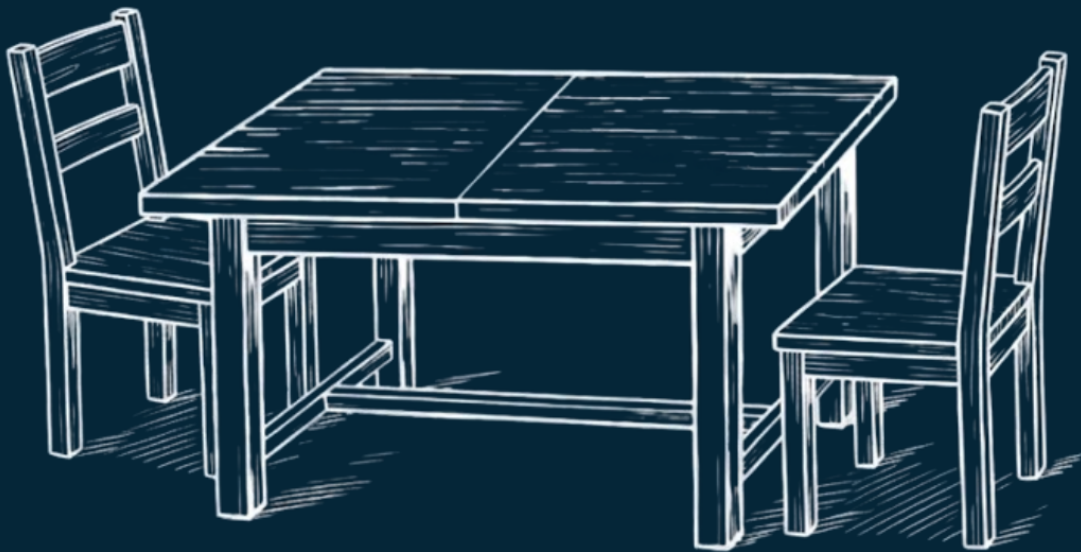


KITCHEN TABLE MESSAGING

— *for the Populist Era* —



AUGUST 2026



RURAL URBAN BRIDGE
INITIATIVE



The Center for Working Class Politics

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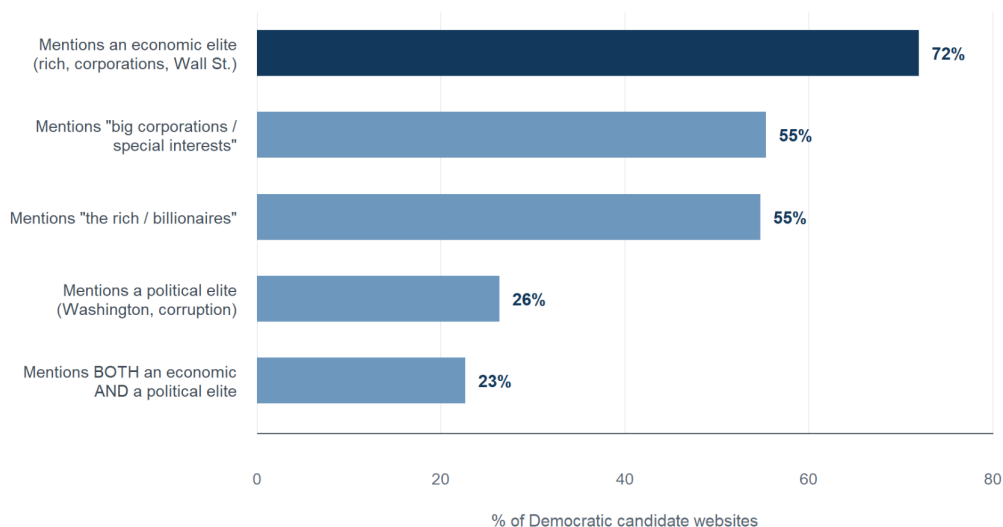
DEMOCRATS AND ECONOMIC POPULISM

It's been more than twenty years since George Carlin quipped that "the reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it." Since then, inequality has climbed to its highest level since the Gilded Age, and the shared prosperity of the post-World War II decades looks, to twenty-first-century working Americans, like a distant dream. The top 1% of households now controls a greater share of national wealth than at any point since the 1940s, and a share of national income not seen since the 1920s.¹ Deindustrialization, mass layoffs, and the decline of unions, alongside tax cuts for the wealthy and the deregulation of finance, have effectively smothered the American Dream in its sleep.

Extreme inequality, growing precarity, brazen political corruption, and the hollowing out of rural areas and deindustrialized factory towns, have fueled a populist backlash that Donald Trump rode twice to victory. In the wake of the 2024 election, Democrats are rediscovering their roots as the party of working people, at least rhetorically, and are increasingly deploying economic-populist rhetoric. When we analyzed Congressional candidate websites of all Democrats running in 2026, we found that about 60% of 2026 Democrats call out an economic elite of some kind, (the rich, corporations, Wall Street), 44% blame a political elite (Washington, career politicians, corruption), and 35% do both. Likewise, "Resistance" and other liberal advocacy campaigns increasingly speak in populist registers.

Economic populism has gone mainstream

Keyword analysis of 1,059 Democratic congressional candidates' campaign websites, 2026.



Share of candidates using at least one term from the CWCP anti-elite dictionaries. "Big corporations" and "the rich" are subsets of the economic-elite bar; the last bar is the overlap of the economic and political bars. Base: campaign websites with 500+ words (1,059 of 1,121 Democratic candidates); congressional office (.gov) sites excluded.

¹ Arloc Sherman, Danilo Trisi, and Josephine Cureton, *A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2024).

The economic-populist appeals in circulation fall into three broad families:

divide-and-conquer narratives that show how elites blame scapegoats to keep the working class divided; **soft kitchen-table populism** that affirms people's economic worries and calls for an economy that works for everyone; and **strong kitchen table populism** that affirms those worries *and* people's anger at corrupt elites, calling more stridently for taking the elites on.

Alongside these populist appeals, many Democrats still lean on "saving democracy" from the authoritarian threat Trump poses. This category comes in three forms: Direct attacks on Trump and the pocketbook damage of his rash and sometimes illegal actions; abstract condemnation of oligarchy and fascism; and ridicule of his flaws, lies, and mistakes. We take the last as a given loser and focus, in our survey, on the first two.

The question is no longer *whether* Democrats will run as economic populists (most already do to one degree or another), but which kind wins, and which style has the greatest capacity to maximize Democratic support, whether among low-propensity base voters or swing voters.

Read the Main Story as Comparisons Between Message Clusters Rather Than Individual Messages

The thirteen messages do not spread out evenly; they fall into a handful of clusters, and the differences *between* clusters are large and reliable while the differences between individual messages within a cluster are often small and *within* the margin of error. What the data tell us with confidence is which kinds of messages are more or less appealing to voters, not that one exact wording beats another by a point or two. We describe those clusters next, and read the rest of the report with them in mind.

The Stakes

Democrats have to do two hard things at once: Hold a base that wants them to fight, and win back working-class and rural voters, many of them 2024 Trump voters, whose votes are essential in most competitive races. A message that revs up the base but alienates those voters (or the reverse) loses. Our goal was to find economic-populist messages that do both, so we pay special attention to the groups whose support candidates in red and purple districts most need: rural, non-college, and working-class voters, Trump "waverers" (those who voted for Trump in 2024 but are not planning on voting Republican in 2028), independents, low-engagement voters, and undecided likely-2026 voters. If Democrats and other left-of-center candidates want to rebuild a durable electoral majority, they will need to regain lost ground with at least some members of these groups.

WHAT WE TESTED

In June 2026, the Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP) and the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative (RUBI) fielded an online Verasight survey of 6,100 U.S. adults (5,000 nationally representative plus a 1,100 rural oversample), June 16 to July 1. Each respondent first saw a Republican opposition message, randomly assigned to focus on either government corruption and waste or immigration, so that the Democratic messages were tested against a realistic partisan counterargument rather than in a vacuum. Respondents then rated three messages, drawn at random from a pool of thirteen that span the range of economic-populist appeals in today's Democratic Party, on a 5-point likelihood-to-vote_Democrat scale.²

The thirteen messages include five of our own design plus eight others of a type we frequently see deployed or recommended by prominent messaging professionals, including the Winning Jobs Narrative, ASO Communications, and American Bridge 21st Century's Working Class Project. The anti-Trump message was fielded with two variants, described below, which we report and analyze here pooled as a single message.

The June survey follows an April 2026 survey we conducted (fielded by CINT polling) of over 9,000 Americans. That preliminary study tested dozens of individual *components* of a kitchen-table populist message, swapped at random, to find the strongest ingredients. Seeing which components did the best enabled us to assemble two “best-in-class” messages for the June test (the *Broken Deal* and *Dignity of Work* messages discussed below). In short, the April survey found the best *ingredients*; the June study finds the best *finished messages*, and, crucially, which ones reach beyond the Democratic base.

How to Read the Numbers

The primary number we report is net would-vote-for-candidate, meaning the share of respondents who are “likely” to vote for the candidate minus the share who are “unlikely,” on a 5-point scale (“How likely would you be to vote for this candidate?”). Each respondent first rated one Republican message and then three randomly chosen Democratic messages. Respondents were told the party affiliation of each hypothetical candidate and that they were candidates running for Congress.

Alternative Measures and Margins of Error

We also estimated every result with a more precise metric, the mean of the full 1–5 rating rescaled to 0–100, which keeps the information in the neutral middle of the scale that net would-vote throws away. The margin of error for a single message is about ± 5 points for the net would-vote and about ± 2 on the tighter 0–100 score. The two metrics give the same

² For exhaustive crosstabs, definitions of subgroups, alternative specifications, and other analyses, please visit our interactive online appendix at <http://kitchentablepopulism.com/>.

ranking, the same top cluster, and the same bottom cluster, so we report the more interpretable net metric throughout and every primary result holds under the more precise measure.

BIG TAKEAWAYS

- **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 with Republicans, and beat one of the Republican opposition messages among 2024 Trump waverers (Trump voters who say they're not planning to vote Republican in 2028).
- **Divide-and-conquer narratives significantly underperform.** Overall and with every single group, including Democrats, these messages significantly underperformed Kitchen Table populism.
- **Attacking Trump or MAGA accomplishes little.** Across the board and with every sub-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.
- **Name the villain, but don't vilify.** Adding an anti-corruption promise lifts a plain cost-of-living message across party lines (with Republicans, from +1 to +19); but going one step further to name a class enemy and call voters to "take them on" forfeits that cross-party reach (Republicans fall to -6) for and yields no real gain with the base. This finding is corroborated by the Winning Jobs Narrative's research-informed "aspirational" versus "adversarial" populism [messaging guidance](#).

Equipped with these learnings, we encourage candidates and groups to adopt messages that resonate with key persuadable groups and to avoid the ones that are lukewarm or trigger backlash. This is what it takes to create a Big Tent electoral movement. A party that successfully draws in a plurality of voters united in their support for Kitchen Table populism is a party that can achieve great things like a [New Deal for Rural](#) and other pro-worker agendas.

THE THIRTEEN MESSAGES AT A GLANCE

Every message we tested represents a current of economic-populist messaging that Democratic candidates are currently using, or that prominent advocacy and messaging organizations are advising them to use. All the language we include we either created from scratch or adapted directly from real campaign messaging or from suggested language by Democratic pollsters and strategists. The table below shows each statement in full, where it comes from, and its net support, sorted best to worst. The two Republican opposition statements are included for comparison.

Net would-vote-for-Democrat (% likely minus % unlikely) for each Democratic message and the two Republican opposition messages, sorted best to worst. Cells shaded green (strongest) to beige (weakest).

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
American Way <i>Adapted from The Working-Class Project</i>	"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 <i>Adapted from Winning Jobs Narrative</i>	"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) <i>Original message by study authors</i>	"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

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
American Way (confrontational) <i>The American Way message with a more combative tone added by the study authors</i>	"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
Broken Deal <i>Strongest (cross-party) performing sentences from Phase 1 survey</i>	"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 <i>Strongest (cross-party) performing sentences from Phase 1 survey</i>	"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 <i>Original message by study authors</i>	"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

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
Unity <i>Adapted from James Talarico</i>	"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 <i>Adapted from language used by Abdul El-Sayed, Graham Platner, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez</i>	"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
GOP (government waste) <i>Adapted from language used by Lauren Boebert, Riley Moore, and Gus Bilirakis</i>	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 <i>Adapted from Abbott & Williams, Class Gaps (economics-focused anti-Trump)</i>	"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) <i>Verbatim from ASO Communications</i>	"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

STYLE	MESSAGE CONTENT	NET VOTE INTENT
GOP (immigration) <i>Adapted from language used by Tommy Tuberville</i>	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)³ <i>Study author modification of RCN (no mention of race)</i>	"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) <i>Study author modification of RCN (race emphasized)</i>	"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

THE RESULTS BY CLUSTER

While there are interesting nuances in the results between variations of the top-, middle-, and bottom-performing economic-populist messages, the most important story is the ways that the messages cluster. Using the more precise 0–100 predicted-vote score and testing every pair of statements with a correction for multiple comparisons, the thirteen Democratic messages and the two Republican opposition messages sort into five statistically distinct tiers.

³ 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.

TIER	STATEMENTS (PREDICTED-VOTE SCORE, 0-100)
Tier 1: Kitchen Table Economics	American Way (69); Fair Share (68); Fair Share (more colloquial) (68); American Way (confrontational) (66)
Tier 2: Story-Driven Populism	Dignity-of-work (65); Broken Deal (64); Immigrant solidarity (63)
Tier 3: Fighting the Powerful	Unity (59); Fighting oligarchy (58)
Tier 4: Anti-Trump and Race-Class Narrative	Anti-Trump (56); RCN race-light (56); RCN no-race (53); RCN race-heavy (52)

Tier 1: Kitchen Table Economics

The top tier are all variations on a “kitchen-table populism” that we describe in greater detail below. These messages all performed very well and landed close enough together that any differences between them could be due to random chance (though the difference between American Way and American Way (confrontational) was marginally significant). Where these messages clearly part ways, however, is cross-partisan reach, the subject of the sections that follow.

Tier 2: Story-Driven Populism

A notch below are the messages that lead with a story: Dignity-of-work’s named occupations, the Broken Deal narrative about a betrayed American Dream, and Immigrant Solidarity’s shared interest frame. They are all very strong, and not particularly polarizing. (By polarizing, we simply mean how much a message alienates Republicans and Independents). Two messages can get the same overall support, but one performs roughly the same across the political spectrum, while the other receives very high Democratic support but very low Republican support. The only partial exception was the Immigrant Solidarity message, which was viewed much more negatively than the other two by Republicans but was still viewed positively by independents, non-white, and Latino respondents.

Tier 3: Fighting the Powerful

The next best-performing group of messages is built primarily around resisting elites. This tier includes (1) the Talarico-based Unity appeal, a RCN-style message which argues that billionaires stoke division by party, race, gender, and religion to distract from an agenda that defunds schools and guts health care; and (2) “Fighting Oligarchy,” a Sanders/AOC-inspired messages which names a handful of billionaires and would-be oligarchs who have captured the economy and government and casts the stakes as democracy against a “fascist project”. These two messages hold up well with the Democratic base (+70 to +73)

and stay modestly positive with independents (+28 to +30), but, unlike the top two tiers, they turn clearly negative with Republicans and 2024 Trump voters (-21 to -24).

Tier 4: Anti-Trump and Race-Class Narrative

At the bottom of the economic populist message field are the explicitly anti-Trump message and the Race-Class Narratives, including the race-light version and the versions that either strip race out or emphasize it. (The Tier 3 Talarico Unity message discussed above is another type of RCN message that performed better than the Tier 4 RCN messages).

KITCHEN TABLE POPULISM NEVER FAILS

The top six messages all directly address people's cost-of-living woes, suggest who or what is to blame, and offer some form of redress. Each does four things, in its own way:

1. Acknowledges that wages aren't keeping pace with rising costs
2. Affirms that people are working hard and deserve a decent standard of living
3. Recognizes that elites are doing well while ordinary people are struggling
4. Pledges to do something about it (crack down on corruption, make corporations and billionaires pay their fair share in taxes, refuse corporate PAC donations)

The messages vary in how aggressively they attack elites ("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. A couple of messages distinguish themselves by referencing the "American way," the idea that if you work hard you should get ahead. And the "Broken Deal" message stands out for weaving a betrayal narrative in which ordinary people kept up their end of the deal by working hard, but CEOs broke the contract by hoarding the profits for themselves. (Hat tip to [Antonia Scatton](#) for some of the concepts and language in the Broken Deal message.)

All of these messages did substantially better than the Republican opposition message. Even among Independents and high-income, college-educated professionals, who one might worry would balk at anti-elitist rhetoric and economic grievance narratives, the Kitchen Table populism messages scored highest. The "American way" message was most popular overall and among undecided likely-2026 voters, working-class, rural, non-college, non-white, and Black voters. The only subgroups that crowned a different winner were Latino respondents (Dignity-of-work) and, predictably, Republicans and Trump voters (the GOP immigration message). That said, Kitchen Table populism was the most effective of the Democratic messages among Republicans and Trump voters. (Most of these groups are

self-evident but three require explanation: “Trump waverers” are those who voted for Trump in 2024 but are not planning to vote Republican in 2028; pure independents are people who self-identify as political independents and also report that they do not lean toward either the Democrats or the Republicans; undecided 2026 voters are respondents who reported that they are likely to vote but haven’t made up their mind about which party they will support in the 2026 midterms for Congress; and Dem-leaning non-voters are respondents who are either Democrats or Democrat-leaning independents who did not vote in the 2024 general election.

HOW THE MESSAGES LAND ACROSS KEY GROUPS

Net would-vote for every statement (rows, sorted by overall performance) within each key group. Cells are shaded on a common scale, green = stronger, red = weaker, so a group that likes every message less shows up as a redder column.⁴

⁴Full results and exact definitions of each subgroup are provided in the online appendix <https://kitchentablepopulism.com/>

By party and persuadable group

	Overall	Dem	Ind	Rep	Trump wav.	Pure ind.	Undec. '26	Dem-lean non-vtr
American Way	+50	+86	+51	+19	+46	+43	+51	+75
Fair share (colloq.)	+45	+85	+47	+2	+34	+46	+44	+74
Fair share	+45	+90	+49	+1	+24	+44	+43	+73
American Way (confr.)	+42	+89	+42	-6	+33	+37	+31	+83
Broken Deal	+39	+81	+38	+4	+31	+23	+40	+73
Dignity-of-work	+38	+84	+44	-9	+25	+39	+36	+79
Immigrant Solidarity	+32	+84	+43	-25	+32	+37	+47	+67
Unity	+26	+70	+28	-23	+20	+25	+21	+61
Fighting Oligarchy	+21	+72	+30	-28	+24	+22	+28	+40
GOP (govt waste)	+20	-17	+15	+61	+42	+12	+33	-1
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	+18	+73	+26	-36	-15	+26	+9	+43
RCN (race-light)	+18	+71	+22	-44	-9	+22	+1	+63
GOP (immigration)	+13	-39	+8	+80	+56	+12	+36	-14
RCN (no race)	+11	+74	+13	-50	-10	+15	-4	+55
RCN (race-heavy)	+8	+68	+8	-50	-16	+9	-13	+59

By place (self-reported)

	Overall	Big city	Suburb	Sm. town	Rural
American Way	+50	+63	+48	+42	+45
Fair share (colloq.)	+45	+55	+45	+45	+34
Fair share	+45	+60	+42	+44	+34
American Way (confr.)	+42	+58	+38	+46	+29
Broken Deal	+39	+41	+38	+42	+35
Dignity-of-work	+38	+55	+37	+39	+19
Immigrant Solidarity	+32	+46	+28	+35	+21
Unity	+26	+42	+20	+25	+16
Fighting Oligarchy	+21	+33	+22	+20	+5
GOP (govt waste)	+20	+8	+19	+19	+35
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	+18	+38	+21	+12	-4
RCN (race-light)	+18	+36	+20	+14	-7
GOP (immigration)	+13	+11	+10	+9	+27
RCN (no race)	+11	+32	+4	+9	+1
RCN (race-heavy)	+8	+28	+11	+6	-18

By class and race/ethnicity

	Overall	Work. class	Mid/upper	White	Non-white	Black	Hispanic
American Way	+50	+47	+50	+44	+59	+67	+56
Fair share (colloq.)	+45	+46	+49	+39	+57	+61	+56
Fair share	+45	+47	+47	+38	+59	+64	+55
American Way (confr.)	+42	+44	+38	+38	+52	+54	+49
Broken Deal	+39	+37	+41	+38	+42	+45	+41
Dignity-of-work	+38	+37	+44	+32	+51	+60	+57
Immigrant Solidarity	+32	+35	+29	+21	+51	+58	+56
Unity	+26	+30	+24	+17	+39	+50	+44
Fighting Oligarchy	+21	+17	+24	+18	+27	+44	+18
GOP (govt waste)	+20	+20	+14	+27	+8	+9	+9
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	+18	+14	+22	+8	+36	+49	+29
RCN (race-light)	+18	+21	+15	+7	+34	+47	+26
GOP (immigration)	+13	+22	+4	+18	+7	+12	+6
RCN (no race)	+11	+13	+12	+1	+29	+41	+31
RCN (race-heavy)	+8	+13	+8	-3	+27	+45	+26

By age

	Overall	18-34	35-54	55+
American Way	+50	+56	+43	+40
Fair share (colloq.)	+45	+53	+34	+35
Fair share	+45	+55	+34	+28
American Way (confr.)	+42	+51	+32	+31
Broken Deal	+39	+44	+32	+34
Dignity-of-work	+38	+49	+26	+21
Immigrant Solidarity	+32	+42	+22	+20
Unity	+26	+37	+11	+7
Fighting Oligarchy	+21	+32	+8	+6
GOP (govt waste)	+20	+16	+27	+17
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	+18	+24	+10	+14
RCN (race-light)	+18	+30	-0	+7
GOP (immigration)	+13	+12	+17	+9
RCN (no race)	+11	+20	+3	-13
RCN (race-heavy)	+8	+22	-7	-13

By education

	Overall	HS/less	Some coll.	BA	Postgrad
American Way	+50	+49	+45	+57	+49
Fair share (colloq.)	+45	+41	+47	+51	+43
Fair share	+45	+49	+38	+47	+50
American Way (confr.)	+42	+42	+40	+45	+44
Broken Deal	+39	+34	+36	+49	+42
Dignity-of-work	+38	+29	+44	+42	+47
Immigrant Solidarity	+32	+36	+26	+31	+40
Unity	+26	+19	+33	+22	+35
Fighting Oligarchy	+21	+17	+21	+28	+22
GOP (govt waste)	+20	+22	+29	+17	+4
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	+18	+16	+14	+23	+26
RCN (race-light)	+18	+16	+17	+18	+24
GOP (immigration)	+13	+26	+14	+9	-13
RCN (no race)	+11	+10	+7	+13	+21
RCN (race-heavy)	+8	+11	+0	+10	+11

DIVIDE-AND-CONQUER NARRATIVES UNDERPERFORMED

Divide-and-conquer rhetoric is 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 are distracted fighting each other for crumbs, the elites run off with the bank.



Image: Denis Lushch

We tested five versions of divide-and-conquer: We wrote the Immigrant Solidarity message; the Talarico Unity message is taken verbatim (but condensed) from his website; Race-Class Narrative (RCN) race-light was provided verbatim by ASO Communications; RCN race-heavy is our modification of it that foregrounds race ("Black people and new immigrants," "white, Black, and brown"); and RCN (no race) is identical to RCN (race-light) but with the reference to "every color and background" removed.

Of the five, Immigrant Solidarity was the most effective. It was the second favorite overall for undecided likely-2026 voters and significantly net positive for every subgroup except Republicans and Trump voters. Its strength lies in offering a specific, galling story (CEOs getting bonuses for shipping jobs overseas) and a down-to-earth tone (what RUBI calls [“talking like a neighbor”](#)). It also named politicians and lobbyists as the culprits, where the RCN messages names billionaires and Republicans. A downside to Immigrant Solidarity is that it could create a linguistic linkage (immigrants=problem) in the minds of voters.

RCN (no race) and RCN (race-light) did about the same, and RCN (race-heavy) did the worst. The strongest of the three RCN versions was the race-light original that ASO Communications recommends, not either of our modifications (foregrounding race, or stripping it out) — so the RCN version that performed best is the one its own advocates put forward for this survey, as opposed to the more race-heavy messages promoted in their [2025 Guide to Messaging Our Freedoms](#). Rural voters, Trump waverers, and undecided likely-2026 voters particularly disliked all three RCN messages. Non-white voters liked the RCN messages, but preferred Kitchen Table populism and Immigrant Solidarity over every RCN version.

Could the RCN messages have underperformed simply because they include explicitly partisan language, naming Republicans as the ones keeping Americans divided? That is unlikely. First, every Democratic-leaning subgroup we examined (Democrats, Harris voters, liberals, and Democratic-leaning non-voters) also ranked the RCN messages near the bottom of the field, so the drag is not just a partisan backlash from Republican respondents who were not the intended audience for RCN messages. Second, similar divide-and-conquer messages that make the “elites keep us divided and distracted” argument, but without the partisan cue, *also* substantially underperformed Kitchen Table populism. Whatever is holding the RCN messages back, it does not appear to be simply the reference to Republicans.

A second difference in message construction is also worth examining: some messages are delivered as explicit first-person pledges from the candidate (“I’m going to bring those costs down”; “I’ll never take a dime from corporate donors”), while others, including the RCN family, Unity, Fighting Oligarchy, and American Way (confrontational), rely on collective or impersonal calls to action. Could this missing pledge, rather than the divide-and-conquer structure itself, explain the RCN results?

Again, this is unlikely to account for more than a modest share of the gap in support between the Kitchen Table and Divide and Conquer messages. First, messages without a first-person pledge appear at every level of the rankings: American Way (confrontational) is among the top performers, Immigrant Solidarity also performed strongly, while other messages without the first-person pledge garnered less support.

In turn, our Phase 1 sentence-level experiment lets us gauge the size of the first-person pledge effect directly: candidate-pledge solution sentences (“That’s why I support raising

wages...") outperformed otherwise-similar "should"-based phrases and collective-action lines by only one to three points. This is a useful lesson for message writers, but an order of magnitude smaller than the gaps separating the RCN messages from the Kitchen Table messages. We encourage future studies to field pledge-framed variants of RCN and other divide-and-conquer messages to test this directly.

Neither explanation, then, accounts for the gap between Kitchen Table and Divide and Conquer messages. It is important to note, however, that the key finding here is not "never address race or scapegoating," but rather that the divide-and-conquer narrative structure specifically underperforms the economic solidarity framing of the Kitchen Table messages.

Why Does Dwelling On Division and Scapegoating Backfire?

The pattern points to several plausible explanations:

- **It tells voters they have been duped.** "If they can talk you into thinking anyone else is to blame..." implies that *you have been manipulated and do not realize it*. People resist being told they have been fooled; it reads as subtly condescending and puts the listener on the defensive rather than on the candidate's side.
- **It may only work if you already agree that scapegoating is actually happening.** The divide-and-conquer frame likely works mainly for people who already believe that division is deliberately manufactured and that the scapegoated groups are blameless. For the persuadable voters in the middle who do not start there, it offers little to grab onto, and can even imply that their own concerns (e.g. about immigration) are illegitimate.
- **Naming the scapegoat may inadvertently activate resistance toward it.** To say "do not blame immigrants and Black people," you have to say "immigrants and Black people." Dwelling on the scapegoating keeps those groups salient and pulls race and identity into what might otherwise be a clean economic appeal, thereby yielding the opposite of the intended effect.
- **It sounds like an activist, not a neighbor.** "Divide and conquer," "keep us divided," "the many can take on the money" is movement language. It may come across to voters more as sermon than solidarity, which could undercut the authenticity of the message in the ears of persuadable voters.

Why Immigrant Solidarity Performs Better Than Other Divide-And-Conquer Messages

Immigrant Solidarity shares the same anti-scapegoating mechanism as the RCN and Unity messages; what differs is the intensity of focus on scapegoating and framing:

- **The Immigrant Solidarity message leads with the material story, not the meta-story.** Concrete villainy tied to concrete harm (CEOs collecting bonuses for shipping jobs overseas; politicians handing tax breaks to the rich and then pleading poverty on schools), rather than an abstract account of how elites keep us divided.
- **Self-interest, not moral instruction.** “Most of us have more in common with an immigrant who works paycheck to paycheck than with a CEO” frames the anti-scapegoating as the listener’s own interest, not a lecture about being fair to others.
- **Oblique reference to scapegoating means no condescension and no priming.** Immigrant Solidarity asserts that immigrants aren’t the problem. That assertion implies that the politicians and lobbyists mentioned in the next sentence are scapegoating immigrants but doesn’t implicate ordinary people as actors in the divide-and-conquer scheme. Its more central complaint is that politicians shortchange schools and roads while handing tax breaks to the rich, behavior people can recognize as wrongful without having to embrace an identitarian scapegoating accusation.
- **It talks like a neighbor.** Conversational, specific, and mildly indignant, rather than the abstract, canned cadence of a solidarity sermon.

CAVEATS: WHAT MESSAGE TESTING CAN AND CAN'T SEE

- **Surveys can't measure whether messages can break through dense media environments.** Out in the real world, no message persuades anyone until it first competes for a sliver of attention inside an overwhelming flood of content. Survey conditions erase that competition entirely, since participants have agreed to sit and absorb all 80 to 100 words, fully aware their opinions are what we're after. That hothouse environment may reward whatever feels safest or most conventional (particularly among right-leaning respondents), regardless of whether such a message could ever earn a moment's attention outside the questionnaire.
- **No message operates in a vacuum, and our design accounts for this.** Some of the messages we tested were written intentionally to push back against a rival story that Republicans tell, one that plays on economic anxiety, racial fear, hostility to outsiders, and the sense that one's standing in society is under threat. If you remove that adversarial backdrop from the test, messages engineered specifically to neutralize that threat may look weaker than they actually are. We anticipated this challenge and built our messages accordingly. Every respondent saw a Republican opposition message, either on government waste or immigration, before rating the Democratic messages, so the Democratic messages were all judged under adversarial pressure rather than in a vacuum. That choice paid off analytically: When the preceding Republican attack was the immigration dog-whistle, messages that explicitly named racial scapegoating performed better than they did otherwise. That is real, if narrow, evidence that rebuttal-framed messages gain force when they are directly responding to an initial attack.
- **Persuasion is cumulative, not instant.** Surveys capture how respondents feel at a single moment in time, but effective narratives should become more potent through sustained repetition. This means the central question is not which message is most effective in a single survey, but which, hammered home over an entire campaign, has the potential to slowly but meaningfully reshape how voters think about specific issues over the course of the campaign.
- **Winning votes is not the only goal a message can serve.** Our outcome measure is vote choice—which messages maximize support for Democratic candidates, particularly among the persuadable and working-class voters who decide competitive races. But some practitioners deploy Race-Class and related narratives not primarily to win elections but to build public will for a substantive agenda like defending immigrants and other scapegoated communities, on the theory that an advocacy campaign that never names an injustice cannot expect a mandate to remedy it.

A one-shot vote-choice survey like ours cannot adjudicate that longer-run persuasion strategy. (On that score, readers may wish to review [recent research by We Make the Future](#) showing that some RCN messages made voters more likely to support a tax-the-rich ballot initiative).

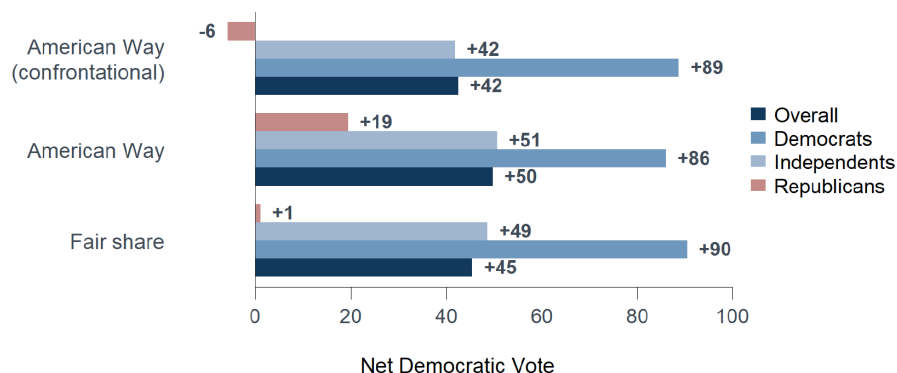
Nothing in our results, however, shows that naming immigrants is itself a liability: Immigrant Solidarity, which defends immigrants explicitly and by name, landed in our second statistical tier, ran significantly net positive with every subgroup except Republicans and Trump voters, and was the second-favorite message among undecided likely-2026 voters. What our data speak to is narrative structure, not subject matter: Messages that lead with shared economic interest and a concrete villain outperformed those built around the divide-and-conquer framings, even when both are focused on defending the same vulnerable communities.

There are real limits on what any one-shot test can measure, and no one should read the results of a single study as comprehensive affirmation or refutation of any messaging approach. That said, Kitchen Table Populism wins in the one-shot environment. We encourage future studies to retest our results to assess their replicability and the degree to which they do or not hold up.

NAME THE VILLAIN BUT DON'T VILIFY

We tested three intensity levels of anti-economic-elite messaging– three messages using Kitchen Table populist appeals that differ in how aggressively they attack elites.

How strongly should Democrats go after elites?



✓ **Fair Share** states the problem (costs are rising) and simply asks corporations to pay their fair share to fund programs.

✓ **American Way** keeps the above and adds a critique of corruption plus a promise to crack down on the people who “game the system for themselves.”

✓ **American Way (confrontational)** keeps that same anti-corruption promise word-for-word, then turns the dial up 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. Among our whole sample, the gap between American Way and American Way (confrontational) was only marginally significant. However, that difference was large and significant among Republicans, rural and small-town residents, and 2026 undecideds. Whereas American Way scored +19, +45, and +51 among those three groups respectively, the more confrontational variant dropped to -6 (a 25-point drop), +29 (a 16-point drop), and +31 (a 20-point drop). (Among Republicans and rural residents, the gap survives correction for multiple comparisons on our more precise 0–100 score; overall the two messages fall in the same statistical tier, which is why we call the aggregate difference marginal).

The gap we observe between the two versions of American Way among center-to-right-leaning respondents echoes other recent polling showing that many working-class Americans admire successful people and do not like seeing them vilified. In other words, they are more keen on ordinary people getting ahead than on bringing the rich down a peg. That does not mean they love billionaires or large corporations: 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.⁵ But most prefer politicians who name the specific people responsible for tilting the playing field rather than condemning economic elites wholesale, and prefer politicians who offer practical solutions to corruption and inequality rather than activist calls to “take them on.”

So the difference between the winner (American Way) and its confrontational twin is primarily whether you explicitly blame big corporations and the superrich for rigging the system and invoke activist-sounding rhetoric to rally people in a fight to take them on. The takeaway: Don’t be afraid to name and blame the culprits, but do not needlessly provoke a backlash by going over the top. The differences among these three were comparatively small on the whole sample, and future surveys should drill down on these distinctions to confirm or challenge them.

Does the confrontational version at least fire up the Democratic base? Directionally yes, but not reliably. Among the base, it edges the less confrontational version by a small, non-significant +1 to +5 net points (0 of 56 subgroups reach significance), while giving up far more with the voters who decide races in swing districts (e.g. a 22-point loss with 2024

⁵ CWCP analysis of ANES 2024 and the CWCP/YouGov 2024 Trump’s Kryptonite Report: Among working-class respondents (no four-year degree, middle income quartiles), 56% disagree that the country would be better run by business leaders, and 48% say they at least sometimes feel resentment toward the rich.

Trump voters). The base is already near the ceiling, so there is little to gain and a great deal to lose.

REACHING BEYOND THE BASE

Every Democratic message was, not surprisingly, viewed very positively among Democrats, though not equally positively: Net support ranges from about +90 for the strongest down to roughly +68 for the weakest, a spread of more than 20 points, a gap which *may* have implications for voter enthusiasm among the base. Even so, every message clears a high bar with the base, so among Democrats this is a contest of winners. We see much larger gaps among swing voters, meaning voters who went Republican in 2024 but don't currently plan to do so in 2028, and with pure independents who don't lean either Democratic or Republican, and with respondents who reported being undecided about their Congressional vote choice in 2026.

The Kitchen Table messages are the most effective among Republicans and persuadable voters. The American Way message is the only message that is clearly positive with Republicans (+19), and it also leads the field with Trump waverers (+46), pure independents (+51), and undecided voters (+43). The Fair Share messages win the persuadable voter groups comfortably (independents +44 to +46, undecided +43 to +44) but drop off sharply among Republicans, hovering at a rounding-error +1 to +2.

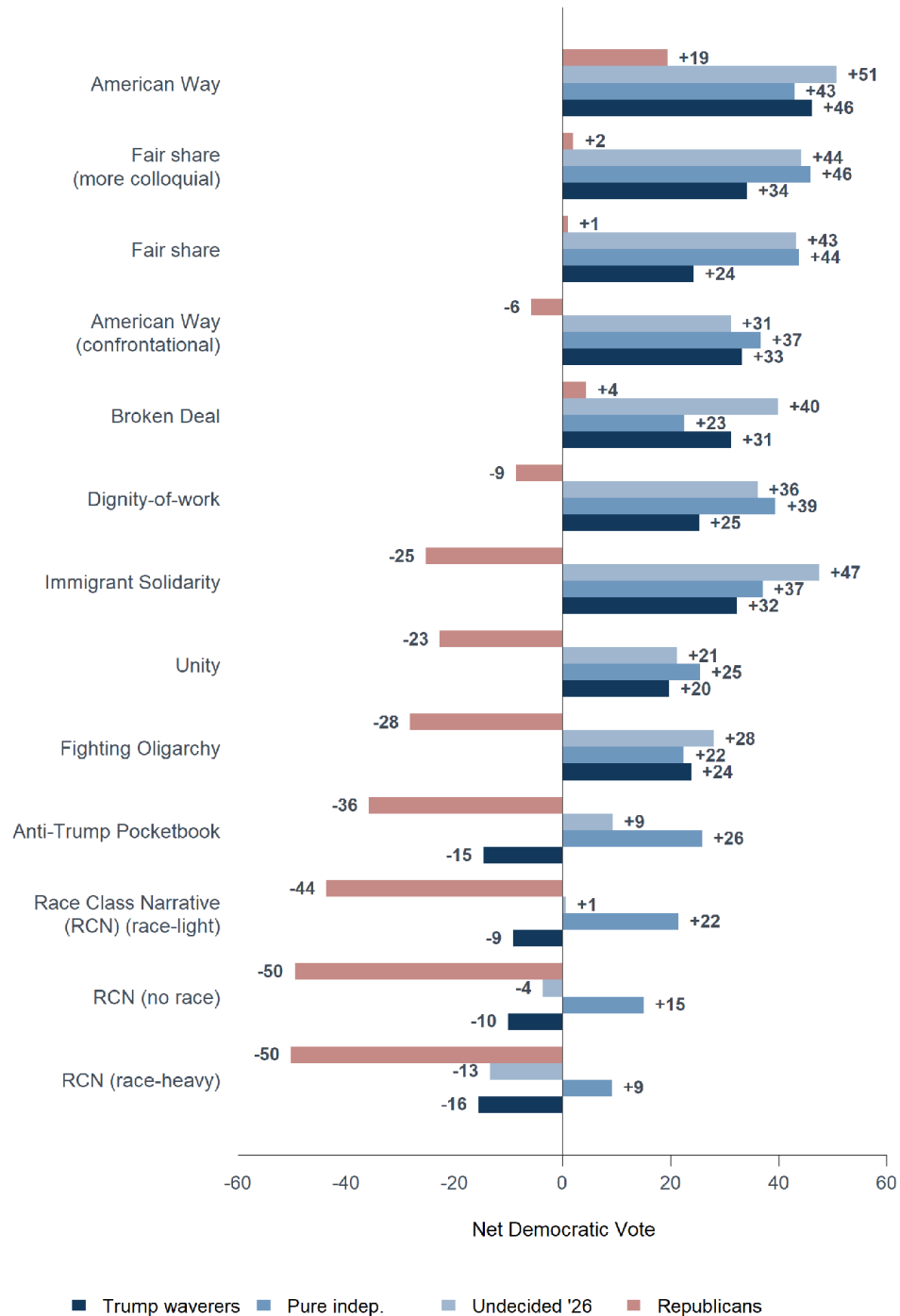
Below them, the confrontational American Way message still does well with persuadables (Trump waverers +33, independents +37) but turns negative with Republicans (-6). Fighting Oligarchy also holds up reasonably well with persuadables (+22 to +28) yet falls to -28 with Republicans; and Dignity-of-work, Broken Deal, and Immigrant Solidarity all behave similarly—strong with Democrats, middling among persuadables, and very negative among Republicans. So whether these are electorally strategic messages to employ depends heavily on the shape of your district.

The bottom performers among persuadables and Republicans are the Anti-Trump Pocketbook message and the three Race-Class narratives. These messages don't just fail to reach Republicans, they fall off a cliff — the Race-Class messages bottom out at -44 to -50 with Republicans and go negative even with Trump waverers (-9 to -16). The same ordering holds among the working-class, rural, and non-college voters who are critical to Democrats' coalition-building efforts in swing states and purple districts: American Way and the Fair share messages lead across all three (+45 to +47 with working-class voters), and the Race-Class narrative messages fall precipitously, worst in rural areas, where the race-heavy version reaches -18. The lesson is clear and consistent: The messages with the greatest potential to reach the most critical voter blocks in difficult districts are the ones whose appeal does not depend on the listener already being a Democrat, and the ones that

should be avoided in most cases are the ones built around a partisan enemy or a divide-and-conquer messaging framework.

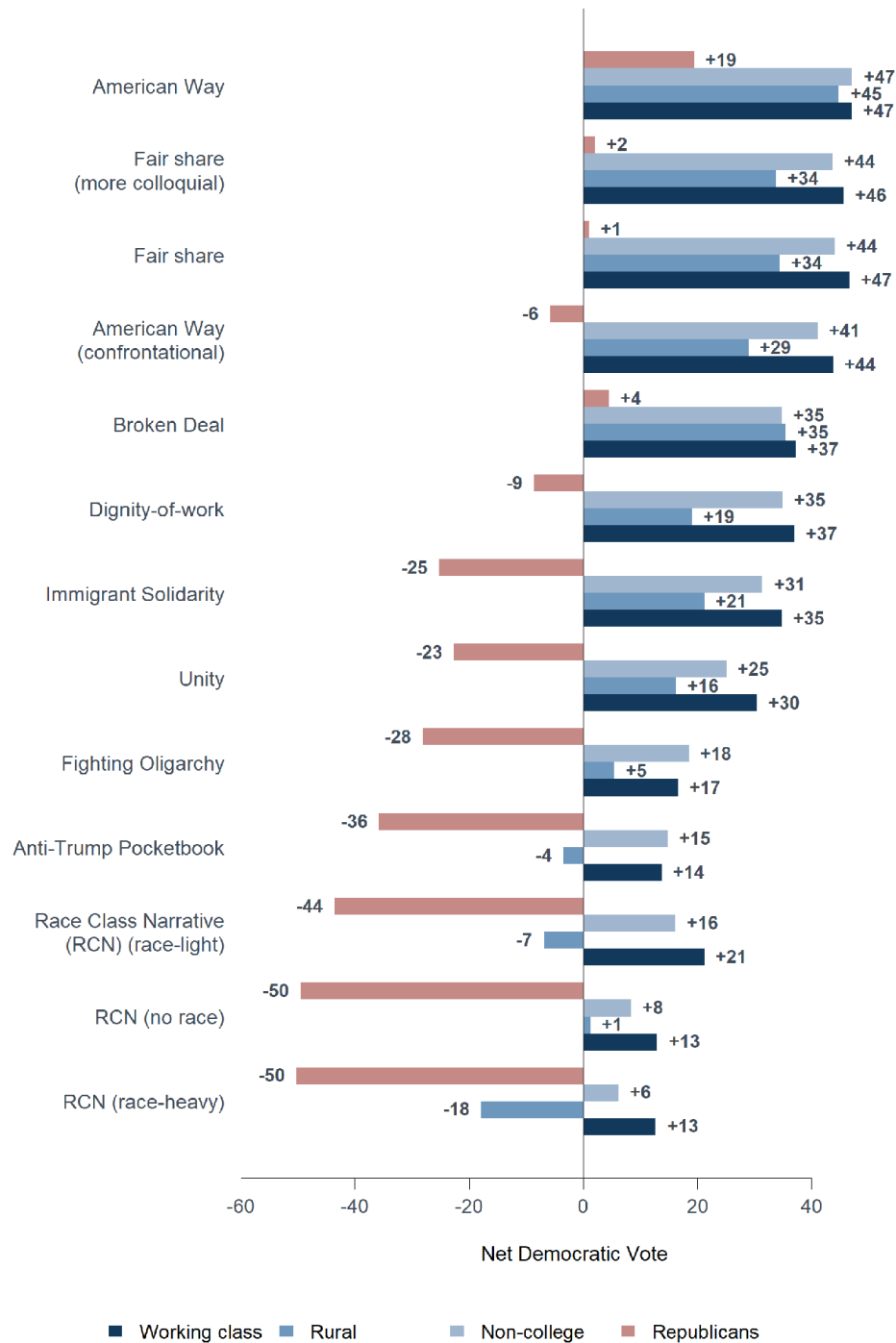
The full field among persuadable voters and Republicans

Net Democratic Vote, all thirteen messages by group.



Working-class, rural, non-college, and Republican voters

Net Democratic Vote, all thirteen messages by group.



HEAD-TO-HEAD: WHICH MESSAGES BEAT THE REPUBLICAN ATTACK

Every respondent rated one Republican opposition message and three Democratic ones on the same scale, so we can also ask how often a Democratic message actually beat the Republican message the same voter saw. This is a demanding bar, and it is the clearest way to see which appeals can win over the two audiences a swing-district campaign cares about most: 2024 Trump voters and rural and small-town voters.

Which Trump Voters are Persuadable?

About one in six 2024 Trump voters (17%) rated at least one Democratic message higher than the Republican message they saw. To see who these voters are, we compared the Trump voters who ever preferred a Democratic message against those who did not, across a range of personal characteristics.

Two demographics stand out: Women are about 5 points more likely than men to prefer a Democratic message, and younger voters are more likely than older ones (a 30-year-old Trump voter is roughly 7 points more likely to prefer a Democratic message than an otherwise similar 65-year-old). Income, education, race, region, and union membership do not independently predict whether a Trump voter will choose a Democratic message over a Republican one. One exception is worth noting: Among Trump voters who still plan to vote Republican in 2028, those with lower incomes are noticeably more open to a Democratic message than those with higher incomes, though that difference disappears among the Trump voters already drifting away from the party (aka Trump Waverers).

Share of Trump Voters Rating At Least One Democratic Message Above the Republican One

TRUMP VOTER GROUP	SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC OVER REPUBLICAN MESSAGE
Woman	20%
Man	15%
Under 40	22%
40 or older	10%

Economic, kitchen-table appeals do the most to push Trump voters toward Democratic messaging: Fair share (colloquial) and American Way are the first- and second-strongest of

the thirteen messages at winning them over, while the Race-Class and anti-Trump messages perform worst. Two practical notes: The Republican immigration attack is meaningfully harder to overcome than the affordability attack (it lowers defection by about 5 points), and American Way is an outlier in beating the Republican message equally regardless of which GOP attack the respondent read.

Share of Trump voters rating each Democratic message above the Republican message they saw. Waverers = Trump voters not planning to vote Republican in 2028.

DEMOCRATIC MESSAGE	ALL TRUMP VOTERS	TRUMP WAVERERS
American Way	13.3%	23.5%
Fair share	12.3%	19.0%
American Way (confrontational)	12.1%	20.5%
Immigrant Solidarity	11.2%	25.6%
Dignity-of-work	10.4%	25.3%
Broken Deal	10.0%	18.8%
Fighting Oligarchy	8.5%	20.2%
Unity	8.4%	21.5%
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	7.7%	19.3%
RCN (race-heavy)	8.1%	14.7%
RCN (race-light)	7.6%	18.1%
RCN (no race)	7.8%	15.8%

There is also a simpler predictor of which Trump voters are reachable—whether they are already unsettled about voting Republican in 2028. Trump 2024 voters who are not planning to vote Republican again (“Trump waverers”) are about 14 points more likely to prefer a Democratic message than those who still intend to.

Rural and Small-Town Voters

One in five American adults (20%) lives in a small town or rural area; our rural oversample means 1,899 respondents fall in this group, 31% of the raw sample. Among them, 41% rated at least one Democratic message above the Republican one. Apart from partisanship, obviously the dominant factor, the more surprising result is that rural voters without a college degree are *less* likely to prefer a Democratic message, not more.

Among rural and small-town respondents, 48% of college graduates preferred at least one Democratic message over the Republican message, versus 39% of those without a degree. This runs against the common assumption that a populist economic message is a natural fit for the non-college rural voter. Younger rural voters are somewhat more persuadable, voters under 40 were 8 points more likely to support a Democrat compared to those over 40.

Share rating at least one Democratic message above the Republican one

RURAL / SMALL-TOWN GROUP	SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC OVER REPUBLICAN MESSAGE
College graduate	49%
No college degree	39%
Under 40	47%
40 or older	39%

Kitchen Table messages lead here as elsewhere, though among rural voters as a whole, the Fair Share (colloquial) message is the top performer, and the two versions of American Way are effectively tied among rural voters, 35.4% for the plain version against 35.1% for the more confrontational one, so turning up the heat carries against corporations and billionaires has no effect among rural voters. Among rural Trump voters specifically, the plain American Way is the single strongest Democratic message, the same pattern seen among Trump voters nationally.

Share rating each Democratic message above the Republican message they saw, among all rural voters and among rural 2024 Trump voters

DEMOCRATIC MESSAGE	ALL RURAL VOTERS	RURAL TRUMP VOTERS
Fair share (colloquial)	38.2%	10.7%
Fair share	35.8%	7.7%
Broken Deal	35.4%	9.1%
American Way	35.1%	12.2%
RCN (no race)	35.1%	9.2%
American Way (confrontational)	35.1%	11.0%
Immigrant Solidarity	34.6%	9.3%
Unity	31.6%	4.2%

DEMOCRATIC MESSAGE	ALL RURAL VOTERS	RURAL TRUMP VOTERS
Dignity-of-work	31.2%	9.4%
RCN (race-light)	29.3%	7.6%
Fighting Oligarchy	27.9%	10.9%
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	27.3%	6.8%
RCN (race-heavy)	25.2%	5.7%

The Same Order Across Almost All Groups

When we step back from any single group we can see how *little* the rankings move between them. American Way ranks first in nearly every subgroup: independents, undecided, working-class, professional, rural, non-college, college, non-white, and Black voters alike. Only a few audiences crown a different winner: Democrats put the Fair Share message first, though only a hair ahead of the two American Way versions; Latino respondents put Dignity-of-work first; and Republicans and Trump waverers put the GOP immigration message first, i.e., they would back that Republican over any of the Democrats.

Essentially, all of the big cross-group differences come from just two sources. First, the Republican/Trump bloc looks quite a bit different than the overall results: The two Republican opposition messages are near the bottom of the field overall (ranks 10 and 13), but leap into the top three among Republicans and Trump waverers.. Across the Democratic-leaning and swing electorate the order barely moves, with independent, working-class, and non-white voters tracking the overall ranking closely. Second, whole groups mostly shift in level, not order: Rural and Trump-leaning voters rate nearly every message well below the national average (on the order of 15 points).

Each cell is the message's rank (1 = strongest) within that group, shaded green (top of the field) to red (bottom). Read across a row: most messages barely change color, which is the point. The rows that shift sharply are the exceptions discussed next.

Message rank within each group (1 = strongest)

	All	Dem	Ind	Rep	Trump wav.	Work. class	Mid/upper	Rural	Non-white	Black	Hisp.
American Way	1	3	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	4
Fair share (colloq.)	2	4	3	5	4	3	2	5	3	3	2
Fair share	3	1	2	6	9	2	3	4	2	2	5
American Way (confr.)	4	2	6	7	5	4	6	6	4	6	6
Broken Deal	5	7	7	4	7	5	5	2	7	10	8
Dignity-of-work	6	6	4	8	8	6	4	9	6	4	1
Immigrant Solidarity	7	5	5	10	6	7	7	8	5	5	3
Unity	8	12	9	9	11	8	9	10	8	7	7
Fighting Oligarchy	9	10	8	11	10	12	8	11	13	12	13
GOP (govt waste)	10	14	12	2	3	11	12	3	14	15	14
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	11	9	10	12	14	13	10	13	9	8	10
RCN (race-light)	12	11	11	13	12	10	11	14	10	9	12
GOP (immigration)	13	15	14	1	1	9	15	7	15	14	15
RCN (no race)	14	8	13	14	13	14	13	12	11	13	9
RCN (race-heavy)	15	13	15	15	15	15	14	15	12	11	11

The Exceptions: A Few Messages That Swing Hard with One Audience

Beyond those two broad patterns, the following individual messages move more than a few positions with certain sub-groups: Broken Deal slips with Black voters (from 5th to 10th place); Race-Class narratives rise up toward the middle with the Democratic base and, especially, with Latino voters. Latino voters are, in fact, the single most distinctive audience, also lifting Immigrant Solidarity and (as noted above) crowning Dignity-of-work.

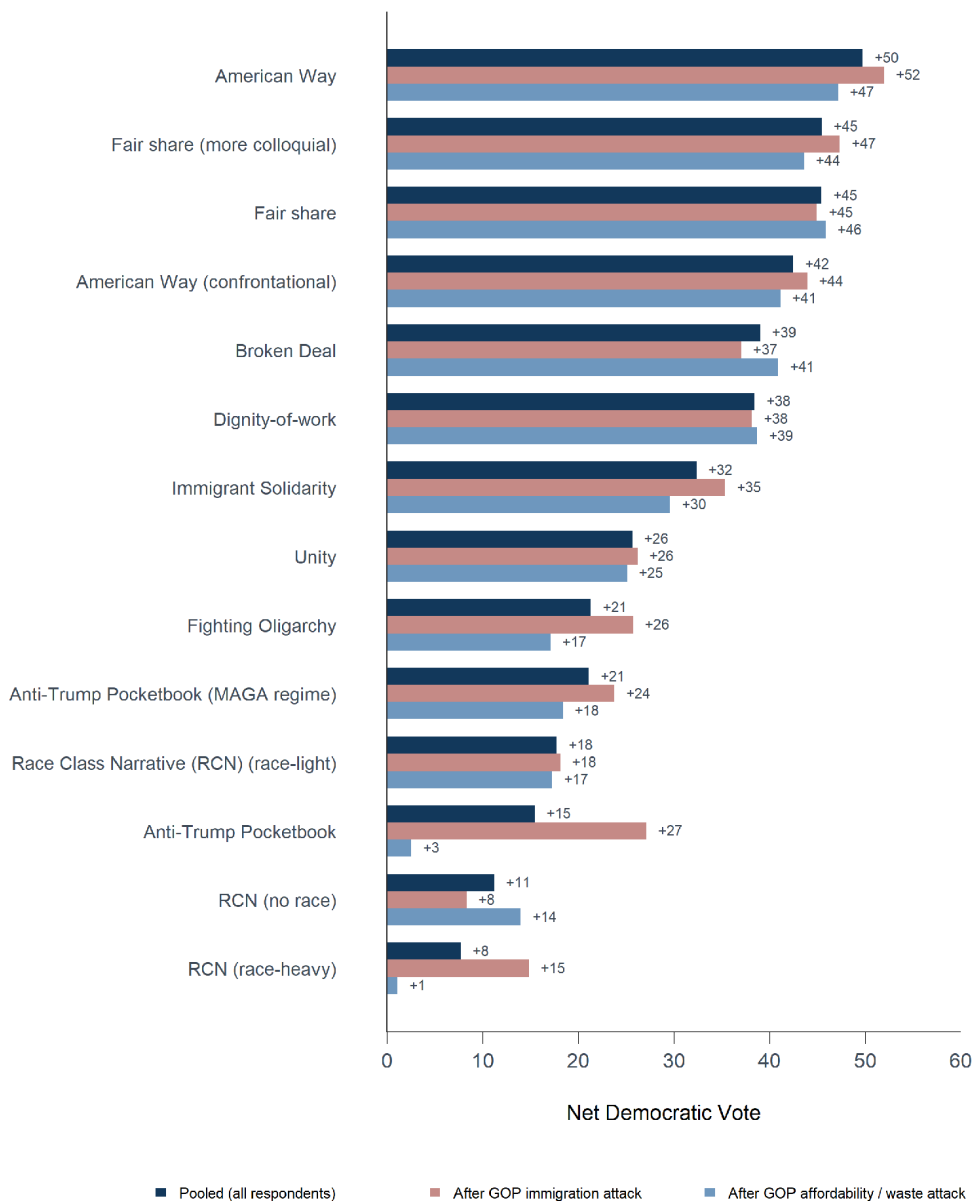
RESULTS ACROSS THE REPUBLICAN OPPOSITION MESSAGES

Every respondent was primed with one of two Republican attacks, one on affordability and government waste, the other on immigration, before rating any of the Democratic messages. Because each person saw only one attack, this is a between-respondents comparison by design, and it lets us ask two questions: Do the study's results hold up regardless of which attack a voter saw first? Do any Democratic messages play differently depending on the attack they have to answer?

How each message lands overall, and by which Republican attack the voter saw first. Net would-vote with 95% confidence intervals.

How each message lands, by which Republican attack came first

Net Democratic Vote. Each respondent rated one Republican message, then three Democratic messages.



For The Economic Messages That Anchor the Study, the Opposition Prime Barely Matters

American Way scores +47 after the GOP affordability attack and +52 after the GOP immigration attack; the Fair share and American Way (confrontational) messages move by

two or three points at most, well within the margin of error, and the overall ranking is essentially unchanged whichever attack comes first. Pooled across the six economic messages, the shift is +1.3 points (not significant). In short, the success of concrete Kitchen Table populism is not an artifact of the Republican attack it was tested against.

A Few Messages Do Respond to the GOP Immigration Attack, and They Are the Ones Built Around a Fight

The largest and most reliable shift is the anti-Trump pocketbook message, which jumps from +3 after the opposition affordability message to +27 after the opposition immigration message, a swing of roughly 24 points. Fighting Oligarchy (+17 to +26) and the race-heavy Race-Class message (+1 to +15) move in a similar direction. The common thread? A harsh GOP immigration message gives the confrontational, anti-Trump and anti-scapegoating messages something to push back against, while a milder GOP affordability attack does not; the Kitchen Table messages, already strong, are neither boosted nor undermined by the opposition frame.

The sharpest split across Republican primes is among the Race-Class Narrative (RCN) messages, where the versions move in different directions after the Republican immigration prime, splitting the field into three groups:

MESSAGE FAMILY	AFTER AFFORDABILITY ATTACK	AFTER IMMIGRATION ATTACK	DIFFERENCE
Class-only economic (6 messages)	+42.8	+44.1	+1.3 (n.s.)
Race-class, names race (RCN race-light + race-heavy)	+9.0	+16.5	+7.6
Race-class, race stripped out (RCN no-race)	+14.0	+8.3	-5.7 (n.s.)

After the immigration dog-whistle prime, the race-heavy RCN variant jumps (+13.8) compared to no prime while the no-race version drops (-5.7) compared to no prime; the race-versus-no-race difference is +13.3 points. In short, when the Republican opponent tries to scapegoat a group based on race or ethnicity, a message that names racial scapegoating gains moderate traction, reading as a direct rebuttal, while stripping race out leaves it flat. But that said, all of the RCN messages still underperform the Kitchen Table messages even when we look only at respondents who received the dog-whistle prime. The weakest Kitchen Table message (+44.0) still beats the strongest RCN message (+18.1) by 26 points among the voters who were primed with the dog-whistle opposition message.

ATTACKING TRUMP, OR “FIGHTING OLIGARCHY,” ADDS LITTLE

Two of the loudest appeals on the left ask voters to see the economy through a democracy-under-threat lens, one by making Trump the villain, the other by making the billionaire class the villain. To give the anti-Trump case its best shot, we fielded [Williams and Abbott's own top-performing anti-Trump message](#), the one that ties his rule-breaking directly to pocketbook pain.⁶ Even this “steelman” version did no better than the divide-and-conquer messages, and it went net-negative with exactly the voters a campaign must convert: Trump waverers, undecided likely-2026 voters, 2024 Trump voters, and Republicans.

A Variant Within the Anti-Trump Message: “Trump” Vs. “The Fascist MAGA Regime”

We fielded the anti-Trump message in two randomly assigned, word-for-word-identical halves that differed only in one clause (the results throughout the report for the Anti-Trump message reflect pooled estimates across these two variants): “Trump is cutting Medicaid...” in one version, “The fascist MAGA regime is cutting Medicaid...” in the other, to test whether attacking the *regime* rather than the *man* lands differently. It did not, at least not reliably: overall the “fascist MAGA regime” version scored +21 net would-vote versus +15 for the “Trump” version, a +6 gap well inside the margin of error (± 11). There is a directional hint that the “regime” framing does better with working-class voters, but it is only marginal ($p = 0.06$).

The Sanders/AOC-inspired “fighting oligarchy” message, which ties economic elites to the erosion of democracy, tells the same story with a different villain. In absolute terms, it is not weak (it stays positive with the base and the middle) but, measured against the Kitchen Table messages, it trails everywhere: by about 15 points behind American Way, even among Democrats, and by 20 to 40 points behind American Way among persuadable, working-class, and rural respondents. The through-line is the coalition math. Yoking the economy to a democracy-in-peril frame, whether the peril is Trump or oligarchy, rallies the voters who already share the speaker’s alarm and loses the rest of the electorate.

⁶ Joan C. Williams and Jared Abbott, *The Left’s Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divide Between Working-Class and College-Educated Voters, and How to Bridge It* (Equality Action Center, 2026).

A MORE EFFICIENT MEASURE: THE 0-100 PREDICTED-VOTE SCORE

Throughout this report we have led with net would-vote, the share “likely” to vote for the candidate minus the share “unlikely,” because it is easy to read. But it discards information, collapsing a five-point rating into three buckets. A more efficient summary uses the whole scale: we rescale each 1–5 vote-likelihood rating to run from 0 (certain not to vote for the candidate) to 100 (certain to) and take the weighted mean. This is the metric behind the statistical tiers discussed earlier, and because it uses the full scale its confidence intervals are roughly half as wide as the net-vote intervals.

The point of showing it here is reassurance: It tells exactly the same story. Ranked on the 0–100 score, the field falls in the same order as net would-vote, simply compressed onto a 50–70 band.

Mean 5-point vote-likelihood rescaled to 0–100 (higher = more likely to vote for that candidate), pooled across all respondents and weighted. Confidence intervals are about +/-2 for the Democratic messages. The two Republican opposition messages (italicized) are shown for a common yardstick.

MESSAGE	PREDICTED VOTE SCORE (0-100)	NET DEM VOTESHARE
Fair share	68	+45
Fair share (more colloquial)	68	+45
American Way (confrontational)	66	+42
Dignity-of-work	65	+38
Broken Deal	64	+39
Immigrant Solidarity	63	+32
Unity	59	+26
Fighting Oligarchy	58	+21
Anti-Trump Pocketbook	56	+18
GOP (government waste)	56	+20
Race Class Narrative (RCN) (race-light)	56	+18
GOP (immigration)	54	+13

MESSAGE	PREDICTED VOTE SCORE (0-100)	NET DEM VOTESHARE
RCN (no race)	53	+11
RCN (race-heavy)	52	+8

The order is identical to the net-vote ranking: American Way on top, other Kitchen Table messages just behind, and the Race-Class Narrative messages at the bottom, with the top four messages statistically indistinguishable from one another while pulling clearly away from the divide-and-conquer, and anti-Trump styles below. Nothing in the report's central findings depends on which metric we use.

TWO TOPICS WE DELIBERATELY DID NOT TEST THAT ARE COMMON AMONG DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES

Anti-Corruption As Its Own Message

While anti-corruption played an important role in the most effective messages we tested, we did not field a stand-alone anti-corruption message. Also, note that most of the messages we *did* test out-performed the Republican anti-corruption opposition message and were not undermined by it, and that an anti-corruption promise is the single most powerful ingredient inside the winners from our phase one sentence-level messaging experiment (see pp. 35-47 below). Check out [GBAO's messaging guidance](#) for additional ideas.

Corruption is a growing concern for voters across the political spectrum. A [May 2026 Navigator poll](#) finds corruption is voters' number two issue, but that they trust the GOP more on it, which is why *how* Democrats frame it matters.

Hot Potatoes

We did not test messages on Israel/Gaza, ICE, climate change, or transgender rights. As these issues hold center stage for parts of the progressive left, it would be prudent to compare the resonance of such messages against economic-populist themes directly. We won't hazard a prediction, only note that most of the country does not resemble Democratic primary voters and refer readers to [The Left's Coalition in Crisis](#) and accompanying [Class Gaps Poll](#).

RESULTS OF SENTENCE-LEVEL MESSAGING EXPERIMENT (PRELIMINARY SURVEY, APRIL 2026)

As described above (“What we tested”), we used the results of the Sentence-Level messaging experiment to generate two best-in-class messages that we included among the thirteen messages outlined at the beginning of this report (the *Broken Deal* and *Dignity of Work* messages). In addition, the Phase 1 test also generated a series of interesting findings, which we describe below.

Details of the Sentence-Level Messaging Experiment

- **Survey Sample:** In April 2026, we conducted a large survey-experiment (fielded by CINT) of over 9,000 respondents, weighted by age, gender, race, region, and education to match the U.S. adult population.
- **What respondents saw:** Each respondent read and rated three made-up campaign statements. No partisanship was mentioned: each statement was presented simply as coming from “a candidate for U.S. Congress,” with no party attached. So the ratings reflect the words themselves, not a party cue (This is the opposite of the main survey described above, where the candidate’s party was disclosed).
- **How messages were constructed:** Every statement was assembled from four interchangeable parts, a problem, a cause (who’s to blame), a solution, and an emotional closer, drawn from a library of 66 interchangeable sentences (15 problems, 22 causes, 15 solutions, 14 closers), plus 12 ways to name the victim (which workers) and 11 ways to name the villain (how the elite is described). Three style variants (rigged vs. broken, clean vs. profane, an AI line on vs. off) were tested in separate head-to-head experiments.
- **What we measured:** How favorable each respondent found each statement, on a 5-point scale from very unfavorable to very favorable.

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")

WHAT FELL FLAT	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE	DID WORSE THAN...
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-market 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"

AUDIENCE	WHAT WORKED	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE	DID WORSE THAN...
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")

SENTENCE-BY-SENTENCE SUPPORT

The tables below list all sixty-six tested sentences from most to least favorable overall, broken out by respondent party and by place and education. The numbers are the weighted share of respondents rating each statement *favorable* or *very favorable* (4–5 on the 5-point scale). Because these are single components rated in context, and a message uses one from each part, read the ranking as a rough guide rather than a menu.

Every Tested Sentence, By Party

All sixty-six tested sentences, sorted from most to least favorable overall (weighted % favorable). The *Part* column shows each line's role, since a message uses one from each part, so read the ranking as a rough guide rather than a menu.

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Problem	Young families can't afford a new home, prices keep rising, and working people can't get ahead. Meanwhile, Wall Street and Silicon Valley get richer and richer.	66	78	59	63
Solution	That's why I will never take a dime from corporate donors or PACs. I want to work for the people, not the wealthy few.	66	76	59	62
Cause (political)	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.	66	73	57	67

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Problem	So many working Americans are working hard but still can't make ends meet. Grocery prices alone have gone up 28% in the past 5 years.	66	72	59	67
Cause (economic)	If worker pay had kept up with CEO pay since 1978, the average worker today would be earning \$381 an hour.	65	77	58	62
Problem	We've got the people working full-time who still can't pay for things they need to survive like housing, health care and food.	65	75	57	62
Cause (political)	Miners, farmers, truck drivers, nurses, home health aides, teachers...These are the people who made this country great, and we're selling them down the river.	65	75	57	62
Problem	We get told our whole lives that there's this deal: You work hard. They pay you enough to raise a family on. But they're not holding up their end of the deal anymore.	65	73	58	64
Cause (economic)	We've got an economy that's so upside down that, when we go to the grocery store, somehow the healthy food grown by hardworking farmers costs more than the packaged junk that's making us sick.	64	78	55	60
Problem	It's just plain wrong that hardworking families are struggling to keep up while big corporations get massive tax breaks and then turn around and lay off American workers.	64	76	56	59
Problem	So many the people work so hard but are barely scraping by.	64	75	56	61
Problem	Working families are getting squeezed with low pay and high prices.	64	75	56	63
Closer	We need to stand up to big corporations and the politicians who serve them.	64	75	58	60
Cause (economic)	If workers today made the equivalent of what they made in the 1950s, they'd be earning \$381 an hour.	64	74	53	66
Closer	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.	64	74	54	66
Closer	I taught my kids that hard work pays off. I want them to grow up in a world where that's actually true.	64	74	54	64
Solution	The economy should work for working people and small businesses, not just those at the top.	64	73	60	58

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Cause (economic)	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.	64	72	54	68
Problem	When I see so many Americans barely scraping by, that's a sign to me of a rigged system.	63	76	56	58
Solution	Taxpayer dollars shouldn't be going to corporations that layoff thousands of American workers.	63	75	54	60
Solution	We need a government that works for all of us, not just the lucky few.	63	75	56	59
Solution	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.	63	74	54	61
Closer	What would truly make our country great again is to go back to being a nation of builders that pays working American workers what we truly owe them.	63	74	54	61
Cause (political)	Elected officials are focused on enriching themselves and their big donors. They're out of touch with the struggles everyone else faces.	63	73	56	62
Closer	I'm going to Washington to fight for these things, and I'm not going to take no for an answer.	63	73	56	62
Solution	That's why I support making sure people earn enough to afford the basics and put something aside for the future.	63	72	56	60
Closer	If you work hard and play by the rules, you shouldn't be having to stress out just trying to make ends meet.	63	71	55	63
Cause (economic)	American workers set the gold standard for excellence around the world. They're the people who light up our homes and put toys under the Christmas tree, and we repaid them by shipping their jobs to China and Mexico.	63	68	59	61
Cause (economic)	The rules of the economy are rigged by corporate CEOs who can afford to buy politicians.	62	77	53	56
Solution	Our tax dollars should be paying for schools and hospitals here at home, not for bombs and tanks in other countries.	62	77	57	50
Problem	The rich keep getting richer while working people are just trying to survive.	62	76	53	58
Cause (political)	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.	62	75	54	60

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Closer	We shouldn't have to survive off crumbs from the billionaires' table. We deserve our own damn table.	62	75	53	57
Closer	I'll work with anyone and fight against anyone to get stuff done. It doesn't matter which party they're in.	62	74	55	56
Cause (economic)	It's natural to admire billionaires for how successful they are, but they don't give a damn about us and our day-to-day problems—they got rich by not caring about us.	62	73	59	54
Cause (political)	Politicians are giving massive taxpayer-funded handouts to corporations that were already making record profits.	62	73	57	57
Cause (political)	Politicians are out of touch with folks who work for a living, and they think we're too stupid to notice.	62	72	54	59
Closer	I want to know whose future the rich and powerful are building, because it sure isn't ours.	62	72	58	55
Solution	We need to start making stuff here again.	62	71	55	63
Closer	I'll never stop fighting to crack down on corporate greed.	62	70	56	61
Cause (political)	They took away our health insurance subsidies to pay for tax breaks for the rich. Next, they'll be coming for our Medicare and our Social Security.	61	79	50	57
Cause (economic)	Big corporations and CEOs make rules that are good for them and don't give a hoot when working people pay the price for their bad decisions.	61	76	55	55
Solution	The economy should work for working people, not just those at the top.	61	75	51	59
Problem	It used to be that if you worked hard for a living, you could take care of your family, but not anymore.	61	74	50	60
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.	61	74	52	59
Solution	Our economy ought to have enough good opportunities so that everyone can find a way to support themselves and their families.	61	73	52	61
Cause (political)	For years, politicians in Washington have turned their backs on people who work for a living.	61	71	56	59
Solution	That's why I'm laser-focused on fighting to restore the American Dream.	61	71	53	61

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Closer	If you work hard, you should get to cash in on the American Dream, no exceptions.	61	71	53	61
Solution	Young families should be able to afford a decent home in a safe neighborhood without working 70 hours a week. This used to be the norm, but it's becoming a luxury.	61	70	54	61
Solution	That's why I'm laser-focused on making life affordable.	61	70	53	60
Problem	The wealthy few have more money than they can spend in ten lifetimes, but the bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth...that's nuts!	60	73	53	57
Cause (economic)	Billionaires make some nice things but, at the end of the day, they always do what's most profitable for them, and that means workers and consumers get squeezed.	60	73	52	55
Solution	We used to make things here in America, and those were well-paid union jobs. We need to get back to that.	60	72	52	58
Closer	I don't give a shit how well the stock market is doing if ordinary people still can't afford groceries.	60	71	56	52
Solution	That's why I'm going after the industries that are bleeding us dry—health insurers, housing speculators, credit card companies—the ones that profit off our hard times.	60	69	54	58
Cause (political)	Elites have betrayed working Americans, and you're right to be pissed off about it.	60	67	54	62
Cause (political)	They shipped our jobs to China and promised us cheap crap in return. But then that cheap stuff got expensive, and wages haven't kept up.	60	67	55	59
Cause (political)	Politicians are sitting by while a handful of corporations control everything and jack up prices. That's not a free market, that's a rigged system that's controlling our lives.	59	73	53	54
Problem	The system is rigged so the farmer and the miner and the waitress always come in last.	59	72	51	57
Closer	This isn't Left versus Right. This is the elites versus the rest of us.	59	72	51	56
Problem	The bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth...that's nuts!	59	71	51	56
Cause (political)	Politicians could make it illegal for corporations to rip us off but instead they're sitting on their hands.	59	69	51	60
Cause (economic)	The economy is in the toilet but somehow the rich keep getting richer. They're like vultures feeding off a rotten corpse.	58	68	53	53

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	DEM	IND	REP
Problem	We've got a winner-take-all system where the richest three people have as much wealth as the bottom half and they still want more.	58	67	53	55
Problem	The economy sucked under Biden and it sucks under Trump.	55	60	55	49

Every Tested Sentence, By Place and Education

The same sentences and order, broken out by rural/small-town vs. suburban/urban residence and by college degree.

Rural / Small-Town = R/ST

Urban / Suburban = U/S

College = C

Non-College = NC

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Problem	Young families can't afford a new home, prices keep rising, and working people can't get ahead. Meanwhile, Wall Street and Silicon Valley get richer and richer.	66	66	66	73	62
Solution	That's why I will never take a dime from corporate donors or PACs. I want to work for the people, not the wealthy few.	66	63	67	69	64
Cause (political)	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.	66	65	66	71	63
Problem	So many working Americans are working hard but still can't make ends meet. Grocery prices alone have gone up 28% in the past 5 years.	66	65	66	73	62
Cause (economic)	If worker pay had kept up with CEO pay since 1978, the average worker today would be earning \$381 an hour.	65	65	65	70	62
Problem	We've got the people working full-time who still can't pay for things they need to survive like housing, health care and food.	65	63	66	72	61

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Cause (political)	Miners, farmers, truck drivers, nurses, home health aides, teachers...These are the people who made this country great, and we're selling them down the river.	65	66	64	68	63
Problem	We get told our whole lives that there's this deal: You work hard. They pay you enough to raise a family on. But they're not holding up their end of the deal anymore.	65	64	66	72	62
Cause (economic)	We've got an economy that's so upside down that, when we go to the grocery store, somehow the healthy food grown by hardworking farmers costs more than the packaged junk that's making us sick.	64	65	63	69	61
Problem	It's just plain wrong that hardworking families are struggling to keep up while big corporations get massive tax breaks and then turn around and lay off American workers.	64	61	65	67	62
Problem	So many the people work so hard but are barely scraping by.	64	61	65	69	61
Problem	Working families are getting squeezed with low pay and high prices.	64	62	65	70	61
Closer	We need to stand up to big corporations and the politicians who serve them.	64	64	64	72	60
Cause (economic)	If workers today made the equivalent of what they made in the 1950s, they'd be earning \$381 an hour.	64	60	65	74	58
Closer	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.	64	61	66	69	62
Closer	I taught my kids that hard work pays off. I want them to grow up in a world where that's actually true.	64	62	65	70	61
Solution	The economy should work for working people and small businesses, not just those at the top.	64	63	64	69	60
Cause (economic)	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.	64	64	64	69	62
Problem	When I see so many Americans barely scraping by, that's a sign to me of a rigged system.	63	62	63	69	59
Solution	Taxpayer dollars shouldn't be going to corporations that layoff thousands of American workers.	63	63	62	68	60

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Solution	We need a government that works for all of us, not just the lucky few.	63	64	63	68	60
Solution	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.	63	63	63	71	59
Closer	What would truly make our country great again is to go back to being a nation of builders that pays working American workers what we truly owe them.	63	62	63	67	60
Cause (political)	Elected officials are focused on enriching themselves and their big donors. They're out of touch with the struggles everyone else faces.	63	61	64	69	60
Closer	I'm going to Washington to fight for these things, and I'm not going to take no for an answer.	63	61	65	69	61
Solution	That's why I support making sure people earn enough to afford the basics and put something aside for the future.	63	63	63	70	59
Closer	If you work hard and play by the rules, you shouldn't be having to stress out just trying to make ends meet.	63	60	64	71	58
Cause (economic)	American workers set the gold standard for excellence around the world. They're the people who light up our homes and put toys under the Christmas tree, and we repaid them by shipping their jobs to China and Mexico.	63	60	64	70	59
Cause (economic)	The rules of the economy are rigged by corporate CEOs who can afford to buy politicians.	62	59	63	67	59
Solution	Our tax dollars should be paying for schools and hospitals here at home, not for bombs and tanks in other countries.	62	58	64	68	58
Problem	The rich keep getting richer while working people are just trying to survive.	62	64	61	67	59
Cause (political)	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.	62	61	63	69	58
Closer	We shouldn't have to survive off crumbs from the billionaires' table. We deserve our own damn table.	62	61	62	66	59
Closer	I'll work with anyone and fight against anyone to get stuff done. It doesn't matter which party they're in.	62	65	60	69	58

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Cause (economic)	It's natural to admire billionaires for how successful they are, but they don't give a damn about us and our day-to-day problems—they got rich by not caring about us.	62	60	64	69	59
Cause (political)	Politicians are giving massive taxpayer-funded handouts to corporations that were already making record profits.	62	63	62	68	60
Cause (political)	Politicians are out of touch with folks who work for a living, and they think we're too stupid to notice.	62	59	63	69	58
Closer	I want to know whose future the rich and powerful are building, because it sure isn't ours.	62	59	63	65	60
Solution	We need to start making stuff here again.	62	59	65	66	60
Closer	I'll never stop fighting to crack down on corporate greed.	62	64	61	65	61
Cause (political)	They took away our health insurance subsidies to pay for tax breaks for the rich. Next, they'll be coming for our Medicare and our Social Security.	61	59	63	66	59
Cause (economic)	Big corporations and CEOs make rules that are good for them and don't give a hoot when working people pay the price for their bad decisions.	61	63	60	69	58
Solution	The economy should work for working people, not just those at the top.	61	60	61	64	59
Problem	It used to be that if you worked hard for a living, you could take care of your family, but not anymore.	61	58	63	67	58
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.	61	61	61	67	58
Solution	Our economy ought to have enough good opportunities so that everyone can find a way to support themselves and their families.	61	61	62	69	58
Cause (political)	For years, politicians in Washington have turned their backs on people who work for a living.	61	62	61	64	60
Solution	That's why I'm laser-focused on fighting to restore the American Dream.	61	59	63	67	58
Closer	If you work hard, you should get to cash in on the American Dream, no exceptions.	61	60	62	66	58

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Solution	Young families should be able to afford a decent home in a safe neighborhood without working 70 hours a week. This used to be the norm, but it's becoming a luxury.	61	60	62	67	58
Solution	That's why I'm laser-focused on making life affordable.	61	60	61	65	59
Problem	The wealthy few have more money than they can spend in ten lifetimes, but the bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth...that's nuts!	60	61	60	65	58
Cause (economic)	Billionaires make some nice things but, at the end of the day, they always do what's most profitable for them, and that means workers and consumers get squeezed.	60	58	60	66	56
Solution	We used to make things here in America, and those were well-paid union jobs. We need to get back to that.	60	61	60	66	58
Closer	I don't give a shit how well the stock market is doing if ordinary people still can't afford groceries.	60	57	61	62	58
Solution	That's why I'm going after the industries that are bleeding us dry—health insurers, housing speculators, credit card companies—the ones that profit off our hard times.	60	59	61	63	59
Cause (political)	Elites have betrayed working Americans, and you're right to be pissed off about it.	60	61	60	63	59
Cause (political)	They shipped our jobs to China and promised us cheap crap in return. But then that cheap stuff got expensive, and wages haven't kept up.	60	59	61	60	60
Cause (political)	Politicians are sitting by while a handful of corporations control everything and jack up prices. That's not a free market, that's a rigged system that's controlling our lives.	59	59	59	65	56
Problem	The system is rigged so the farmer and the miner and the waitress always come in last.	59	59	60	61	58
Closer	This isn't Left versus Right. This is the elites versus the rest of us.	59	59	60	66	56
Problem	The bottom half have only 2.5% of the wealth...that's nuts!	59	60	59	63	58
Cause (political)	Politicians could make it illegal for corporations to rip us off but instead they're sitting on their hands.	59	56	61	63	58

PART	STATEMENT	ALL	R/ST	U/S	C	NC
Cause (economic)	The economy is in the toilet but somehow the rich keep getting richer. They're like vultures feeding off a rotten corpse.	58	57	59	61	56
Problem	We've got a winner-take-all system where the richest three people have as much wealth as the bottom half and they still want more.	58	55	60	62	56
Problem	The economy sucked under Biden and it sucks under Trump.	55	55	55	59	53

CONCLUSION: A CHECKLIST FOR CANDIDATES

Do

- ✓ **Unite people around a shared, kitchen-table vision.** Costs, jobs, and corruption cut across race and background, so an appeal to what working people have in common reaches further than one built on dividing lines.
- ✓ **Lead with concrete costs** people feel this month: rent, groceries, health care, not abstractions like “the economy” or “fair share to fund programs.” Kitchen-table messages were the top cluster in our primary messaging survey.
- ✓ **Call out the corruption and promise to fix it.** Name the rigged system and the well-connected who game the rules, and pledge to crack down on them. This was key for building cross-partisan support: adding it lifted the kitchen-table message from roughly even to +19 with Republicans.
- ✓ **Frame messaging around hard work** and the promise that effort should be enough to raise a family. The hard-work “American Way” message topped the field.
- ✓ **Name real people and real numbers relevant to working people.** Specific jobs (miners, nurses, teachers) and a figure people can picture (the \$381-an-hour pay gap, groceries up 28%) beat abstract wealth-share statistics like “the bottom half own 2.5%.”

Don't

- ✗ **Don't escalate from corruption to all-out class war.** Calling out the corruption works across the board, but going further, blaming economic elites as a class or urging voters to “take them on,” turns off swing voters for little gain with the base: confrontational American Way fell to -6 with Republicans and Fighting Oligarchy to -28.
- ✗ **Don't build your message on divide-and-conquer.** The “they divide us” narratives were the weakest performers in the full survey, with the race-class versions dead last, weak even with the non-white and young voters they target. The lone exception, Immigrant Solidarity, worked by leading with shared economic interest rather than foregrounding the scapegoating.
- ✗ **Don't make Trump the main story.** The anti-Trump message added little and dramatically underperformed Kitchen Table populism among independents, swing voters, and infrequent voters.
- ✗ **Avoid overly dramatic anti-rich imagery.** Lines like “vultures” or “crumbs from the billionaires' table” please Democrats but turn Republicans off.
- ✗ **Cut the swearing.** Clean wording beat profanity with Democrats, independents, and Republicans alike.

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

The Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP) is a research organization dedicated to understanding how progressives and Democrats can rebuild durable support among working-class voters. It pairs original survey and messaging research with practical guidance for candidates, campaigns, and organizers. Follow us on Substack [here](#).

The [Rural Urban Bridge Initiative \(RUBI\)](#) creates political, economic and communications strategies that build bridges and serve the common interests of working and middle class Americans across geographies.

