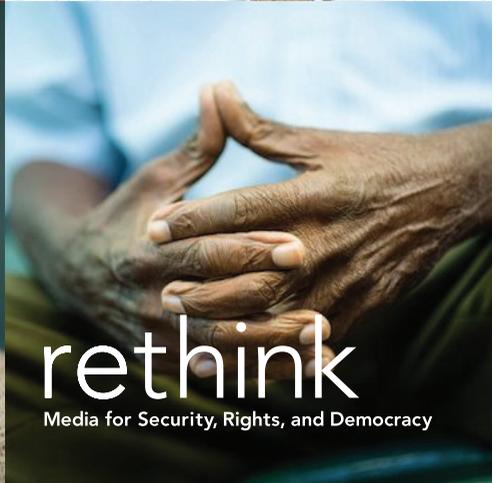




MOVING AMERICANS TO ACTION

A MESSAGE GUIDE FOR DEMOCRACY ADVOCATES



rethink

Media for Security, Rights, and Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The subject of money in politics exists in a unique place within American political discourse. Virtually all Americans, across party lines and demographics, recognize that there is something fundamentally wrong with our democracy today. And yet, while 91 percent agree that money in politics is a problem, only 9 percent believe that we can reduce its influence in the next few years (Global Strategy Group).

Plainly stated, the greatest challenge to addressing the problem of money in politics is the public's cynicism and hopelessness. The aim of this guide is to overcome that obstacle.

In our efforts to move Americans from cynicism to action, we must reach new audiences, and with new messages. From members of the emerging New American Majority—communities of color, women, and young people—to Democrats and Republicans alike, the opportunity exists to make new allies and strengthen the diversity and impact of a growing movement.

It is no surprise that polls show widespread frustration with a political system that most Americans do not think represents them, and that support for solutions to reduce the political influence of big campaign donors has held steady for years (Democracy Corps). Americans sharing this belief are as diverse as our nation itself, and our strategies and messages must reflect that.

To our advantage, voters already understand the connection between their frustration toward dysfunction in the political system and money's outsized role in it. They understand that big-money politics limits the people who run for and win office, limits the policies they consider, and threatens our democracy as a whole. It is up to us to connect voters' kitchen-table issues to the overriding issue of money in politics. We must make connections to their lives, and connections to their futures.

We have won the debate about the nature of the problem. Now we must win the debate about the achievability of meaningful solutions.

To that end, this message guide has two core objectives.

Synthesize the findings of recent major message research to help advocates understand and use the most persuasive message frames to move people from cynicism to action.

01

The major message research projects on which this guide is based were undertaken over the course of 2014 and 2015. These include focus group and polling research conducted by Lake Research Partners (LRP) for the Democracy Initiative and Demos; polling, focus groups, and online research completed by the Purpose Institute; framing analysis and ethnographic study undertaken by the Topos Partnership; and polling and focus group work prepared for the Women Donors Network. It also draws upon research on redistricting reform that was done by LRP and Hattaway Communications.

Demonstrate opportunities for connecting the issue of money in politics to other issues of democratic engagement, such as voting rights and redistricting reform.

02

In all cases, the researchers have done outstanding work assessing public attitudes in order to inform our movement's efforts to more effectively communicate solutions and to move the public toward action. While specific findings and recommendations vary among the four research projects, it is a testament to the clarity of the path forward that their results reach, and reinforce, several similar conclusions.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT OUR AUDIENCE

Unlike most issues in American politics today, there is widespread agreement that when it comes to the influence of money in politics, our system is broken. Given this agreement, our overall audience is equally broad: Americans voters who can be motivated by the values of voice and equal say, and of having a government that is truly “of, by, and for the people.”

However, as we make recommendations in this guide about what to say and how to say it, important distinctions arise. Throughout this document, we will refer to the “base,” “persuadables,” and the opposition (LRP).

- **Our Base**, which makes up approximately 13 percent of voters, are people strongly committed to the values of equal voice and equal say. They are core supporters of democracy reforms across the board, from money in politics to voting rights. Women, Democrats, and people of color are over-represented, though given the demographics of the country, a majority are still white.
- **Persuadables** are arguably our most important target audience. You may have heard them referred to as the “movable middle.” They make up 77 percent of voters and are oriented to values that more closely reflect those of the total population (Their demographics also look more like the national electorate.) Persuadable voters are receptive to democracy reforms, but not automatically supportive.
- **The Opposition** is the smallest group, and least important. They cannot be motivated to act around the values shared by the pro-democracy community and our base.

Demographics	Total (%)	Base	Opp.	Pers.
Men	48	45	68	46
Women	52	55	32	54
Under 30	16	13	4	18
30-39	15	14	14	15
40-49	15	17	21	15
50-64	30	34	27	29
Over 65	24	23	34	23
White	69	57	82	69
AA	13	15	7	13
Latino	12	14	5	13
White Men	35	24	59	34
White Women	34	33	23	35
AA Men	5	9	4	5
AA Women	8	6	3	9
Latino Men	5	8	2	5
Latinas	7	5	3	7
Democrat	43	67	11	43
Independent	17	17	17	17
Republican	38	16	67	38

They prioritize free speech and individual responsibility, and tend to be older, white, male and Republican. Critically, the opposition should not be confused with Republicans. *Sixteen percent of our base and 38 percent of persuadables are Republicans.* Opponents are more accurately considered as perceiving reform as threatening to their interests rather than as supporters of a particular party or ideology.

It is important to remember that in regard to our two target audiences—the base and persuadables—we are talking to a very diverse group. We must mobilize our base on the issue, but success is contingent upon attracting and convincing the persuadables not only that we are right, but that we will win. The messages and frames recommended in this guide are designed to achieve that goal.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT FRAMING

THE BASICS

A message frame (as compared to talking points in response to a given policy opportunity or individual messages within a specific campaign) establishes a larger conceptual framework for addressing an issue. Reframing an issue can fundamentally shift the way that audiences consider the topic. For example, the movement for marriage equality adopted a frame that encouraged Americans to look at same-sex relationships as about love and freedom rather than sex and sexuality, and helped the movement change minds and policy. Similarly, advocates working to increase the minimum wage adopted the frame of a “livable wage” to underscore that it is not possible to support a family on a minimum-wage income.

A successful frame provides the structure for developing talking points and specific messages and harnesses those individual efforts to drive a broader shift in public response.

FRAMES THAT MOVE VOTERS

Understanding that our most critical objective is to move the public from cynicism to engagement and hopefulness, the research projects described earlier found the following frames to have the most powerful impact.

A SYSTEM ‘OUT OF BALANCE’

One striking example of language that emerged across research efforts was voters’ response to descriptions of a system “out of balance.” This 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 restore 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.

Voters understand that big-money politics limits the people who run, limits who runs, wins, and governs. Similarly, since very few Americans can make large political contributions, the scale of big-money contributions made by major political donors effectively marginalizes the democratic participation of smaller donors.

This disproportional influence of those who can make major political contributions ultimately affects which policies are even considered. A system dominated by big money and special interests produces outcomes that fail to reflect the needs and concerns of everyday people. Pursuing a better “balance” implies achieving a system where all voices are more evenly heard.

EQUAL VOICE AND EQUAL SAY: INCLUSION AND FAIRNESS

Several of the research efforts also found respondents very receptive to messages about inclusion and exclusion. Irrespective of party affiliation, people favorably responded to the simple principle of fairness – that every citizen should have an equal voice and an equal say, and that every voice should be heard.

Extending the concept further, a system dominated by wealthy special interests precludes us from achieving a “reflective democracy,” a concept explored by the Women Donors Network. In an era of diverse workplaces, a rising New American Majority, and women graduating from college at higher rates than men, some of the best candidates for public office are excluded from a process dominated by the influence of big money predominantly contributed by white male donors. While classrooms and boardrooms are becoming more diverse, diversity in political representation has visibly lagged behind, making the de facto case that the current system is not working for all of us.

The frame of “inclusion,” wherein everyone enjoys equal participation, also provides a bridge between money in politics and other democracy issues such as voting rights. Despite finding that few people believe that there are systemic efforts to suppress or deny some citizens’ voting rights, the LRP research also found strong support for the proposition that everyone has a right to vote. A top-performing message argued that it should be against the law to deny the vote to anyone. While not every American votes, no American likes the idea of being excluded from having the opportunity.

Every citizen should
have an equal voice
and an equal say.

BARRIERS TO RUNNING

One of the major findings of the Topos Partnership’s research was a dramatic shift among respondents when they were asked their views on eliminating “barriers to running” for “people like me.” Respondents who expressed deep disillusionment over the prospect of ever “getting money out of politics” were genuinely enthusiastic about solutions that would remove these barriers.

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 they get representatives who are like them, or who understand their lives. This organic understanding among voters also makes it easy to build support for a range of reforms—from public financing and spending limits to redistricting reform and eliminating other barriers to full democratic participation.

As with the proposition of restoring balance, rather than focusing on the perceived impossibility of getting money out of the system, this frame shifts respondents’ focus to positive considerations of what representative government would look

like if those in elected office more fundamentally shared and understood voters’ life experiences. Respondents contemplated how much more responsive policy making would be if policy-makers themselves had genuine connections to the types of issues that the majority of American households contend with. Not only were they themselves demonstrably more excited about this framing, they suggested that more Americans overall would be more engaged with, and hopeful about, a representative system that removed “barriers to running.”

Every voice should
be heard.

THE PRICE WE PAY

Research conducted by the Purpose Institute explored the views of independents, conservatives, and liberals on money in politics. In focus groups, researchers found that the “price we pay” frame moved voters through the money in politics problem quickly, and raised engagement on the issue. It is important to note, however, that without also addressing solutions, messages using this frame can lead audiences back to disempowerment and cynicism.

The “price we pay” frame is rooted in connecting the issue of money in politics to the range of policy issues that people already care about, such as the environment or gun violence. It follows a formula to take the voter from the abstract issue of money-in-politics, which can seem too big to deal with, to an issue of personal and local importance.

- **The formula:** When [wealthy special interest] makes large political contributions/lobbies the legislature (be specific where possible), we all pay the price with [negative personal outcome/consequence/cost].
- **An example:** When Duke Energy lobbies the state government to monopolize utilities in N.C., we all pay the price with higher gas and electric bills and less money to feed our families.

The “price we pay” frame’s primary asset is that it easily allows advocates to connect money in politics to the issues their audiences already care about. Given that part of our goal is to engage new audiences—in particular those for whom money in politics is not a key issue—the “price we pay” frame gives us a very concrete way to do that. While making these connections is important, it is not sufficient in terms of moving voters to action. The solutions component is critical in messages that adopt this frame. It is not enough to simply make the connection from money in politics to climate change. We must demonstrate that we have the solutions to fix money in politics, and that these solutions will also help us fix climate change.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CORRUPTION FRAME

The “corruption frame,” based on the idea that money is a corrupting influence on elected officials, has been a consistently popular way to discuss money in politics. It has succeeded in convincing Americans of the depth and severity of the problem to the nearly universal understanding among Americans that our system is broken.

Corruption has also been the lynchpin of the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence related to money in politics for 40 years. By limiting restrictions on campaign finance to those meant to prevent corruption (largely defined as quid pro quo bribery), the Court has also limited the people’s power to pursue results beyond preventing corruption—such as ensuring that every voice matters, and limiting the undue influence of wealthy special interests. As we aspire to move our jurisprudence beyond corruption, we must also move beyond it in our communications. (Importantly, while we are pursuing a legal change of course regarding corruption, laws will not change overnight. Organizations working on legislation and ballot measures will need to make sure the language of those policy proposals comports with the laws we currently have.)

While LRP research shows that the corruption frame still tests well with our base (though not as well as other messages), research by Topos points to significant flaws and limitations in emphasizing the corrupting influence of money alone.

First, using the corruption frame consistently leads voters into what Topos termed a “vortex of despair.” While it may result in initial outrage, it is difficult to convert that outrage into action because the human problem of greed seems

insurmountable. It is easy to tell the story of wealthy special interests “buying off” elected officials, but that drives the message that no elected official can be trusted. This frame also blurs the legal with the illegal (e.g., unlimited and undisclosed donations vs. bribery) and is limited by its focus on money alone—to the exclusion of discussing participation, representation, and democracy. And for many, the prospect of getting money completely out of politics is simply unrealistic, strengthening the narrative that “nothing can be done” because ultimately money will find a way.

Second, the corruption frame also creates a self-defeating paradox. If money is both corrupting and universal, politicians will invariably be corrupted. Yet in order to move policy solutions forward, it is politicians who we will need to elect and trust to drive those solutions.

The Topos research concluded very directly that, “the ‘politicians are bought’ frame is so deeply established and so negatively charged that essentially no new outrage is capable of changing people’s basic take on the situation. This is a very important consideration given how tempting it is for advocates to believe that ‘the next scandal’ will create a meaningful tipping point.”

When specifically testing a corruption message, LRP also found limitations to adopting this frame:

- While it resonates with the base and persuadables, it is also one of the strongest frames in motivating the opposition.
- It proves weaker than the equal voice frame in motivating advocates and base.

Remembering that the key to winning is to motivate our base and engage persuadables, the corruption frame is not as likely to be successful in motivating people to action. We must redirect people from pessimism and disgust with government toward a more productive engagement with reform and good governance. To counter this, research shows that it is crucial that all messages begin aspirationally and move quickly to introduce actionable solutions.

THE MESSAGE SANDWICH

The order in which you structure your argument is critically important. LRP was explicit on this point, noting, “the focus groups also underscored that clear delivery of the frame is critical, as is the order in which the aspiration and problem is discussed. 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 with our democracy and recognize the impact of the money in politics; 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 (example #1)

“We have the power to build a democracy that is truly of, by, and for the people.”

Begin with the aspirational (example #2)

“We all want our children and the next generation to have a better life and more opportunities than we did.”

Describe the problem (example #1)

“The problem is that today very few people can run for office who aren’t either extraordinarily wealthy or connected to very wealthy people. As a result, there are very few people in office who genuinely share most people’s perspectives or life experiences.”

Describe the problem (example #2)

“As it stands, we all pay a price in our daily lives for our system being out of balance. We pay a price when big-box retailers lobby against a living wage, corporate polluters spend millions of dollars electing politicians, or the pharmaceutical industry writes healthcare policy.”

Establish the villain

“The bottom line is that wealthy special interests have far too much power in deciding who can run and what policies our representatives will consider when they are elected.”

Describe solutions, part 1

“We need to restore balance to our system and make it possible for regular people to run for office. We need to attract the most qualified people that want to go into public service and make sure that they aren’t excluded by the barriers of big money.”

Describe solutions, part 2

“That’s why we need practical solutions like small-donor matching systems for funding elections that will level the playing field and make candidates listen to the voters, not big donors.”

Tell the story of a growing movement

“The good news is that there is a fast-growing movement of people taking action to solve the problem. Overwhelming majorities of Americans understand that big-money politics is killing our democracy and there are efforts nationwide to change it. In the last election, reform efforts from Maine to Seattle won because voters across race, class, gender and party lines alike want a government that fairly represents us all.”

Close with the aspirational

“Over the years our country has overcome many challenges. We are resilient problem solvers. This should be no different. We can restore balance to our democracy and make sure that everyone’s voice is heard and every voice matters.”

THE MESSAGE SANDWICH: BARRIERS TO RUNNING FRAME

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

Running for office requires personal wealth or support from wealthy people, which prevents regular people from representing their communities. This limits our choices to those who can amass huge sums of money.

LETTUCE ESTABLISH THE VILLAIN

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

Across demographics, the villain that most resonates with voters are “wealthy special interests.” This villain can speak to a broad array of problems in our democracy today, and also invoke values of voice and equal say. 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. To restore a more representative government, elect the best representatives, and get policy solutions that reflect the needs of We the People, we need to address the barriers that prevent ordinary people from running for office.

- 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.

Notably, while Success Stories was not among the top-testing messages, giving examples of solutions already working in other states appears to be important to overcome inertia among potential supporters and bring about change.

THE BREAD

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



CONSERVATIVES AND PROGRESSIVES

Reducing the influence of big money in politics is not a partisan idea. Research indicates that conservatives are as concerned with the dominance of wealthy special interests over our political process as progressives, and agree that our democracy is fundamentally out of balance.

The challenge is that, while our base is persuaded by solutions messaging, the solutions advanced by many of the organizations in our sector are not necessarily those which will find immediate resonance with “persuadable” conservative voters. We should not permit this obstacle to prevent engagement with conservatives.

A FEW TIPS:

Assert the bipartisan nature of the issue—big-money politics is a problem for everyday voters of all political stripes. Regardless of their political affiliation, wealthy special interests look out for their own interests, not those of everyday Americans.

Engage conservatives on “gateway” solutions: transparency, ethics, and enforcement that can lead the way to bolder solutions such as citizen-funded elections and a constitutional amendment.

Identify and deploy resonant messengers. Not all conservatives are in the opposition, and there are influencers on the right who can speak credibly on these issues to conservative audiences. Employ them.

ELEMENTS OF A STRONG MESSAGE

There are a few key points to underscore about message delivery. These are more general aspects that are critical to reaching and engaging your audience regardless of frame or message specifics.

BE ASPIRATIONAL + COUNTER THE CYNICISM

The frames recommended in this guide are designed to move voters to action. They talk about the problem of money in politics in terms of our positive aspirations and expectations (e.g., everyone having an equal voice and a government that addresses our needs), not in terms of negative characteristics (e.g., bought politicians and a corrupt system). In order to combat cynicism, messages should focus on speaking to our core values—such as equal voice, concern for the future, that our democracy is for everyone—and discuss the solutions that can help us realize them. Remember, voters are well aware of the magnitude of the problem of money in politics. In fact, they are so aware that framing the conversation around the severity of the problem is likely to lead to apathy rather than action. The problem seems insurmountable and unsolvable without a vision for a better future and roadmap to get there.

CONNECT

Our broadest target audience responds strongly and favorably to notions of our democracy working “for the people,” and of a government that is “of, by, and for the people.” Using inclusive language connects messengers and messages to target audiences, improving resonance. Personal pronouns like “our” government being more responsive and “your” voice being fully heard bring the issue down to a personal level. Connecting with audiences by discussing the issue in terms that underscore the impact of money in politics to voters’ everyday lives is instrumental in moving them to appreciate solutions and mobilize.

ADDRESS REAL SOLUTIONS

We need to move quickly to talking about real solutions. While voters are overwhelmingly convinced that the outsized influence of big money is a major problem, they are equally convinced that little can be done to curb it. In order to compel voters to engage and act on these issues, advocates must be clear in communicating that there are practical and achievable solutions that will strengthen our democracy and reduce the influence of special interests. The more voters understand that the question is one of political will rather than availability of solutions, the more they can be engaged in demanding action from elected officials.

We need to talk about real solutions. While voters are convinced that the influence of big money is a major problem, they are equally convinced that little can be done to curb it.

DESCRIBE A GROWING MOVEMENT

It isn't enough just to clarify that solutions exist. We must also persuasively argue that millions of increasingly diverse Americans are getting involved and turning those solutions into reality. Our goal is to make the case that the problem of money in politics can be solved and there is no better way to do so than pointing to examples of people getting it done. Recent reform victories in Maine and Seattle, the success of Connecticut's public financing system, and the hundreds of localities that have said yes to a constitutional amendment opposing *Citizens United* provide easy illustrations of the reality that the movement to restore democracy is gaining momentum. Americans who care about our democracy and our future will want to be a part of it.

IDENTIFY THE VILLAIN

Any effective narrative has all the common elements of a good story. There should be a good guy, a villain, a conflict, and a resolution. This isn't solely about storytelling, however. Audiences need to understand that our dysfunctional democracy is the outcome of the villain's work—it did not happen magically or overnight. Similarly, the system will not fix itself. Strengthening our democracy will be the outcome of "good guys" overcoming the obstacles.

These narrative devices oblige audiences to choose sides and identify with a course of action, as well as reshape the conflict away from being intractable. In the case of money in politics, the research is clear—"wealthy special interests" are the villain. While people with differing ideological outlooks may define the motives of those interests differently, they are in solid agreement that "wealthy special interests" are controlling the system and influencing policy-making in ways that average, everyday Americans cannot.

SPEAK TO A REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY

One of the key reasons to expand the broader democracy movement is to actually build a broader and more diverse democracy, one that looks like our growing and changing nation. Research from the Women Donors Network found that we can most effectively elevate the critical issue of representation in our democracy when we are explicit about race and gender—and the barriers faced by women and people of color candidates—and talk about improving diversity in representation in terms of changing who has access to power and who is excluded from it. Discuss issues of inclusion and exclusion in ways that acknowledge why white men dominate our political system (e.g., barriers to running), rather than mask this problem, such as by referring to a "racial gap" or "gender gap" in representation. This common phrasing fails to make clear that there are man-made obstacles that are disproportionately faced by women and people of color who wish to run for office, and as a result precludes discussion of the solutions that exist to combat these barriers.

CONNECTING WITH THE ISSUE OF VOTING RIGHTS

The frames outlined in this message guide can also provide a bridge to a larger discussion of American democracy. While the problem of money in politics is enormous, it is not the only problem facing our democracy, and connecting with related issues of voting rights and redistricting reform strengthens the broader movement for change and opens the door to a more inclusive and diverse coalition.

The LRP research explicitly made this connection: “Importantly, through this research we have found ways to link the issues of money in politics and voting rights together so that umbrella frames can be used to talk about a variety of democracy issues. The values of voice and equal say are themes that can link the issues of money in politics and voting rights together. In an unequal system, the voices of the people are not being heard.”

While attempts at voter suppression and attacks on voter rights are well documented and well known to advocates, most voters (including our base) are much less aware of systematic efforts to deny voting rights to targeted constituencies and don't necessarily perceive that voting is a problem.

LRP notes, “voters broadly agree that it's easy for anyone to vote if they just take responsibility. Even among base voters, nearly three-fourths believe that anyone can vote if they just take responsibility. That belief is even more intrinsic among persuasion voters. That said, civil rights is a key motivator for base voters and advocates.”

While much of the framing outlined earlier is applicable to talking about both money in politics and voting rights, and provides the means to connect these issues, when discussing voting rights it is important to establish the fact that there are specific attacks on these rights backed by special interests.

THEMES TO NOTE:

At the core of democratic participation is the vote. Our votes are our voice and essential to a great democracy. If citizens are prevented from exercising their right to vote that is an obvious threat to principles of inclusion, equality, and a functioning democracy.

In message testing, the largest increase in support for the notion that voting rights are in jeopardy was among those who believe special interests are changing the rules to make it harder for some Americans to vote. In short, invoking the villain makes a difference.

The values of voice and equal say are themes that can link the issue of money in politics and voting rights together. In money in politics, big money drowns out the voice of the people. In attacks on voting rights, the voice of the people is silenced by dangerous law and policy.

CONNECTING WITH THE ISSUE OF REDISTRICTING REFORM

The frames in this guide also have strong parallels to messages that resonate when addressing redistricting reform.

Research focused on redistricting reform saw respondents making the connections to money in politics organically. Voters already believe that they are not being fairly represented because of the influence of money in politics, so when the less well-known issue of redistricting is raised they place it in the same category—as one more

way in which some people have more influence than others, and one more way in which they are not being equally heard. In LRP's research, voters reported not "feeling heard," and the feeling that their vote may not matter due to how district lines are drawn conforms to that belief.

At the same time, message research on redistricting points to adopting similar positive, aspirational themes.

LRP found a "Will of the People" message to test strongly:

In America, elections are supposed to represent the will of the people, not politicians. But partisan politicians manipulate voting maps to keep themselves and their party in power. We need to reform the rules and make the process of drawing districts impartial, so that our government is of, by, and for the people.

Voters' number one priority is equality. When they see graphic representations of electoral outcomes that don't reflect actual votes cast as a result of gerrymandered district lines, they critique the lack of fairness even if their own party is a beneficiary. They place a top value on maximum "transparency" in the redistricting process because they feel that politicians should be accountable to the people. In pursuit of fairness, they strongly favor the prospect of an "impartial" body determining district lines.

COMMUNICATING THE WAY FORWARD

Past message frames allowed us to effectively explain the depth and severity of the issue of money in politics and played an important role in establishing voters' understanding of the problem.

The extensive research synthesized in this guide challenges us to re-work, de-emphasize, and, in some cases, abandon these frames as we adopt new messages that will help us win the debate about "when" and "how" we ensure government is truly of, by, and for the people.

By offering a positive aspirational message with actionable solutions we can move voters from cynicism to action.

This guide is only a resource, however. It won't get the message out on its own. The onus is on each of us to craft the most resonant messages for our target audiences, to explore creative ways to reach them where they are, and to exercise the message discipline that will help us move Americans to action.

By offering a positive aspirational message
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CASE STUDY: **CONNECTING DEMOCRACY AND MONEY IN POLITICS TO OTHER ISSUES: THE ENVIRONMENT**

Meet people where they are

“We can all agree that our system isn’t working as well as it should to resolve our country/state/community’s environmental challenges.”

Begin with the aspirational

“We have the power to make environmental policy-making more responsive and effective to the needs of our country/state/community.”

Address the problem (national example)

“The problem is that the views of those in office don’t reflect the views of the country. More than two-thirds of Americans want to see the government adopt a strong agenda to address global warming, but the majority in the Senate resists that agenda at every turn.”

Address the problem (environmental justice example)

“It is perfectly obvious that poorer neighborhoods and communities of color are paying the price for a status quo that places polluting industries in their backyards and gives us second-class status when it comes to environmental policy.”

Address the problem (local example)

“Both people who grew up here and newcomers alike can see that development policies are not doing what they should to protect open space and preserve the quality of life that made this place so special in the first place.”

Establish the villain

“Wealthy special interests have far too much power in shaping environmental policy. Their principle agenda is their bottom line, not the health and well being of our country/state/community.”

Describe solutions, part 1

“We need to better balance our system and make it possible for regular people to run for office. People who share a love for our open spaces/wild lands and who have seen first hand how environmental policy impacts public health. We need to attract the people who want to address these issues by going into government and make sure that they aren’t excluded by the barriers of big money.”

Describe solutions, part 2

“That’s why we need practical solutions like complete disclosure of who is paying for a candidate’s campaign—it’s important for us to know who is backing our elected officials and as a result having an impact on our laws and regulations.”

Tell the story of a growing movement

“The good news is that people see these connections clearly. They understand that the only way to address environmental issues is to have people in office with first-hand experience with the environmental concerns of their constituents and people who feel that they are accountable to those constituents above big donors.”

Close with the aspirational

“We’ve successfully addressed enormous environmental issues before, whether it was cleaning up major rivers, or preserving our national parks, or improving the air quality that affected millions in major cities. We can do it again, but we will need to reduce the influence of money in politics and enact real reforms so that our elected officials reflect the environmental values of those that elect them.”

DON'T SAY	DO SAY
Corruption	Barriers to running Equal voice Equal say Everyone's voice should be heard
Individual	Of, by, and for the people Everyday people Ordinary Americans Everyone participates, every vote is counted, and everyone's voice is heard
Unresponsive	Out of balance
Influence	Power
Politicians or government as the villains	Wealthy special interests as the villain
Campaign finance reform	Free and fair elections We deserve a real democracy
Inflow of money, Rising tide of campaign cash	Political rules unfairly favor the rich; Political loopholes
Our democracy is eroding	Changing who has access to power
Representation gap, Racial gap, Gender gap	Barriers to running, Political exclusion
Women or POC candidates/leaders/politicians	Best and the brightest, Talent and energy of all
Women candidates, Voters of color	New American Majority
Our democracy is eroding	Changing who has access to power
Only [X] of seats are held by	[X] denied representation, excluded from power

APPENDIX I

TEXT OF TOP MESSAGES

LAKE RESEARCH PARTNERS

EQUAL SAY / PRICE WE PAY

We need strong protections in our democracy so every voter's voice is heard, and every voice counts equally. That way we can all have an equal say over the decisions that affect our lives. Otherwise, big money yells loudest, sets the agenda, and rigs the rules in their favor, with tax breaks for the wealthy paid for by cuts in education or health care for the rest of us. We need to strengthen our democracy so that the government works for all of us.

NOTE: An equal voice frame is powerful in framing both the problem and the solutions—voters believe that part of the problem in democracy is that voters' voices are drowned out by money and special interests, or simply ignored. Importantly, pointing out that big money yells the loudest alienates opposition and engages the base and persuadable voters. This frame is also stronger in motivating advocates and base voters than corruption frames.

EVERYONE

We need to build a democracy where everyone participates, every vote is counted, and everyone's voice is heard; where people from all walks of life can run for and win office, not just the wealthy and well-connected; where every eligible American has the right to vote; and where politicians are held accountable to fair, common-sense rules with tough enforcement of penalties. There are examples of strong protections in place and working in communities around the nation to curb the influence of money in politics. Now it's time to strengthen our democracy by providing opportunity, real choices, and an equal voice for all.

FUTURE

As a nation and as individuals, we all want our children and the next generation to have a better life and more opportunities than we did. But there's something wrong when millions of hardworking Americans are just scraping by. That's what happens when a few wealthy special interests have too much power and make the rules—working families get left behind. We need to work together to put everyday American families first and foremost, not just the wealthy and special interests. I want my children and the next generation to inherit a free and fair America, and that will take coming together to make our democracy work for us.

PEOPLE POWER

America is a nation of farmers, teachers, caregivers, inventors, entrepreneurs, and workers, founded on the belief that we are all created equal. We know that it's not what you look like or where you come from that matters, but who you are. Our country's strength is grounded in our ability to take many perspectives and work together as one. That's why we believe in bringing all voices to the table, and ensuring that our elections are free, fair, and accessible for all citizens. When some voices are kept out of the political process, we all miss out. We need to strengthen our democracy so that every American has an equal voice in order to build a more perfect union.

PURPOSE INSTITUTE

THE PRICE WE PAY

There's a personal price we all pay for the money flowing through Washington: When our representatives become dependent on funding from big-moneyed interests—who employ thousands of lobbyists and spend millions of dollars to protect their own agendas—it leaves them unable to solve the problems of the American people. If we don't do something to fix the systemic corruption ravaging our democracy, progress will continue to be blocked on critical issues of all kinds. And we, the American people, will personally suffer the consequences—to our health, our financial stability, our environment, our economy, and our opportunities to get ahead. It's time we take back our democracy and liberate American ingenuity so we can solve the real problems affecting people's lives and restore the promise of this great nation.

TOPOS PARTNERSHIP

BARRIERS TO RUNNING

Running for office has become so expensive that it is nearly impossible for a regular person to get elected. As a result, many Americans now feel like they can't get the kind of representative who would stand up for their interests and points of view. In order to get back to a government "of the people and for the people," there are efforts around the country to dial back the amount of money elected officials have to pay out of their pockets and raise from donors.

EVERY VOICE VERSION

Running for office has become so expensive that it is nearly impossible for a regular person to run and get elected. Big money yells loudest. As a result, many Americans feel like we can't get the kind of representative who is like us and who listens to us. But there are steps we can take to overcome the money barrier and ensure we all have an equal say over the decisions that affect our lives. By making it easier for regular people to run and serve, we get back to a government that is truly of and by the people, where every voter's voice is heard and every voice counts.

PRICE WE PAY VERSION

Most people agree that today's elected leaders don't really represent regular people but rather the big-moneyed interests who employ thousands of lobbyists and millions of dollars to protect their own agendas. As a result we, the American people, personally suffer the consequences — to our health, our environment, and our opportunities to get ahead. One way to change this is to make it easier for regular people who aren't rich or well-connected to get elected and to serve without undue influence.

FOUNDING FATHERS VERSION

The Founding Fathers made it clear that in a democracy the government is supposed to be "by the people." This means regular people rather than just moneyed elites. Unfortunately, a number of factors – including how much it costs to run a campaign, special interest lobbying and so on have become an obstacle preventing regular people from representing us in government. There are a number of simple steps we can take to overcome that obstacle and create a government that is "by the people."

APPENDIX II:

THE UNITY PRINCIPLES UNITE GROUPS, SOLUTIONS, AND MESSAGES

The Fighting Big Money Agenda, based on the five Unity Principles and adapted here, captures the key values of a strong democracy strategy and provides solutions that reflect them.

VALUE: EVERYONE PARTICIPATES We need to provide incentives that encourage the active participation of small donors in our elections so candidates are accountable to the people—not wealthy donors and special interests.

01

SOLUTION: CITIZEN-FUNDING Providing public funding support (such as matching funds, tax credits, or small dollar vouchers) to amplify the role of ordinary Americans in financing elections makes elected officials less indebted to a narrow set of funders, allows candidates to spend more time listening to their constituents, gives more people the ability to run for office, elects office-holders more reflective of the community at large, and leads to policies more responsive to public needs and less skewed by wealthy interests.

VALUE: EVERYONE'S VOICE IS HEARD From equal access to the ballot box to the right not to be silenced by big money, democracy requires everyone to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives.

02

SOLUTION: SPENDING AND CONTRIBUTION LIMITS Our democracy is undermined when elected representatives only hear the policy preferences of the wealthy. We need reasonable limits on money in politics so our government doesn't just respond to wealthy donors and special interests when it should be responding to all Americans. Limits are most effective when combined with reforms to encourage more small donors to participate.

VALUE: EVERYONE KNOWS Voters have a right to know who is trying to influence our views and our elected representatives.

03

SOLUTION: DISCLOSURE Americans should be able to easily look up candidates, online and in “real-time,” to see what entities have spent substantial sums on the candidate’s behalf and which donors have provided the funds, both during the election and afterwards. We need effective disclosure requirements so outside spending groups cannot hide from voters the wealthy donors and special interests funding them.

VALUE: EVERYONE PLAYS BY COMMON-SENSE RULES The size of your wallet should not determine the strength of your political voice. But in a long series of decisions, the Supreme Court has cemented a flawed reading of our Constitution that strips the ability of We the People to impose common-sense limits on money in politics.

04

SOLUTION: CORRECTING THE COURT AND AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION Moving the Court from a corruption-based jurisprudence on money’s influence in politics to one that recognizes the people’s power to shape democracy will help us ensure all of our voices can be heard, not just wealthy special interests. We can also put in place a constitutional amendment that would allow Congress and states to set reasonable limits on campaign finance.

VALUE: EVERYONE IS ACCOUNTABLE

A fair and accessible election system requires strong enforcement of our laws so those who break them face real consequences that deter bad behavior.

05

SOLUTION: ROBUST ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAW

Individual-candidate super PACs and coordination between candidates and outside spending groups allow federal candidates and their big donors to evade the candidate contribution limits set by law. Shutting down individual-candidate super PACs and strengthening coordination rules are necessary to ensure accountability.



MOVING AMERICANS TO ACTION

