DEFINE
AMERICAN

HARMONY LABS

Part 2:
Strategies for Reaching the Middle

MOVE THEM OR LOSE THEM

Findings from a 2023-2024 research partnership between Define American and Harmony Labs to understand the patterns of people who are moderate and open to change on issues concerning immigrants and immigration policy.

Knowing the Audience

Overview

Define American sought to better understand people in the U.S. who are moderate on immigration and have the potential for pro-immigrant attitudes and actions. We partnered with research nonprofit Harmony Labs to study one year of media consumption data to analyze how this "Moveable Middle" engaged with media in their daily lives and to identify potential opportunities for future intervention.

In **Part 1** of the research series, we analyzed insights across news, TV, film, and social media. The findings suggest that immigrant stories resonate with the four Moveable Middle audiences but they respond better to narratives emphasizing everyday interpersonal connections, order, or achievement, rather than explicit immigration policy or news.

The Audiences

Taking Responsibility

This audience responds to stories that emphasize interpersonal drama, family, and fairness in the way people are treated. Media with light-hearted, relatable concepts—like The Kelly Clarkson Show—can be leveraged to introduce immigrant characters in everyday roles that feel familiar and approachable.

Following The Plan

With a strong interest in safety, order, and established roles, this audience prefers media featuring law enforcement, heroes, and relatable, supportive storylines. Stories with immigrants as protectors or valuable contributors to community safety work well, as seen in shows like Law and Order.

Doing My Own Thing

With a preference for autonomy and rebellion, this audience connects with stories of self-determination and individuality. Content highlighting immigrant resilience and independence, where immigrants are portrayed as forging new paths–like in Shark Tank–appeals to this audience.

Getting It Done

Achievement-oriented, this audience appreciates action-driven, gritty narratives that showcase personal growth and family loyalty. Depicting immigrants in Do It Yourself (DIY) storylines, with agency and resilience, aligns well with their values.

The Audiences

	Taking Responsibility	Following The Plan	Doing My Own Thing	Getting It Done
Values	Equity, Adventure	Command, Order, Helping	Adventure, Achievement, Independent	Command, Order, Achievement
Characters	Introspective, Realistic, Flawed	Heroic, Protective, Older Women	Eccentric, Unconventional Fun	Protective, Male, Loyal, Leaders
Setting, Tone, Texture	Neighborly, Lighthearted, Dramatic	Gritty Settings (bad) vs Serene Suburbs (good), Heartwarming	Surreal, Futuristic, Satirical, Offbeat	Suspenseful, Gritty, Action-Packed
Conflict and Resolution	Personal Dilemmas, Family-Centric	Good vs Evil, Maintaining Order	Challenging Norms and Conformity, Favoring Rebellion	Dangerous Missions, Redemption and Achievement Through Making Things
Distinctive Streaming Media	Call Me Kat, Workin' Moms, Bridgerton, The Kelly Clarkson Show, The View, Snowfall, Insecure	Chicago Med, Law and Order: SVU, Grace and Frankie, Mrs. Harris Goes to Pairs, Heartland	The Kardashians, Rick and Morty, Grown Ups, Minions: The Rise of Gru, Avengers: Infinity War, Euphoria	Top Gun: Maverick, Trailer Park Boys, Shotgun Wedding, Tex Mex Motors, FUBAR, Mayor of Kingstown
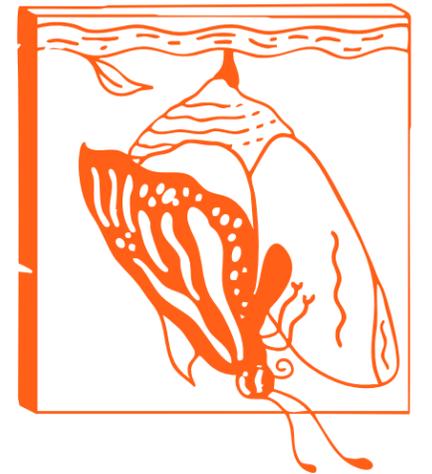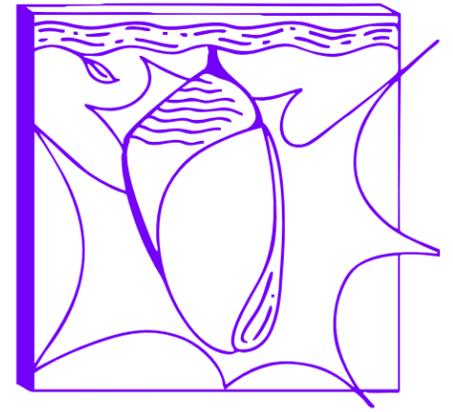
This report provides a roadmap for crafting stories across mediums that align with the Moveable Middle's values, fostering meaningful engagement and promoting deeper support of immigrant communities.

Executive Summary

Key Findings

Immigrant Storytellers as Messengers

Stories told by immigrants themselves resonate deeply, creating relatable and credible narratives that break down stereotypes and build emotional resonance.

Leveraging Allies

Allies can effectively tell immigrant stories by amplifying authentic immigrant voices and aligning storylines with their audience's values. It is essential to avoid portrayals that reduce immigrants to passive characters in an ally's story.

Culture-First Stories

Narratives centered on shared human experiences, such as food, sports, or comedy, are more effective than overtly political or policy-driven content. These stories foster a sense of collective identity without triggering defensiveness.

Using a Cast of Characters

A diverse cast of characters helps audiences to see multiple perspectives and avoid monolithic portrayals of immigrants. This approach highlights both individual and collective contributions while dismantling stereotypes like the "Good Immigrant" trope.

Balancing Explicit and Implicit Messaging

Explicit mentions of immigration status move audience more than implicit references. However, subtly integrating immigrant experiences into broader storylines resonates well with these audiences, who are hesitant about overt political content.

Positive Endings for Undocumented Stories

Narratives that mention undocumented status are most effective when they conclude positively, fostering empathy and reducing defensiveness. By contrast, neutral or uncertain endings risk reinforcing biases or fostering indifference, potentially alienating the audience.

How Moveable Are They?

A highly moveable audience across all treatment conditions, **Taking Responsibility** seems ready to move toward pro-immigrant perspectives.

Following The Plan is ready to imagine better futures for immigrants if their own lives benefit, too.

Doing My Own Thing knows the problem exists, but has a hard time being told what to do (like moving toward a positive future).

Getting It Done sees a problem and is ready to take action and make a change for the better, even for the undocumened immigrants.

Research Questions

- Who is the Moveable Middle?

- How do immigrants and immigration show up in the audience's media ecosystems, and what does it say about audiences' perceptions of immigrants?

- How might this exposure affect the audience's beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding immigrants and immigration policy?

- What media content ecosystems around immigrants activate the audience?

Scripted TV.
Film.
Social Media.
Online/TV News.

Target Narrative

Define American and Harmony Labs, with guidance from an external advisory board, developed a target narrative focused on the Moveable Middle. Centered on cultural rather than political indicators, this narrative aligns with Define American's belief that cultural change drives policy change. The following statements outline the three core areas used to assess audience shifts toward or away from pro-immigrant-belonging ideologies.

Right now

Immigrants do not fully belong and are not able to lead the lives they choose in the United States.

To change that

We should make certain that in the United States every immigrant fully belongs and can choose their own path.

When these changes happen

Everyone in the United States will feel a deep sense of belonging and benefit from a fuller, richer society.

Methods

Define American partnered with Harmony Labs to analyze how moveable audiences engage with media featuring immigrants and immigration to better understand their values and identify potential media-based opportunities for intervention.

Harmony Labs used a values-based methodology, focusing on core human values rather than political or demographic factors, to map and engage audiences moderate on immigration who are significant media consumers. This approach began with a survey of 2650 participants to understand audience segments based on core human values rather than solely political or demographic lines. They segmented the audience into distinct categories, each with unique media consumption patterns and values. By using media engagement data across TV, film, digital, and social media platforms, Harmony Labs analyzed media engagement data across TV, film, digital, and social media platforms. This helped pinpoint where and how these audience segments interacted with immigration narratives, uncovering opportunities for culturally resonant storytelling.

The testing phase involved two rounds of media experiments to determine the narrative elements most effective for moving the middle audience toward a pro-immigrant stance. In the first round, Define American and Harmony Labs analyzed a broad spectrum of existing media featuring immigrant themes to identify what initially resonated with these segments. This collaborative, iterative approach helped us refine our understanding of story features that resonate across segments, providing a clear path for future media strategies aimed at fostering empathy and understanding for immigrants among Moveable Middle audiences.

For a deeper dive into the methodology behind Harmony Labs' research for the *Move Them or Lose Them* series, go to **DefineAmerican.com/research/Move-Them-Or-Lose-Them**
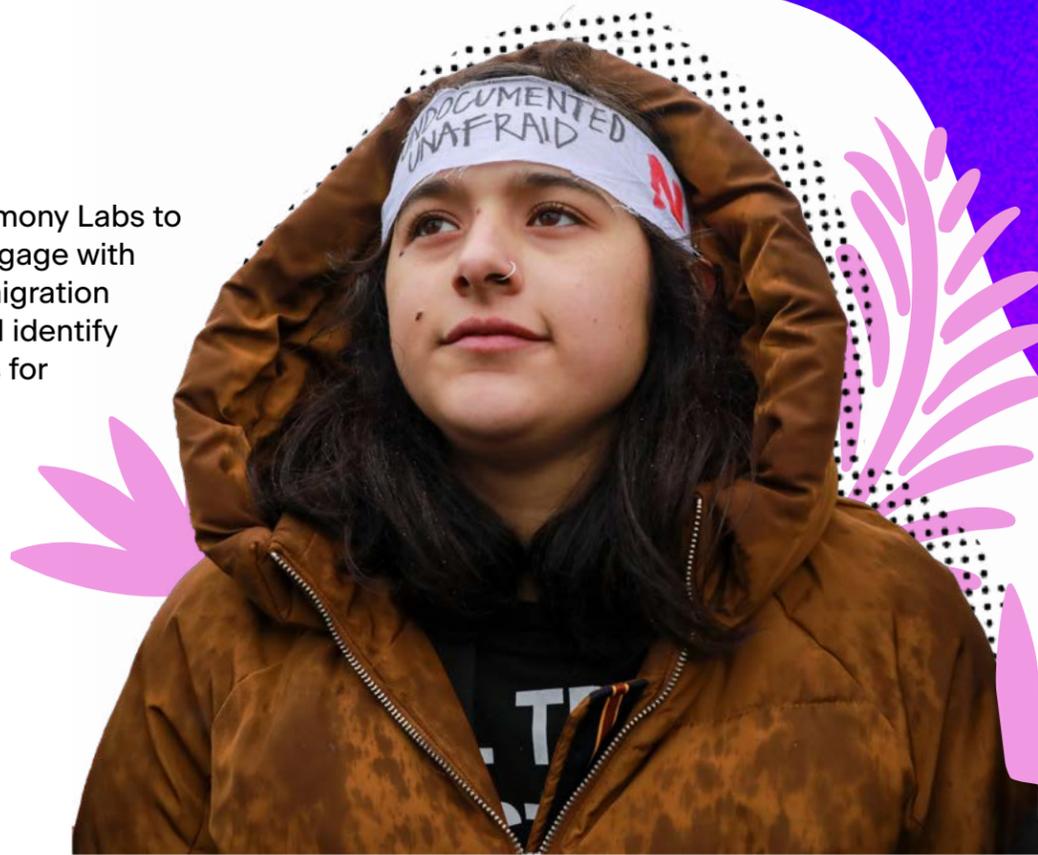
What moves all of the middle?

Five storytelling approaches that move all of the audiences toward pro-immigrant belonging
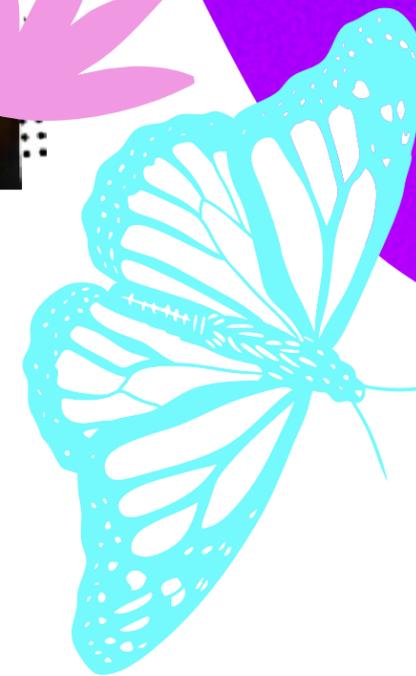
Immigrants telling a their own stories.

Immigrants telling their own stories are particularly impactful in shifting Moveable Middle audiences toward a pro-immigrant stance.

When immigrants share firsthand experiences, they create authentic and relatable narratives. These stories foster emotional connections, breaking down stereotypes and building empathy.

In Trevor Noah's comedy stand-up special Son of Patricia, he says, "I feel like there should be a rule in America. They should say, you can hate immigrants all you want. But if you do, you don't get to eat their food." Using no political labels like "Conservative" or "Progressive," he pokes fun at the idea of immigrant exclusion.

✦ **This video moves all of the Moveable Middle.**

Findings suggest that personal narratives resonate more effectively than those told by allies. The firsthand perspective of immigrants builds trust and credibility, making their stories more impactful.

Allies telling immigrant stories.

Allies' stories do shift the Moveable Middle, though not as significantly as immigrants telling their own stories. Allyship resonates best when the stories emphasize shared values and foster understanding. However, the lack of direct lived experience often limits their emotional impact.

To influence the Moveable Middle, allies' stories should reflect their audience's values and avoid portraying immigrants as passive recipients of help.

Allies can be effective when they amplify immigrant voices in ways that feel genuine and supportive. By using their platforms to share nuanced, authentic stories—such as highlighting immigrants' contributions to community or culture—they can foster understanding and empathy.

While talk shows are popular with Taking Responsibility, this clip from The Kelly Clarkson Show of a woman, who is a refugee, discussing her after-school program for Chicago-based kids was the only video that significantly moved Following the Plan toward pro-immigrant belonging. Clarkson, as an ally, responds positively and excitedly to the young woman's story, modeling inclusion and belonging to her audience.

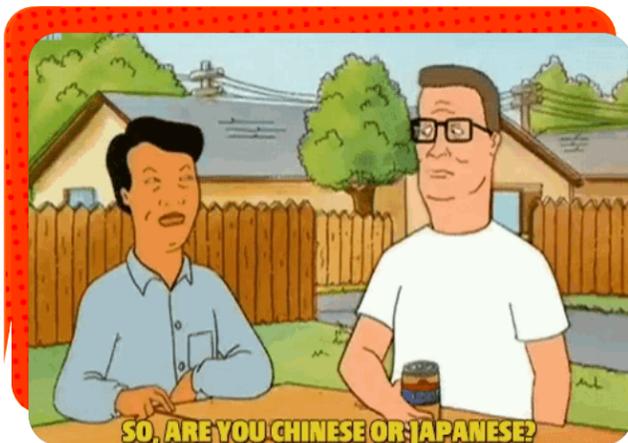✦ **This video significantly moves Following the Plan.**

Culture-first stories.

Culture-first stories—centered on everyday experiences, relationships, and personal growth instead of political or immigration issues—are especially effective in engaging the Moveable Middle. They respond to narratives focused on shared human experiences like food, sports, and comedy rather than policy debates. This approach aligns with the Moveable Middle's preference for content that reflects their personal values and familiar social dynamics. This approach subtly shifts perceptions and fosters empathy by portraying immigrant characters as integral to everyday life, making their stories relatable and accessible.

Culture-first stories foster a sense of shared identity and collective wellbeing without triggering defensiveness or ideological resistance.

This highlights the importance of weaving immigrant narratives into broader cultural contexts, making them accessible to audiences who might avoid politically charged content.

SO, ARE YOU CHINESE OR JAPANESE?

"Hank Hill: So are you Chinese or Japanese?" from King of the Hill only moved Getting It Done but light-hearted comedy moved all of the middle audiences.

✦ **This [video] significantly moves Getting It Done.**

"Going To COSTCO in AMERICA For The First Time Ever" from YouTuber Raphael Gomes only moved Taking Responsibility. For audiences that care about "we," cooking shows are popular. For audiences that care about "me," shows about trying foods are popular.

✦ **This [video] significantly moves Taking Responsibility.**

Casts of characters.

A cast of characters is popular across the Moveable Middle's media. A diverse cast presents multiple perspectives and backgrounds, making it easier for audiences to connect with and empathize with the characters.

Relatable characters help Moveable Middle audiences see themselves in the story, creating new ways of understanding immigrants and immigration issues.

Diverse casts also help to reflect the reality of varied immigrant experiences, dismantling monolithic stereotypes and presenting a more nuanced view of immigrant communities.

Themes of family, community responsibility, and personal resilience strongly resonate with Moveable Middle audiences. Showcasing a range of immigrant experiences avoids the "Good Immigrant" stereotype, idealized figures that are only "good" if they have no inherently human flaws. Casts of characters give space to portray immigrants as complex and multidimensional individuals amongst other complex characters.

Taking Responsibility
Bridgerton, Netflix

Following The Plan
Chicago Fire, NBC

Doing My Own Thing
Euphoria, HBO

Getting It Done
Top Gun: Maverick, Paramount Pictures

Can we lose the bootstraps narrative and still win the middle?

The American "bootstraps" narrative suggests that hard work and determination alone enable immigrants to achieve the American Dream.

This framing overlooks systemic racism and oppression, distorting the realities of the immigrant experience. It oversimplifies and erases the structural barriers many immigrants face. At the same time, it reinforces the "Good Immigrant" trope.

To understand how the bootstraps narrative resonates with Moveable Middle audiences, we tested which elements could foster positive influence without reinforcing stereotypes.

Our goal was to reframe immigrant stories in ways that encourage empathy and belonging, moving beyond the reductive bootstraps narrative.

Agency + Positivity

Stories of immigrants overcoming challenges and ending on a positive note effectively engage the Moveable Middle while avoiding bootstraps narrative pitfalls.

This approach reframes the narrative by emphasizing resilience and success. It avoids implying that immigrants must achieve extraordinary feats or conform to the "Good Immigrant" ideal to be valued.

Positive endings, such as feeling proud of one's family or achieving a meaningful goal like a high school graduation, resonate deeply with moveable audiences. These stories reflect the Moveable Middle's core values of achievement, family, and community, fostering emotional connections and understanding.

Importantly, this strategy moves beyond the bootstraps narrative by addressing systemic barriers immigrants face without erasing them or downplaying their significance. Celebrating immigrant achievements in humanizing ways shifts the focus from "earning" belonging to recognizing inherent worth and contributions. Stories that balance the portrayal of challenges with hope and success inspire audiences to see immigrants as integral members of society.

This approach dismantles stereotypes and builds support for immigrant inclusion while avoiding harmful tropes.

But does that really move them to support immigrant belonging?

Yes!

On the immigrant belonging scale, audiences showed a clear shift toward greater support when they clearly understood a character's status as an immigrant, underscoring the power of direct storytelling.

Audiences also responded to subtle or implicit references to immigration status. These references are particularly effective when centered on universal experiences and values that resonate with the Moveable Middle.

Explicitly referencing immigration themes may have a stronger effect when there is already a positive character portrayal and clear narrative arc.

Implicit references, meanwhile, are effective in broader, culture-first stories that integrate immigrant experiences naturally, without centering immigration as a defining theme.

Subtlety appeals to Moveable Middle audiences who may be wary of overtly political messages and/or less familiar with the character or narrative arc.

Even around undocumented immigration?

In 2018, Javier Juarez gave a viral speech at Brown University, sharing his journey of crossing the U.S. border with his father and eventually working as a custodian at the university. In his master's ceremony address, he expresses how he is graduating from the same university whose bathrooms he and his father once cleaned.

Javier granted Define American permission to use his video in our tests with Moveable Middle audiences. We edited his speech to end at two different points: one at a moment of uncertainty about his family's future, and another at the conclusion of his actual speech, where he expressed deep gratitude to his family.

Stories explicitly mentioning undocumented status are more effective with a positive ending, which helps audiences build connection without eliciting defensiveness.

A positive ending in these narratives creates a sense of hope and optimism that works to dismantle the stereotypes of undocumented people that dominate U.S. media.

Ending on a note of uncertainty led to backlash regarding undocumented immigrant belonging, while a positive ending resulted in audiences remaining neutral on the issue.

All stories we tested included elements of hard work and achievement but transcended the bootstraps narrative by emphasizing universal American values grounded in collectivism like family, education, and intergenerational progress. Success was framed not as extraordinary individual feats, but as the relatable journeys of individuals within the broader context of family and community stories.
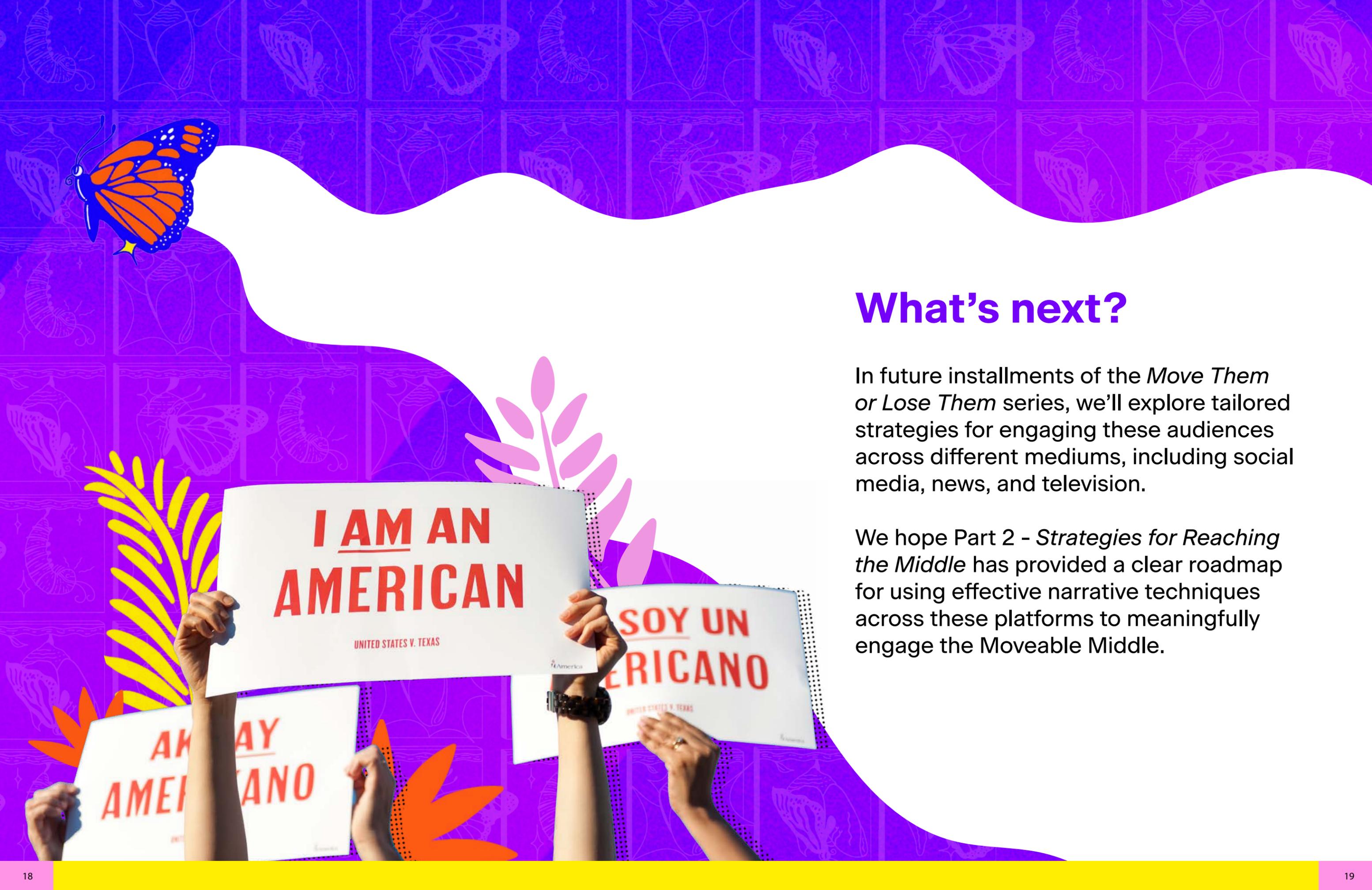
What's next?

In future installments of the *Move Them or Lose Them* series, we'll explore tailored strategies for engaging these audiences across different mediums, including social media, news, and television.

We hope Part 2 - *Strategies for Reaching the Middle* has provided a clear roadmap for using effective narrative techniques across these platforms to meaningfully engage the Moveable Middle.

DEFINE AMERICAN

About Define American

Define American is an award-winning media advocacy organization and go-to resource for storytelling on immigrant experiences across film, TV, theater, publishing, and digital media. Define American engages storytellers and equips them with research and resources to combat harmful narratives and tell nuanced, authentic immigrant stories. Founded in 2011 by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Tony and Emmy-nominated producer Jose Antonio Vargas, Define American continues to redefine the conversation around immigration and identity, fostering a greater sense of belonging for immigrants in the U.S.

HARMONY LABS

About Harmony Labs

Harmony Labs is a media research lab, using science, data, and creativity to research and reshape society's relationship with media. For more than a decade, their work has helped storytellers and strategist, decision makers, and dreamers, harness the immense power of media to shape a positive, pluralistic future.

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