



# BEYOND DEMOCRACY: MOBILIZING BIPOC VOTERS IN THE SOUTH

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A NARRATIVE GUIDE



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## INTRODUCTION

***The South is not a problem to be solved but a promise to be fulfilled. It has been the birthplace of civil rights movements, labor movements, and moral movements. It is where we've learned to fight, and it is where we've learned to win.***

**- REV. DR. WILLIAM J. BARBER II, CO-CHAIR OF THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN.**

Historically, the South has been characterized by its deep-rooted racial divides. The mobilization of Black voters has been instrumental in challenging systemic inequalities and shaping the political landscape. Activists and politicians emphasize the importance of mobilizing these and other BIPOC communities to advance social justice, economic equity, and political representation. Their participation is crucial for building a more inclusive and representative democracy in the South.

This narrative guide pulls together public opinion research and the insights of partners and allies to provide guidance and tools for telling the story of community, activism, and the importance of protecting our democracy in the South. It is our hope that by creating and pushing out a cohesive narrative about community and activism, we can continue to build on BIPOC Southerners' legacy of power building to rally for the kinds of policies and approaches we know will result in better communities for everyone living in the region.

# background

In 2023, The Opportunity Agenda (TOA) invited 23 individuals whose organizational or primary work is conducted in the U.S. South to join our Beyond Democracy cohort. The primary objective of the Beyond Democracy project is to influence the thinking and motivations of potential and current Southern voters of color by meeting them where their civic interests lie. To complete the first portion of this project - cohort development, insight gathering, and research - TOA collaborated with consultants at Uprise and researchers from Frameshift.

By recruiting cohort participants who are artists and advocates regularly conducting civic engagement work at a grassroots level, our shared research questions and communication strategies were able speak directly to their respective audiences and evoke tones with a greater likelihood of audience resonance. Together, we embarked on research into the motivations of BIPOC Southern voters and what encouraged or prevented their participation in community at a number of levels. Following are our recommendations for encouraging community and civic engagement among these audiences.

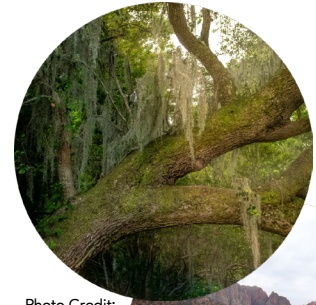


Photo Credit:  
Adam King



Photo Credit:  
George Pagan III

## THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

History and experience show that to be effective in moving hearts, minds, and policy over the long term, we need to frame messages under strong, values-based narratives that can transform the larger conversation, shift culture, and result in lasting change. Supporting and promoting a narrative in our communications does not mean we all must say the same thing with the same words. Rather, we each can find ways to translate the narrative and its core themes to the audiences we know best through our message development.

### building a narrative

Experience and research suggest that successful narratives share a few common elements.

#### THEY SHOULD:

- > **Lead with shared values and a clear vision;**
- > **Describe problems, but also point audiences toward clear solutions;**
- > **Be informed by public opinion research, media analysis, communications practice, and collective experience;**
- > **Adapt to key audiences, spokespeople, sub-issues, and circumstances; and**
- > **Support a coherent “drumbeat” of stories, messages, and events—both short and long-term.**



To ensure that the Beyond Democracy narrative met these criteria, the development process was guided by consultation with those active in the field of civic engagement and democracy, and original narrative research with Southern voters of color. These formed the strategy for and core pillars of a narrative that we hope will move audiences, reflects the values, and experience of the field, and has a positive impact on the lives of those most affected by the policies we want to protect, improve, or change.

# A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK TO MOBILIZE BIPOC VOTERS IN THE SOUTH

## vision

- > Broad support for, participation in, and reclamation of democracy in the South;
- > Motivated and inspired communities of color who cross the barrier from interest in community involvement to a desire to participate more directly in civic engagement and democracy and;
- > Increased support for policies that protect democracy and voting.

## values: sample language

### COMMUNITY



**We share responsibility for each other, and the strength of our nation depends on the vibrancy and cohesiveness of our communities. We understand that opportunity is not only about personal success but also about our success as a people.**





## LEGACY

**We have to build on the legacy of our ancestors by being active participants in the shaping of the world that we leave our children and grandchildren.**



## HOPE



**We believe that the impossible is possible. We have a vision of a community and country that values and respects everyone's rights and where everyone can reach their potential. We will center that vision in everything we do.**



## ACTIVISM/PARTICIPATION

**By coming together to share our experiences and ideas, we can form solutions to the many issues facing us. It's crucial that we join together to make them happen.**



## VOICE



**We should all have a say in the decisions that affect us. Our voices must be heard in voting booths, at public forums, and across all media.**

## desired narrative

We all have a responsibility to our communities, leaving behind a legacy for future generations. Each of us can make a positive impact, showing that the impossible is possible. By protecting democracy and participating in community efforts, we pave the way for a brighter tomorrow. When we work together, we prove that even the most daunting challenges can be overcome. Let's join forces and make a difference that echoes through time.

# narrative pillars

## Insist the “Impossible” is Possible

### SAMPLE LANGUAGE:

- “ Action on a larger scale DOES change the world - it’s hard to see in the moment, but it’s clear and inspiring to see change across generations
- “ Ordinary people can make change happen
- “ We are the change we want to see. When we come together, we can make anything happen.

## Emphasize Unity and Belonging

### SAMPLE LANGUAGE:

- “ Be a part of something, join a crew
- “ Safety in community, we have your back
- “ Activism is welcoming, inviting and accessible
- “ A collection of everyday heroes changing their world for the better
- “ A safe place for people of all stripes to feel belonging and joy
- “ A safe space to have your opinion heard and respected
- “ Part of a mutually respectful, caring team that works together seamlessly towards a shared goal

## Lean in on Legacy

### SAMPLE LANGUAGE:

- “ Connect the past and future
- “ We will be judged by future generations
- “ Be a role model
- “ A civic duty that supports the precious freedoms and opportunities that we are lucky to have in this country
- “ Resilience - no matter how many times you fall down, get up to build a better future for yourself
- “ Part of a family legacy - wise elders who better the future for their children and children’s children.
- “ Being the family protector - by supporting policies that create a safe space for their children’s children to thrive.
- “ Connect with the vision young members of the family have for their future, and to help them fight for it.

*“I firmly believe that confidence will get you what you want in life. If you manifest something, claim something - you’re gonna reach it. It all comes down to your commitment and effort level.”*

– BEYOND DEMOCRACY RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

*“You are doing something that is meaningful and important, but to see that out of someone else, so it’s not just about you. You’re seeing that same level of care and dedication...and then you get to do it together. That is incredible.”*

– BEYOND DEMOCRACY RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

*“The question that was asked ‘What will our grandkids think of us?’ makes me realize how big our impact can be on our children and grandchildren one day.”*

– BEYOND DEMOCRACY RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

**TONE:** defiant, inspirational, urgent, “real” language that is culturally competent



# SETTING NARRATIVE GOALS

Once we've established the narrative we want to emerge and the narratives that currently prevail – through research and observation - we can start to outline clear narrative goals.

## Prevailing Narratives

Participating in democracy is a personal, individual act. Getting people to vote is the central goal. But I'm not sure how I fit in otherwise.

It's admirable to be involved in community and civic engagement, but it's only for certain people. People need to be experts and have a lot of experience to engage. Those that don't may be rejected. There are also huge risks involved in community engagement, particularly anything political.

## Desired Narrative

We all have a responsibility to our communities, leaving behind a legacy for future generations. Each of us can make a positive impact, showing that the impossible is possible. By protecting democracy and participating in community efforts, we pave the way for a brighter tomorrow. When we work together, we prove that even the most daunting challenges can be overcome. Let's join forces and make a difference that echoes through time.

## ACTION: Narrative Goals

Show how collective action and participation in our democratic opportunities benefits society and individuals.

Center and encourage the protection of policies that encourage participation.

Make civic engagement and participation welcoming and accessible – and connected to tangible change.

Increase audience's understanding of impact by leaning in on legacy.

## audience considerations

In any communications strategy, knowing the audience you are hoping to influence is crucial. Each message should be tailored to that specific audience's needs. A narrative can span several audiences, with different language and points using the same general themes. A flexible narrative will be able to inspire messages to motivate our base, expand our constituency, bring along persuadables, and neutralize the opposition's effect on all of these groups. Rather than spending time and resources trying to change the mind of the opposition or even fighting with them, we should focus on considering how to address any influence they have over audiences in the middle.

# Audience Segmentation: Identifying Your Audience

## SEGMENTING AUDIENCES

### Base

Are “with you” and don’t need persuasion or much education about why a cause is important. They DO need communication to take a specific action and stay engaged.

### Persuadables

Identified through public opinion research, experience, and partner conversations, among other tactics, these are groups that could be with you with the right information and motivation. Over time, you can build trust so that they “get it” and require less and less persuasion.

### Opposition

This group is highly unlikely to be inspired to join you and is the “base” of your opposition.

1

2

3

4

5

#### 1 Base

- Skeptical of the prevailing narrative
- Would embrace new narrative quickly

#### 2 Base-Leaning Persuadable

- Open to new narrative
- Still susceptible to elements of prevailing narrative

#### 3 Persuadable

- Skeptical of and susceptible to elements of both narratives

#### 4 Opposition-Leaning Persuadable

- Susceptible to prevailing narrative
- But could be open to elements of new narrative

#### 5 Opposition

- Embrace prevailing narrative
- Would reject new narrative

**ACTION:** Identify where your target audience falls to help determine how to approach them.



# BUILDING A MESSAGE

To introduce people to a new way of thinking about any issue, it's important to consider the structure of our messages—particularly how they begin.

People think in shortcuts and once we've activated a familiar shortcut, they are likely to process all future information through the lens of that shortcut.

If we start with vision and values and fit the importance of the solutions we want into that framework, many audiences will find themselves more open to the rest of our points.

To this end, we suggest you build messages using the following structure:

**VALUE**

**PROBLEM**

**SOLUTION**

**ACTION**

## values and vision

Starting with shared values helps audiences to “hear” our messages more effectively than do dry facts or emotional rhetoric.



**COMMUNITY** - We share responsibility for each other, and the strength of our nation depends on the vibrancy and cohesiveness of our communities. We understand that opportunity is not only about personal success but also about our success as a people.



**LEGACY** - We have to build on the legacy of our ancestors by being active participants in the shaping of that world that we leave our children and grandchildren.



**HOPE** - We believe that the impossible is possible. We have a vision of a community and country that values and respects everyone's rights and where everyone can reach their potential. We will center that vision in everything we do.



**ACTIVISM/PARTICIPATION** - By coming together to share our experiences and ideas, we can form solutions to the many issues facing us. It's crucial that we join together to make them happen.



**VOICE** - We should all have a say in the decisions that affect us. Our voices must be heard in voting booths, at public forums, and across all media.

# problem

This is the place to pull out statistics or stories that are likely to resonate with the target audience.

- > Frame problems as a threat to our vision and values.
- > Underscore our connections to one another, and why this problem matters to everyone.

# solution

Positive solutions leave people with choices, ideas, and motivation.

- > What is the commonsense approach to the problem you have outlined?
- > Find ways to frame the solution as both the most commonsense and the most in line with our values.
- > Assign responsibility—Who can enact this solution?

# action

While the solution points out the overarching policy or program ask, the action is an audience-specific way to spur action.

- > What can this specific target audience do? Try to give them something concrete that they can even picture themselves doing: making a phone call or sending an email.
- > Steer clear of vague “learn more” messages, when possible.

## sample messages:

<b>value</b>	<b>We all want to live in a community where our voice is heard.</b>
<b>problem</b>	<b>Too often, we can feel powerless, as though no one is listening to us.</b>
<b>solution</b>	<b>When we join together, we fuse our power and our possibility and can make the seemingly impossible, possible. For instance... (include a specific example of a win from your work).</b>
<b>action</b>	<b>Join us! (Invite them to a town hall, community event, to sign a petition – something concrete and actionable.)</b>



**value**

Leaving the world better than we found is the mission of most parents and grandparents. And we know we're leaving a legacy for our children with everything we're doing – and not doing.

**problem**

We want to change our community, country, and world for our children and grandchildren, but we don't know where to start and activism can seem overwhelming.

**solution**

We need to become part of something bigger, join together and make our voices be heard. We have to be a part of the decision making that will shape the world our children inherit. Our ancestors marched for our rights when segregation and barriers to voting threatened our ability to fully participate in our democracy. We have to build on that legacy and ensure we keep its foundations strong.

**action**

**Come to our town hall.**

**value**

When we actively engage in our communities, we demonstrate our commitment to building a stronger, more connected society where everyone can thrive.

**problem**

Yet, many communities face challenges such as lack of resources, social isolation, and inequality. These issues hinder our ability to create vibrant and inclusive communities where everyone feels valued and supported.

**solution**

We can address these challenges by coming together and taking action. By volunteering our time, supporting local initiatives, and advocating for positive change, we can make a meaningful difference in the lives of those around us.

**action**

**Let's get involved in our communities. Whether it's volunteering at a local shelter, joining a neighborhood clean-up effort, or participating in community meetings, let's take concrete steps to make our communities stronger and more resilient. Together, we can build a brighter future for all.**

# Useful phrases to build narrative-supporting messages, from Frameshift research:

## Impossible is Possible

- “ Action on a larger scale DOES change the world - it’s hard to see in the moment, but it’s clear and inspiring to see change across generations.
- “ Every small action - recycling, helping a neighbor - is part of a larger purpose. Political action is about contributing to the greater good and living a meaningful life.
- “ You know what it means to be resilient in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Taking a small political action shows that you don’t give up - you keep trying to build a brighter future for yourself and others.
- “ When everyone does their part, anything is possible! Political action is not about me, it’s about WE. You can do your small part in politics, and be part of greater change for your kids and their kids.

## Unity and Belonging

- “ A democratic movement is a safe space to have your opinion heard and respected - be reassured that others want to hear you and there are no right or wrong opinions.
- “ You’ve faced your own struggles and have emerged stronger as a result. You can help everyone who is part of the movement feel validated as a mini changemaker.
- “ You can be part of a movement that welcomes you, whoever you are - we are all different people, but we belong together - finding joyful moments as we work to make the world a better place.
- “ A progressive movement, by definition, is focused on bringing to life new ideas from younger generations - your voice will be valued and welcomed.

## Lean in on Legacy

- “ Be a part of your family’s legacy - by taking political action, you are the wise elder who betters the future for your children and children’s children.
- “ Be your family’s protector by supporting policies that create a safe space for your children and your grandchildren to thrive.
- “ Taking political action is a bridge to the younger generation - asking them what they want for their future, and figuring out how you can help fight for it.
- “ We’re all grateful for the freedoms and opportunities we have in this country - participating in political action to support those freedoms is a way to fulfill your civic duty.

***Community is not just where we live; it’s who we are. Our strength lies in our relationships, our shared values, and our commitment to each other. When we come together as a community, we have the power to create positive change and shape our collective destiny.***

**- WILMA MANKILLER, PRINCIPAL CHIEF OF THE CHEROKEE NATION.**