Progress Now Arizona
Narrative Research Project
Messaging Synthesis from Research to Date

Prepared by Ben Lazarus and Lily Siegman
June 2018
Defining The Problem
Why Define The Problem?

This is not about educating. This is about connecting. By echoing Arizona voters’ frustrations with the problems that exist in our politics (both state and national) we:

- Stoke the embers of engagement and bring the problems to the fore
- Create a paradigm that forces Republicans and conservatives to own the failures and corruption of the current system
- Speak voters’ language, thus becoming more likely to be viewed as authentic change makers, rather than as corrupt parts of the political establishment
- Provide advocates in the field with a clear entry point for engagement

Voter desire for political messages that provide truth, not spin, provides opportunities for progressives to connect with Arizonans and prove their authenticity
What Is The Problem?

The problems voters associate with the status quo stem from the theme that our political system is broken; politicians are motivated by, and make decisions based on, money, their own personal interests, and the special interests, NOT the interests of the people they represent. This self-dealing is seen as corrupt, and Arizona progressives would be wise to use this language. Voters researched across the demographic and ideological spectrums identify this problematic dynamic in the state (and across the nation).

Problems stemming from this dynamic:

- **Voters do not trust politicians to be honest.** Politicians use political spin to say only what they think voters want to hear or what will lead to more votes on Election Day. They don’t listen, they overpromise, and they under-deliver.

- **Negative partisanship abounds as political parties are seen as broken.** This applies to both parties, as politicians of all stripes are emblematic of the larger problems associated with money in politics. Democrats are viewed as being weak and unable to articulate what they stand for. Republicans are seen as closer to corporate interests, but there is a definite lack of a partisan dimension to feelings about corruption.

- Because politicians are listening to their donors and those with money, government is seen as corrupt and putting the needs of those with money before the needs of regular, working Arizonans.

- Too much partisan bickering makes it so even less work on behalf of the people is accomplished.

- **Voters conflate government institutions with the corrupt politicians who currently inhabit government.** Given the negative attitudes about politicians, this degrades the notion of government as an institution that can do good things for people.
Who Wins And Who Loses In The Current System

**Who Wins**

Those with the money – greedy, corrupt corporations... and the politicians they buy.

Lobbyists and the political establishment.

---

**Who loses**

The people collectively, or “us”. This isn’t tied to one loser, politicians are failing all of us.

How do we lose?
- **Our** kids’ schools are underfunded
- **Our** communities are threatened & discriminated against
- **Our** health care & prescription drugs are too expensive
- **Our** jobs don’t pay enough
- Living here is starting to cost us too much
- **Our** utility bills are too high
- **Women** are still earning less than men
Solving The Problem

- Politicians who are honest and accountable
- Government that’s not corrupt, but does good for Arizonans
- Policies that help us, not them
- Tools that equip those who work hard with what they need to succeed
Voters fundamentally desire authenticity. Their bullshit meter is incredibly high and they pick up on political spin very easily. Key characteristics voters prioritize are honesty, accountability, listening to people, and transparency. We view all of these factors as coming back to authenticity. Moreover, voters are more inclined to trust candidates who don’t sound like typical politicians.

Make it clear we are *listening* to regular Arizonans, not donors, their money, or our party leaders.

Admit to problems and limitations; don’t over promise; clearly state values and commit to focusing on the things that matter.

Consistency and message discipline is also important. Voters want politicians (particularly Democrats) to stick to their beliefs. One ethnography participant’s sentiments about Bernie Sanders sum it up well: “I saw his videos from 40 years ago and a lot of people, uh, criticized him that, ‘Oh, you know, he's repetitive. He says the same thing.’ But you know, he was consistent.”

We recommend experimenting with atypical sound bites and finding new ways to get down to brass tacks. Voters are tired of traditional spin, progressives should get creative in thinking through low-BS ways to communicate on the issues we care about.
Fighting For: Government That Works On Behalf of Arizonans

Make conservatives own the corruption associated with government, while making a case for government as an institution that can do good things for the people.

This means casting federal, state, and local government as a provider of solutions that open up opportunities for all Arizonans. By doing this, government can create a level playing field that will enable those who work hard to succeed.

This research highlights the need to mercilessly and repetitively contrast those solutions with gross examples of conservatives using government to help themselves and other corrupt, corporate actors. Their agenda is to fully undermine trust in government and in the process conflate their corruption with genuine government failures to deliver adequate services and opportunities to hardworking Arizonans. Progressives must not let them succeed.

But we cannot be blind to the frustrations that open the door to the conservative agenda and we ignore negative feelings about government at our peril. Instead, progressives should work to proactively channel the mistrust of government to where it belongs – the conservative actors who use it to benefit themselves and their corporate benefactors.
Trump Presents Opportunity, But Tread Carefully

- Regarded differently between different communities and by political ideology
- Unprofessional & Tweets too much vs. Existential threat & Racist
- AZ Republicans not linked to him, “maverick” image helps to inoculate them
- Research conducted before family separation policy
- Trump alone may very well galvanize Latinx voters and some progressive activists, but offering an affirmative vision for the future, not just what we’re against, is vital
A Note on Identity

Quantitative research found that identity-based characteristics and descriptions for candidates who “look like me and sound like me” or “come from my community” were less salient, even among Latino voters, than the more-resonant characteristics of honesty, accountability, and transparency.

We urge community organizations to employ strategies and tactics that they know connect with the individuals they are organizing, but to consider working these notions into their broader messaging as well.