

SEPT
2025

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES *for* AN INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY



Purpose of this toolkit and who this is for

In this time of authoritarian overreach, our nation stands at a crossroads, facing multiple crises — from attacks on civil liberties to a federal administration which is ignoring the rule of law to further their unconstitutional attacks on our freedoms. Among the most urgent crises is the fight to protect the future of our democracy, the right to due process, and the dignity of all people — especially immigrants.

This toolkit offers some basic guidance for crafting narrative in this time, and offers a shared frame for building a larger unified narrative in advocating for immigrant and refugee rights. This narrative can be woven into your strategic communications and campaign strategies as you begin your field plans and organize for midterm elections. Narrative shift happens over the long-term, with the hopes of moving new audiences, popular discourse and status quo mindsets to our side. Therefore this document is the beginning, to test the framing and revise over the course of the next year.

This toolkit is for Executive and Communications Directors of NPNA member organizations, stakeholders and allies, and those working to build solidarity and struggle with immigrant and refugee rights.

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What is Narrative?

Narrative, as defined by the Center for Story-based Strategy is:

“A story or account of events, sequenced over time and space. It is the process by which our minds make meaning* and relate with the world.”

*(*Meaning is the currency of narrative, not facts.)*

Narrative Frame



A framing narrative sets the terms for understanding the issue and defines what is possible—the WHY of your issue. It uplifts your values and vision. It defines the problem by showing what's at stake, laying out the solution, and reframing the dominant narratives. Stories, messages and all the resonant elements are within that frame. This narrative frame is shared across coalitions and membership, and each individual organization creates messages and interventions geared towards their specific audiences. Those who hold the frame hold the power.

Developing an Effective Narrative Strategy

A narrative strategy should be integrated into a campaign, field or project plan from the beginning as the foundation for challenging power and changing dominant, harmful narratives to ones that move hearts and minds for a just, inclusive future for all of us.

A narrative strategy includes:

- **Personal Stories** that share experiences from targeted communities and build empathy
- Messaging that **connects attacks on vulnerable groups to threats against everyone** and everyone's rights—names the villains and the threats
- **Culture and joyful celebration** that includes and attracts people to join us—building the bigger “We”
- **Education** that helps people understand the history of immigration policies of criminalization, and how authoritarian targeting works currently and in the past

Audiences

When building your narrative strategy, **be specific in identifying constituents, allies and new audiences** who have influence over target decision-makers. Include your audiences as part of the narrative (see the framework on page 7), so that they see themselves as part of the solution, and have agency in building the just, inclusive future that we all want. A large part of the work of narrative change is baked into organizing and advocacy, so that we are building the Bigger We, and working towards long-term, sustained change.

Strategic Opportunities for Narrative Interventions

Trump's harmful anti-immigrant agenda, ICE attacks, and unwarranted militarization of cities across the U.S. are revealing to the American public the cruelty of this administration's policies. Current polling has shown that voters increasingly believe that immigration is good for our society, as they witness their neighbors, co-workers, and families being ripped apart. **This provides a strategic opportunity for us to drive more wedges into the weaknesses and fissures of the oppositional narrative**, to exemplify who are the real villains, and to reframe narratives with our values and visions for the future. These interventions can manifest in op-eds, organizing opportunities, social media posts, cultural and direct actions at strategic points of intervention. What other opportunities are coming to light so that we can collectively elevate our narratives and counter the harmful ones?

Building Narrative Power With a Shared Narrative Frame

We offer this narrative frame to build into your narrative strategy. **When we all share a narrative frame, we build narrative power.** This frame lifts up our values and underlying assumptions (see next section). You can use this as the container for writing op-eds, creating videos and graphics, developing campaign, field, and strategic communications strategies.

Everyone has the right to pursue a better life and live in safety— free from fear—no matter where we were born or our race, gender or religion. We have the right to participate in society at our fullest capability, and to make the best choices for our families. Our Democracy guarantees the opportunities for all to pursue our dreams, and to protect our rights from arbitrary decisions and attacks. Yet, when some politicians divide us by scapegoating immigrants as the cause of our problems, then they create a society that is less welcoming and safe for all of us.

A strong Democracy is a reflection of the power of the people who have fought for the rights and possibilities that it guarantees. When we come together and provide safe pathways for welcoming people into our communities, we have the power to shape our futures together. We can build the Bigger We for protecting democracy for all of us. We must hold our elected officials accountable to our rights and defend fairness and justice for everyone.

Challenging Harmful Narratives

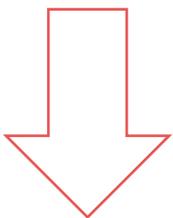
To understand how the opposition is reaching audiences, it is important to research and analyze the narrative terrain that shapes dominant and harmful narratives. **We must not reiterate or reinforce harmful narratives, nor repeat the language of our opposition.** These narratives are intentionally spread by politicians who are aiming to harm immigrants, and unwittingly perpetuated and normalized in status quo narratives, such as through mainstream media.

The following table shows some of the top harmful narrative assumptions (that which we must believe in order to believe the narratives and stories) to challenge and counter.

To counter harmful assumptions and narratives, we lift up our own assumptions within our narrative framing, and integrate them into messaging and stories to reach intended audiences.



Examples of Harmful Assumptions and How They Show Up in Narrative and Our Assumptions and Helpful Narratives to Elevate



Othering, to create fear and divisiveness

- “illegal immigrants” / criminalization of immigrants / “scary tattoos”
- “Immigrant invasion”
- Scapegoating, us vs them
- racist rhetoric, coded “dog whistle” language such as “urban”, “woke,” “leftist”, etc.



Interdependence / Belonging / Inclusivity

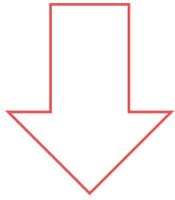
Everyday people want to keep their communities whole — to have a voice in decisions that impact them, to have access to opportunities to achieve their dreams, and to meet our nation’s challenges with compassion and humanity. We have a responsibility to each other, because our futures are interconnected. Immigrants have and always will be essential to our communities, and when we deny opportunity and safety to one group we diminish opportunities and safety for all.

Freedom / Dignity

People have always moved to find a better life. In a democratic society, all people, no matter where they were born, or what their race, gender or religion is, have the freedom to live in safety, free from danger, and to have opportunities to pursue their best life. A democracy should strive to uphold the guarantee of these freedoms to pursue your dreams—and our government must ensure that those opportunities are accessible for all.

Examples of Harmful Assumptions and How They Show Up in Narrative and Our Assumptions and Helpful Narratives to Elevate

(continued)



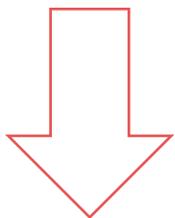
Scarcity

- *“There isn’t enough to go around.”*
- *“There is no alternative.”*
- *“Immigrants are taking our jobs”*



Abundance / Thriving / Safety

Increasingly voters believe that immigration is good for America. America and its promise of democracy, fairness and justice is called home to all of us including [New Americans / immigrants / refugees...]. America’s multicultural fabric is woven together of people from all backgrounds, religions, races and ethnicities, and a thriving society honors the contributions and legacies of its people, including immigrants. When people thrive, we can all live free of fear in the communities we call home, and be proud of the cultures that contributed to our nation.

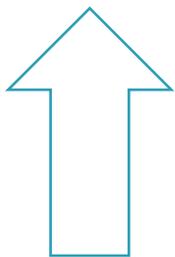


Merit / Individualism

- *“Only some people deserve to be protected by democratic principles, defining who belongs, and who gets to be American.”*

Zero sum / Individualism

- *“I will lose if they get some.”*



Fairness / Justice

Enshrined in our foundational documents are civil and labor rights that have been hard fought for by Black, Indigenous and Brown people and other marginalized communities, to guarantee fairness and equality for all, including immigrants.

Foundational rights such as due process protect everyone against arbitrary or prejudiced decisions. It is up to us and elected officials to defend our Constitutional rights and make sure they are extended to everyone, regardless of immigration status.

Messaging Frameworks and Tactics

The below framework has been adapted from [Narrative Initiative's Guide for Immigrant Futures \(2025\): How To Create Narrative Interventions That Counter Fear and Change Attitudes](#), (this toolkit also provides results of testing with some segmented Moveable Middle Audiences).

Lead with values, a shared stake in the matter & a shared identity (“we”)

Example: “As people who honor the long tradition of helping neighbors and welcoming newcomers, we know that our communities are stronger when we look out for each other and have each other’s backs, when we honor each others’ cultures, and participate in our communities together.”

Name how villains scapegoat immigrants to divide us (the same villains will hurt us all, such as corporations / billionaires)

Example: “Some politicians are lying and scapegoating immigrants as criminals, to justify authoritarian overreach for increased militarization, surveillance and policing of communities of color. Billionaires are profiting off the unconstitutional detentions of immigrants. Attacks on vulnerable communities are attacks on democracy itself. They are creating division that makes our communities less welcoming and less safe.”

Offer a new vision & connect the dots to the bigger picture (building the movement, mobilizing audiences to join us)

Example: “Instead of trying to divide us, politicians should be helping us build a future that values the contributions from people who have come from near and far towards our shared American story. We deserve a future where everyone has the opportunity to pursue their dreams and no one is left behind, no matter where they were born or what they look like. In our best future, we don’t just survive, we all thrive.”

Provide an action step as a throughline for engaging the audience

Example: “It’s time to tell our elected officials to put our communities first. [Call your rep, join our campaign, etc...]”

Weaving Narrative Into Your Advocacy Through Personal Stories

A personal story (with identity made anonymous if necessary) allows your audience to move from the abstract to the tangible reality of everyday people to understand the issue. Telling a personal story can be powerful and affirming for the storyteller, and organizations must follow best practices to not be transactional or extractive, but to use that opportunity for leadership development. Offer a connection back to the larger narrative, linking systemic injustice and the solution that was offered in the story to the larger vision. **Provide an immediate, accessible way for the audience to take action once they are activated by the story.**

Identify the Messengers Who Will Spread Your Narrative

The right messengers will validate and move your narrative to build a larger constituency. Who are some of the “unlikely allies?” Who are the cultural workers who have appeal and make the movement “irresistible”? Who are we making visible, who are usually invisibilized, and can tell untold stories and realities?

Examples of Stories Which Highlight Solutions

- [With legal defense, the 13.2K people in ICE detention would have a shot at freedom](#)
- [Michigan should join states funding legal representation for immigrants](#)
- [#NewAmericanVoters — Your Duty is to Vote!](#)

Messaging Examples Which Uplift the Narrative Frame



City of Shoreline

“Home is more than a point on a map. It’s beyond the boundaries of district lines. Home is where you belong. It is more than a physical location. Home is the interactions, experiences, relationships, and moments that become lifetimes. This is the human experience of belonging- and YOU BELONG. This Immigrant Heritage Month, we stand together with Cities for Action and Cities & Counties for Citizenship to support, honor, and celebrate our immigrant communities in Shoreline and nationwide.”

#YouBelong #ImmigrantHeritageMonth #CC4C #C4A

July 4th Democracy Summer Opinion Editorial

“This Fourth of July, I bought an American flag. As a refugee, I bought this flag not because America is perfect, but because of its promise. The flag, and the country for which it stands, belong to those who believe in something better, kinder, and in the promise of liberty and justice for all. It belongs to everyone who dares to hope, who fights for compassion, and who still — despite everything — believes in its promise. This flag is our flag.”

COMMENTARY

My complicated love for the American flag

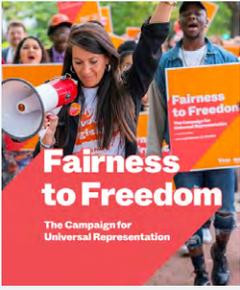
“As we step into a new chapter of American history, the flag belongs to us all.”



FATIMA SAADI

JULY 4, 2025 5:52 AM





Fairness to Freedom: The Campaign for Universal Representation

“Nobody should have to face the prospect of deportation alone simply because they can’t afford a lawyer. But unlike in the criminal justice system, people facing deportation from the United States do not have a right to publicly funded legal representation if they can’t afford to hire an attorney. As a result, most immigrants facing detention and deportation who can’t afford a lawyer are forced to defend themselves in a highly complex area of the law against well-resourced government lawyers. By passing the Fairness to Freedom Act and establishing universal representation for all people facing deportation, we can make sure that everyone has a fighting chance to understand their legal options, exercise their rights, and stay with their families and communities.”



NPNA Immigrant Heritage Month (June 2025)

“Our democracy depends on us. Regardless of where you were born, we each have a role in protecting it—and in shaping a democracy that reflects our communities’ right to participate, to be protected under the Constitution, and to thrive socially, economically, and culturally. Join us and we collectively educate, inform, and inspire action to protect democracy and our communities! When you stand up for immigrants, you stand up for democracy.”



Democracy Summer

“Our dignity is not measured by our economic value. We strive for a truly representative democracy in which immigrants are seen as full members of our society - and that their contributions are not limited to economic value but also measured by the culture, community and all that immigrant communities contribute into the fabric of our nation. “

Testing Your Narrative

- Does it provide an opening to talk about other parts of the work/struggle?
- Have your audiences engaged with your activities?
- What is resonating with new audiences?
- Have power dynamics shifted?
- Have news headlines changed and dominant narratives been reframed?
- Has your language become normalized? Is your slogan being adopted and spreading?
- What tactics were successful: strat comms, creative direct actions, cultural work and programming, organizing opportunities?

The success of your narrative should be guided by your theory of change, and long-term strategy (as well as measuring engagement with your messages and calls to action). Ultimately, we want to remove harmful narratives about immigrants and refugees from public discourse and political rhetoric, and achieve political and structural wins for moving policy for safe pathways for immigrants and refugees in the US.

Resources

[Pro-Immigrant & Anti-Immigrant Narratives | Messaging Guide](#)

[Narrative Initiative: Guide for Immigrant Futures \(2025\): How To Create Narrative Interventions That Counter Fear and Change Attitudes](#)

[Race Forward: Butterfly Lab Report on Immigrant Narrative Strategies](#)

[Immigrants Rising: Storytellers Bill of Rights](#)

About National Partnership for New Americans

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a multi-ethnic, multiracial coalition of nearly 90 of the nation's largest immigrant and refugee organizations across 40 states. NPNA works together with its members to advance immigrant equity and inclusion policies; build and expand capacities around immigration legal services and integration programming; and, drive campaigns that strengthen democracy through increased civic participation.