTRINSIC VALUE NARRATIVES



KEY FINDINGS

- Direct democracy can improve connections between citizens and institutions and may increase turnout in elections under some circumstances.²⁴
- Citizens do not uniformly prefer more participatory democracy, some view it as a desirable complement, but some are wary of the responsibility for themselves and others.²⁵
- Excessive referenda can overburden and inconvenience voters causing resentment and disengagement, especially in contexts with many election cycles.²⁶
- If citizens already believe the electoral or political system is rigged, more voting opportunities are unlikely to change negative attitudes.²⁷

2. INTRINSIC VALUE NARRATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RELYING ON INTRINSIC VALUE NARRATIVES

- Messaging that assumes democratic values are self-evident or universal may further alienate those who feel agnostic about whether democracy is inherently a good thing.²⁸
- Messaging that only focuses on democracy's positive aspects can undermine real concerns and frustrations people have about their experience of democracy.²⁹
- Divisive political events can influence levels of support for specific elements of democracy, such as weakened support for universal suffrage after a contentious election.³⁰
- When overly pro-democratic messages are delivered from experts it is often perceived as elites talking down to citizens and telling them that democracy is good for them without leaving any room for disagreement.³¹

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVATING THE MORE PRO-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

- Explain the reasons democracy is vital in clear and simple terms. Explain the specific, direct, and tangible benefits of democracy to people's everyday lives with concrete examples.³²
- Emphasize empowerment and accountability when advocating for more innovative forms of democratic participation.³³
- Personal stories of negative experiences under authoritarian regimes (past and present) can highlight the benefits of democracy.³⁴
- Directly address dissatisfaction with current political parties, practices, or institutions.³⁵
- Offer a renewed vision for politics that increase positive expectations of what democracy can deliver for society with clear, actionable steps toward attaining that future.³⁶

EXAMPLES

- In Tunisia's 2011 revolution, protesters tied their demands for a democratic transition to core democratic values like freedom, diversity, and peaceful dissent. Importantly, they rooted these democratic values in Arabic and Islamic traditions of dignity and justice.
"Freedom is a national right"
- Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 was a popular protest movement in defense of democratic values and sovereignty. The movement focused on the importance of institutional integrity and genuine representation of the people's voices rooting their demands for sovereignty in Hong Kong's founding constitutional documents.
"Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong"

3. COLLECTIVIST NARRATIVES



IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSE VOICES

Democracy requires acknowledging and engaging with people who you disagree with. Cooperation and consensus building with diverse people and perspectives is key.

RELATED NARRATIVES

- Democracy is a call to action
- In democracy, we get things done together

TO COUNTER



THE OTHER SIDE IS HORRIBLE

The other side (of any politically salient group) is fundamentally opposed to my views (or even evil) and cannot be engaged productively or collaboratively.

RELATED NARRATIVES

- Security justifies all
- Democracy is messy and dysfunctional

KEY FINDINGS

- Participatory practices, such as citizens' assemblies, deliberative policy consultations, and participatory budgeting, support long-term societal commitment to democratic values, by increasing perceptions of fairness, legitimacy of and trust in institutions, and creating a more nuanced understanding of decision-making processes and the necessity of compromise.³⁷
- Collectivist narratives can be abused by political parties, politicians, and authoritarian leaders to justify anti-democratic reforms while claiming to protect democracy or secure collective interests, often using democratic terms like "electoral mandate" to lend legitimacy.³⁸
- Those with strong populist attitudes are not less supportive of democracy in principle and even support most democratic institutions, but they do tend to be wary of representation through established political parties and more supportive of simple majority rules logic.³⁹
- Divisive narratives are particularly powerful because when people feel they are perceived negatively by opponents or that others think less of them, this reinforces polarization and hostility encouraging resentment and a rejection of democratic norms.⁴⁰

3. COLLECTIVIST NARRATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RELYING ON COLLECTIVIST NARRATIVES

- Polarization of the media landscape and entrenched power asymmetries, which are reinforced by social and economic inequalities, can worsen the perception that productive engagement with the opposition is futile.⁴¹
- Polarization tends to be deepest where party affiliation intersects with other salient identities. In Hungary, for instance, voters are less likely to punish undemocratic behavior by their preferred party compared to their European peers, especially among Fidesz voters, who are the most tolerant of such violations.⁴²
- The use of democratic terminology and logics by populist and authoritarian leaders to justify anti-democratic policies and reforms can result in overconfidence, especially among their supporters, in the actual levels of democracy present and denial about erosions.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVATING THE MORE PRO-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

- Involve the public in participatory processes to generate mutual understanding across disagreements, build public trust, and increase commitments to democracy, which can ultimately reduce polarization and build long-term support for democracy.⁴⁴
- Communicate publicly and transparently about participatory processes at all stages of deliberation, explaining the process and goals to expand the positive effects on social trust and legitimacy beyond the core participants.⁴⁵
- Redefine the other by highlighting shared enemies of prosperity and well-being, such as injustice, corruption, and wealth inequality, clearly explaining how and why these threats or dynamics create a system that disadvantages most people.⁴⁶

EXAMPLES

- “The Problem is Corruption” Campaign by RepresentUs in the US reframed democratic dysfunction as an issue of corruption, positioning it as a shared enemy:
“The problem isn’t left vs. right. It’s corruption vs. the people.”
- A 2011 Anti-Corruption Campaign in India led by Anna Hazare positioned corruption as a shared enemy of all citizens and their prosperity explaining concretely how it raises prices, weakens government services, and blocks opportunities.
“Corruption hurts every Indian - rich, poor, Hindu, Muslim, urban, rural.”

4. INDIVIDUALIST NARRATIVES



DEMOCRACY IS EMPOWERING

Democracy is inherently empowering. We should defend and promote democracy because it allows me to have my voice and perspective heard. Democracy allows local knowledge like mine to constructively inform decision-making.

RELATED NARRATIVES

- Democracy works for me
- Democracy is local power

TO COUNTER



DEMOCRACY DOESN'T REPRESENT ME

Democracy as a concept or set of values does not personally resonate. Democratic institutions and practices seem contradictory or confusing. Decisions feel that they are made far away from me by elites who do not understand me.

RELATED NARRATIVES

- Democracy doesn't resonate with me
- Democracy is distant

KEY FINDINGS

- People's personal experience with democracy influences their perception of it.⁴⁷
- Positive experiences in participatory processes, especially in youth, increases the likelihood of future participation and civic engagement.⁴⁸
- Rural communities further from the seat of decision-making power tend to feel less represented, have lower trust in government, and are more likely to disengage.⁴⁹
- Intentional encounters between citizens and elected representatives can help increase perceptions that local voices and perspectives are valued.⁵⁰

4. INDIVIDUALIST NARRATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RELYING ON INDIVIDUALIST NARRATIVES

- Relying on personal stories to build support for systemic change can backfire. The focus on individual experiences can distract from the systemic context and lead audiences to conclude that the problem lies with the individual rather than a systemic cause.⁵¹
- Increasing public listening sessions and town halls, opening legislative processes to the public, and investing in CSO-government relations can help increase perceptions that democracy is locally relevant and increase trust in government.⁵²
- Information campaigns conducted in Mexico, Canada, Turkey, Latvia and Greece that communicated to the public about participatory processes regularly and at major milestones resulted in increased support for and engagement with the process and an improved culture of participation.⁵³

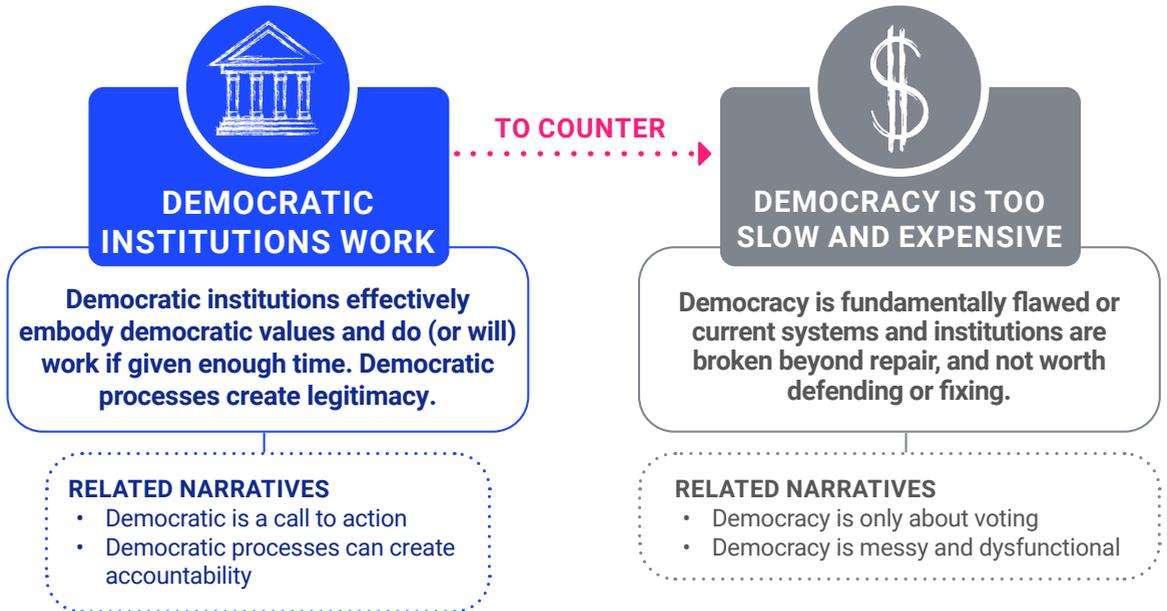
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVATING THE MORE PRO-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

- Focus on individuals with similar identities to the target audience if using testimonies or stories of positive experiences with democracy to increase the likelihood of resonance.⁵⁴
- Move away from a top-down broadcast model of messaging, toward communications that foster dialogue, community, and relationship-building.⁵⁵
- Develop localized narratives and messaging from within the communities you are targeting, rather than simply importing messaging from international organizations or donors.⁵⁶
- Target more rural communities with outreach and messaging, since areas farther from the seat of decision-making power tend to have higher distrust of and lower support for democracy.⁵⁷

EXAMPLES

- In a participatory budgeting initiative in Porto Alegre, Brazil the empowering nature of localized decision making was emphasized throughout the organizing process and design decisions. Local residents ran the meetings, and co-developed messaging focused on neighborhood priorities.
“This is our city budget!”
- A People’s Planning campaign in Kerala, India focused on the power of the community to shape government decisions. Messaging used local dialects and examples, local facilitators led planning assemblies, and direct links were shown between participation and projects.
“Development decisions belong to the people affected.”

5. PROCESS ORIENTED NARRATIVES



KEY FINDINGS

- It is not just about what democracies do, but how they do it; where the procedural quality of democracies are higher, more consistent, and less corrupt, support for democracy is higher as is the perception that democracy lives up to its ideals.⁵⁸
- Where trust in institutions is strong, support for populism tends to be weaker, thereby increasing the strength of democracy and support for more direct democracy.⁵⁹
- The idea that voting and elections are the only requirement for democracy has allowed authoritarians to use tokenistic elections to lend democratic legitimacy to their regimes.⁶⁰
- More inclusive and participatory democratic processes can strengthen the legitimacy of institutions and build a more robust civil society.⁶¹

5. PROCESS ORIENTED NARRATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RELYING ON PROCESS ORIENTED NARRATIVE

- People can hold value systems that both support and undermine democracy depending on the circumstances.⁶²
- People (especially in the US) often equate democracy with the act of voting, so when a vote does not go their way they may be prone to conclude that democracy does not work.⁶³
- An overemphasis on voting as the primary (or only) form of participation can deepen reductive understandings of democracy and discourage other forms of participation.⁶⁴
- Deliberative approaches, like citizens' assemblies, can make issues feel relevant to all, even if the issue is not affecting everyone directly.⁶⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVATING THE MORE PRO-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

- Contrast direct or participatory democracy with representative democracy to make the former feel more empowering.⁶⁶
- Remind people that democracy does not just happen, but needs engagement and action, including participatory innovations like citizens' assemblies and legislative theater.⁶⁷
- Communicate publicly and transparently about participatory processes at all stages of deliberation to increase trust and legitimacy.⁶⁸
- Focus on the ways that democratic practices and processes align with, embody, or help achieve shared values to deepen democratic commitments.⁶⁹

EXAMPLES

- The Citizens' Climate Convention in France was promoted as a more direct, authentic, and legitimate approach to policy making through a deliberative process.
"150 randomly selected citizens can propose stronger climate action than politicians"
- The Citizens UK Community Organizing Model emphasizes democratic participation as a means of holding elected officials accountable.
"You don't just vote. You hold power accountable."

HOW TO HARNESS DEMOCRACY NARRATIVES

Our research revealed a number of factors that influence how communications are received, which affect their likelihood of being remembered and internalized. Figure 1 shows key considerations for developing effective messages and their suggested order. When deployed in a way that activates and directs underlying meta-narratives, these considerations can influence narrative change.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IDEA ORDER FOR MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

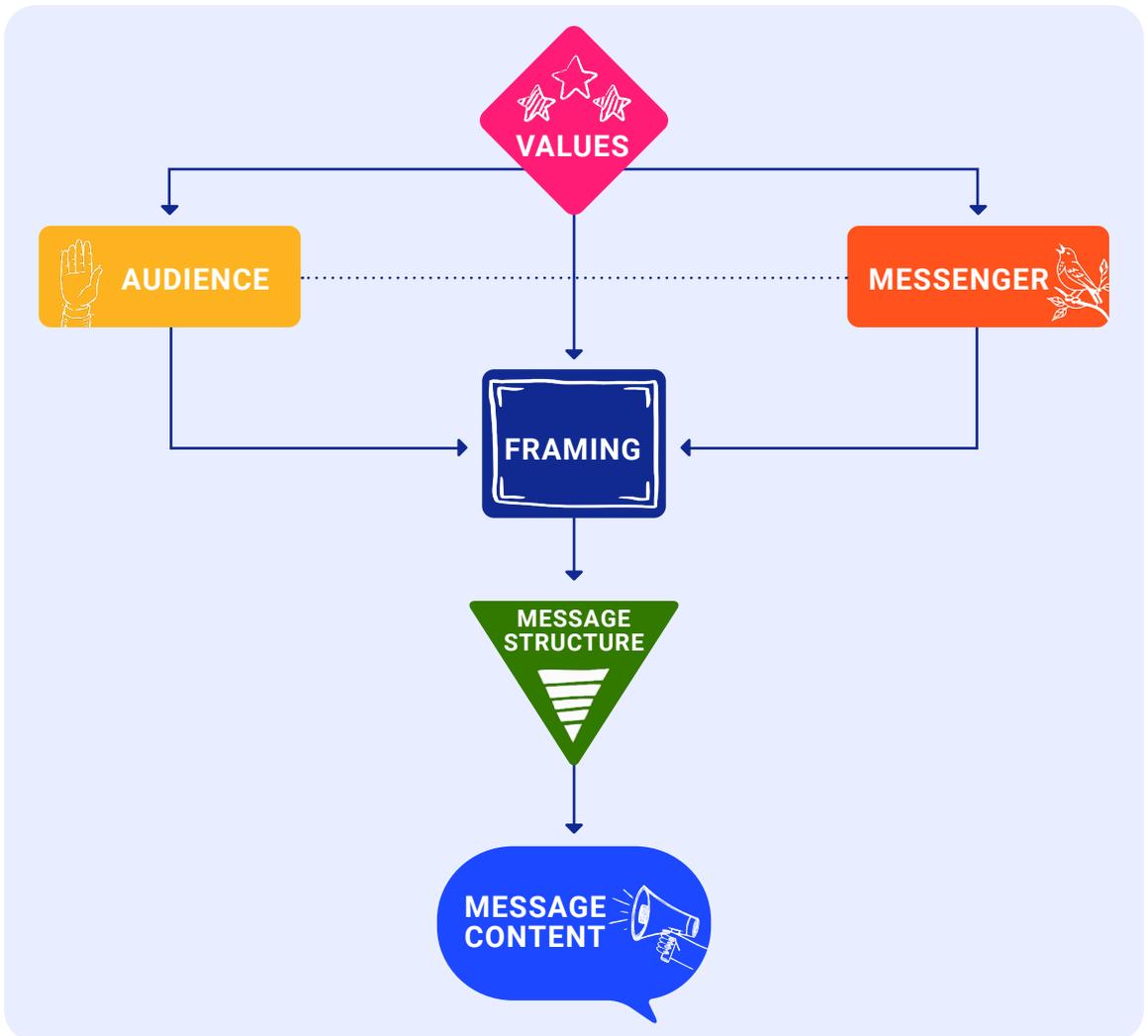


Figure 1: Key Considerations and Idea Order for Message Development

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE NARRATIVE UPTAKE



VALUES

Lead with and center shared values explicitly in communications about democracy.

KEY FINDINGS

- Multiple publications emphasize the efficacy of leading with shared values.⁷⁰
- Shared values can create a sense of community and connection that transcends geography and identity.⁷¹
- Increased political polarization means that emotion and identity, which are foundational to value formation, are now deeply intertwined with political beliefs.⁷²
- The core values people hold influence how they see the world and democracy, so choosing the right value frame to lead with will depend upon the intended audience and messenger.⁷³
- Several organizations have conducted quantitative and qualitative message testing to identify value terms that resonate consistently across demographic groups and national contexts.⁷⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lead with one of the ten core values identified by Metropolitan Group: Freedom; Fairness; Safety/Security; Honesty; Representation; Prosperity; Strength/Fearlessness; Responsibility; Family/Belonging; Tradition.⁷⁵
- Invoke highly resonant value terms identified and tested by Pace's Civic Language Perceptions Project in the US: Community; Service; Belonging; Liberty; Freedom; Citizen; Unity.⁷⁶
- Connect with people's sense of self by activating personal, cultural, and moral values.⁷⁷
- Continue testing the resonance of these and other values in other national and local contexts.⁷⁸

EXAMPLES

- Topos Partnership and Think Big developed a flexible value led narrative linking democratic empowerment to the core identity of America:
"In America, the people are supposed to be in charge."⁷⁹
- Metropolitan Group developed and tested several value leads to begin messages, such as:
"All people deserve to be both free and secure."⁸⁰



AUDIENCE

Identify the group or type of person you are targeting and tailor the message to ensure it resonates based on their values, interests, and priorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Those with higher rates of democratic literacy, defined as the knowledge to understand and the civic skills necessary to participate in democratic processes, are more likely to support democracy.⁸¹
- Those with lower overall education levels and who have received less support for civic skill development are less committed to democracy. This is especially true of youth who show weaker democratic resilience.⁸²
- People's personal feelings of financial insecurity, self-perceptions of being relatively lower status in society, and feeling excluded from government decision making all negatively influence trust in government. Rural communities are likely to experience all these factors.⁸³
- Those groups who express a lack of trust in government also feel the least able to participate in democratic processes.⁸⁴
- Interactive and experiential learning is most effective for teaching civic skills. Providing opportunities to practice civic skills, especially for youth, is critical to developing a life-long commitment to democracy.⁸⁵
- The values people hold shape how they interpret and respond to communications. No single message will persuade everyone, so using different messages for different audiences is key.⁸⁶



AUDIENCE

Identify the group or type of person you are targeting and tailor the message to ensure it resonates based on their values, interests, and priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use simple, plain language free of jargon and technical terms to ease comprehension.⁸⁷
- Offer clear and digestible explanations about how to participate in democratic processes as a means of re-engaging those individuals with low trust levels in government.⁸⁸
- Map potential audience segments, through surveys or similar means if possible, then focus messaging on the persuadable segments rather than strong opponents or ardent supporters.⁸⁹

EXAMPLES

- In Ireland's 2018 abortion referendum, supporters of the movement such as the "Together for Yes" coalition tailored messages to distinct voter blocs owing to the fact that this was a contentious issue with very different attitudes across genders, generations, and religions.⁹⁰

Targeting hesitant male voters: "Your sister. Your friend. Your daughter. Trust her. Vote yes."

Targeting young women: "Our bodies. Our choice. Vote Yes."

Targeting older generations: "Support her. Don't export her."

Targeting swayable Catholics: "Abortion is already here. Just not safe, legal, or local."

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE NARRATIVE UPTAKE



MESSENGER

The source or person(s) communicating the narrative will influence how it is received by different audiences.

KEY FINDINGS

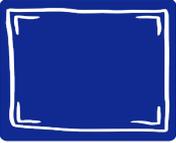
- The source of a narrative is important and different messengers will appeal to different audiences.⁹¹
- Recipients are much more likely to believe, repeat, and share messages from someone perceived to be within their in-group or community, including community media sources.⁹²
- The channel of communication impacts who receives the message and their expectations.⁹³
- There are age and generation gaps and different norms for length, tone, and format of content across social media platforms.⁹⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use a messenger that is likely to be trusted by your target audience to create a credible narrative, especially if the goal is to achieve organic dissemination of the message.⁹⁵
- Match the messenger to the medium. Use multiple channels to reach a wider audience, but adapt messages to align with content expectations and the audience on each.⁹⁶

EXAMPLES

- In Yemen, Tawakkol Karman became a uniquely powerful messenger of the 2011 democratic movement. As a conservative muslim woman, her role leading protests disrupted the regime's narrative that reforms were driven by foreign or secular forces, and she was viewed as a member of the community, known as the "Mother of the Revolution."
- Greta Thunberg became one of the most famous and successful messengers of the Global Climate Movement. Her youth combined with blunt rhetoric and a fearless demeanor, was a powerful contrast to the cautious diplomatic language and inaction of older world leaders. She encapsulated the sense of urgency, anger, and injustice felt by many youth.



FRAMING

Words, images, metaphors, or context clues that encourage recipients to interpret a story through a certain lens or activate underlying narratives.⁹⁷

KEY FINDINGS

Context, word choice, and emphasis influence how the audience processes messages.⁹⁸

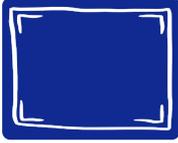
Even subtle nudges toward a given narrative, including single-word metaphors can have significant effects on how people interpret information and attempt to solve social problems.⁹⁹

In an otherwise identical news story, a crime wave was likened to a beast or to a virus. When crime was described as a beast, participants in the study advocated for a law enforcement response, when it was likened to a virus they proposed more social reform policies.¹⁰⁰

Take into account divergent sentiments on a topic by unpacking competing narratives, making the causal story explicit, amplifying local rights, and advocating for mutual understanding.¹⁰¹

Performance indicators and other metrics can support legitimacy through transparency, and can also be framed as tools of accountability and transparent management in governance.¹⁰²

Reason-based appeals that rely mainly on facts and statistics to make their case are often the least effective.¹⁰³



FRAMING

Words, images, metaphors, or context clues that encourage recipients to interpret a story through a certain lens or activate underlying narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make messages context-specific.¹⁰⁴
- Emphasize the agency of the recipient.¹⁰⁵
- Choose metaphors carefully. Where possible, test the effect of different framings on how a message is interpreted.¹⁰⁶
- Do not focus on countering false claims or debunking competing narratives. It is proven to be ineffective and often backfires by reinforcing the false claim or narrative in people’s minds.¹⁰⁷
- Offer solutions that are proportional to the scale and scope of the problem so that recipients are more likely to view the issue as solvable.¹⁰⁸

EXAMPLES

- The Race Class Narrative (RCN) developed by Demos has proven effective because it counters narratives that rely on racial fears in the US by problematizing their causal story:

“For decades, a handful of corporations and wealthy insiders have rigged the rules to enrich themselves. To distract us, they blame Black, brown, and immigrant communities for problems they didn’t create. But when we stand together—across race and background—we can rewrite the rules so working families thrive.”¹⁰⁹

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE NARRATIVE UPTAKE

MESSAGE STRUCTURE

The structure of communications and narratives will influence how likely they are to be heard and internalized.

KEY FINDINGS

- Guidelines on constructing effective communications are largely similar across the literature.¹¹⁰
- Sortition Foundation’s messaging structure: Value - Problem - Solution (Example) - Call to Action.¹¹¹
- Metropolitan Group’s messaging structure: Core Message (with value statement) - Problem - Solution - Benefits - Call to Action.¹¹²
- We Make the Future’s narrative architecture: Shared Value - Name Villains - Emphasize Collective Action to Solve the Problem - Vision of the Future

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use a direct and personable style, similar to spoken language with simple vocabulary, short words, and short, simply constructed sentences like: “subject-verb-complement.”¹¹³
- Lead messaging with values; briefly name the problem (and don’t belabor the point); offer a realistic and proportional solution; make a clear and specific call for action.¹¹⁴
- Use communications that activate emotions, invoke shared values, and use hope-based messaging, which are more persuasive than fact-based appeals.¹¹⁵

EXAMPLES

- The 2017 Marriage equality movement in Australia used this approach effectively:
“Love is love, but same-sex couples are still denied the right to marry. Legalizing marriage equality ensures equal rights for all and strengthens families and communities. Vote Yes to make marriage equal for everyone.”
- The #BreakFreeFromPlastic campaign used this message construction effectively:
“Our oceans deserve protection, but plastic waste is killing marine life and polluting ecosystems. Reducing single-use plastics and switching to alternatives keeps oceans clean and ecosystems healthy. Take action today by signing the petition and committing to reduce your plastic use.”

COUNTERING DISENGAGEMENT NARRATIVES

Survey evidence from around the world shows a clear majority of people in every region believe that democracy is the best way to govern their countries.¹¹⁶ Yet, at the same time global dissatisfaction with democracy is rapidly increasing with a growing majority expressing that in practice they do not feel their political system lets them have a meaningful say over decisions.¹¹⁷ An expanding share of the global citizenry feels unheard, unrepresented, and alienated, having lost faith in their democratic institutions and the integrity of their elected policymakers.¹¹⁸

Despite a still globally dominant mental model that democracy is a good system, competing negative meta-narratives of democracy are contributing to disengagement and disillusionment. Research by the Metropolitan Group and others have identified strong narratives emerging in many countries, including Ecuador, Indonesia, and Nigeria, that democracy does not deliver and democratic institutions are corrupt.¹¹⁹ Similarly, growing numbers of people hold the mental model that elites control the government and that the system is rigged against average citizens.¹²⁰

These meta-narratives tend to fuel ambivalence or even hostility toward democracy, creating a feeling that participating is useless and therefore discouraging the practices necessary for sustaining democracy.¹²¹ These narratives did not form in a vacuum. They have developed based on real perceptions that democracy has not delivered on its promises. Moreover, injustices and corruption, especially corruption at the highest levels of government (apex corruption), reinforce these negative mental models.¹²² Combatting these meta-narratives is a long-term project that will require more than just persuasive messaging or catchy slogans. But our research shows some promising approaches to at least weakening the power of such narratives and beginning to rebuild trust in democratic institutions.



DO'S

PRE-BUNK

Also called 'psychological inoculation.' This approach involves educating people on common misinformation tactics so they are better able to recognize misleading arguments and misinformation when they encounter it.

A meta-analysis of 42 studies found that psychological inoculation effectively reduced the credibility of misinformation.¹²³

Pre-bunking is most effective when recipients trust the messenger delivering it. Therefore, choosing the right messenger for the audience matters.¹²⁴

● **Example: Pre-Bunking Election Fraud Claims**

"In the weeks after an election, you may hear claims that 'the numbers don't add up' or that late-counted ballots are suspicious. A common misinformation tactic is to highlight normal procedural steps (like counting mail ballots later) and present them as evidence of wrongdoing. Delays or shifting totals are usually the result of state laws about ballot processing, not fraud. Accurately counting votes takes time."

DRAW OUT NARRATIVE CONTRADICTIONS

Authoritarian narratives are often built on faulty logic or contradictions, claiming for instance that because they were elected therefore any action they take is legitimate and automatically sanctioned by the people.¹²⁵

Making explicit the causal story that underlies authoritarian narratives, and pointing out the contradictions can help people see the logical flaws and begin to question the larger narrative.¹²⁶

● **Example: Unmasking the Strongman Narrative**

"When someone says only a strong leader can keep the country safe, they're asking you to believe that removing checks and balances protects us. But when leaders don't have to answer to courts, journalists, or voters, it opens the door for corruption and abuse of powers, which are actually the biggest sources of instability and danger to our collective well-being."



DO'S

EMPHASIZE THE LONG HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS

- Rooting is a strategy that emphasizes the local historical traditions of democratic decision-making and institutions. Where relevant, highlighting democratic legacies of pre-colonial societies can help to disarm the narrative that “democracy is a Western concept.”
- **Example: Rooting LGBTQ+ identities**

In Zimbabwe, activists used ancient cave paintings to illustrate the fact that queer identities were always part of their country’s history to disarm the accusation that it was a foreign-imposed concept.¹²⁷

MAKE A COMPELLING AND SPECIFIC CASE FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

- Populists have capitalized on pervasive anxieties about the future, including climate change, demographic shifts, and rising inequality, blaming democracy for these crises and offering a more secure alternative future.¹²⁸
- Stories about the future are most effective for inspiring audiences to imagine a better version of democracy for themselves.¹²⁹
- Positive framing, aspirational thinking, and the ability to imagine a better future all positively contribute to motivation, engagement, and collective action.¹³⁰
- **Example: Imagine Using AI to Amplify Democracy**

Gideon Lichfield uses design fiction to tell a story set in America in 2045, in which public comments from millions of voters are distilled by AI to allow politicians an accurate understanding of voters’ genuine preferences and then act on them.¹³¹



DONT'S

DON'T JUST FACT CHECK

Reason-based appeals that rely mainly on facts and statistics to make their case are often the least effective.¹³²

DON'T REPEAT TO REFUTE

Efforts to refute narratives often have the opposite effect because they repeat the narrative they're trying to counter, which subconsciously further reinforces the idea.¹³³

DON'T ALLOW ANTI-DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE TO DOMINATE THROUGH SILENCE

Democracy narratives are developed through daily experiences of and (often implicit) messages about democracy, if pro-democratic voices are absent or silent, especially on social media, it can give the impression that anti-democratic perspectives represent the majority opinion.¹³⁴

DON'T DWELL ON THE NEGATIVES

Crisis framing is more likely to spur disengagement than incite people to action because it can easily give the impression that the problem is unfixable or even inevitable.¹³⁵ Wherever possible highlight the many positive things that democracy delivers or secures, including freedom, fairness, protection of rights, and security from tyranny.¹³⁶

LIMITATIONS

Though this brief includes findings from Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and includes some Spanish language publications, a majority of the research and findings are from the Global North, most notably the US and the UK. English is the most common language of publication on the topic of narratives, and most case studies focus on the United States and Western Europe. The perspective of practitioners, funders, and researchers from the Global Majority were incorporated into this brief through discussion and consultation at the first DNA workshop.

While our literature searches spanned multiple disciplinary fields, we did not stray beyond the social sciences. Other fields, such as public health, behavioral economics, and neuroscience likely offer additional insights on behavioral change and effective communications that are not captured in this brief. Finally, we intentionally cast a wide net and took a systematic approach to searching for publications in our literature review, but we still likely missed relevant publications.

We make several recommendations in the Research Needs section of this brief to help address these limitations and those of the literature in general. These recommendations include expanding narrative infrastructure and research to Global Majority countries, testing narratives in non-English and non-Western contexts, and co-creating narratives with local partners.

RESEARCH NEEDS

This section lays out specific directions for future research to fill gaps in knowledge. This research would advance our understanding of which messaging strategies work best in different contexts and provide a better sense of where and how narratives can be invoked to change beliefs, actions, and commitment to democracy.

1. MESSENGER EFFECT

Test different messengers or different mediums to deliver the same message to similar groups to see which have the most influence, as measured by changes in attitude or behavior. It is clear from the research that different messengers appeal to different audiences. But there are few generalizable findings about which messengers work best and in what contexts.

2. DISSEMINATION EFFECTS

Test spontaneous dissemination, as measured by shares or reposts of different messages on social media, to understand which messages people are more likely to repeat and spread. Humans are social creatures that are more likely to internalize and repeat messages that come from people they trust and perceive as their peers. Therefore, the organic dissemination of messages through social networks is important.¹³⁷ Without it, democracy advocates are limited by the reach of their direct messages.

Test narrative penetration or change by scanning social and traditional media for prevalence of a specific narrative over time that you are actively trying to promote. For communication and messaging aimed at creating narrative change, the core ideas must be internalized. Narratives are internalized through exposure. The prevalence and frequency of narratives in media is a key indicator of whether or not people are hearing and internalizing these narratives.

3. FRAMING EFFECTS

Test different value and identity frames by varying messages based on the values they invoke (freedom, fairness, security) or the identities they attempt to activate (masculinity, nationality, social responsibility). Framing is a large topic with near endless message testing possibilities. But to understand how messages are received, it is crucial to systematically test the effects of different framing strategies.

Test the reception of or response to messages that use different words or terms for the

same concept, or that use different metaphors for democracy or democratic processes. Words like democracy and government or phrases like random selection and policy making are heavily laden with meaning and associations, some of which we know and some that we do not.¹³⁸ Varying the metaphors invoked by changing a single word can dramatically change how people understand and respond to a problem.¹³⁹ More testing is needed to understand the most effective words, phrasings, and metaphors used in pro-democratic messaging, and to co-develop messages that resonate most in diverse national and local contexts.¹⁴⁰

4. NETWORK EFFECTS

Test the rate or prevalence of narrative uptake, through scans of social and traditional media or through survey instruments, when a single organization consistently shares the same narrative compared to when multiple organizations with overlapping audiences share messages with the same underlying narrative.

Narrative formation requires repetition. The largely subconscious process through which messages and stories are internalized as narratives usually relies on hearing similar themes repeated, typically by multiple sources that you trust. However, little is known about the threshold at which this occurs. Producing narrative change requires narrative infrastructure - a coordinated and consistent effort across multiple organizations and funders with a shared vision.¹⁴¹

5. ANTAGONIST EFFECTS

Thoughtfully develop and test different messages and narratives that clearly identify the cause of an existing problem, and measure their resonance and mobilization effects either through reception of the message or whether recipients take up an action, behavior, or attitude. Every good story has a villain. Authoritarian narratives are effective in part because of their use of villains.¹⁴² Identifying a clear cause of grievances can have a powerful mobilizing effect and help galvanize action. However, democracy advocates should be cautious of this approach since it can undermine democratic values of inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect if the antagonist is not chosen carefully. Test the power of using systemic villains in messaging, such as corruption, inequality, and abuse of power, which can mobilize action against a common foe without demonizing a specific group in society.

6. INCENTIVE EFFECTS

Test how different gamification techniques and participatory process or platform designs increase usage of or engagement in processes or on digital participation platforms. Gamification can be creatively explored in both traditional and digital participatory processes.¹⁴³

Test different approaches to activating social incentives by developing different messages that tap into self-perceptions or activate social desirability effects and measure their effect on attitudes, actions, or behaviors.¹⁴⁴ Incentives motivate behavior and influence narrative formation. But it is not always clear how incentives can be leveraged to encourage democratic behaviors or positively influence narrative uptake.

7. CONTEXT & LANGUAGE EFFECTS

Test different adaptations of messages and narratives in different cultural, geographic, and linguistic contexts, including the resonance of different words and values or the development of culturally specific metaphors and narratives. The resonance of messages and narratives is highly dependent on the cultural and political context in which they are received.

Develop and test the power of narratives co-created by the communities they are targeting versus those developed in a more top-down way.¹⁴⁵ Our research highlights the importance of constructing locally relevant narratives rather than simply adopting narratives from the Global North organizations or donors.¹⁴⁶

Support messaging infrastructure and conduct more research on narrative formation and change in non-English contexts, particularly in Global Majority countries.

CONCLUSION

Changing narratives is a long-term project that will require a significant investment and a consistent coordination effort to unite democracy's defenders from around the world in a shared strategy. Funders, practitioners, researchers, and civil servants must work together to test, refine, scale, and sustain narratives that reconnect democratic ideals and values to everyday life. Building up a global narrative infrastructure is also key so that knowledge, tools, and tactics can be shared freely with other practitioners and dissemination networks can help magnify reach and impact.

The more evidence that lived experience provides to support positive mental models of democracy, the more quickly this type of deep narrative change will occur. Thus, narrative messaging efforts must be combined with democratic reforms and innovations to make democracies more responsive and representative. Authoritarian narratives have proven powerful, but they are neither inevitable nor immutable. With coordinated action, sustained commitment, and suitable infrastructure, democracy's defenders can reshape mental models and create a future in which the narratives that support and sustain democracy dominate.

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