

MESSAGING THIS MOMENT:

MOBILIZING OUR BASE AND PERSUADING THE MIDDLE ON POLICING, PROTEST AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

2020



PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

As we grapple with COVID claiming lives and decimating livelihoods, advocates for racial justice and economic equality now find ourselves in the midst of even greater horrors. Yet another set of killings of Black people at the hands of law enforcement and racist vigilantes have brought the white supremacy at the root of our society into stark relief. And, with it, sent courageous activists into the streets. With every demand for justice comes reprisal – meted out with brutal force by militarized police, ordered and cheered on by Trump and his enablers. This is rendered all the more destructive, in many places, by opportunistic white nationalists hiding behind the critical protests of people fighting to ensure justice for all.

In this moment of enormous tension, widespread fear, and police brutality, opinions are formed and cemented. The potent pull toward “Law and Order,” a frequent rightwing refrain, can have potential supporters harden against protests and embrace our opposition’s version of an incredibly chaotic storyline. Arguably as dangerous for our aims, the severity and magnitude of the state-sponsored violence can extinguish in our base the hope required for civic engagement.

More broadly, this has become a fight over American democracy itself, the very nature of the implicit pact between “we the people” and the leaders who claim to govern in our name, purportedly to carry out our collective will. While this literal battle rages – with tear gassing militias on one side and kneeling protestors on the other – the rhetorical one does as well. We must seize the story of what is happening, making clear the reasons behind events unfolding in order to have our solutions seem both obvious and worth battling for.

With all of this as our backdrop, we’ve crafted this guide to offer high level suggestions for activating the broadest possible range of support for desired policy solutions, inoculating against our opposition’s narrative, and contending with the understandable despondency we cannot risk from our base. What follows are overarching directives, full sample narratives and rebuttals to common objections.

Messaging Principles

- **DO speak from and reinforce our own narrative**

- Lift up all the ways people are showing up in cross racial solidarity: examples include neighborhood safety patrols, spontaneous clean-ups, joyous expressions even in midst of protest, food donation and distribution, transit drivers refusing to transport protestors to jail, major corporations speaking in solidarity (no matter how hollow the gesture) etc. These help quell the sense of futility among our base and show-not-tell our aims to the middle.
- Make clear, in values-based terms, what people are seeking and create cognitive dissonance between our audiences' desired self perceptions and how the actions of our opposition go against them. We cannot take it for granted that people will readily understand what undergirds protests because for our persuadable audiences, they simply have not had to contend with injustice themselves on these terms.
 - Examples of effective opening shared values include *"no matter what we look like or where we come from, we all want to know we can make it home to our families at the end of the day"* or *"whatever our race, background or zip code, we all want to move through our communities without fearing for our lives or our loved ones."*
- Talk about what people, across races, faiths and backgrounds, are choosing to do together right now: take a stand to make this a place of justice for all against the deliberate attempts to divide us based on our race so we won't demand proven solutions that begin with ending brutality against Black people.
- Tie the particular race-based harms against Black people and other people of color to the corresponding economic plunder that ultimately hurts us all, albeit to a far lesser degree. Use the language of deliberate division and scapegoating to make this connection clear and, with it, the operating mechanism of the opposition visible.
- To the extent possible, frame demands in terms of creating desirable end states as opposed to eliminating present-day harms.
 - For example, instead of "end police violence," say, *"make this a place where everyone can safely walk our streets"* or *"ensure that those sworn to serve and protect us honor their oath."*
- **DON'T inadvertently reinforce the opposition's narrative**
 - Quotations like "a riot is the language of the unheard" actually accepts the premise that events unfolding can be characterized as a "riot." They can't.
 - Refutations like "antifa is *not* a terrorist organization" or even "antifa is *not* an organization" actually lend credence to our opposition by lifting up elements of their desired discourse, not ours. Say instead what we *do* believe and desire, for example, *"courageous leaders are standing up for justice for all"* or *"brave marchers are demanding accountability."*

- While the impulse to offer instances of corporate “looting” (and they’re seemingly infinite) makes sense, it still bolsters the conversation about looting itself. And, given the opposition’s megaphone, our signal isn’t likely to break through this noise. Instead, weave in the truth about how the 1% fuel divisions to create the cover they need to rig the rules and take the wealth our work creates.
- When required, we must present effective rebuttals to our opposition’s core claims about present activism. However, there is no reason to lead with nor belabor these explanations. In our own talking points, we must center our values, name our villains, and convey our vision.
- **DO disaggregate terms and use precise language**
 - Instead of using the blanket term “violence” that unhelpfully equates property destruction and harm to humans, get specific with terms like “police brutality” “police repression” “military force” “murder” “maiming” and, conversely, “harms to property” “damage to objects” and “taking goods.”
 - Similarly, terminology like “outside agitators” is dangerously opaque; it also has its origins in othering people who protest, people of color in particular. Indeed, this is now bandied about on both sides of this conversation. Instead, use the most specific terms possible that accurately characterize the real culprits in the given situation – e.g. white nationalists, white vigilantes, armed Trump loyalists, etc.
- **DON’T dismiss or diminish the justified emotions of this moment**
 - Directing people to just vote, while understandable, is ill-timed and unlikely to have any desirable impact. It is definitely critical to talk about voting – but never in the context of a substitution for or condemnation of current direct action.
 - Admonishing people to peacefully assemble misses the reality that violence is frequently coming in reprisal (not from protesters) and anger is an absolutely understandable and potent emotion that leads to a range of behaviors. Achieving non-violent organizing tactics won’t come from stern lectures.
- **DO employ linguistic techniques proven to work in areas of tension and conflict, especially with on-the-fence audiences**
 - Pivot when possible toward a future-orientation. People reason much more progressively about the future, especially in terms of what they want to see for kids and grandkids, than they do about the present. Forcing people to consider how they want to be remembered for their actions or what they want to come of all this can help shift them toward our approaches and solutions.
 - Presuppose rather than assert core claims. This is, in essence, the “show not tell” principle many of us know.

- For example, instead of saying “these protests are about X” say “*across our country, people are coming together for X.*” And, similarly, in lieu of “what this is about is defending Black life” say “*people of good conscience are demanding that we respect and honor Black lives.*” Describe what people are doing toward the goals rather than simply stating the goals alone.
- Acknowledge and redirect challenging assumptions. For deeply polarizing issues in particular, carefully acknowledging a person’s feelings of ambivalence or confusion and then pivoting to desired policy or behavior can be far more effective than simply trying to negate or brush aside these concerns. This is especially true in interpersonal exchanges.
 - For illustration, “*These are confusing times and people can have different feelings about how a person acts out during a protest, but that does not mean we ignore or shut down the central purpose here which is to make this a place where everyone’s rights are respected, no exceptions.*”
- Mitigate stereotyping effects by using the singular. When you must describe more challenging elements of what is transpiring, it is far better to say, for example “when a person breaks into a store they do so...” than “when people break into stores they do so...”

Sample Full Narratives¹

No matter what we look like or where we live, most of us want our families to be whole and our communities to be vibrant. But the people entrusted to serve and protect our communities target, detain and even kill Black people like George Floyd, Tony McDade and Breonna Taylor, among too many others. All the while, a handful of politicians throw out lies to divide us. They know that if we’re made to fear each other, we’ll look the other way while police officers meant to uphold the law harm our communities and elected leaders meant to govern in our name hand millions to corporations to militarize local law enforcement and deny resources for the schools and healthcare we actually need. We are coming together - from cities to suburbs to towns - to demand [insert your specific call to action] so that our communities are safe for every one of us and so that the resources we pitch in for together create the schools, services and care we all need.

Whatever our race, background or zip code, we all want to move through our communities

without fearing for our lives or our loved ones. But time and again, we have witnessed evidence of horrors committed against Black people by police in cities and on back roads, in living rooms and on neighborhood streets, in the dark of night and the light of day. All the while, a handful of politicians shame and blame the very victims of this police brutality to distract us from their failures to ensure we have the care, security and support every one of us needs. We are coming together to demand that liberty and justice be for all and that our elected officials and public servants respect our rights, no matter our race, accent or zip code. Join us by [insert your specific call to action.]

Most of us, no matter our color, origin or gender, want America to be a place where freedom is for everyone. That's why people are coming together to demand that we rewrite the rules and retake our democracy. We know that right now, while specific officers inflict the insults, injustices and injuries, it's a handful of politicians, stoking hatred against Black people, new immigrants and other people of color, that abet and encourage them. These powerful few want to keep us from uniting so that all of our families can have what we need. They know that the many can defeat the money when we stand united. By [insert your specific call to action] we can ensure life and liberty for all.

Whether we're Black or white, Latino or Asian, Indigenous or newcomer, we want our families to be healthy and whole. But today, as we're marching together in anger and mourning over the brutal killings of Black Americans, a handful of politicians are trying to turn us against one another. They hope that by spreading lies about our collective public actions, we will turn against these efforts to secure equal justice under the law. But we reject their attempts to divide us. We know a better future is possible, this is why we must [insert your specific call to action.] By pulling together, we can make this a place where all of us have our rights respected. And where we vote in real leaders who reflect the very best of every kind of American.

Most of us believe that everyone should be able to live a full and healthy life, no matter what we look like or where we come from. But today, Black people are under the dual threat of higher fatality from COVID and from police brutality. Throughout our history, brave Americans have joined together across race and place and taken to the streets – risking their lives and their livelihoods. And, throughout our history the powers that be have found ways to divide us – by casting doubts or sowing fear about our protests.

We are showing up today not despite but rather because of COVID. We're taking every possible precaution even as we understand that coming together means increasing our risks. Because we know that – in this moment – staying apart guarantees unacceptable outcomes for Black people and that our lives continue to be put at risk to COVID by leaders who deny us the tests and protections we need to get and stay well. We are long overdue to rewrite the rules that govern our lives and it is only by showing that the many are willing to stand up to the money that we have the power in numbers to get the care and respect everyone of us deserves.

Common Claims and Our Rebuttals²

When they say....

"Destroying property and stealing isn't the way to protest."

We say...

We may have concerns about seeing things taken or broken, but there is no object on earth of the value of a human life. Focusing in on things and not people is a distraction from what matters and a barrier to pursuing equal justice for all. Until we see and value Black people as equally worthy of respect as everyone else, people of good conscience should be outraged.

When they say...

"The way we make change is by voting. All of these people out in the street should just focus on voter turnout."

We say....

Voting is critical, and the people organizing protests today are the ones making calls, sending texts and registering voters the rest of the year. We must do both. A ballot cannot stop a bullet. To cast your vote, you have to be alive to do it.

When they say....

"This is going to cost us the election. This is just handing things over to Trump."

We say...

We have come together to stand up for the promise of justice for all, demanding an end to brutality against Black people, precisely because we know the existential importance of this election. We know that Trump came to power by dividing us from each other based off of what we look like, where we come from, or how we live. He tries to get us to blame someone else from Black people to new immigrants, first responders to Governors, to cover up his failures and keep handing kickbacks to the 1%. The only way to defeat Trump is to help people realize that as long as he is distracting us by blaming someone else, his corporate friends can pick our pockets.

When they say...

"There's no point to doing anything. They just keep killing us/Black people."

We say...

Your anger and despair are absolutely understandable. And, if you look under the cover the powerful few use to keep us from demanding better, these are also times of extraordinary courage and progress. People from all walks of life are coming together to demand change, just as people did in our past for everything from civil rights to unions and marriage equality to voting. All of the gains we have ever made have come from people refusing to accept that what is true today seals our fate for tomorrow. We must use every tool available from marching to voting to make this a country we can be proud to call home.

Endnotes

- 1 This can be utilized with each paragraph acting as an independent example of the whole narrative or edited to eliminate repetition in order to tell a fuller story.
- 2 Claims included here are from audiences we would deem persuadable or our unengaged base. Engaging with the committed opposition is fruitless, exhausting and actually affords them more airtime.