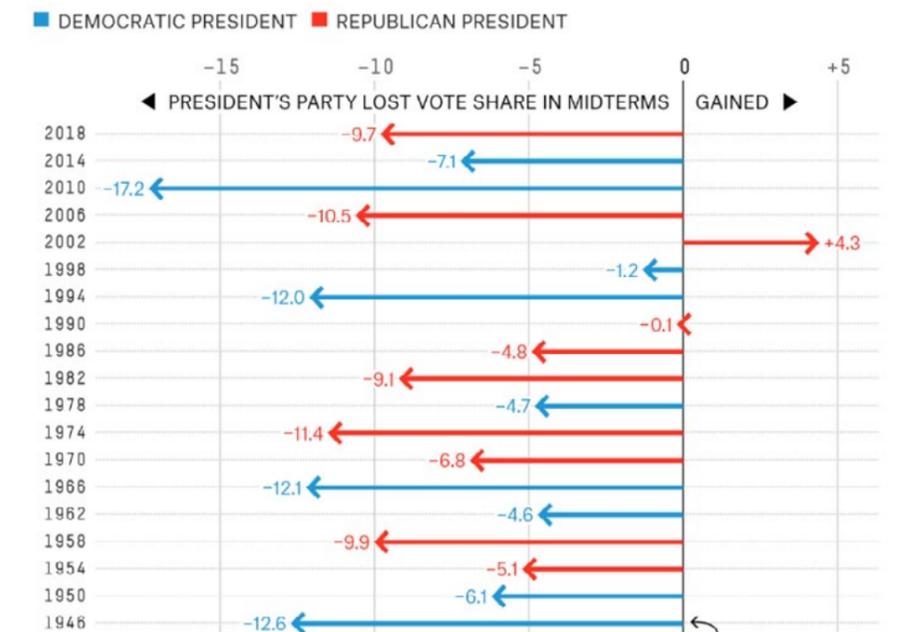


# INTRODUCTION

It's well-known that the party in power in a midterm year faces a difficult political environment. [FiveThirtyEight's analysis of the 19 midterm elections between 1946 and 2018](#) found that the president's party improved upon its share of the House popular vote just once. Most often, the president's party lost significant ground.



Graph courtesy of FiveThirtyEight } Data source: U.S. House of Representatives

**But 2022 may be different.** Recent developments, including a vote in deep red Kansas to protect reproductive rights and overperformance in special congressional elections in Minnesota, New York, and Alaska, offer reasons for optimism that Democrats can overcome much of the historical headwinds facing the Party; however, significant challenges remain.

NewDEAL has spent the past few months convening state and local policymakers along with pollsters and other strategists to discuss what they are hearing from voters and to share ideas with each other about how to navigate messaging challenges and opportunities. **Based on these conversations, we've compiled information on communication strategies about how to appeal to the broadest possible cross-section of voters,** recognizing that [even among Democrats, about half of voters consider themselves moderate or conservative](#), while fewer than one-fifth consider themselves very liberal. Specific guidance on top issues is included.



We hope that this memo will help NewDEAL Leaders continue to set an example for how Democrats can navigate difficult issues, broaden their appeal, and build a more durable coalition that can lead to sustained progress.



## MESSAGING HANDBOOK

# LESSONS FROM 2020

The 2020 election results illuminated the ongoing shift among white working-class and Hispanic voters away from the Democratic Party. Key trends include:

## EDUCATION LEVEL AS A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF PARTY ALIGNMENT

- ➔ White voters without college degrees have shifted more than 20 points towards Republicans over the last eight years.
- ➔ College-educated voters engage more than non-college-educated voters about social issues, especially the positions that have animated many Democrats in recent elections.

## HISPANIC VOTERS ARE LEAVING THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

- ➔ Obama got nearly 75% of the Hispanic vote, while Biden got 62%.

## POLITICS ARE MORE NATIONALIZED THAN EVER

- ➔ Historically, Senate and Congressional Democrats have done better than the top of the ticket, but in 2016, all federal Democratic candidates shared a common national brand.
- ➔ The correlation between Senate vote and presidential vote in 2008 was 0.7 -- high, but candidates like Heidi Heitkamp could still win in a state that voted Republican. In 2020, the number was 0.96, making split tickets nearly impossible.



# LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022

Voters remain pessimistic about the direction of the country: In an NBC News poll, nearly 75% of voters said they “believed things in the U.S. were headed in the wrong direction” — a record for that poll.

## Key issues for the 2022 election cycle:

63%  
OF VOTERS

### INFLATION AND THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY

Rising costs (inflation, gas prices, the economy, & everyday bills) was the top concern for 63 % of voters in [a June Monmouth Institute poll](#)

### SURGING ISSUES:

### ABORTION ACCESS AND GUN VIOLENCE

Post-*Dobbs* decision, polls show growing support for access to abortion. Recent data from key states like Wisconsin and Michigan, as well as in Kansas ahead of the recent vote to reject an anti-abortion constitutional amendment, show a surge in voter registration among women.

Polling shows 68% of voters in support of legislative action on gun control, the largest movement among independents which increased by 11% since May. 97% of voters agree with violence history check requirements.

## Another key issue for the 2022 cycle:



Photo by Colin Lloyd on Unsplash

## UNITED MESSAGE, UNITED PARTY

**Democrats are struggling to coalesce behind key messages.** While Republicans have clear topline issues (inflation, crime, and undocumented immigration), Democrats have a wide range of competing priorities, with a split between progressives and moderates.

**Democrats can't count on just their liberal base to win nationally.** Nearly half of Democratic voters identify as moderate, while only a quarter identify as very liberal.

## MESSAGING STRATEGIES

### Establish Democrats' Credentials

Democrats have taken decisive action through ground-breaking legislation to help the economy recover, create millions of new jobs, and help small businesses through the pandemic.

But that progress isn't clear to most voters. For example, a survey from Third Way and Impact Research found [only 24% of those polled believe the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has been signed into law](#), despite the provisions of the law being widely popular.

**The takeaway here is clear: messaging around the Democrats' successes is falling short.** The Democratic Party needs to better promote its achievements, and Democrats must focus on the real benefits they are delivering to their constituents.

### Recommendations

**Tout accomplishments** and how Democrats are making people's lives better, even as you acknowledge that people are struggling with inflation and uncertainty.

Emphasize the positive benefits of these accomplishments by **sharing stories about their impact on individuals**, which are especially clear from the investments state and local policymakers have made with an influx in federal funding.

**Support the president**—feeding into negative narratives about him will only bring Democrats down.

**Communicate what Democrats will do with more time in power** - lower everyday costs, cut taxes for families and small businesses, while asking big corporations to pay their fair share; bring back manufacturing and reduce our reliance on the global supply chain.

#### Strategy in Action



Mayor Lacey Beaty of Beaverton, OR released [an impact report touting the success of their business recovery grant program](#), which distributed over \$6 million to support existing and emerging small business owners throughout the pandemic. In addition to the report, the city developed an interactive dashboard and website to tell the story of the program's success to the public.

# MESSAGING STRATEGIES

## ***Push Back on Wedge Issues***

Democrats are getting attacked as Republicans focus on cultural issues to divide the country. Republicans are misrepresenting Democratic positions while also distracting voters from the real issues people deal with day-to-day.

## ***Recommendations***

**Democrats must address the criticism and pivot to what truly matters.** “I don’t believe that” - Assert what you do and don’t believe. This allows you to engage without giving value to a bad faith attack.

**Frame Republicans as the party of chaos, and call them out on corruption, extremist ideology, and distraction from meaningful policies to address the real issues people are facing.** Rational, factual arguments will not move voters, as they prioritize identity issues as the key issues in their voting decision making.

**Respond in real time, with honest, authentic, and clear messaging.**



Photo by Colin Lloyd on Unsplash

### *Strategy in Action*



**Michigan Senator Mallory McMorrow** responded quickly and decisively to a false accusation of being a “groomer” with a [floor speech that went viral online](#). McMorrow spoke about her truths, reclaiming her identity, and creating spaces for others. “It isn’t going low - this was hitting back, calling a spade a spade and then pivoting,” said McMorrow.

# MESSAGING STRATEGIES

## ***Engage on Your Terms***

Another strategy to engage on cultural issues is to reject unfair characterizations and questions that distract from the real issues. Clearly rebut the false charge, acknowledge the broader issues, then **engage on your terms**.

## ***Recommendations***

When asked a question that is an obvious trap, **reject the lie, state your belief, and engage in solutions**. Research shows it is essential to rebut the false attack.

When dealing with constituents, do not scoff at or dismiss their question; **try to understand the underlying concern**. Prepare for culture war attacks on crime, immigration, and critical race theory -- we provide more context on these topics in this document.

**Don't explain** - Often Democrats seek to explain the details but miss the concern and what's actually bothering voters. Do not get engaged in a back and forth on the topic.

## ***Use "Freedom Language"***

Democrats have allowed Republicans to define themselves as the party of freedom, but their policies on women's rights and efforts to control classrooms indicate otherwise.

## ***Recommendations***

Polling clearly finds "freedom" as the number one value for Americans, and Independents believe that Democrats are more likely to restrict freedoms than Republicans by 30 points. **Integrate freedom arguments into your statements**, and talk about how Democrats are protecting voters' freedom to choose how they want to live their lives.

## *Strategy in Action: Critical Race Theory in school curriculum*

**Break the frame: Don't get trapped into defining or debating CRT; address the underlying concerns of parents about their kids' education.**

Pivot to solutions - "I do not believe that students should be taught to feel badly about themselves. I firmly believe children deserve an honest and accurate education that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past to help create a better future. Teachers and parents have been put through the toughest two years. My focus is on fixing overcrowded classrooms, and ensuring teachers aren't forced to buy their own supplies, and instead can focus on working with families so that every student, no matter their background, is included and given the opportunity to succeed."

## *Strategy in Action: Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill*

**Break the frame: Frame them as being disingenuous about improving schools.** "I believe that students should be taught in an age-appropriate manner and firmly trust our district's teachers to do exactly that. Republicans want to make a statement for their radical base; I want to make a difference and ensure every child has the freedom to pursue their dream. We should focus on strengthening our public schools by giving them the funding they need to ensure every child feels welcomed and has a fair shot at a quality education."

## *Strategy in Action: Reproductive Rights*

Emphasize how limitations on reproductive rights are an infringement on personal rights and freedoms: "Women deserve the freedom to receive necessary medical services. Republicans seem to want a country that takes away a woman's right to privacy and autonomy and pushes government-mandated pregnancies."

# MESSAGING STRATEGIES

## ***Focus on the Solution, Not the Problem***

Start with values, not problems, to undermine cynicism and find a message that resonates positively with voters.

### ***Recommendations***

#### **Present success stories:**

Connect problems to solutions: spend twice as much time discussing solutions - voters already know the problems.



Connect solutions to outcomes: Put a face on it, and talk about the human impact. Use value-oriented terms and avoid percentages or policy jargon.



Make a call to action and give people the sense that they can enact change.

#### **Engage People in the Solution:**

Give people a roadmap and explicit actions (contacting leaders, elections) to give them a positive sense that anyone can aspire to take action to fix problems.

#### *Strategy in Action: Connecting Problems to Solutions*

##### **Focus on the solution itself, not the funding:**

**Weak:** Providing more funding to the schools that need the most help will improve the education children in those schools receive.

**Strong:** Providing quality teachers, counselors, and healthy meals to the schools that need the most help will improve the education children in those schools receive.

The second sentence receives significantly higher approval ratings, including among swing voters.



*Photo by Christina @ wocintechchat.com on Unsplash*



*Photo by Rémi Walle on Unsplash*

# MESSAGING STRATEGIES

## ***Make Deep and Sustained Connections with Voters***

Democrats must meet voters where they are by recognizing how they consume information and who they trust.

### ***Recommendations***

Voters use different sources to find information. **Use multiple platforms to break through the crowded communication ecosystem and connect with target audiences with timely and relevant content.** Think about Facebook, Youtube, Google searches, streaming audio, and more.



Photo by Jeremy Bezanger on Unsplash

Communication efforts must be durable and consistent. It is not enough to engage with voters during the election cycle – **consistently work to connect with voters and empower voices in the community** to resonate with voters and turn engagement into meaningful action.



Photo by Antenna on Unsplash

Provide authentic storytelling about the real impact of policy outcomes. The messenger matters – **voters need to hear from voices with whom they can relate.** The stories should be personal and speak to the lived experience of the audience. Cultural understanding can be a barrier to entry, or a path to a larger conversation with voters.



Photo by wes lewis on Unsplash

### ***Strategy in Action***

Engage with community activists by posting a rapid response video to events in the community. A lower production cell phone video on the ground in an easily recognizable location can resonate more than polished, scripted responses a week later. Once the target audience is engaged, convert their engagement into a call to action, such as voting.

# COMMUNICATING ON KEY ISSUES

## HIGH COSTS

### *perception*

A recent poll found 63% of voters identified inflation, gas prices, or the economy as their top concern (inflation and gas prices alone combined for 47%). The same poll also found only 8% believe the federal government has helped with their most important concern over the last 6 months.

The reality is that the Democratic party has passed laws to bolster programs and funding to reduce cost of living for working families, help the country get off of its dependency on foreign energy, and provide a wide variety of renewable sources.

Democrats must do a better job communicating the benefits and relief being implemented or that will come soon, due to major legislative victories including the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act.

Emphasize other actions by the White House to address inflation and the impacts of high costs on families, such as:

- ➔ Releasing 1 million barrels per day from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve since May, which has helped drop gas prices below \$4 a gallon nationally.
- ➔ Investing billions of federal resources in agricultural workers and fostering competition in the meat-processing sector to lower food prices.
- ➔ Extending health insurance subsidies and lowering the costs of prescription drugs through the Inflation Reduction Act.



### *Strategy in Action*

Over 70% of Americans know that refusing Russian gas will cause prices to rise but still support it because they are willing to make some personal sacrifice to stand up to Putin. Pivot, and address the fact that oil companies are posting record profits at the expense of everyday Americans.

# COMMUNICATING ON KEY ISSUES

## IMMIGRATION

### perception

Nationally, immigration will always be a top issue because of the consistent focus on it by the Republican Party. Polling shows [66% of voters disapprove of President Biden's handling of immigration issues](#), with just over 70% identifying immigration reform as an important priority for the White House and Congress.

Supporting reforms can work, but leaders get in trouble when they downplay, don't mention, or don't show they are taking seriously the concerns about border security.

Swing voters care about border security, not necessarily comprehensive immigration reform. Voters tend to distrust Democrats on the issue, believing they do not care about it. This feeling is reinforced when Democrats choose to avoid the subject, seemingly in fear of appearing Trumpian in supporting policies that secure the border and create a system of strict rules and processes.

It's a false dichotomy: **Democrats should feel comfortable advocating for a path to citizenship for immigrants who are an important part of the country, as well as a secure border and respect for the rule of law.**



Photo by Nitish Meena on Unsplash



Photo by Manny Becerra on Unsplash

## ABORTION

### perception

Following the Supreme Court's decision overturning Roe v. Wade, [55% of all voters and 77% of Democratic voters claimed access to abortion was "very important" to their vote in November](#), said abortion access is very important, an increase from February. A [61% majority of U.S. adults say abortion should be legal](#) in all or most cases.

Polling after the Dobbs decision showed that voters have heard more about this decision than any other. This presents an opportunity to mobilize voters by keeping this topic front and center leading up to the midterms.

Create an image: "If my 20-year-old unmarried niece were pregnant, I don't know what advice I'd give her - I do know that I don't want my opponent/the government coming into her bedroom and telling her what to do."

Highlight the extreme consequences of anti-abortion policy and the limits to exceptions that Republicans would allow, recognizing that even many people uncomfortable with abortion want it to be an option in some cases and positioning Democrats as having the mainstream position.

# COMMUNICATING ON KEY ISSUES

## CRIME

### *perception*

One poll found [voters trust Republicans on crime by a 12-point margin](#), and overall concerns about crime are growing, with 53% saying they worry about crime a “great deal.”

Crime is a prominent issue across the country and voters are predisposed to distrust Democrats to address it. It is important to acknowledge, and not dismiss, their concerns. Talk about working with other government agencies on the issue instead of blaming them - it puts the spotlight on them without passing the buck. For example:

“I see the rising crime problem, it is a major concern and one of my chief priorities. As a legislator, there are limits to our ability to address this, but we are working to ensure that local law enforcement have access to the resources they need. We’re working with local communities and I call upon \_\_\_\_\_ to do \_\_\_\_\_ so people can feel safe in their communities.”

Even just calling out the issue is important and opens the opportunities to discuss second tier issues, such as providing additional resources and services in our communities so cops can focus on violent crime.

## EDUCATION

### *perception*

[Over 46% of voters say education is important to their vote](#), with over 30% stating they care about education’s broad social benefits and only 7% specifically naming “critical race theory” as their main concern.

Cynicism about improving public education is the most significant obstacle in winning over voters, more than the opposition. Part of the fight will be to persuade pessimistic voters to believe things will get better.

**Voters respond better to messages of “fixing” the system** over messages about changing it. They want to know what they are buying with additional funding - talk about investing in basic reading, writing, and math skills; helping children get good jobs and reach their full potential; and supporting children’s emotional and physical well-being. Voters also want parental involvement, we cannot be against it.

### *Strategy in Action: Equity Messaging*

“Providing more funding to the schools that need the most help” is a more effective message than “Funding schools equitably to help ensure that every child can get a quality education”.

The first statement resonated stronger by being clear about who benefits. **Do not make it a zero-sum game; voters want to know that schools are getting more funding and relate more to asset-based arguments.**

It’s important to communicate clearly when discussing equity. Many voters are uncertain about the word “equity,” and communities of color are particularly suspicious of the word. This message is solution-oriented, value-based, that tells a clear success story while avoiding zero-sum arguments and jargon: “No matter their race, background, or zip code, children deserve an education that sets them up for success. But for years, some elected leaders have left schools from major cities to rural areas with overcrowded classrooms and teachers forced to buy their own supplies. A better way is possible – when we fund our schools fairly and based on need, the results are clear.”

# COMMUNICATING ON KEY ISSUES

## THREATS TO DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

### *perception*

Public trust in democratic institutions has eroded, and multiple polls have found that [most Americans believe the US democracy is unstable and on the verge of failing](#). Republicans are actively increasing threats to the stability of our democracy.

**Draw the clear contrast:**

**This is an opportunity to show Republicans as a party of chaos.**

The Republican Party leadership has led a concerted effort to obstruct the peaceful transition of power, defraud the American people, and overturn the results of the 2020 election, culminating in the January 6 insurrection. Even now, they are continuing to spread disinformation and mount personal attacks against election administrators to intimidate and undermine our democratic process. They are even calling for defunding, and encouraging attacks on, the FBI while pretending to be the party of law enforcement.

**When people have a better understanding of the rules and systems, they come away with more confidence in elections.**

Combat disinformation in real time and lead with the truth. Lead with empathy, to reach everyday people who have been misled; it's possible to not dismiss all concerns about election integrity without giving credibility to attacks on the 2020 election results.

Maximize transparency: show how elections are administered, including how voting machines work, to educate the public.

### *Strategy in Action*

The [Minnesota Public Accuracy Test](#) is a great example of advertising transparency to build public trust in an upcoming election. All counties and municipalities that are conducting elections are required to test their equipment 14 days prior to Election Day. The test events are open to the members of the public and observed by at least two election judges from different parties.



Photo by little plant on Unsplash

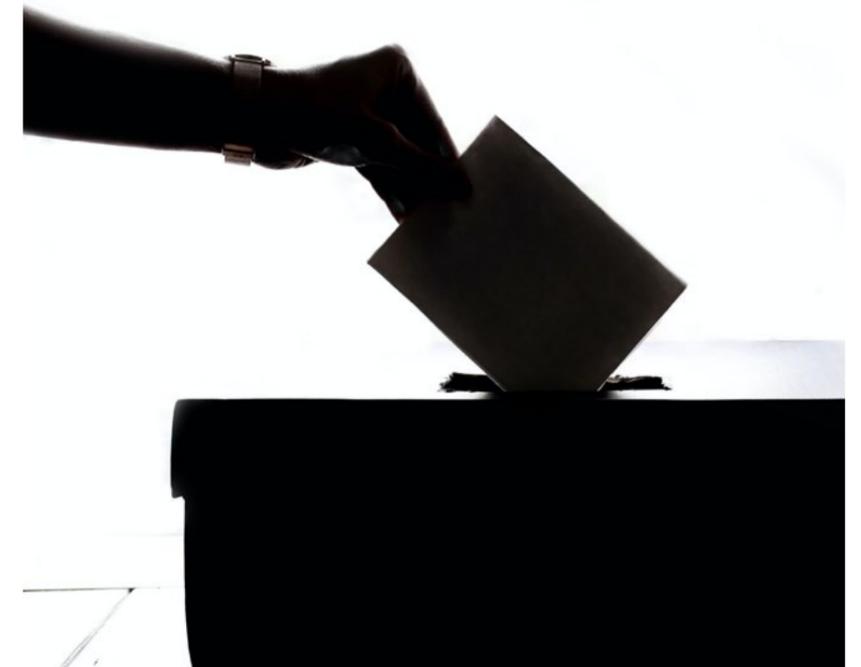


Photo by Element5 Digital on Unsplash



# MESSAGING HANDBOOK

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT THE NEWDEAL

The NewDEAL is a national network of over 180 rising state and local elected leaders who are pro-growth progressives. Our mission is to bring together leaders focused on expanding opportunity and to help them develop and spread innovative ideas to spur economic growth that is broadly-earned and sustainable. We do this by connecting the NewDEAL Leaders with each other to exchange ideas, and connecting them with other pro-growth progressive political, policy, and private sector leaders.

[WWW.NEWDEALLEADERS.ORG](http://WWW.NEWDEALLEADERS.ORG)

