



How to talk about democratic reform: a cheat sheet to change the story

This cheat sheet is a summary of research by an alliance of Australian civil society organisations, working together to achieve legislative changes that limit corporate influence on our political system.

It is designed for people working across civil society who are advocating for change that involves democratic decision making and participation.

Its purpose is to help us talk more effectively about government, democratic participation and reform, and to motivate people to get involved.

See the full messaging guide and detailed research results at www.acf.org.au/democracy-narrative-guide

Key insights

- **People in Australia are generally not confident that our democratic system is working well** and in everyone's best interests, but many are reluctant to explicitly acknowledge this. They are confident that corporations exert undue influence in our democracy, but we cannot assume this will translate into widespread support for action. However, people can be convinced.
- **There is widespread dissatisfaction with politics** globally and in Australia. People have a negative view of "politicians". However it's important to resist the urge to focus on bad politicians or needlessly repeat the idea of flawed government, as this invites people to get stuck on that point.
- **It is effective to lead with solutions** and a positive vision for how our democracy should work.
- **Focus on the important activities governments do** on behalf of the public and frame government as belonging to all of us. Talking about our "elected representatives" works better than "politicians".
- **It is effective to talk about a "balanced and fair" democracy**, the "common good" and "the next generation".
- **It is ineffective to use hyperbole or overly political language** such as "splashing cash" or "lobbying". Show rather than tell, and avoid attributing mal-intent.
- **Give concrete examples of the impact of money in politics** and avoid commentary on possible motivations. More specific examples, such as "mining companies donating millions during elections," are more effective than generalities such as "corporate money influencing politics."

A message framework that works

While it may be tempting to lead with outrage, especially when talking about democracy and political reform, it is most effective to lead with a positive vision and the values we share before listing barriers and problems.

Always include who is causing the barrier and why – the more specific the better, but avoid attributing mal-intent – and lay out a clear solution and path forward.

<p>Start with what we share</p> <p>A clear vision of how our democracy should work</p>	<p>"No matter where we were born, the colour of our skin or the size of our wallets, in our democracy, we should all have an equal say in the decisions that impact us.</p> <p>When the people we elect to government represent us and reflect our values and concerns – that’s when democracy works best."</p>
<p>The barrier</p> <p>Who is responsible and what are they doing?</p>	<p>"But when mining companies and other large corporations are able to make large political donations, they gain greater access and influence over our elected representatives, throwing the whole system out of balance.</p> <p>Like major donor to the Liberal Party Trevor St Baker, who lobbied our Environment Minister for public money to keep burning coal in his coal-fired power station in NSW. "</p>
<p>The solution</p> <p>Our pathway to action, what we can do together</p>	<p>"By working together to cap the amount of money that can be spent during elections (or other specific action) we can put people back at the heart of our democracy.</p> <p>This will make our democracy fairer and ensure that our elected representatives serve the whole community – not just big businesses."</p>



1. Start with what we share – the kind of democracy we value

Lead with shared values and the outcome of what you seek – the kind of democracy we want to be part of.

Our research found leading with problems and processes is less activating for both supporters and persuadables. Emphasising that democracy is under attack or failing reinforces a sense of hopelessness, suggesting the system itself is fundamentally broken, rather than specific aspects of the system which we can change. It also primes a fatalistic, cynical story that makes our solutions (such as elected representatives putting caps on corporate donations) seem unbelievable.

Instead, talk to our best selves and the kind of democracy we want to be part of. Language such as democracy being under "attack" or "under threat" evoke values of power and security. These frames activate our opponents and can pull persuadables toward opposition messaging. Frames evoking ideas of balance/imbalance and fairness/unfairness are far more powerful for both supporters and persuadables.

✓

Interdependence, cooperation, power shared
Common good, wellbeing, community
Collective rules
Our democracy works best when everyone gets a fair and equal say.

✗

Competition, authority
Self-interest, isolated individuals
Freedom to harm
Our democracy only works when everyone steps up and takes responsibility for their role.

Offer relatable, tangible examples of the benefits of working together for our common good, rather than processes or generalities:

✓

No matter where we were born, the colour of our skin or the size of our wallets, in our democracy, we should all have an equal say in the decisions that impact us.
When the people we elect to our parliaments represent us and reflect our values and concerns – that’s when government works best.
Collective efforts by our governments on behalf of the public provide a foundation for our way of life – whether it’s providing Medicare, basic safety and public health, city parks, the postal service, good libraries and schools.

✗

Democracy is under attack from corporate interests.
Your ability to participate in democracy is at risk.

2. The barrier and who is responsible

Our challenge is motivating people to take action on a specific, concrete ask (such as joining the campaign to remove money from politics) without further increasing cynicism and disillusionment with government.

If we lead with messages about how big money is flooding Australian politics with money, we risk reinforcing the belief that politics is broken.

When it comes to democracy, it is important to be clear about who is doing what to whom, as well as the agents who have the power to intervene and fix this.

When we leave out who is responsible for why things are the way they are, we make problems seem inevitable and we become powerless to solve them.

This may look like:

- **A specific corporation or lobbyist** – such as a mining corporation or a big pharma lobby group – doing a specific action – such as donating money to our elected representatives – which has a specific tangible, consequence
- **Elected representatives** who need to listen to the people, and act
- **We the people**, citizens, who can work together to stop the specific corporation or lobbyists doing the wrong thing, by asking our elected representatives to act.

Use specific examples of how actors are doing specific things, and how this is impacting specific policies.

✓ Big pharma lobby groups [make this specific] give millions to the major political parties each year, as all of us continue to pay higher prices for medication.

Coal and gas lobbyists [add specific example] are making large donations to our elected representatives, while calling for them to weaken environment protection laws.

✗ Money is flooding the political system
(money is not an actor)

Dirty politicians (it is unhelpful to position politicians as the villain)

Big money is distorting politics
(not specific enough)

However be careful to show, rather than tell. Our research found hyperbolic language and exaggeration backfired, especially for persuadable audiences. It is more convincing to describe a situation than to theorise on the intentions of the actors:

✓ Big mining corporations and gambling corporations spending millions of dollars on elections risks throwing our whole democratic system out of balance and leaving everyday Australians struggling to make our voices heard.

Last year, the gambling lobby spent almost a million dollars lobbying in order to influence policy outcomes and block gambling reforms.

✗ Big corporations are splashing cash with their oversized wallets. The super rich are buying influence. Big business is dictating politics.

The wealthy are attempting to buy elections (attributing mal-intent)

3. The solution

and pathway forward

Offer a path forward - a simple action, a first step to begin to solve the problem. Present your vision as inevitable, not exceptional.

Rather than framing your desired outcome as something radical, normalise it and present it in a way that makes people feel it's only a matter of time before it is achieved.

Explicitly mention the solution and give tangible examples of how democracy will work better with this solution.

Say what government can and should do, not just how government is failing. However, avoid regulatory and controlling language, as it tested poorly – instead of 'banning', it is more effective to talk about 'capping' political donations.



When we limit the amount of money corporations can hand to political parties and spend on election campaigns, our elected representatives will listen to our communities and think beyond the next election cycle to the next generation.

With a lobbyist register, citizens will be able to see who is meeting our elected representatives and why, and public deliberations will be open, robust and vibrant.

When a national body, like a federal integrity commission, has the power to investigate corruption and uncover deep networks of influence, we will clean up politics.

Capping donations will ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a fair and equal say on the issues that matter to them.



Our government must **stop** big corporations from making donations.

Banning donations to political parties.

Our democracy is under threat. Government has failed to stop the corrosive influence of corporate interests.

Call on our elected representatives to take action and emphasise what governments should do, rather than what the government is failing to do. Research shows when people hear criticism of government (and even specific politicians), they hear it as “politics and politicians are failing, and democratic government is not working.”

People are left to conclude that government cannot solve big problems and private corporations are a viable option. Of course, call out bad decisions by specific people, but do so in a way that focuses on what government should do to restore trust in democracy.



Our governments should represent us and reflect our values and concerns. We call on [specific target] to...

A good government would...

When our elected representatives...



Politicians are failing.

The political system is under attack from big money and governments have failed to intervene for decades.

Focus on restoring balance, rather than fixing the broken.



Together we will ensure our democracy represents all of us

This will keep our democracy in balance.

By taking big money out of politics we can make sure people, not corporate profits, are at the heart of our democracy.



This will help fix our broken democratic system

A note on talking about government

Research suggests people often go to corrosive stereotypes when they think about government.

They think of government as:

- THEM – untrustworthy, highly partisan politicians who play power games or engage in battle, while citizens passively watch as spectators.

Alternatively, people think of government as:

- IT – an inefficient, mission-less, paper-pushing bureaucratic blob.

To restore trust in government and overcome fatalism, avoid reinforcing these stereotypes. Instead, remind people that government is:

- US – an expression of the people’s voice, a way of working together to implement the common good and improve our quality of life.

Make vivid and concrete the important work we all appreciate that only happens through collective efforts on behalf of our communities – such as safeguarding our foods, our medications, our clean air and water, hospitals, roads and schools, setting fair conditions for workers, protecting public safety and planning for the future.



Government is something we create together - it's the one thing we're all a part of. We all contribute to our society and get things done we can only do together.

Through democracy, we all have an opportunity to shape the decisions that impact us - like schools, laws, roads and hospitals.



Politicians are untrustworthy and don't keep their promises.

Government is inefficient and ineffective. Reducing red tape will strengthen the economy and increase jobs and growth.

The game is rigged, we must stop the money game.

Use inclusive language. Frame government as “our elected representatives” or “our government”, with inclusive language that gives a sense of ownership – and remember, government is not the villain. Also avoid politicised and partisan language. Phrases linked to nationalism and national identity tested poorly.

It is also important to be clear what you are referring to when discussing ‘the government’. ‘The government’ can mean the Liberal/National Coalition, it can also mean public servants working for the common good, and services that we all rely on such as Medicare.



Elected representatives

Our government

People across Australia, all of us

Together, we can make our democracy work for all of us.



Politicians

The government

Australians, as a nation

About this research

This cheat sheet is a summary of a six-month research project exploring how Australians understand democracy and democratic reform, with a particular focus on the issue of corporate influence over our politics.

We reviewed existing research from Australia and abroad, used discourse analysis to understand how allies, opponents, media and the public talk about these issues, undertook elicitation interviews and workshops, and ran a quantitative survey and online dial test with a representative sample of 1300 Australians in November 2019.

Our goal was to find the frames and messages which ring true with supporters, and which move most people in the persuadable group towards supporting the idea of progressive reform including limiting the influence of money in our democracy.

Research partners

This research project was led by Jolene Elberth and Dr Tessa Fluence from the Australian Conservation Foundation, with quantitative research conducted by Troy Burton, Madeleine Holme and Holly McCarthy of Reveille Strategy.

For more information and the full report, visit www.acf.org.au/democracy-narrative-guide



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