

Commitment to Uphold Democracy: Strategy and Messaging Considerations from November 4 and Onward

Summary:

The 78-day post-election period, stretching from November 4, 2020 through to Inauguration Day (January 20, 2021), will likely be one of the most critical stretches of American history. Democracy itself is at stake.

Most elections do not threaten to shake the foundations of constitutional rule and our democratic system, but this year is different. Myriad ways in which post-election scenarios can go wrong have been documented by experts and numerous journalists. Refusal to accept the results, attempts to delegitimize election returns, efforts to halt the ballot counting process, the submission of competing slates of electors to Congress, election-related violence, and foreign interference that attempts to undermine confidence in the election process and exploit societal divisions are all possible factors that may afflict the post-election period and compound each other. While there are many possible threats to our democracy, a common thread among many scenarios are anticipated efforts by Donald Trump, and his enablers within his campaign, the government, and the media, to take whatever steps needed to stay in power.

We hope for the best in this period, but we must be ready for the worst. We will accept the results of the election, regardless of who the victor is. **But ultimately, this election is not about Trump or Biden. It's about us—and our constitutional right to choose who serves us in government, without intimidation, interference, or malfeasance. This year, Americans have turned out in record numbers to cast a ballot in good faith that their votes will be counted. Our officials owe it to us to act in good faith to count every vote. And we will not accept or comply with efforts to delegitimize the election, degrade the US Constitution, or foment election-related violence.**

To deny that such scenarios remain possible at this point would be negligent. Failure to plan for them would be reckless. Fortunately, there is a great deal that people are already doing nationwide to protect the vote and uphold our democracy. This jointly developed strategy and messaging plan seeks to build on these efforts. Planning for



contingencies from November 4, 2020 onward is challenging because of the range of possible circumstances that may emerge. Our goal in writing this is to help diverse groups, institutions, and individuals navigate the coming days, respond to rapidly developing circumstances, and take actions that uphold democracy and our Constitution so that the US emerges from this period stronger and more stable, with accountable government and clear rule of law.

The plan has three parts:

PART I: INTERPRETING WHEN RED LINES ARE CROSSED

All eligible votes must be counted, irregularities must be promptly investigated and adjudicated, legitimate results must be respected.

PART II: MOBILIZATION STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN THE POST-ELECTION PERIOD

Mass mobilization and nonviolent action may be appropriate to defend the integrity of the election.

PART III: MESSAGING IN THE POST-ELECTION PERIOD

Focus on what we are struggling for, changes to the national situation, the role of nonviolent action, targeting key institutions, and countering false narratives.

PART I: INTERPRETING WHEN RED LINES ARE CROSSED

For our democracy to work, there are at least three lines that must hold post-election:

THREE LINES THAT MUST HOLD POST-ELECTION:

- 1. All eligible votes must be counted, without interference or intimidation.**
- 2. Incidents of voter suppression, voter intimidation, fraud, or other election irregularities must be investigated impartially and promptly remedied.**
- 3. The legitimate election results must be respected, regardless of who wins. Preserving democracy is more important than any individual candidate.**

Sometimes identifying if these lines have been crossed is easy, for example, if a candidate declares victory early when there are still millions of uncounted ballots. Sometimes identifying a crossed line can be more challenging—for example, a lawsuit could be filed to examine legitimate discrepancies among ballots, or it could be filed to try to stall for time and run out the clock on the window for certifying election results. Therefore in some cases it may be necessary to look at a pattern of actions and statements to see growing evidence of an attempt to cross these lines. If such an attempt is evident, then an immediate, powerful, disciplined, and clear response is merited. Legal measures, statements and actions by local, state, and national political leaders are critical aspects of this. But by themselves, these efforts may be insufficient. Social, political, and economic pressure from everyday Americans within their communities, from businesses and corporate leaders, civil society groups, members of the news media, faith leaders, and others may also be necessary to ensure a peaceful, constitutional election and transition process.

To understand why institutional challenges as well as immediate and powerful public mobilization and business pressure will be needed if lines are crossed, it is important to understand the timeline and terrain of the post-election period that this country will soon face. Here are some key factors:

- 1. It may take several days, a week, or longer until we are certain of the election results.** This is due to the large volume of ballots cast this year by

mail, which will take days or weeks to count.

2. **Many analysts expect that mail-in ballots will trend towards Democrats.** If this is the case, the incomplete results reported on Election Day may be the highest point for President Trump, since mail-in ballots counted in the ensuing days would boost the vote proportion for Biden. This means that, assuming the presidential contest remains in doubt, it could benefit President Trump's electoral chances to:
 - a. Declare victory early, even though the final results are not at all clear.
 - b. Continue to cast doubt on the legitimacy of mail-in ballots (something he has already been doing for months).
 - c. Try to stop mail-in ballots that will trend towards Biden from being counted in the days after November 3.
 - d. Challenge ballots that have already been counted on technical grounds (such as signature discrepancies or missing privacy sleeves).
3. **With numerous legal challenges expected from the Trump campaign, the timeline for resolving disputes is highly compressed.** December 8, 2020 is the “safe harbor” deadline, which assures a state that its slate of electors will be accepted by Congress. Any state that fails to resolve any disputes and certify its vote count by December 8, 2020 risks having their election results discarded. Under these conditions, Trump and his allies would not need to win all of their legal challenges to mail-in ballots in order to be effective. Instead, they simply need to delay vote counting such that by December 8, 2020, many mail-in ballots remain uncounted. The Trump campaign can then put pressure on governors to certify the incomplete election results, or else the results could be discarded altogether if no certification is made by the December 8 deadline.
4. **Governors have until December 14, 2020 to send a “certificate of ascertainment” to Congress which declares which candidate won their state,** and which slate of electors will be casting their votes for that state. December 14, 2020 is also the day in which electors meet to cast their votes officially for president. A record of those votes is then sent to Congress.

However, in states that have split control of government—such as the key

swing states of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan and North Carolina—one possible scenario is that Democratic governors could recognize a Biden victory, while Republican legislatures could claim (even without evidence) that a Trump loss in those states was the result of a rigged election. Republican legislatures could then try to appoint their own alternative slate of electors. These alternative slates could also vote and send their own vote tallies for consideration to Congress. This is a low probability scenario, but it has happened before in US history.

5. **After December 14, 2020, the process would move largely to Congress.** If the election is disputed, the final decision will be made in Congress, because Congress decides which Electoral College votes to count and which ones to discard. The 117th Congress is sworn in on January 3, 2021, and on January 6, 2021 they count the electoral college votes at a joint session presided over by the current vice president. The Constitution gives Congress the power to decide if a slate of electors was legally or illegally appointed. In any effort to address disputes over Electoral College votes, politics and levels of public support and mobilization will likely play a key role in shaping how Congress and the Supreme Court interpret the Electoral Count Act and the [Twelfth Amendment](#).

There are two uncertain scenarios that follow.

First, in the event that [neither candidate has secured a 270 electoral majority](#) through the Electoral College by December 14, each state gets one vote for President, and that vote is decided by the House delegation for that state. In a party-line vote, right now, the GOP would get 26 votes for President in Congress, whereas the Democratic party would get 22. This could enable Congress to elect Trump even if Biden has more electoral votes or more popular votes than Trump. This scenario is possible if some state vote counts are delayed beyond the December 8 safe harbor deadline and therefore not submitted to Congress.

Second, if the vote totals of any alternate slates of electors were submitted to Congress, Congress has to decide which results to recognize for that state. There is no clear process for doing this. A law passed after the contested 1876 election called the Electoral Count Act is supposed to govern such disputes, but the law is untested, and there's no precedent to guide how it should be applied. The Supreme Court could become involved, although their ruling could be seen as highly political. The House and Senate could deadlock over

different views of which electors to recognize from various states. Ultimately, Congress decides, and if they can't decide, the Speaker of the House becomes the new President on Inauguration Day (January 20, 2021).

The above offers a number of critical possibilities between Election Day and Inauguration Day (these and other scenarios are addressed in more detail in [The Count: A practical guide to defending the Constitution in a contested 2020 election](#)). The fact that after the Electoral College votes there is a second, elite-led election for President within Congress, where democratic rules have traditionally held but which are not necessarily binding, creates further opportunities for election manipulation and cheating. There are additional factors that could compound the post-election landscape further—for example, the possibility of election-related violence, including threats and intimidation targeting election administrators by unlawful armed groups, the inability of social media outlets to stem the flow of false information, and possible foreign interference in the counting of ballots. There is the possibility that President Trump invokes the Insurrection Act. There is the possibility of a Trump-backed Justice Department launching investigations of political figures. There is the possibility that there will be coordinated and/or uncoordinated attempts to destroy ballots, impound ballots, or stop counting ballots, under the premise that any shift towards Democratic results in vote-by-mail results is suspicious.

What should be clear from the above process is that:

1. **It's possible for democracy and the will of the people to be subverted after November 3, 2020.**
2. **At any point in time in which democracy may be subverted, there will likely be an ongoing institutional process—in the courts, among election boards, in state legislatures, or in Congress.** This institutional process is part of the foundation of the electoral and democratic system. However, if abused it can also undermine the will of the people while providing a veneer of legitimacy. While there will be an argument that people should be patient and let institutions work by themselves, a different framing would center on vigilance and determination—we are not passively waiting and seeing, but actively ensuring every vote is counted and delivering our democracy.
3. **The first 35 days—between November 3, 2020 and December 8, 2020—are especially critical.** They will set the course of any contested election, and the ability to mobilize broad public support in favor of election integrity will influence political calculations made by state and local officials. If red lines

are crossed, being able to mobilize quickly, within days or even hours, may be important to preventing an orchestrated effort to subvert the election.

Therefore, based on President Trump's past actions, we see seven courses of action he could take to undermine the integrity of the election:

- **Declare himself the winner on election night and try to convince his supporters of a victory.**
- **Falsely declare the election fraudulent if he loses.**
- **Challenge ballots and the ballot-counting process through legal action in numerous states, largely based on technicalities** (rather than voter fraud, which is exceedingly rare).
- **Delay the tallying and certification of election results by initiating recounts in states where results were close** in order to prevent Biden from achieving an outright 270 electoral vote majority, and to further delegitimize the results.
- **Prevail upon GOP state legislatures (or governors) to submit a separate, fraudulent slate of electors to Congress.**
- **Attempt through various legal cases to move the election to Congress or to the Supreme Court**, where his party currently possesses electoral and judicial majorities.
- **Seek to provoke violence, delegitimize nonviolent civic action, and claim that he must deploy federalized law enforcement or nationalized national guard in an attempt to quell "civil disorder."**

Given the likely combination of potential formal, informal, and questionable activities in the post-election period, being able to state firmly that red lines have been crossed can in some cases be challenging. It may not always be evident from a single action (although in some cases, a single action will be clear enough by itself) and instead may only become clear when we observe a pattern of facts and behavior. It is therefore important to remain vigilant—to respect the need for peace and patience after November 3 while at the same time responding to attempts to subvert the election process—including through mass civic mobilization if needed.

PART II: HOLDING THE LINES

MOBILIZATION STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN THE POST-ELECTION PERIOD

At various points in US history popular nonviolent mobilization has been used alongside voting, the legal system, and legislation to hold the government accountable, advance democracy, and defend the rights granted to us by the US Constitution.

Nonviolent action works by raising awareness, challenging the status quo, holding the powerful to account, and highlighting the fierce urgency of now. When people shift their social, economic, and political behavior, they can quickly shift incentives for people in the power structure.

For example, a labor strike can cause divisions among a company's leadership, who then become conflicted about how to respond. As the strike denies profits to the company's leadership, that leadership is often forced into a bargaining position and may have to fully accept the strikers' demands. In many cases around the world, even police and military have refused to obey orders to try to repress popular movements who are expressing grievances that are widely seen as legitimate. Nonviolent action consistently makes repressive and unlawful orders costly for opponents, and increases the risk that such orders will backfire and lead to decreasing support for the perpetrators.

Nonviolent action can be used proactively to express support for institutions that are working (i.e. we support every vote being counted; we support federal workers committed to upholding the Constitution). It can also be used reactively (i.e. we oppose efforts to stop vote counting). This is an important distinction because it means that even if a red line has not yet been crossed, we can still show we are organized and unified by mobilizing tactics, such as the wearing of symbols or rallies, in support of institutions. Such proactive, supportive mobilizing may actually deter some officials from trying to cross red lines. **It is important to encourage and reward good behavior by thanking and even celebrating officials who decide to not cross red lines** even when we otherwise might disagree with their policies. Doing so may encourage others to follow suit.

However, if officials are not deterred and do cross red lines, either in their statements or conduct, it is important to make sure our response is rapid, clear, and powerful. The timeline for post-election resolution is tight. Therefore, whether an

official's misconduct or statement seems moderately or severely over the line, the response must be substantial enough to send a message that no such transgressions will be tolerated, and any and all transgressions will be met with organized nonviolent community mobilization.

Such mobilization can take many forms, depending on a variety of factors. It's also important to keep various risks in mind in any mobilization you do. First, polarization and inflammatory language are likely to continue in the post-election period. The vast majority of protests over the last year have been nonviolent, but incidents of political violence have occurred, including by unlawful armed or paramilitary groups. Language that promotes violence against protestors as a "defensive" action is particularly concerning in this context, and may be an indicator of higher risks for public protests in this period. In the ballot counting period, especially of swing states, where small margins of votes may have a larger impact, existing tensions may be more likely to inflame.

In addition, given the dangers of COVID-19 transmission, there are also health risks associated with public gatherings. While this does not mean that people should not engage in street protest, it does mean that organizers should choose tactics that minimize the risk of harm done to protesters while maximizing the amount of social, political, and economic pressure created through those actions.

Two Phases in the Post-Election Period

Below we have divided the post-election period into **two phases**, with strategic ideas and goals for both. We also list tactics that may be useful to people, but we encourage people to develop their own, and this [tactic brainstorming worksheet](#) may be useful for this purpose. Everyone is an expert in what unique tactics would be most effective in their own communities. Effective tactics may vary from state to state and town to town.

PHASE I: Civic mobilizations to incentivize officials to count every vote and respect the results

The first phase of public mobilization to ensure that all valid votes are counted and the results reflect the choice of voters begins immediately after November 3 (Election Day). Public perception of who won and who is organized to hold institutions accountable will play a strong role in [influencing decisions made by officials](#), particularly when it comes to determining the slate of electors to send

forward to Congress. Public actions by civic groups, faith-based organizations, businesses, and private citizens should focus on holding election officials accountable for ensuring that all valid ballots are counted and included in tallies that are certified, and that there is resounding clarity, consistency, and uniformity among them about who won.

GOALS:

- **Ensure that all legitimate in-person and mail-in ballots are counted and certified in a complete, impartial, and timely manner.**
- **Counter threats to vote certification**, such as orders to pause or halt the count by judicial order, on-site delaying tactics, or intimidation at ballot counting sites.
- **Insist that the state vote count be continued past December 8 (the deadline for states to choose electors that will be accepted by Congress) if Trump and GOP officials succeed in preventing all ballots from being counted.** This is important because if there are competing slates of electors from a state, an accurate vote count even completed after December 8 could influence which slate of electors Congress chooses to recognize.
- **Prevent rogue state legislative activities**, such as attempts by GOP state legislatures to appoint fraudulent electors to the Electoral College.
- **Reject declarations of emergency powers**, the deployment of federal forces to quell “civil disorder,” and other attempts to deny First Amendment rights to peaceful protestors.
- **Anticipate, deter, prevent, and mitigate violence** caused by paramilitary and unlawful armed groups and empower community mediators.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS (subject to the judgement of local organizers):

- **Send letters, and organize petitions, rallies, vigils, symbolic protests, etc. demanding that elected officials conduct a complete, impartial, and timely count of all cast ballots.** If no lines have been crossed, these can be done to support individuals and institutions that are doing this work and to incentivize constitutional behavior. A powerful aspect of these can involve demanding [written commitments](#) from officials. You can also [sign online petitions](#), and call

and email local and state officials using these easy templates. There are many other methods of nonviolent action available. [Here](#) is an illustrative (but not exhaustive) list of such methods.

- **Organize public actions to demand that state, local, and federal authorities open investigations into any illegal actions to suppress the vote and prevent ballots from being counted.**
- **Organize public actions to demand that law enforcement (police chiefs, county sheriffs, [National Guard](#)) defend protesters' First Amendment rights and protect peaceful protesters from far-right paramilitaries.** You may also need to organize elected officials who oversee police departments and/or have oversight authority (For guidance on how to do this, and the language of possible demands you may make, see the [Commitment to Uphold Democracy campaign plan](#)). Given the lack of accountability of groups like ICE, CBP and the Federal Protective Services, people may wish to avoid direct confrontations with them.
- **Organize public actions to demand that state, local, and federal authorities open investigations into and take action to protect people from paramilitaries or unlawful armed groups that may be mobilizing.** In doing this, it can be helpful to know the [laws barring unauthorized private militia groups in your state](#).
- **Increase pressure if Trump or GOP officials attempt to halt or stop the vote count and appoint fraudulent electors.** Examples might include sit-ins or other mass action inside or outside state legislatures to prevent voting on a fraudulent slate of electors or to pressure state representatives to boycott the session.
- **If the above actions are showing results, make sure to publicly thank and congratulate officials for not crossing red lines** even if you otherwise disagree with other actions those officials take. Doing so may encourage others to follow suit.
- **If activists are targeted for violent repression by law enforcement or unlawful armed groups, document and publicize the episode, and consider whether decentralized tactics may be needed** (i.e. instead of mass demonstrations where people all gather at a central place, you may consider flash demonstrations, or roaming demonstrations, or protests by people

banging pots and pans outside their windows in densely populated areas. Targeted consumer boycotts, work slow downs, and stay-at-home strikes are other examples.)

Informing local monitors and trusted intermediaries about the risk of violence and actual violence that is occurring, and working with community leaders skilled in violence de-escalation could help prevent and mitigate violence.

PHASE II (if needed): Mass noncooperation to stop an election-related power grab, and secure a transition of power that reflects the will of the voters

If the above actions are not having results and red lines continue to be crossed, movements in other contexts have found it useful to undertake economic noncooperation.

The goal of people responding with stepped-up actions from their homes, their workplaces and businesses, their religious communities and their schools has been to make it untenable for their community, state, or the country to continue operating until all eligible votes are counted and results are respected. Sometimes just the credible threat of economic noncooperation has been enough to get decision makers to change their behavior.

GOALS:

- **Ensure that state legislatures and Congress reject any attempts to appoint or certify illegitimate slates of electors** that don't reflect the election's results in that state.
- **Bring the country to an orderly standstill if Congress attempts to appoint slates of electors that were not reflective of the popular will** as evident by the election results.
- **Send a clear message to state and federal courts**, including the U.S. Supreme Court, that the public demands that our votes be counted and respected.
- **Incentivize the loser to concede** by causing his enablers to defect and admit defeat.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS (subject to the judgement of local organizers):

- **Organize targeted labor strikes, work slowdowns, wildcat strikes, walkouts, and economic and consumer boycotts** that are designed to hold community leaders, public officials, powerholders, and their enablers accountable.

It can take people time to prepare for economic noncooperation (for example, people may need to buy certain goods in advance of a boycott, or prepare for loss of income if there is a strike). Therefore, communities will want to put out a call in advance for people to prepare, if they feel that events are trending in a direction where economic noncooperation may be necessary. Preparations can also involve communities engaging with or creating mutual aid associations to help people who will be impacted by a strike or boycott. You can look online to see if there is an association in your area.

- **One sector of society appears ready to be the bulwark: youth. A national youth coalition is putting in place plans — if necessary — to call a nationwide youth strike.** As is often the case, young people from around the country may be the vanguard to withdraw from schools and workplaces, and go into the streets in protest, help to organize general (or rolling) and limited strikes as appropriate, or intensify mobilization in other ways across the country. Keep in mind that noncompliance and noncooperation is much more powerful than symbolic marching or mass protests.
- See the last bullet point from [Phase I](#) on responding to violent repression.

PART III: HOLDING THE LINES

MESSAGING IN THE POST-ELECTION PERIOD

General Themes:

If lines are not crossed in the post-election period, then messaging is a simple matter. It can emphasize patience with institutions as votes are counted, peaceful forms of mobilization to support the process, the common values for which we are struggling, and acceptance of the outcome and supporting an orderly transition.

However, if lines are crossed in the post-election period, messaging becomes more complex. There are at least five categories that need to be considered:

1. What we are struggling for

While Americans from across the political spectrum often disagree about how to tackle policy problems, we all agree that we want a government that is competent, effective, and responsive to policy problems. We also want a government that serves the greater good, protects us from threats to our health and safety, and allows us all to thrive. Ultimately, we are the ones who deliver democracy, ensure every vote is counted, and select leaders to serve us. For many people, American democracy has yet to fulfill its promises. But millions of people have struggled for centuries to try to improve the experiment of American democracy, leading to major breakthroughs in justice, representation, and improvements in government. We are the inheritors of their efforts. And we do not want to miss our chance to have our voices heard, and to do our part to make sure that those gains are expanded upon, not lost.

2. Challenges due to the national situation

Heading into this election, the public is exhausted and primed to suspect efforts to cheat. People are struggling to stay healthy and make ends meet. Tired of political shouting, we simply want this election over so we can focus on tackling COVID and its attendant hardships. Baseless accusations of voter fraud paired with aggressive voter suppression have seeded widespread doubt in the integrity of the election.

Adding to this combustible climate, we can expect some leaders, operatives, and media outlets to continue to stoke chaos by dog whistling about “illegal voters,” alleging ballot tampering, filing lawsuits, and declaring victory irrespective of the results.

If red lines are crossed, communications will need to help people recognize that we are no longer in a normal democratic process, and that institutional processes by themselves may not be sufficient to ensure a democratic outcome. Messages will need to help to break a sense of passivity, denial, confusion, or sense of powerlessness.

Center the people and the voters, rather than the candidates. People are tired of partisan fights and crave unity. We must discuss this election in terms of the will of the people, not the clash of two politicians. It's not about Biden or Trump, but about swearing in a government of, by, and for us. We should focus on why winning matters, not winning for winning's sake. Thus, statements like "we won, get over it" and the like do not aid the cause.

3. **Mass mobilization**

Communications will need to normalize the idea of mass action and explain the need to mobilize, while recognizing the broad array of nonviolent tactics available that include dispersed actions and organized noncooperation.

4. **Key organization and institutions**

Communications will have to address people in key institutions to try to get them to take actions that uphold democracy and not cooperate with those who are subverting the election.

5. **Countering false narratives**

Communications will be used by President Trump and sympathetic media to try to mobilize his base of supporters, and to falsely characterize nonviolent civic mobilization as a threat to order, stability, and democracy. Trump will likely claim that he is the rightful winner and he will likely accuse protesters of trying to launch a violent coup, when in fact the opposite would be true.

Each of these is addressed below:

1. What we are struggling for

Democracy itself is at stake in this post-election period, and so too is the possibility of creating a brighter, safer, and more prosperous future. An election-related power grab is a fundamental threat to our country and society.. But we can respond

powerfully through nonviolent action, following in the footsteps of generations of Americans before us who made this country better.

Lead with values:

- Democracy: “will of the people,” “delivering our democracy,” “every vote counts,” “peaceful transfer of power,” “defend the vote”
- Fairness: “count every vote”
- Unity: “we the people,” “count on us”
- Future: “move forward together,” “look ahead, we will not be pulled backward”

Sample Messages to Consider Using

Includes excerpts from the [Everyone Counts Project Metanarrative](#) and “[How We Message November 3rd and Beyond](#)” by ASO Communications and Voting Rights Lab and [Delivering Our Democracy](#) messaging guidance from ASO and The Leadership Conference.

The following messages may be appropriate:

- *“Whether we are Black, white, or brown, Native or newcomer, Asian or Latino, most of us believe that everyone counts, no exceptions.”*
- *“Most of us believe that for democracy to work for all of us, it must include us all. And this election, voters turned out in record numbers to have our voices heard. We saw young people, Black people and people struggling to make ends meet overcome unacceptable barriers to exercise their most basic right as Americans. And now all of us must join together to demand that every legitimate vote is honored.”*
- *“Millions of people have struggled for centuries to try to improve the experiment of American democracy, leading to major breakthroughs in justice, representation, and improvements in government. We are the inheritors of their efforts. And we do not want to miss our chance to have our voices heard, and to do our part to make sure that those gains are protected.”*
- *“While Americans from across the political spectrum often disagree about how to tackle policy problems, we all agree that we want a government that is competent, effective, and responsive to policy problems. We also want a government that makes it possible for us to get the care we need, protect us from threats to our health and safety, and ensure that everyone can thrive.”*

- *“We are the ones who deliver democracy, ensure every vote is counted, and select leaders to serve us.”*

2. Challenges due to the national situation

If attempts are made to subvert the election results, messages should emphasize confidence and shared values of upholding democracy, rather than triggering fear and resignation.

Sample Messages to Consider Using

Includes excerpts from the [Everyone Counts Project Metanarrative](#) and "[How We Message November 3rd and Beyond](#)" by ASO Communications and Voting Rights Lab and [Delivering Our Democracy](#) messaging guidance from ASO and The Leadership Conference.

The following messages may be appropriate:

Build confidence in the process

- *“We need to listen to the will of the people.”*
- *“The will of the people decides.”*
- *“Swear in the person/people the voters have chosen.”*
- *“Democracy wins.”*
- *“Anyone running for office can say whatever they want to, but it’s the will of the voters that decides.”*
- *“The United States has always held elections and upheld the results, even in times of great crisis. We held successful presidential elections amid the Civil War, the great influenza pandemic of 1918, the Great Depression, and both World Wars. Now it’s our turn to prove that nothing—not even this pandemic—will stand in the way of counting every vote and delivering our democracy.”*

- *“In every election we have counted votes after election day and there will be nothing different this year.”*
- *“We must demand that we count every vote, deliver our democracy, and swear in a government of, by, and for the people.”*
- *“We, the people, decide who governs in our name.”*

Speak to the barriers voters were deliberately made to face:

- *“Despite every attempt to silence our voices and put up barriers to our votes, we turned out in record numbers to deliver our voices for an America where everyone counts, no exceptions.”*
- *“Trump and his allies are trying to bully, cheat, and steal one of our most important Constitutional rights—the right to select our President— out from under us. But the American people will not let them get away with it.”*

Go on offense:

- *“We the people decided the winner, and now it’s time to swear in our choice as the next president. Voters have spoken and are ready to swear in a government that will tackle our challenges and make life better for our families.”*
- *“We did our jobs as voters. Now our elected officials must do theirs, ensuring that every vote is counted and that those we elected are sworn in.”*

3. Mass mobilization

Protest and other forms of nonviolent direct action have driven positive social and political changes in the United States for centuries, from our struggle for independence, to abolishing slavery, to winning the right to vote for everyone, to advancing women’s rights, to gaining worker protections. They are core to our country’s identity. Acts such as protests, labor strikes, and boycotts are constitutionally-protected ways to advance fairness and to make our institutions work for us.

The goals, potential actions, and messaging around civic action will vary depending on the phase of the election process. In the first major phase, the focus will mainly be at the state-level; if the result of the election remains contested when it gets to Congress, the locus of attention will shift to the national-level.

Sample Messaging to Consider Using

Includes excerpts from the [Everyone Counts Project Metanarrative](#) and "[How We Message November 3rd and Beyond](#)" by ASO Communications and Voting Rights Lab and [Delivering Our Democracy](#) messaging guidance from ASO and The Leadership Conference.

The following messages may be appropriate:

- *"Each of us has a voice and each of us contributes to the fabric of our communities and our country."*
- *"From big cities to suburbs to small towns, we are Americans from all walks of life uniting across our differences to deliver our voices and votes for an America where everyone counts. Just as generations past came together to demand women's suffrage and civil rights, we count on us to make the future."*
- *"Americans from all walks of life have a right to have their voice heard and their vote counted. Those rights are protected in the First amendment of the Constitution."*
- *"People joining together to ensure every voice is heard makes our democracy stronger and more responsive."*
- *"Throughout our history, generations of Americans have come together to make a future where our voices are heard and rights are respected, no matter our color, income, or zip code."*
- *"We count on us to keep each other healthy and safe, to show up for one another, and to be voters in this election."*
- *"We must turn out in record numbers to show that everyone counts and to ensure every vote is counted and to swear in the government elected by us."*

- *“We’re the ones we’ve been waiting for. We, the People, are stronger than a ruler who cares only for himself, and we will prevail.”*
- *“We count on us to lead. We are determined. We are united. The force that can uphold democracy is the American people. Now is the moment to stand up for our rights as Americans, united for freedom and justice for all.”*
- *“The protests are about making this country a place where everyone counts and every vote is counted, no exceptions.”*
- *“When we are mobilizing out in the streets or taking action from our homes or workplaces, we are acting with compassion, commitment to our goals, and caring for one another.”*
- *“We are speaking our truths, holding the powerful to account, voicing our values, making our voices heard, caring and showing up for each other, we keep us safe. We also will not allow Trump to stoke fear and division nor distract us from our efforts to deliver democracy.”*
- *“By striking or walking-out from our schools and workplaces and raising our voices together today, we will ensure we swear in the government we chose and tackle the very real issues our country faces.”*
- *“Trump is desperately trying to divide and scare us because he’s lost. Our demands are to uphold the rule of law.”*
- *“We must demand that we count every vote, deliver our democracy, and swear in a government of, by, and for the people.”*

4. Key organization and institutions

Communications will also have to address people in key institutions to try to get them to take actions that uphold democracy and not cooperate with efforts to subvert the election. Below are some key pillars of support that will be needed to protect our democracy. Other groups that may not fit into these categories should also self organize to demand action.

The overarching message is: “We must demand that we count every vote, deliver our democracy, and swear in a government of, by, and for the people.”

Members of security forces

Members of the police and armed forces swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution, which includes the right to “freedom of speech,” the right “of the people peaceably to assemble”, and the right “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” In short, many acts of nonviolent action are protected under the Constitution.

We recognize that there is a gap between the promise of the Constitution and the lived reality of many communities. Nonetheless, an approach used by pro-democracy activists is to call on members of the police and armed forces to uphold their oath to the Constitution and reject orders and directives that are either illegal or that violate the Constitution, including efforts to subvert the election. In other countries, police have shown up to police a protest but refused to fire on or arrest protesters. High profile military leaders have also publicly rebuked illegal or immoral orders or resigned their positions in protest.

Sample Commitments for Members of Security Forces

As state officials and law enforcement, we will:

- *Respect protesters’ Constitutional right to nonviolent protest.*
- *Uphold our oath to the Constitution and refuse to participate in unlawful orders.*
- *Prevent, investigate, and prosecute violent paramilitaries and unlawful armed group activity.*
- *De-escalate tense encounters with protesters rather than taking escalatory actions that lead to violence.*
- *Identify ourselves in uniform when engaging with protesters.*
- *Do our jobs to maintain peace and public safety without preference or bias toward specific political groups.*

Workers and Organized Labor

Labor has historically played a critical role in advancing the rights of ordinary people and upholding democracy. Workers organized in formal unions and informally have used pledges, walk-outs, stay-at-homes, strikes and other means in order to build solidarity and apply economic pressure on key stakeholders to advance rights and freedoms. The AFL-CIO has already made a [public pledge](#) to defend the integrity of the election and various local labor federations have resolved to prepare for a general strike if attempts are made to subvert the election.

Sample Commitments for Workers and Organized Labor

As workers and members of labor unions, we will:

- *Insist on free and fair elections in which all legitimate votes are counted and the winner is decided by we the workers and we the people.*
- *Stand firmly in opposition to any effort to subvert, distort, misrepresent or disregard the final outcome.*
- *Prepare to engage in acts of mass noncooperation, including walk-outs, pickets, strikes and deny our labor in the event that attempts are made to subvert the will of the people.*

Religious leaders and groups

Religious leaders, institutions, and faith groups wield considerable moral authority and organizational capacity. Their words and behaviors can have a significant impact on their congregations and communities. Public statements like [this one](#) by over thirty faith-based organizations urging “leaders across the political spectrum [to] call on their supporters to refrain from violence and the threat of violence regardless of results,” and condemning efforts to intimidate voters or cast doubt on the election outcome, are a positive model. Such statements, especially from evangelical leaders, should be encouraged and amplified. Religious leaders can also play a key role in promoting calm, de-escalating violence, and mediating disputes in communities and in the streets. Their active rejection of attempts made to subvert the election, including through organized noncooperation, would lend considerable weight and legitimacy to those actions.

Sample Commitments for Religious Leaders and Groups

As religious leaders and institutions, we will:

- *Publicly endorse a fair, impartial and complete vote count and condemn the use of violence regardless of results.*
- *Serve as mediators and trusted intermediaries to prevent and de-escalate violence in communities and the streets.*
- *Actively reject attempts to steal the election, and to join acts of noncooperation in they become necessary to uphold our democracy.*

Economic and business elites

The health of the US economy rests on the founding principle of our democracy—elections where everyone’s vote is counted and the winner is decided by voters. Businesses, corporations, and institutional investors have an economic interest in protecting the integrity of the election and rejecting efforts to thwart the democratic process. Attempts to delegitimize or cheat in the election will only exacerbate the current economic crisis and increase risks that contribute to an unstable investing climate. Commitments like [the Leadership Now Pledge](#), [the Civic Alliance](#), and [the Chamber of Commerce Joint Statement](#) to ensure that all votes are counted are key first steps to getting involved.

In the event that attempts are made to subvert the election results and create chaos, businesses and institutional investors have an additional role to play. They can use corporate influence to reject such attempts and to throw their weight behind civic action to respect the results. In the same way that pressure by airline companies, flight attendants and air traffic controllers helped end the [2019 government shut-down](#), the business community can support similar actions to uphold our democracy. Businesses can denounce a power grab and refuse to cooperate with enablers of such efforts until the legitimate winner is sworn in. They can commit to avoid future hiring of officials and security personnel who actively contribute to undermining public institutions and the peaceful transition of power. Workers, including at social media companies, can stage walk-outs. The business community may have an opportunity to use civic action to simultaneously defend its long-term market interests and serve as a bulwark for democratic institutions.

Sample Commitments for Business and Corporate Leaders

As business and corporate leaders, we:

- *Publicly commit to ensuring that everyone's vote is counted and that voters choose the winner.*
- *Refuse to legitimize cheating by withholding or withdrawing investments in entities that engage in or enable efforts to subvert the election.*
- *Support nonviolent civic action to defend the integrity of the election and uphold our democracy including, if necessary, through boycotts, strikes, and other acts of nonviolent non-cooperation.*

Members of media

Journalists and media outlets have the responsibility to provide clear, consistent, and accurate information to the American public. They can play a critical role in explaining the basics of election processes and in setting expectations related to the post-election period, using resources like [this one](#) and [this one](#). They can discredit those who traffic in disinformation, put out correct information, and counter disinformation intended to sow confusion, chaos, and violence. In the event of a contested election, journalists have a critical role to play as they cover public mobilization. They can provide the larger context related to the protests, center the voices of community members, and avoid ambiguity surrounding the sources of violence if it breaks out.

Sample Commitments for Members of the Media

As members of the media, we will:

- *Refuse to prematurely call elections for Presidential, Senatorial, or House candidates.*
- *Inform the public with clear and accurate information related to election processes, deadlines, the true status of vote counts, when electors will be selected; and prepare the public for critical junctures from Election Day to Inauguration Day.*
- *Debunk misinformation around election results and pro-democracy movements in a timely and consistent fashion.*

- *When covering protests, provide the full context and avoid assigning false equivalencies if one-sided violence occurs. Be clear about the pro-democracy motives of mobilizations.*
- *Remind Americans of the long history of patriotic protest and mass action in this country leading to positive changes.*
- *Refuse to use illegitimate titles such as President-elect or Senator-elect when a race is still being contested.*

Members of government bureaucracy

Civil servants and government employees are servants of the people, responsible for the day-to-day functioning of government and the provision of public services. Their labor, knowledge, and skills keep systems of government running. As with police and armed forces, bureaucrats swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. Defending that oath, while refusing to go along with orders or directives that are illegal or that violate the Constitution, may be the most important role for bureaucrats after Election Day.

Sample Commitments for Civil Servants and Other Government Employees

As civil servants and other federal, state, and local government employees, we will:

- *Commit to upholding our oath to support and defend the Constitution.*
- *Refuse to obey orders that are illegal or that violate the Constitution.*
- *Inform the public when our institutions are directing us to violate the Constitution.*
- *Consult with employee unions, lawyers, and peer support groups to discuss potential red lines and actions that support the integrity of government institutions (exs. public commitments, symbolic actions, keeping a paper trail, work stoppages or slow-downs, potential strikes or walk-outs) while bearing in mind the costs and benefits associated with each course of action.*

Artists and athletes

Artists (musicians, actors, writers, etc.) and athletes can use their platforms to support people demanding that votes be counted. They are influencers who can reach people without an intermediary in the media, and workers who can engage in high-profiled and inspiring acts of noncooperation because the stakes are so high. For example, professional sports teams like the Milwaukee Bucks and athletes from across different leagues launched walk-outs and boycotts demanding racial justice after the shooting of Jacob Blake. Artists and athletes can similarly play an important role now in protecting our democracy.

Sample Commitments for Artists and Athletes

As artists and athletes, we will:

- *Use art and speech to remind Americans of the long history of patriotic protest in this country leading to positive changes.*
- *Support nonviolent civic action to defend the integrity of the election and uphold our democracy including, if necessary, through boycotts, strikes, walk-outs and other acts of non-cooperation.*
- *Publicize civic actions designed to defend the integrity of the election process and uphold our democracy.*

5. Countering false narratives

If President Trump attempts to subvert the election results, he will likely try to mobilize his base of supporters, and to falsely characterize nonviolent mobilization as a threat to order, stability, and democracy. Trump may claim that he is the rightful winner and that nonviolent protesters are trying to launch a coup, when in fact that opposite would be true. In the post-election period, he will likely continue to demonize protesters and encourage activities by unlawful armed groups, and could try to call on federalized law enforcement to “secure” ballot counting sites or to quell unrest.

Attempts to restrict the right to free speech, assembly, and protest is a betrayal of our nation’s principles and our history. People have the right to assemble peacefully and have their voices heard. It will be necessary for elected officials, police, and military leaders to commit to upholding their Constitutional duties to ensure that

every vote is counted and to protect peaceful protesters in towns, villages, and cities across this country from violence committed by anyone trying to silence them.

Our task is always to talk about what we are *for* rather than be distracted into the conversation that those who oppose us want to have. When we need to counter their message, we should call out the motivations behind their actions and/or minimize them and pivot back to our vision and calls to action.

Research suggests it's helpful to zoom out beyond Trump as a named opponent. Because he is such a consuming and polarizing figure, not name-checking him all the time is one way to lend greater focus to the actions of the voters. Further, Trump can do nothing without certain enablers within the federal government, as well as state governments and the media. Therefore, we are against efforts to subvert democracy, and we recognize that those efforts are the work of more than just one person.

Sample Messages to Consider Using

Includes excerpts from the [Everyone Counts Project Metanarrative](#) and "[How We Message November 3rd and Beyond](#)" by ASO Communications and Voting Rights Lab and [Delivering Our Democracy](#) messaging guidance from ASO and The Leadership Conference.

Talking points:

- *"Any politician can say whatever they feel like, but at the end of the day they're done talking and it's time to have our say."*
- *"Certain politicians want to divide us based on what we look like, where we worship, and where we come from so that we shame, blame, and fear one another rather than come together to swear in new leaders who will serve the will of the people."*
- *"For too long, we've allowed certain politicians to divide and distract us from making the future we want."*
- *"If needed: Trump and his enablers tried to cheat and bully their way through this election and lost. Now, they're pointing the finger at Black people, new immigrants, and foreign countries and stoking fears against protesters"*

marching for democracy, hoping we'll turn against our efforts to ensure our votes are counted and swear in the government the voters have chosen."

- *"If needed: Trump is deploying federal forces into our communities to try and silence our voices. But, we are united in delivering an America where everyone counts and where we count on each other. Together, we will swear in a government of, by, and for the people."*

Always close with our vision for the future. For example:

- *"Voters have spoken and are ready to swear in a government that will tackle our challenges and make life better for our families."*
- *"We are building a country where our leaders act in our interest and where we have harmony and understanding in and between our communities. By turning out in record numbers across race and place today to demand every vote be counted, we will deliver a future where we count on each other and where everyone counts, no exceptions."*
- *"We turned out in record numbers to pick new leaders who will care and govern for all of us. And now we will hold our new government to account – to not merely tackle the crises the last government created – but to make this a place where all of us can thrive."*

CONCLUSION

Many modern US elections result in clear victories, prompt concessions, and orderly transitions. While there are exceptions, and our election system is in need of significant reform, most elections are still competently administered, with relevant laws and rules applied impartially. These essential aspects of democracy must continue for our nation to be strong. US democracy—while having a deeply flawed past, and in need of much improvement in the present—remains the bedrock of how We, the People can make a more perfect future. Consistent with our commitment to democracy, our interest is in ensuring that the integrity of the democratic process is upheld, and that election results are respected, whoever the victor is.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of our democracy. Every eligible voter has the right to have their voice heard and their vote counted. Ensuring a peaceful, constitutional election process is the responsibility of all of us—elected officials, courts, legislatures, and ordinary people from cities, towns, and villages across the country.

Ultimately, the outcome of this election will be determined by people across the country, and should not be decided by one person, or by the privileged few. When democracy is under threat, mass nonviolent action is a way that people all over the world—including in the United States—have made their voices heard and ensured that their rights were respected. With this election, as the late Rep. John Lewis reminded us, now it is our turn to let freedom ring.

Additional Resources:

- [Open Resources for Upholding our Democracy](#)
- [The Count: A practical guide to defending the Constitution in a contested 2020 election](#)
- [Hold the Line: A guide to defending democracy](#)
- [Commitment to Uphold Democracy: Campaign planning guide](#)

About

This document was developed in a collaborative process during October 22-November 5. The following groups contributed to it (listed in alphabetical order):

- [Choose Democracy](#)
- **Everyone Counts Project**
- [Hold the Line](#)

This guide is meant to help individuals and groups organize based on the experience we have gained from doing the work on the ground and studying organizing movements, and our intention is to help build a more unified response. Any action taken upon the information provided in this guide is strictly at your own risk, none of the authors, contributors, or anyone else connected with this guide, can be responsible for your use of the information contained in this guide.

For questions, additional information, or to sign on in support contact:

UpholdDemocracyGuide@gmail.com