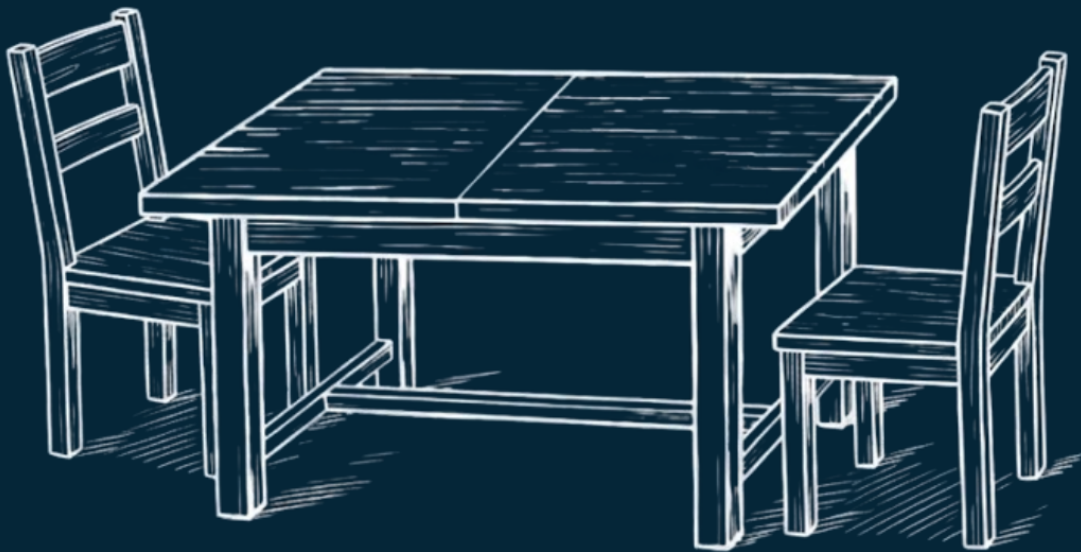


KITCHEN TABLE MESSAGING

— *for the Populist Era* —



AUGUST 2026



RURAL URBAN BRIDGE
INITIATIVE



The Center for Working Class Politics

INTRODUCTION

Economic populist rhetoric is all the rage in Democratic circles these days, but not all populist messages are equally effective. In June, **the Center for Working Class Politics (CWCP)** and **the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative (RUBI)** conducted a poll (fielded by Verasight) of 6,100 adult Americans, including over 1,000 extra rural respondents so we could analyze rural voters on their own.

Each respondent first saw a single Republican opposition message (randomly assigned to focus on either government waste or immigration), then rated Democratic messages drawn at random from a pool of thirteen spanning today's economic populist appeals. This tested the Democratic messages against a realistic counterargument rather than in a vacuum. For example, a respondent might read a Republican candidate attacking wasteful government spending, then rate a Democratic candidate who says: "It's supposed to be government by the people, for the people—but most members of Congress are multi-millionaires, so it's more like government by the millionaires, for the millionaires."

Our thirteen messages include five of our own design plus eight others that are frequently deployed either by campaigns or groups or are recommended by influential messaging professionals, including the Winning Jobs Narrative, ASO Communications, and American Bridge 21st Century's Working Class Project. These messages fall into three categories: Kitchen Table Populism, Divide-and-conquer, and Anti-Trump.

OUR FINDINGS IN A NUTSHELL

- 1. All varieties of Kitchen Table populism are winners.** All varieties of Kitchen Table populism are winners. Every Kitchen Table message performed well and almost always beat the Republican opposition messages among persuadable voters, including 2026 undecided voters. Our top performing Kitchen Table message was even net positive among Republicans, and beat one of the Republican opposition messages among 2024 Trump voters who say they're not planning to vote Republican in 2028 ("Trump waverers").
- 2. Divide-and-conquer messages are significantly less effective than Kitchen Table populism.** With every single group, including Democrats, these messages significantly underperformed Kitchen Table populism.
- 3. Attacking Trump or MAGA accomplishes little.** With every group, including Harris voters, attacking Trump as a corrupt rule-breaker who has wreaked havoc on our wallets significantly underperformed pure Kitchen Table populism. Bringing Trump into the picture muddies the story and triggers defensiveness on the part of anyone who has ever supported him.

MORE DETAILED SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We present below the most significant takeaways from this survey and from a preliminary survey experiment we conducted in April, which drew over 9,000 respondents and tested nearly 18,000 economic populist messaging variants. The preliminary experiment let us examine a wide range of specific messaging choices—from the use of profanity to how you refer to different kinds of elites—to identify which features of populist messaging do and do not shape voter responses. For detailed analysis and methodology, see our [full report](#) and, for detailed crosstabs, see our [online appendix](#).

The results below reflect how respondents in our nationally-representative sample rated their likelihood of voting for that Democratic candidate. **"Net vote intent"** is the share of respondents who said they were somewhat or very likely to vote for the candidate minus the share who said they were unlikely to do so.

The table below displays every message, including opposition messages, in order from most to least effective, in the eyes of the entire nationally representative sample. The eye-poppingly high numbers come with a caveat: Significant numbers of respondents (mostly in the range of 20-25%) said they were neither likely nor unlikely to vote for the candidate. It's nice that all of the tested messages are net positive but, at the actual polling booth, their margin would likely diminish, and the weakest could easily slip into negative territory. In addition, it's important to note that the biggest finding from our survey is related to the message *categories* rather than the individual messages within those categories.

THE THIRTEEN MESSAGES AT A GLANCE

Net vote-intent (% likely minus % unlikely) for each Democratic message and the two Republican opposition messages, sorted best to worst

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
American Way	"Most people just want to work hard, get ahead, and give their kids a better shot - and they should be able to. But the cost of rent, groceries, and health care keeps going up faster than working families can keep up, and paychecks just aren't stretching the way they used to. I'm going to bring those costs down for working people, make sure the biggest corporations pay their fair share, and crack down on corruption and the people who game the system for themselves. Hard work should pay off again - that's the American way."	+50
Fair share	"Working people are doing everything right. But costs are rising faster than incomes. We need an economy that works for everyone - not just the wealthy. That's why I champion policies that raise incomes and lower costs so working people have the tools and opportunities to build good lives. We should make billionaires and large corporations pay their fair share of taxes to fund programs like health care, housing, and childcare. I'll fight for programs that support the working families who make our economy run. When working people do better, everyone does better."	+45
Fair share (more colloquial)	"Most folks are working hard to scrape by, but they can't keep up with how fast prices are going up. People who work hard should be able to take care of their families and live a good life instead of stressing out all the time about paying the bills. If I go to Congress, I want to change things so that the economy works for everyone, not just those at the top. That means billionaires and big corporations pay their fair share of taxes so that there's enough money for health care, housing, and childcare."	+45
American Way (confrontational)	"Most people just want to work hard, get ahead, and give their kids a better shot - and they should be able to. But giant corporations and the wealthy few have rigged the system in their favor, driving up the cost of rent, groceries, and health care faster than working families can keep up, while they rake in record profits. It's time to take them on: bring those costs down for working people, make the biggest corporations pay their fair share, and crack down on corruption and the insiders who game the system for themselves. Hard work should pay off again, that's the American way."	+42

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
Broken Deal	"We're told our whole lives that if you work hard, they'll pay you enough to raise a family. But they're not holding up their end of the deal anymore. If worker pay had kept up with CEO pay since 1978, the average worker would earn \$381 an hour. It's supposed to be government by the people and for the people - but it's really government by and for the millionaires in Congress. That's why I'll never take a dime from corporate donors or PACs. We need a system that values regular people's hard work. We had that once. We called it the American Dream, and everyone I know wants it back."	+39
Dignity-of-work	"So many working people work so hard but are barely scraping by. Miners, farmers, truck drivers, nurses, home health aides, teachers... These are the people who made this country great, and Congress is selling them down the river. When CEOs make dozens of times more than their workers and then jack up prices, that's not a free market - it's a rigged system. If you've got enough money, you can basically bribe politicians to do whatever you want, but if you're a normal person, there's no one representing you. I want to work for the people, not the wealthy few."	+38
Immigrant Solidarity	"So many people are struggling financially - and the question is why. As far as I'm concerned, immigrants who are here to work and feed their families aren't the problem. The problem is politicians and their lobbyist buddies who hand tax breaks to the rich and then turn around and say: 'Sorry we don't have enough money for schools and health care, and it's immigrants' fault.' That's BS. Most of us have more in common with an immigrant who works paycheck to paycheck than with a CEO that gets paid a big bonus for moving their factories overseas. The government should go after the people who rig our economy, not the ones who build it."	+32
Unity	"The billionaires want to keep us from seeing all that we have in common. They divide us by party, by race, by gender, by religion so we don't notice they're defunding our schools, gutting our healthcare, and cutting taxes for themselves and their rich friends. It's the oldest strategy in the world: divide and conquer. They want to keep us from realizing there's far more that unites us than divides us. Because once we do, we'll come together to fix what's broken in our country and take back power for ourselves and our communities."	+26
Fighting Oligarchy	"Let's call it what it is: this is no longer a democracy of, by, and for the people - it's rule by a handful of billionaires and would-be oligarchs who are restructuring our government to serve one agenda...theirs! They've captured our economy, our health care, even our elections, drowning out the voices of everyday Americans and rigging the system in their favor while working families struggle to be heard. That's not capitalism gone wrong - it's a fascist project that hands unchecked power to a few while the rest of us are robbed. People over the oligarchy. It's time to take it back."	+21

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
GOP (government waste)	A Republican candidate recently said: "Washington takes your hard-earned money and lights it on fire. Career politicians let reckless spending spiral out of control while fraudsters rip off Medicaid and welfare, and now we are \$37 trillion in debt. I will cut the waste, root out the fraud, and force Washington to live within its means."	+20
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	"When Donald Trump ignores the rules, it's not just politics - it hits your wallet. Prices rise, jobs feel less secure, and it gets harder for working families to keep up. [Trump/The Fascist MAGA regime] is cutting Medicaid, slashing food assistance, and kicking millions of hardworking Americans off health care - all while pardoning people convicted of more than a billion dollars in Medicare fraud. Trump abuses his power to make himself and his billionaire friends richer. It's time to take that money back and put it where it belongs - with you."	+18
Race Class Narrative (RCN) (race-light)	"Every family, of every color and background, deserves to have what we need. But today, Republicans spread lies to keep us divided while they abduct our neighbors, start wars abroad and jack up prices. If you want to know who took your money, it's the people with all the money. And if billionaires and Republicans can talk you into thinking anyone else is to blame for your hard times, they will keep getting away with it. The many can take on the money by voting for leaders who will fund our futures and respect our freedoms."	+18
GOP (immigration)	A Republican candidate recently said: "Washington threw our borders wide-open and you are footing the bill. Over a million people who broke our laws are living in comfort on the taxpayer's dime while veterans sleep on park benches. I will secure the border, end the taxpayer handouts, and put American families first."	+13
RCN (no race)	"Every family deserves to have what we need. But today, Republicans spread lies to keep us divided while they abduct our neighbors, start wars abroad and jack up prices. If you want to know who took your money, it's the people with all the money. And if billionaires and Republicans can talk you into thinking anyone else is to blame for your hard times, they will keep getting away with it. The many can take on the money by voting for leaders who will fund our futures and respect our freedoms."	+11
RCN (race-heavy)	"Every family, of every color and background, deserves to have what we need. But today, Republicans spread lies to keep us divided while they abduct our neighbors, start wars abroad and jack up prices. If you want to know who took your money, it's the people with all the money. And if billionaires and Republicans can talk you into thinking Black people and new immigrants are to blame for your hard times, they will keep getting away with it. The many - white, Black, and brown - can take on the money by voting for leaders who will fund our futures and respect our freedoms."	+8

SEVEN KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Kitchen Table Populism Never Fails

The top seven messages all directly address people's cost-of-living woes, suggest who or what is to blame and offer some form of redress. All do three things in various ways:

- ✓ Acknowledge that wages aren't keeping pace with rising costs
- ✓ Affirm that people are working hard and deserve a decent standard of living
- ✓ Recognize that economic elites are doing well while ordinary people are struggling
- ✓ Pledge to do something about it (eg. crack down on corruption, make corporations and billionaires pay their fair share in taxes, refuse corporate PAC donations, etc.)

The messages vary in how strongly the culprits are denounced (**American Way (confrontational)**) is the most strident) and in how the "victims" are portrayed. **Dignity of work** name-checks a handful of blue and pink-collar occupations; **Immigrant Solidarity** stresses the common interests of immigrant and native-born workers.

A couple of messages distinguish themselves by referencing the "American way." And **Broken Deal** stands out for weaving a betrayal narrative in which ordinary people kept up their end of the deal by working hard but the CEOs broke that contract by hoarding the profits for themselves. (Hat tip to [Antonia Scatton](#) for some of the concepts and language used in the Broken Deal message).

All kitchen table messages did substantially better than the opposition messages. Given that financial worries have long topped Americans' priorities, it's not surprising that this line of messaging is so effective: It meets people where they're at. Even among high-income and college-educated professionals, who one might worry would balk at anti-elitist rhetoric and economic grievance narratives, the kitchen table populism messages topped the charts.

Specifically, **American Way** was number one among independents, undecided likely 2026 voters, working-class, professional, rural, non-college, college, non-white, and Black voters. The only sub-groups where we see a different winner are Democrats and Harris voters (who crowned **Fair Share**), Hispanic voters (**Dignity of work**), and Republican and Trump voters (the GOP immigration message).

2. Divide-and-Conquer Narratives Didn't Land As Well

Divide-and-conquer rhetoric is very popular in progressive circles. As the story goes, working people have shared economic interests, but elites keep us divided by pointing the finger at scapegoats. While we're distracted fighting each other for crumbs, the elites run off with the bank.

We tested five versions of divide-and-conquer: We wrote the Immigrant Solidarity message; the Unity message is taken verbatim (but condensed) from James Talarico's website; the RCN Race-Class Narrative (race-light) was provided verbatim by ASO Communications; RCN (no race) is identical to RCN (race-light) but with the reference to "every color and background" removed; RCN (race-heavy) was modified from RCN (race lite) to add additional references to race.

Of the five, **Immigrant Solidarity** was the most effective. It was the second favorite for undecided likely 2026 voters and significantly net positive for all sub-groups except Republicans and Trump voters. Its strength is its inclusion of a specific, galling story (CEOs getting bonuses for shipping jobs overseas) and its down-to-earth tone (what RUBI calls ["talking like a neighbor"](#)). It also named politicians and lobbyists as the culprits, where the RCN messages named billionaires and Republicans.

The three **RCN** versions differ only in how much they name race explicitly. The **no-race** version makes no reference to race, color, or background at all.¹ The **race-light** version adds a single reference, in the opening line: "Every family, of every color and background, deserves to have what we need." The **race-heavy** version keeps that same opening line and adds two further explicit references — "Black people and new immigrants," and later, "white, Black, and brown."

RCN (no race) and **RCN (race-light)** did about the same, and the **RCN (race-heavy)** did the worst. Rural, Trump waverers (people who voted for Trump in 2024 and are not planning to vote Republican in 2028), and undecided likely 2026 voters particularly disliked all three RCN messages. Notably, non-white voters and Democratic-leaning 2024 non-voters too preferred Kitchen Table and Immigrant Solidarity messages over the RCN messages. (See full report for race-specific results and further analysis and caveats regarding the generalizability of these findings).

¹ Strictly speaking, a message that omits any reference to race is not a "Race-Class Narrative" message. For clarity and ease of comparison, however, we use the label "RCN (no race)" throughout this report to denote messages that follow the RCN structure while omitting explicit racial references.

3. Name the Villain But Don't Vilify (a Tricky Needle to Thread)

We tested three intensity levels of anti economic elite messaging: **Fair Share** simply asks corporations to pay their fair share; **American Way** adds a critique of corruption and those who "game the system for themselves;" **American Way (confrontational)** turns up the dial further still, explicitly blaming big corporations and the wealthy few for rigging the system and pledging to "take them on". Of these, the assertive, but non-maximalist middle level (American Way) performed the best. On the whole, the gap between American Way and American Way (confrontational) was only marginally significant, but the gap was large and significant among Republicans, rural/small town residents, and 2026 undecideds.

The gap we observed between American Way and American Way (confrontational) among center to right-leaning respondents echoes other recent polling showing that many working-class Americans admire successful people and [don't like seeing them vilified](#). In other words, they're more keen on ordinary people getting ahead than on bringing the rich down a peg. That doesn't mean they love billionaires or large corporations: indeed, majorities of working-class Americans reject the idea that the country would be better run by successful business leaders, and [nearly half report feeling resentment toward the rich](#). But most prefer politicians who name the specific people responsible for tilting the playing field (rather than condemning economic elites wholesale) and who offer practical solutions to corruption and inequality rather than activist calls to "take them on." The takeaway? Don't be afraid to name and blame the culprits, but don't needlessly provoke a backlash by going over the top.

4. Attacking Trump is of Little Value

We know from a [recent study](#) by Joan Williams and Abbott that going after Trump and his authoritarian ways fails to resonate with working class voters. (Defense of democracy is college-educated liberals' second highest priority but it's only 19th for working-class people). For this survey, we used Williams/Abbott's top-performing **anti-Trump** message, the one that ties his rule-breaking to pocketbook pain. Despite testing the "steelman" version of anti-trump Resistance messaging, it did little better than the divide-and-conquer messages. Notably, for Trump waverers (2024 Trump voters who do not plan to vote Republican in 2028), undecided likely 2026 voters, Trump voters, and Republicans, Trump attack messages were **net negative**. Similarly, the Sanders/AOC-inspired **Fighting Oligarchy** message tying economic elites to the erosion of democracy dramatically underperformed all Kitchen Table messages among virtually every group (including, surprisingly, Democrats).

5. Rural Nuance

Rural residents ranked the Democratic messages in roughly the same order, with Kitchen Table messages on top, followed by divide and conquer messages, and then anti-Trump and RCN messages. Not surprisingly, given the Republican lean, rural respondents ranked the two GOP messages higher than the sample as a whole, and liked all of the Democratic messages considerably less than urban and suburbanites.

American Way was the only message rural respondents liked better than the GOP Government Waste opposition message. **Broken Deal** and **Fair Share** basically tied with the Government Waste message. The GOP anti-immigrant message came in seventh place, on par with American Way (confrontational) and slightly ahead of Immigrant Solidarity.

Broken Deal strikes chords of betrayal and nostalgia that resonate with rural people whose grievances Trump so successfully tapped. **Fair Share** is effective because it emphasizes the value of hard work (a core rural value) and calls for a handup versus a handout for working people. And the winner, **American Way**, does a good job of empathizing with people's financial worries and pledging to make hard work pay off again. The tone of American Way is down-to-earth, and the closing line strikes a patriotic cord that goes over well with rural folks.

Anti-Trump and RCN messages were **net negative** with rural voters.

Nearly half of small-town and rural respondents rated a Democratic message above a Republican one, and the same Kitchen Table appeals led there as they did virtually everywhere.

6. Among 2024 Trump Voters, Women and Younger Voters Were Most Likely to Score a Democratic Message Higher Than a Republican One

One in six (17%) 2024 Trump voters rated at least one Democratic message above the Republican message they were shown. This may sound like a small share, but even persuading a fraction of that group to switch parties would have powerful implications in close races.

Not all Trump voters were equally reachable: women and younger Trump voters were the most likely to prefer a Democratic message. Which message mattered, too. Fair Share and American Way were the most likely to win a Trump voter over, while anti-Trump and Race-Class Narrative messages were the least likely, a pattern consistent with the broader finding that economic appeals travel across party lines in a way that identity- and Trump-focused appeals do not.

7. Opt For Messages that Bridge Instead of Divide

With so many effective messages to choose from, it's prudent to opt for the ones that resonate across party lines and avoid those that antagonize persuadable voters. Choose messages that meet voters where they're at, not where political consultants might wish they were at.

All three RCN messages and the anti-Trump pocketbook message turn off pure independents, rural, Trump waverers, and undecided likely 2024 voters. The best bets for building the broadest possible progressive coalition in competitive races are **American Way**, **Broken Deal**, and **Fair Share**.

We made some additional discoveries of note during a phase one preparatory survey that tested a wide array of component parts of populist narratives to try to identify which ingredients do the work.

WHAT MADE MESSAGES LAND

CWCP–RUBI economic-populism study:
Findings from Phase 1 preparatory survey (April 2026)

What Made Messages Land

WHAT LANDED	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE	DID BETTER THAN...
Broken promises	"They're not holding up their end of the deal"; "they sold the workers who made America great down the river"	Pointing out the wealth inequality between rich and poor: "The rich keep getting richer while working people are just trying to survive"
A pledge to bring the American Dream back	"We need an economic system that values the hard work regular people do. We had that once. It was called the American Dream—and every single person I know wants it back."	The American Dream as a bare slogan with no substance behind it: "I'm laser-focused on fighting to restore the American Dream"
Naming the betrayed occupations	"Miners, farmers, truck drivers, nurses, home health aides, teachers..."	A generic "people who work for a living"
Concrete, relatable numbers (used sparingly)	"If pay had kept up with CEO pay since 1978, the average worker would earn \$381 an hour"; "grocery prices are up 28% in five years"	Abstract statistics about the share of wealth held by haves vs. have-nots ("The bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth... that's nuts!", "richest three people have as much wealth as the bottom half")
Specific accusations of wrongdoing	Politicians "taking bribes," or "taking away your health insurance to pay for tax cuts for the rich"	Generic anti-politician complaint: "politicians are out of touch with folks who work for a living, and they think we're too stupid to notice"

What Fell Flat

WHAT FELL FLAT	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE	DID WORSE THAN...
Telling instead of showing	"Elites have betrayed working Americans"; "I'm laser-focused on making life affordable"	The same idea <i>shown</i> with a concrete story or number ("When CEOs make dozens of times more than their workers and then jack up prices, that's not a free market— that's a rigged system")
"Should" / "ought to" phrasing	"The economy <i>should</i> work for working people"; "Young families <i>should</i> be able to afford..."	Concrete plan or pledge to rectify ("That's why I support raising wages, cracking down on price gouging, cutting middle class taxes, and making sure anyone who wants to work can find a good-paying job")
A collective-action closer	"If everyone who's struggling and at the end of their rope comes together, we can fix what's broken and rebuild our country"	Pledging to do something once elected ("I'll never stop fighting to crack down on corporate greed")
Concrete, relatable numbers (used sparingly)	"If pay had kept up with CEO pay since 1978, the average worker would earn \$381 an hour"; "grocery prices are up 28% in five years"	Abstract statistics about the share of wealth held by haves vs. have-nots ("The bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth... that's nuts!", "richest three people have as much wealth as the bottom half")
Swear words	Profane variants ("get shit done")	Clean variants ("get stuff done")

What Barely Mattered

BARELY MOVED THE NEEDLE	THE VARIANTS WE TESTED
How you name the economic villain	"the wealthy few" / "the rich and powerful" / "billionaires"
How you name the political villain	"insiders" / "politicians in Washington"
How you name the victim	"working people" / "middle-class families" / "people who work for a living"
An AI line	Adding "...and AI is about to make it worse" (caveat: AI will likely become more salient over time)
"Rigged" vs. "broken" system	"a rigged system" vs. "a broken system" (about the same with most voters, but Republicans preferred "broken")

What Worked with Specific Audiences

AUDIENCE	WHAT WORKED	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE	DID WORSE THAN...
Republicans	Rigged- <i>market</i> framing; validated anger; outsourcing; the pay gap. Liked “crack down on greed” but not “stand up to corporations”	“When CEOs make dozens of times more than their workers and then jack up prices, that’s not a free market—it’s a rigged system”; “Elites have betrayed working Americans, and you’re right to be pissed off about it”; “they shipped our jobs to China and Mexico”; “I’ll never stop fighting to crack down on corporate greed” holds up	The same anti-elite ideas cast as a call to fight the powerful: “We need to stand up to big corporations and the politicians who serve them”
Independents	Clean-hands pledges; anti-greed; small business	“I will never take a dime from corporate donors or PACs”; “...crack down on corporate greed”; add “and small businesses”... “an economy for working people and small businesses”	Heavy-handed populism (“We don’t want crumbs from the billionaires’ table—we deserve our own damn table”)
Democrats only	Scare tactics; specific policy asks; anti-rich imagery	“They’re coming for your Social Security and Medicare”; “raise wages, crack down on price-gouging, cut middle-class taxes, fund schools and hospitals instead of bombs and tanks”; “We don’t want crumbs from the billionaires’ table—we deserve our own damn table”	Anger validation (“you’re right to be pissed”); patriotic pride (“American workers set the gold standard for excellence around the world”)