Framing Democracy: A Quick-Start Guide

Democracy in the United States is at a crossroads. From widespread voter suppression tactics to an attempted coup in January of 2021, some of the basic foundations of our democratic system are being called into question.

Moving forward, our ability to counter authoritarianism and strengthen our democracy depends on public support and action, which in turn depends on how people think about and make sense of democracy itself. The framing choices we make can have a major impact on how people understand democracy in the US—what it is, how it works, and how it can be better.

In this quick-start guide, we're sharing recommendations for reframing your communications to build support for needed reforms to our democratic system. In addition to these recommendations, you'll find an overview of the research we've conducted into how members of the American public think about democracy. For a thorough exploration of our findings on mindsets around democracy, our political system, and our Constitution, check out the full research report.

Five recommendations for fostering more productive discourse about democracy:

How can advocates, activists, scholars, and other communicators talk about democracy in ways that improve public understanding and build support for change?

1. **Don't assume everyone understands the terms "authoritarianism" and "fascism" the same way you do.**
   Many people do not have a robust understanding of what authoritarianism and fascism *are*, beyond a general sense that both are bad. It is important for advocates to not take these understandings for granted, and instead take the time to explain these concepts to build that understanding.

2. **Appeal to the ideal of effective representation to make a case for change.**
   People have many understandings of what good representation looks like. These understandings all contain a powerful basis for critiquing the status quo: the idea that elected officials are failing to truly represent their constituents. "Good," "accurate," "effective" representation is a highly resonant concept that communicators can and should leverage to advocate for change. However, it is important to explain the structural roots of problems with representation (e.g., gerrymandering or campaign finance) to help people see the need for change beyond voting out current elected officials.

3. **Highlight forms of democratic participation beyond voting to expand people's understanding of democracy.**
   People frequently equate democracy with voting, making it difficult to see the importance of other kinds of participation. Voting is, of course, essential to a thriving democracy. Along with voting, things like mass demonstrations and community meetings are important components of healthy democratic systems and provide critical avenues for expression and voice. When communicating about democracy, it's important to make these connections explicit to help ensure that these other methods of participation don't seem unnecessary or even undemocratic because they involve pressure outside of the formal voting process.

4. **Name structural racism and show how it affects our political processes.**
   We've seen a rise in systemic thinking about racism in recent research on other issues, yet in interviews about democracy, participants across race and political party did not draw on systemic models of racism to make sense of our contemporary political institutions. They can point to historic examples of political exclusion but are unsure of how that exclusion has continued to this day. Advocates should consistently offer explanations and examples of how racism affects our democracy today—e.g., how gerrymandering systemically undermines the power of Black voters.

5. **Offer concrete solutions for strengthening our democracy.**
   People believe that our political system has massive problems, but few ideas of what can be done to fix it. The three most top-of-mind solutions—better leadership, term limits, and campaign finance reform—though valuable and important, are not matched to the scale of the problems identified. Advocates should make sure that if they're trying to bring other systemic reforms into view (e.g., proportional representation) they will need to name these reforms explicitly and be prepared to explain what they are and how they can strengthen our democracy.

Five cultural mindsets to watch:

The evolving balance between these deep, taken-for-granted ways of thinking in our culture will determine whether people recognize threats to democracy for what they are and which steps they see as critical for protecting and strengthening our democracy.

1. **Democracy = Individual Liberty**

   When using this mindset, **people equate democracy with a political order which protects basic civil and political rights.** This mindset limits people's understandings of what our democracy can and should be by focusing entirely on fundamental individual liberties and obscuring ideas like collective self-government, popular sovereignty, and political equality.

2. **Democracy = the US System of Government**

   When using this mindset, **democracy is understood as nothing more or less than what we do in the United States**. This mindset is a barrier to any criticisms that the US is insufficiently democratic—instead, any problems within the US are understood to be weaknesses of democracy itself.

3. **Voting Model of Democracy**

   When using this mindset, people understand voting as not just a feature of democratic participation—**democracy is understood as being the act of voting.** This mindset makes it easy to draw attention to the importance of issues like voter suppression, but its exclusive focus on voting can make other forms of democratic participation (e.g., mass demonstrations) be seen as unnecessary or even undemocratic.

4. **Popular Model of Democracy**

   When using this mindset, **democracy is understood as a political system in which the government does what the people want.** This mindset does not provide a clear explanation of how this happens, only a strong understanding that democracy means rule by and for the people. This mindset provides a potentially powerful basis for reforms to make our institutions more democratic, though it can also potentially be used to justify authoritarianism through exclusionary definitions of "the people" and claims that only a strong leader can speak on the people's behalf. Advocates and communicators must clearly and explicitly offer expansive and inclusive understandings of "the people" to undercut authoritarian appeals.

5. **Representation Model of Democracy**

   When using this mindset, democracy is understood as representation of the people by elected leaders, and this representation can be more or less successful depending on whether elected officials "actually" represent their constituents. This "actual representation" is understood as an ideal for a democracy to strive toward. What "actual representation" means can vary between four main understandings: Elected officials may successfully represent constituents when they **do what is in constituents' best interest**, when they **carry out the people's will**, when they **keep their election promises**, or when they **reflect people's experiences and identities.** Leveraging this mindset can help advocates communicate about how our system needs to change so that our representation—and democracy—is better.