



PolicyLink

Governing for All:

2022

An Equity Narrative Playbook for Policy- Makers

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Invitation to *Govern for All*

The role of government is *equity*

Elected officials and policymakers have a critical role to play and a unique power to deliver on the founding promise of America: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—for *everyone*. The opportunity to perfect our democracy is what attracts many people to run for office—one of the most noble and powerful forms of public service in our nation.

As policymakers, you have the power to transform America so it works for every person, no matter their background. You have the power to govern for all.

Whether you're a city council member ensuring every voice is heard at the council meeting or a Congressperson prioritizing the needs of the most disinvested communities in your policymaking, governing for all is about understanding the inextricable link between your **power to govern** and your **responsibility to all people. You are entrusted with the power to design a nation that fulfills its promise.**

The long-held, long-overdue promise of the United States of America, evoked in the original founding documents, evolves as leaders challenge us to think in new and more expansive ways about access to opportunity for all people.

Despite our evolving sense of purpose, political rhetoric and narratives are increasingly divided. Despite shared values across differences, we don't have a shared vision of how to deliver on America's promise for all. The barriers that have long harmed people of color—social and economic exclusion and community disinvestment—have been maintained and exacerbated, hurting more people than ever before, including **more than 53 million people of color and 46 million white people.**¹

In the face of that divisiveness and struggle, it's easy to get caught up in defining and redefining equity, responding to attacks, and going on the defensive—all distractions from our work to create an equitable nation. We must move beyond defending equity to our colleagues and constituents, and start showing what it looks like when those nearly 100 million Americans—nearly a third of the nation—**are able to fully and freely participate in a thriving multiracial democracy.**

When we show what's possible, we change the way people understand the world around them. We change the way they see their neighbors, the way they vote, and what they talk about with their families.

As policymakers, you have power to shape the narratives and world views of your constituents and the broader public, illustrating a vision of unity that is transformative. With a new world view, rooted in an understanding of how **equity benefits everyone**, you can shape popular understanding and, ultimately, build support for policies that unleash our collective power and benefit us all.

When you engage your constituents to advance equity, you'll have the ability to change the material circumstances of every single person in your community.

As you commit to governing for all, we implore you to contribute to narratives that create public will to pass the legislation we need, and not get distracted by or unintentionally reinforce narratives meant to tear us apart. This playbook will give you a roadmap to do just that.

This playbook gives you the tools to help make equity ubiquitous—no longer a point of debate, but a prescription for freedom and fulfillment. Join us, and let's change the way our nation views equity once and for all.

In Solidarity,

Michael McAfee, President and CEO, PolicyLink
Vanice Dunn, Vice President of Communications, PolicyLink

About PolicyLink

For decades, PolicyLink has advanced a collective understanding of equity through *Lifting Up What Works*.² Now we must bring equity to fruition by redesigning America to fulfill its promise to everyone. This takes courage, vision, and collaboration across government and all sectors, to go **beyond symbolic commitments and enact legislation that makes real structural change.** We believe that with the right tools and resources, everyone can become torchbearers for equity. This playbook is one such resource.

Section One

What Is *Equity*?

Imagine a future where every aspect of your community is open to you. Where everyone is able to fully realize their talents, and build the lives they want for their families and future generations. Where children are able to follow their dreams regardless of their race, abilities, or what zip code they grew up in.

Put simply, equity is just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. It's the American promise.

EQUITY IS ABOUT RESULTS

Equity is not just the moral thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. If we get equity right, we get so much else right; things that we've had to return to again and again because of our failure to focus on equity.

“For when a nation founded on the belief in racial hierarchy truly rejects that belief then and only then will we have discovered a new world. That is our destiny. To make it manifest, we must challenge ourselves to live our lives in solidarity across color, origin, and class. We must demand changes to the rules in order to disrupt the very notion that those who have more money are worth more in our democracy and our economy. Since this country's founding, we have not allowed our diversity to be our superpower and the result is that the United States is not more than the sum of its disparate parts. But it could be. And if it were, all of us would prosper. In short, we must emerge from this crisis in our republic with a new birth of freedom. Rooted in the knowledge that we are so much more, when the “we” in “we the people” is not some of us, but all of us. We are greater than and greater for the sum of us.”

— Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*

EQUITY IS NOT CHARITY.

While charity is essential to alleviate immediate human suffering, equity works to address the root causes of an issue so the need for charity no longer exists.

“Charity is handing out water bottles in Flint, Michigan. Equity is rebuilding the pipes so people have access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water.”

— Michael McAfee

By solving the challenges of those who are consistently left the farthest behind, equity solves the nation's biggest problems. When we reimagine our laws, policies, and regulations so they meet the needs of those who have been excluded; our democracy, economy, culture, and communities become stronger for everyone.

This playbook offers you the tools so you can illustrate what equity looks like to you, your constituents, and your colleagues when we govern for all.

Equity understands that not everyone has the same opportunities. Barriers to opportunity exist all through our society, and nearly everyone has faced a barrier at some point in their life based on their age, gender, class, abilities, or race. Equity is racial equity is gender equity is disability equity is economic equity. When we talk about equity, we're talking about equity for everyone.

Given the history of our nation, how it was formed, and how those historical wrongs are maintained through current actions, it is clear that equity cannot be agnostic of race. Just as our nation was formed on a bedrock of racism—discrimination based on race was written into our founding documents—so every equity journey must start with race. If we don't deal with race forthright, we will never have a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

We address race forthrightly and productively because race is still the most key determinant of outcomes in our country. It also addresses the economic inequities that have excluded and exploited nearly 100 million people in this country, including 46 million white people. When we eliminate racial inequities, everyone—including white people—benefits.

Advancing Equity in the First 100 Days: A Listening Session

“Right now, many Americans are still not able to get unemployment benefits although there’s been a great package to push this forward—only about 30 percent of jobless people receive unemployment benefits. And why is that the case? It’s the case because the unemployment insurance system was built on structurally racist ideology and was deliberately discriminatory. It was built for people not to have access to it. And why? Because it was seen as keeping out Black people. Our social safety net is probably the best place that we can think about in this country right now to address anti-Blackness.”

— Anne Price, *Insight Center for Community and Economic Development*

EQUALITY IS NOT ENOUGH.

Equity is not the same as equality. When policymakers use the terms interchangeably, we lose an opportunity to open up a new conversation.

When we talk about equality, we talk about giving everyone the same treatment and resources, regardless of their situation or circumstances. But when we treat all people the exact same way, we get unjust and unfair outcomes. An equality approach ignores deep disparities across our identities, including race, gender, and class.

When we take an equity approach—particularly, a racial equity approach—we understand and acknowledge those disparities and differences. We don’t just provide equal opportunities, we also **ensure that systems are designed and maintained in a way that makes it possible for everyone to participate**. Equity sees the seeds of possibility in every person and removes the barriers for those seeds to grow.

The Curb-Cut Effect

“Equality gives everyone the right to ride on the bus. Equity ensures that there are curb cuts so people in wheelchairs can get to the bus stop and lifts so they can get on the bus, and ensures that there are bus lines where people need them so they can get to wherever they need to go.”

— Angela Glover Blackwell, *Founder in Residence, PolicyLink*

Put simply, equality relies on equal inputs for everyone and assumes everyone can take advantage of them, whereas equity asks what outcomes we want for everyone and designs an approach for what it will take to get us there.

A quick internet search of “equity vs. equality” will generate no shortage of imagery aiming to visualize the differences in easy-to-understand ways. Although all these illustrations are imperfect in different ways, we can still glean lessons to illustrate these key concepts.

A few reasons why this particular depiction can offer insights into the distinction between the two concepts include:

- Everyone is the same height, so it doesn’t point to perceived individual deficiencies, making clear that individual identities and characteristics are not the barrier between people and access or opportunity.
- The ground is uneven, which acknowledges that not everyone is at the same starting place, for structural reasons, through no fault of their own.
- The fence is uneven, which points to the compounding effect of inequities (the ground and the fence are systems that are working together to further prevent access).



EQUALITY

In the “equality” image, everyone is given the same number of boxes to stand on, regardless of whether they actually provide them what they need to see the game. This doesn’t acknowledge the uneven ground or the staggered height of the fence. The effect is that not everyone is able to see, only those with the advantage of higher ground and a lower fence.



EQUITY

In the “equity” image, you’ll see a depiction of equity. Equity is about creating equal outcomes, which means understanding the context and what is required to provide the same access to opportunity. Here each person is given a different number of boxes based on where they are in relation to the ground and fence. The result is that each person is able to see the game. In fact, everyone can now enjoy a collective experience of the game.

Images created by Cultural Organizing (Paul Kuttner)

The Opportunity *Before You*

You have the opportunity to create your legacy by perfecting our nation so that it works for everyone, which requires an understanding of the impact of historic and current policies. Our shortcomings on equity have left nearly 100 million people of all backgrounds across this country struggling to make ends meet, making it harder for their families, children, and communities to realize their potential. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened this crisis, deepening economic insecurity and laying bare the racial disparities that determine who falls behind, who stays afloat, and who gets ahead.

This moment also presents an unprecedented opportunity to tell a new story, address the root causes of inequities, and give people something to believe in. As the country continues to reconcile the pandemic’s impact, we are at an important crossroad and a return to “normal” is insufficient. Americans ready for change are not the few: three-quarters of voters in our country believe that eliminating racism is a goal we should try to achieve.² **You have the opportunity to push for bold transformation of our systems and institutions so they value all people.**

THE CHALLENGE TO OVERCOME

Redesigning our country to live up to its promise won’t be easy. The biggest obstacles in our way are the **deeply rooted narratives that continue to divide us, even as our fates are intertwined.**

Over generations, a skewed version of history has been widely disseminated and adopted. Too many people are taught that America provides freedom, with the fallacy that said freedom is unconditional. This skewed, romanticized version of history doesn’t name the racial and ideological divides that were encoded into our nation’s founding.

Furthermore, it creates ideal conditions for history to repeat itself, with many people espousing American ideals of liberty and justice for all, while also believing that some people are more deserving than others and one person’s success must come at the cost of another’s.

Many of the stories we repeat are based on a fallacy of fixed-pie thinking and scarcity mindsets, also called zero-sum thinking. It’s an idea crafted by those who want to hoard power and wealth: rather than pull up others around them, they turn us against each other, and make us believe that any other way is impossible and that social inequity is a fact of life. We’re told repeatedly that one group’s success would come at the expense of another, or that a focus on racial equity

is un-American or damaging to white people. Lower and middle-income white voters are being manipulated into supporting policies that lead to greater harm and damage to their own health.

The suspicion that lifting others up requires us to sacrifice something of our own, has become ingrained in popular consciousness and informs the way people make decisions every day. **This perception has been shown time and again to be untrue.**

“In decade after decade, threats of job competition—between men and women, immigrants and native born, Black and white—have perennially revived the fear of loss at another’s gain. The people setting up the competition and spreading these fears were never the needy job seekers, but the elite.”

— Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*

This is a moment to reimagine how we govern. In fact, when the nation targets support where it is needed most—when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully—everyone wins. When we focus on racial inclusion, the benefits extend to working and middle-class families of all races that are feeling the downward pull of an inequitable economy.

The corollary is also true: **when we ignore the challenges faced by those made most vulnerable, those challenges are magnified many times over and become a drag on economic growth, prosperity, and national well-being.** For example, racial inequities in income already cost the US economy about \$2.3 trillion per year, and as the workforce approaches a people-of-color majority that toll will only grow in the absence of bold, equity-focused solutions.³

A CALL TO LEAD A CHANGING NATION

Right now, policymakers like you have an unprecedented opportunity to govern for all. After global protests for racial justice in 2020, more people than ever are aware of our nation’s history. Many Americans are now able to make the connection between our country’s deep and long-standing inequities and



the conditions people of color face today. Almost three-quarters of the nation believe that eliminating racism is a goal we should try to achieve in this country and more than half believe that federal and state government have a responsibility to help solve this problem.⁴

Despite the divisive tactics encouraging us to believe otherwise, data shows that a vast majority of Americans believe in an equitable future for our nation.⁵

America has been locked in a near-perpetual cycle of racial advancement and backlash for over a hundred years; from bills restricting voting access to ending extended unemployment benefits. Governing for all is an opportunity to progress civil rights and safety nets for every American. Our country continues to grow more diverse, and soon more than half of America's population will be people of color.

Our economic future hinges on how we respond to these changes. Yet many policymakers are afraid to advocate for equity, scared to anger or alienate their white constituents.

Racial equity is not just a progressive issue—we know that people of all political leanings see the ways that racial inequities have made it more difficult for some people to access opportunity. Research shows that across all attitudinal clusters—from the most liberal to the most conservative—everyone agrees that there are differences in opportunities based on factors such as where you were born and raised.⁶

This means discussing unequal opportunity should be in the wheelhouse of every policymaker in our nation. We know from polling and research that the guidance in this playbook will help you expand your base by tapping into the values that span race, class, and political parties.

But in order to make progress and deliver results, we need to uproot and rewrite the narratives that have been woven over the last half-century, designed and incentivized to pit us against each other. Many of the narratives we need to uproot aren't even in direct opposition—many times our audiences have more in common than we know.

As policymakers, you have a unique opportunity—and the power—to shift and rewrite these narratives that divide us. People listen to and repeat what you say; your worldview shapes our society. It's time to use your power in service of your commitment to bringing a more equitable government to fruition, to create a nation where every one of your constituents can live fully and freely.

A NEW NARRATIVE TO UNITE US

Narratives are the big stories we tell ourselves about the world, rooted in our values, that influence how we process information and make decisions.⁷

We reference mental narratives constantly, often unconsciously, and they are so powerful that they often matter more than facts. And while they play on our values and beliefs, they don't come from within us—the narratives we know depend entirely on what we've heard and what we've been exposed to.

When harmful stereotypes become embedded in visible and invisible ways within popular culture, we see their manifestation reinforced everywhere around us, oftentimes without even realizing it. For example, if you do a Google search for the phrase 'Happy Family,' the results are overwhelming of white, two-parent families. This is a real-world daily manifestation of a harmful societal narrative that is consistently reproduced, which further embeds the stereotype that white, two-parent households are happier than all other types of households.

That is why zero-sum thinking is so pervasive—it is a narrative created and repeated over time that says there is a limited amount of opportunity available. The more people hear it, the more they believe it, even when the facts say something different.

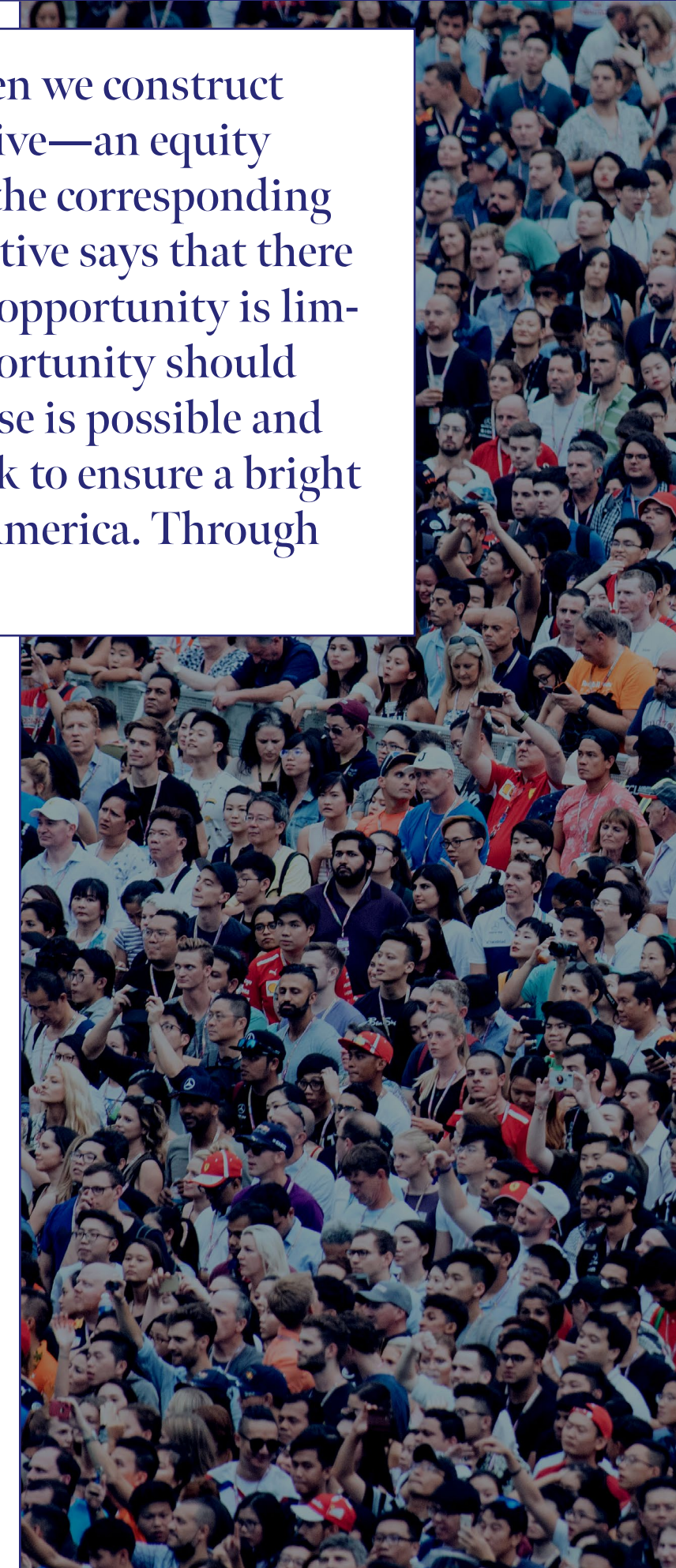
We cannot, and will not, create a just and fair society where all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential by telling people they're wrong and debating on the merits. We won't win by solely listing facts and debunking myths.

Policymakers have a profound influence on narratives and narratives have a profound impact on policymaking. Every speech, talking point, bill name, and story

We'll win on equity when we construct and repeat a new narrative—an equity narrative—and deliver the corresponding results. An equity narrative says that there is enough for everyone, opportunity is limitless, and access to opportunity should be too. America's promise is possible and policymakers must work to ensure a bright future for everyone in America. Through equity, we can all win.

you share reinforces certain narratives, whether you intend to or not. Too often, policymakers who want to advance equity unknowingly end up reinforcing the very narratives that are tearing us apart. But when you repeat the right narratives, you can create a new tipping point in public consciousness and create the conditions for you to advance your agenda and broaden your base.

We know that understanding the right narratives and how to deploy them takes some guidance, which we are pleased to provide in the next section of this playbook.



Section Two

The Playbook

How to *Win On Equity*

This section of the playbook provides the tools to uproot harmful narratives and replace them with equity narratives. We provide guidance on messaging, language, storytelling, and data.

1. BELIEVE IT'S POSSIBLE.

All of the guidance below will only succeed when policymakers are truly committed to delivering results for the nearly 100 million people who are economically insecure in this nation.

There are no language shortcuts to equity—your heart must be invested, your actions must be aligned, and you must commit to transforming the oppressive systems and institutions that have compromised our democracy and economy. If you aren't inspired by your vision, chances are others won't be either.

We need to believe that we can fix inequity and build a thriving, multiracial democracy and be unwilling to let anyone distract us from the work of delivering on that promise. This requires dreaming big and boldly. It is only when we, ourselves, believe, that we can begin to transform the broader narrative and build support for that vision.

2. EMBRACE RACE AND EVERYONE CAN WIN: BUILD YOUR RACIAL EQUITY NARRATIVE.

Equity is in service of *all people*, but it requires that we focus first on those who have been left behind, starting with people-of-color. Equity narratives must be rooted in the proven concept that when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been pushed behind to participate and contribute fully, **everyone wins**.

The proof is there: solving problems in education, health, housing, or any other issue by creating laws and programs designed to benefit people-of-color ends up benefiting people of all races.

You must talk about race. It will free you and your policymaking. Our inability to talk about race keeps all of us from winning. This is your challenge in bringing the equity narrative to life, and it may feel uncomfortable or impossible at first. This is because racial divisiveness is encoded into our nation. White people who have been led to believe that they stand to benefit most from this path forward have been manipulated by racialized political strategies that put fear before progress. While this is ingrained, it is not immutable. But selling political strategies is not going to solve the problem. We must engage people's sense of identity

and humanity, making space for people to see their true place in the world.

“Our economic, political, and juridical systems devalue the lives of people of color and Indigenous people in ways so ingrained as to seem immutable. Changing how white Americans recognize the ways that racism and racialized capitalism affect outcomes for everyone will need to run deeper than recasting political priorities, as hard as that will be. The most meaningful changes must engage one's fundamental sense of identity, humanity, and place in the world.”

— [Transcending Barriers of Whiteness](#), [PolicyLink](#)

Your equity narrative may look and sound different from those of your colleagues. You may not even be able to use the word “equity” at first if it risks alienating your constituents. Regardless of how you describe it, these elements are critical:

- 1. Opportunity isn't the same** for everyone—race, gender, class, zip code, and abilities all affect our ability to participate and prosper in America.
- Our country was built on a promise of freedom and prosperity for everyone, but there are **systems that were built** to keep some people from accessing that promise.
- There is **enough for everyone**. Opportunity in America can be limitless if we open it up to everyone.
- When we make policies that ensure those that have been left behind can participate and prosper, **everyone wins**.

You can—and *should!*—make it yours, speaking directly to the challenges and opportunities in your own community. And if you can commit to telling and retelling this narrative—the true story that our fates are intertwined—it will open the door for you to start delivering on that promise.

You don't have to sound like a robot when following the guidance to build your equity narrative. Your message is most powerful when you use your own voice, tone, and style. In [this video](#) produced by Notice Pictures for the Midwest Culture Lab, Amber J. Phillips shows how you can have a consistent equity narrative without sounding like you're parroting someone else.



In 2018, the campaign Greater Than Fear proved that you don't have to choose between being explicit about race or discussing class. Across Minnesota, candidates successfully overcame fear-based narratives and promoted their own aspirational equity narratives, engaging their base and persuading the middle, and ultimately winning at the ballot boxes. The campaign's research and experience in the community affirmed that economic appeals don't persuade when we don't talk about race.

Minister JaNaé Bates, Communications Director of Faith in Minnesota and ISALAH, explains, *"We found that white farm families out in greater Minnesota were having the same problems as Black families in Minneapolis, yet they were being told different stories about who's to blame and who they should be angry with about it, so we have to talk about race. As a matter of fact, we need to center it and make sure that when we talk about it we're very explicitly naming the dog whistles that are used to divide us and also name that what we really need and deserve and want is a multiracial democracy where everyone is in and no one is out."*

Learn all about the campaign on the podcast [Words to Win By](#).

3. DON'T DEBATE, ILLUSTRATE.

Too often policymakers lose the opportunity to say and repeat an equity narrative because they are busy responding to the opposition—an intentional distraction tactic.

The current media environment has normalized openly and implicitly racist viewpoints under the false premise of exploring balance. This is a direct effect of the coordinated right-wing efforts to diminish the power of people-of-color. They understand that if they make enough noise, they can turn the media cycle into a debate about race-baiting rather than truly address the issues affecting millions of Americans.

There is no winning when you engage in that type of debate. When you engage, you signal that the distraction has merit. Instead, it's important to detect, disrupt, and open up a new narrative.

As Nsé Ufot of New Georgia Project brilliantly articulates in ["The Whole of Government Responsibility"](#) webinar, it's not strategic to amplify misinformation and disinformation even to offer an analysis of why it's incorrect, especially in a digital world where the algorithm only acknowledges your promoting of that information, not your analysis; the key lies in exercising the discipline to seed the conversation with messages you know move your audiences to act. Instead of repeating disinformation, tell your audiences about things that are inspiring that they want for their communities, themselves, and their families.

4. START WITH VALUES.

Regardless of who you're talking to—whether it's your base, undecided voters, or your constituents—always start with shared values. These form the bedrock for all narratives and they provide the bridge for connecting with people who disagree with you. When you start with values, you remind people why they should pay attention and give them a reason to listen. Values are a key way to speak to the hopes and dreams of your constituents, showing both your understanding and alignment.

Not all values are the same, and not all values inspire people to believe or take action. Especially as you speak to people outside of your base, consider what values will most resonate and how you can link those values with an equity narrative.

EQUITY AND INDIVIDUALISM DON'T HAVE TO BE AT ODDS

For example, there are many people of color who have directly experienced racism but have an individualist way of understanding how people can get ahead. The opposition co-opts that value of individualism as a way to support a bootstraps narrative that keeps people of color down by saying they should be able to lift themselves up on their own. By connecting personal responsibility with collective outcomes and emphasizing that equity provides equal opportunity to succeed, you show that you share the value of individualism while showing the benefits of working together.

Examples of how to lead with values:

No matter where you come from, what you look like, or how much money your family has, everyone should have what they need to learn, grow, and thrive.

- Most of us work hard for our families.
- All children deserve a roof over their heads and a safe place to live.
- We all have some responsibility to solve the problem of racism.
- When whole groups of qualified people are excluded from schools, jobs, or advancement, our families and communities suffer.
- We all deserve to have our basic needs met.
- Nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community is essential to solving the nation's problems.

5. WORDS MATTER: CHOOSE LANGUAGE THAT UPLIFTS AND INCLUDES EVERYONE.

Don't define people by the problems they experience. If we met someone new, we'd never start a conversation by telling them what's wrong with them—we'd ask them about their interests and their dreams. Why should we do anything different with groups of people we talk about?

When we define people by their challenges (even if we are out to solve those challenges), we prime our subconscious to stigmatize people. Trabian Shorters describes the importance of this through his concept of asset-framing.⁸ These stigma narratives are stronger than the talking points on your policy solution.

'You Can't Lift People Up by Putting Them Down': How to Talk About Tough Issues of Race, Poverty, and More

"Cognitive science and longitudinal studies strongly suggest that consistently defining people in denigrating terms is one way that racist narratives become institutionalized and part of the culture...While they are right to point out injustices, disparities, and needs, they are dead wrong to do it by deeply associating all these problems with the people who experience them. This unintentionally but categorically lets systemic instigators off the hook."

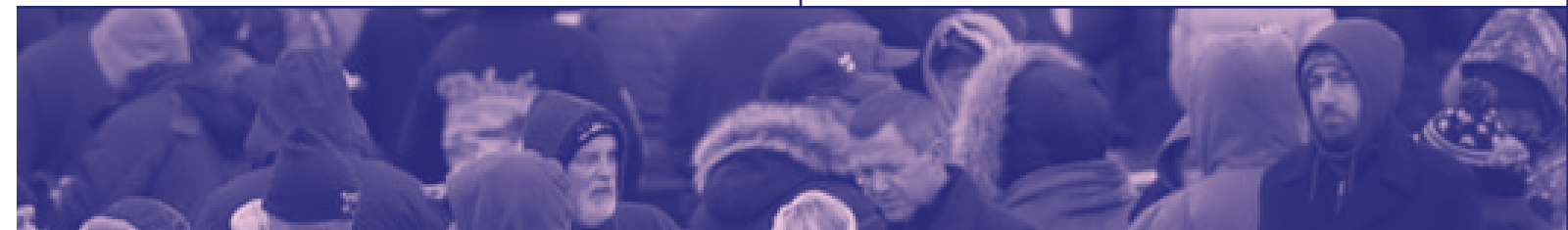
— Trabian Shorters, *BMe*

Name the causes of inequity—both the systems and the people. In order to disrupt the systems that are holding people back from reaching their potential, we need to expose them.

In many cases, these systems are abstracted and hidden from view. For example, when we say "low-income workers," that frame suggests that income is an immutable circumstance or characteristic. When they hear that, people think, "poor them," or wonder what the workers did to become low-income. But when we say "workers underpaid by wealthy corporations," we can see that the worker is experiencing a problem created by their pay and the people who dictate their pay. Instead of an unfortunate circumstance, we see a problem to be solved. This small reframe changes not just people's understanding of the problem, but also their motivation to change it.

Whenever possible, specifically name both the systems that need redesigning and the people who designed them that remain incentivized to maintain them. Together, they represent the villain that we must overcome. To complete the story, describe how people's lives will change for the better when we undo those systems.

When we name broken systems and the people who built them, audiences understand that the only way to solve a problem is to fix the system. When we don't provide that context, people blame individuals for their circumstances.



DON'T SAY	SAY
Black youth are more than four times as likely as white youth to be detained or committed to a juvenile facility.	Inequities leading to harmful social conditions impact some young people in our communities more than others. Case in point: although Black and white youth are roughly as likely to engage in behaviors that could warrant arrest, Black youth are more than four times as likely to be detained by law enforcement. ¹⁰
Vulnerable communities	Communities centering joy despite continual local, state, and federal disinvestment.
At-risk youth	Young people experiencing barriers to education and employment, who have been denied the resources required to thrive.
Renters facing eviction	Community members kept from maintaining the basic need of housing because of skyrocketing rental prices and no rent control in their city.

“When we were walking through the grocery aisle and you wanna buy brownies, what is the image on the brownie box? The brownie! What’s not staring you in the face? The recipe! When you open up the brownie box, there’s no brownies in that brownie box, there’s a bunch of powder and they have to go make that brownie.” So instead of saying “We’re going to create paid family leave for all Californians,” say “You’re there the first time your newborn smiles...” We need to stop messaging our policy and talk about what our policy achieves.

— Anat Shenker-Osorio, *Resistance School at Berkeley Shifting Public Opinion Through Strategic Messaging and Metaphors*

DON'T SAY	SAY
We need a universal job guarantee.	Everyone should have access to a fair, stable opportunity for income.
We need paid family medical leave.	You’re there the first time your newborn smiles. ¹²
We need to solve problems.	We need to implement solutions.
We need to deepen infrastructure investments in this district.	We need to ensure that every person has clean water.

Be explicit about race and class. People are aware of existing inequities along racial lines and want to see themselves in the story. When you are speaking on an issue, reflect on the specific ways it affects different racial groups—if it affects Black people differently, be clear and explicit about that. Avoid coded language that reinforces racial stereotypes.

Phrases to use:

- Opportunity isn’t equal. It depends on who you are and where you come from.
- A healthy, thriving multiracial democracy is only possible if people from all races and all places are treated equally and afforded the same opportunities.
- Americans of all races experience housing injustice, and Black and Hispanic people experience these inequities at even higher rates than all other communities.

Focus on outcomes rather than policies or procedures. While the majority of Americans believe that eliminating racism is a goal we should try to achieve, people are divided on the role of government in doing so.¹¹ But the success of an equity narrative doesn’t hinge on the government’s role and should not be focused on policy. Focus on describing how everyone will have the ability to succeed, live a fulfilling life, and provide for their families.

6. TELL STORIES THAT SUPPORT YOUR EQUITY NARRATIVE.

Stories are powerful. They grab our attention and pull at our heartstrings. They help storytellers connect with their listeners on an emotional level. Powerful stories can break down divides and move people from complacency to action.

Every individual story told is a star in a narrative constellation. The character archetypes, villains, challenges, and outcomes are unconsciously linked in our minds to narratives that help us make sense of the world.

Covid-19 brought new, heightened attention to the pre-existing pandemic of poverty, with millions of Americans being evicted from their homes. However, the stories being told about low-income communities often fail to humanize them and reflect their power.

We have an opportunity to tell the right stories that reinforce equity narratives. But in order to do that, we

need to stop racial stereotyping, resist savior stories, and find the right protagonists.

Here are key things to keep in mind when telling stories:

- Tell your **own story** about how you came to this work and why it matters to you and connect it with the story of your community.
- Tell stories that **come from and reflect your communities** and constituents. People have a hard time finding the same compassion for a generic protagonist as they have for their own neighbors.
- Always **frame individual stories within systems** to show the full story. A story of a Black family struggling with the cost of dealing with chronic health issues could be interpreted within an individualistic narrative frame (“Were they eating right?”). When we place that story within a system—a health care system that routinely disregards the pain of Black people, or the lack of local health care facilities—we see the need for systemic solutions.
- **Don’t reinforce false or harmful narratives.** While a story of a person who achieved success against all odds on their own is compelling, it can unintentionally reinforce a bootstrap narrative and tokenize people as a means to downplay the realities of structural racism. Despite best intentions, we can cause harm, so ask yourself whether your narrative has the potential to unintentionally harm someone.
- **Invite people to tell their own stories.** People aren’t props, and their lives don’t exist to further policy goals. Your constituents have deep expertise in their lived experience that should be valued. Equity is about making it possible for every person to reach their dreams. It is more powerful to let people tell their own stories and share their own dreams.

Jamila Mame, renter on the East Side of St. Paul, a member of the Keep St. Paul Home campaign steering committee, tells a powerful story to the *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, personalizing the fight for rent control through personal, community-centered storytelling. Read her story in full [here](#).¹³

7. USE POWERFUL EXAMPLES TO BRING EQUITY TO LIFE.

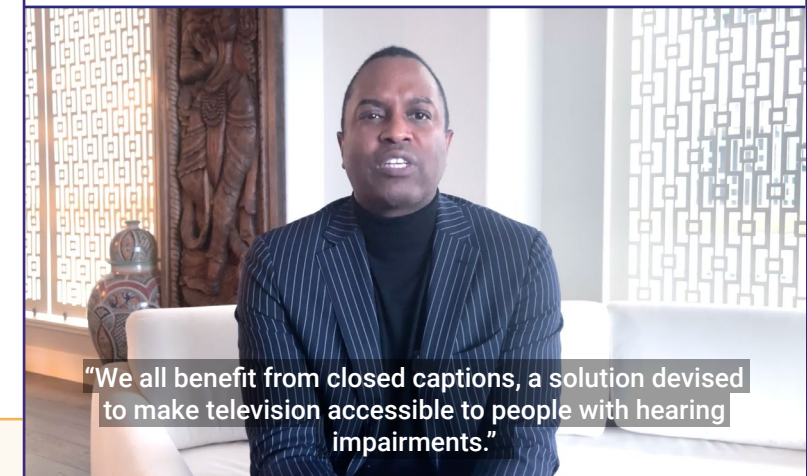
The concept of equity is hard for many people to grasp. The most powerful way to bring it to life is through concrete examples that show, rather than tell, how

when we focus on delivering outcomes for those who have been left behind, it benefits everyone.

The most powerful example that brings equity to life is in **curb cuts**. The ramps at most sidewalk corners are ubiquitous now, but only because of the pressure from disabled student activists at Berkeley in 1972. At that time, moving around in a wheelchair was difficult and dangerous for these students and people with disabilities across the country.

Nowadays, these ramps are used and appreciated by nearly everyone, whether they’re aware of them or not. Parents and caregivers cross the street without jostling children in their strollers. Travelers roll their suitcases across multiple city blocks without having to pick them up. People on skateboards and bicycles can enter the street safely. Curb cuts are a prime example of how intentionally supporting the most vulnerable among us, making it possible for them to participate and contribute fully, benefits us all.¹⁴

There are examples like this everywhere, if we look for them. When we reveal them, they can become the images that bring the concepts of equity to life. When people remember when they’ve benefited from a curb cut themselves, they can start to understand how, even if they are white, if we improve outcomes for Black people and other people-of-color, they benefit as well.



8. ALWAYS CONTEXTUALIZE DATA.

We have an incredible amount of data at our fingertips that provides the proof for the equity narrative. Data, disaggregated by identities such as race, gender, and nativity is essential for understanding how outcomes differ when we invest in equity.

But facts without context or story are almost meaningless. It’s just human nature—we need stories to make sense of facts.

The [National Equity Atlas](#) can help you drill down to a local level to assess the state of equity in your community, based on how well your community's diverse populations can participate in its economic vitality, contribute to its readiness for the future, and connect to its assets and resources. This incredible resource puts an end to excuses by providing data for the United States as a whole, as well as every state including DC, 150 metro areas, 100 cities, and 430 counties.

When you do bring in data, focus on only one to two key statistics at a time, and contextualize the numbers you're sharing so they become part of a story. The "Why it Matters" tab underneath each indicator display in the National Equity Atlas provides example language to describe how each indicator connects to the goal of building equitable, prosperous communities.

By wrapping a data point in an experience people can connect to, we offer the opportunity for greater resonance with our audiences. For example, the statement, "There are only 5 parks in our city and only 15% of residents have access" doesn't feel as connected to human experience as the same data point articulated differently: "Families in the Richmond neighborhood have to travel one hour by bus, each way, just to reach their closest local park to have outdoor playtime with their children."

9. REPEAT, REPEAT.

Narratives are seeded and sustained by repetition and proliferation. Whenever you are speaking on an issue, tie it to a broader equity narrative, and sandwich your talking point in that narrative. For instance, if asked about housing, instead of diving right into the details of your policy proposal, start and end with a narrative. For example:

Start with a narrative, rooted in values:
 "Housing is a basic human need, but not everyone has the same access to housing."

Describe the outcomes of your policy proposal.

End with the narrative: "When we have safe places to live, we improve educational opportunities, family well-being, and health outcomes for everyone in the community."

RENT STABILITY IN ST. PAUL

A coalition of groups in St. Paul built a multi-racial movement to easily pass a rent stabilization bill meant to keep residents in their homes. They were outspent 7 to 1 in their campaign, as landlord and real estate interests invested \$4 million to defeat the measure. The coalition was successful because their message emphasized a core value shared by people of all backgrounds: everyone deserves a home they can rely on. Renters of color were most likely to be pushed out of their homes by rent increases: 83% of Black households in St. Paul are renters, compared to just 41% of white households. But the campaign wove a clear equity narrative, showing how the benefits of the measure extend to all people, regardless of their race or background, and worked to repeat, repeat, repeat their narrative without fail. Because they focused on delivering results for everyone, the measure, against all odds, passed with support across political party lines. This win will transform the lives of St. Paul residents.

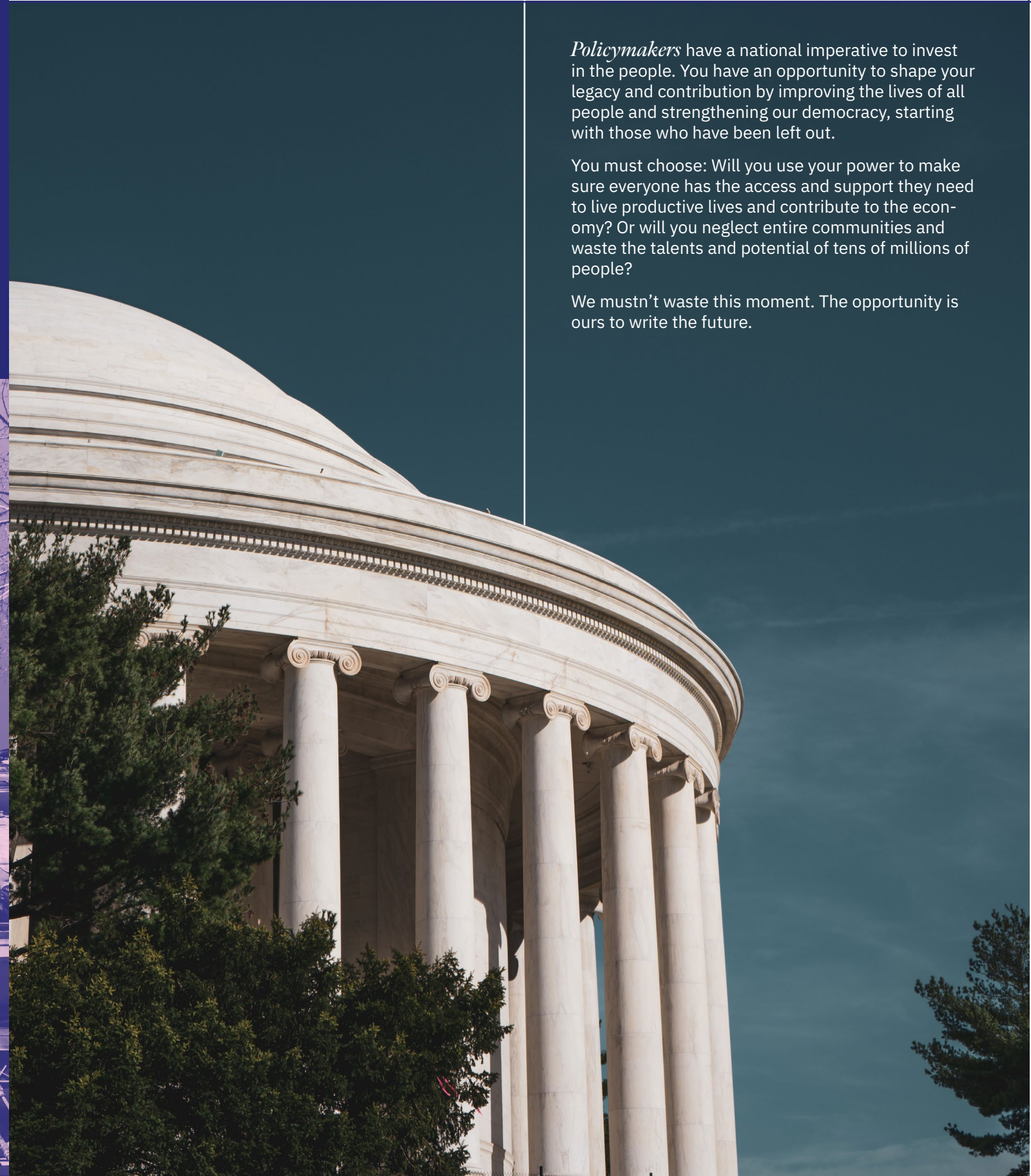


Equity Is an *Imperative*

Policymakers have a national imperative to invest in the people. You have an opportunity to shape your legacy and contribution by improving the lives of all people and strengthening our democracy, starting with those who have been left out.

You must choose: Will you use your power to make sure everyone has the access and support they need to live productive lives and contribute to the economy? Or will you neglect entire communities and waste the talents and potential of tens of millions of people?

We mustn't waste this moment. The opportunity is ours to write the future.



The Equity Manifesto



THE EQUITY MANIFESTO, A GROUNDING DOCUMENT WHICH NOT ONLY DEFINES EQUITY BUT ACKNOWLEDGES THE BROADER CONTEXT AND ENABLING CONDITIONS OF EQUITY, HAS BEEN INSPIRED BY THE WORK, COMMITMENTS, INSIGHTS, AND RESOLVE OF THE MANY PARTNERS WITH WHOM POLICYLINK HAS SHARED THIS JOURNEY.

IT BEGINS by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond.

IT EMBRACES complexity as cause for collaboration, accepting that our fates are inextricable.

IT RECOGNIZES local leaders as national leaders, nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community as essential to solving the nation's problems.

IT DEMANDS honesty and forthrightness, calling out racism, and oppression, both overt and systemic.

IT STRIVES for the power to realize our goals while summoning the grace to sustain them.

IT REQUIRES that we understand the past, without being trapped in it; embrace the present, without being constrained by it; and look to the future, guided by the hopes and courage of those who have fought before and beside us.

This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.

FURTHER READING

This playbook is one of many resources we recommend as you work to build, refine, and amplify your equity narrative. Below find a list of additional recommended resources.

Resources from PolicyLink:

- [For Love of Country](#)
- [Curb-Cut Effect](#)
- [National Equity Atlas](#)
- [Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness](#)

Other resources to deepen your understanding of how narrative and messaging can advance equity goals:

- [Sum of Us](#)
- [Race Class Narrative](#)
- [Dying of Whiteness](#)
- [Building Narrative Power for Racial Justice and Health Equity](#)
- [GARE Communications Guide](#)
- [Opportunity Agenda](#)
- [Words to Win By](#)
- [Through the Looking Glass 2022 Narrative Predictions](#)

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PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by Lifting Up What Works®.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 PolicyLink's seminal report [100 Million and Counting: A Portrait of Economic Insecurity in the United States](#) reveals that 100 million people in the United States are struggling to make ends meet. It includes some powerful insights on this population, and on the depth of the impact that systemic inequities have on our society.
- 2 [This oral history film](#) recalls PolicyLink's vision and contributions over the last quarter century.
- 3 [PolicyLink Race & Equity in America: Annual Attitudinal Research, 2021 Findings](#)
- 4 <https://nationalequityatlas.org/research/race-and-the-work-of-the-future>
- 5 [PolicyLink Race & Equity in America: Annual Attitudinal Research, 2021 Findings](#)
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Narrative definition borrowed from [The Opportunity Agenda](#)
- 9 ["You Can't Lift People Up by Putting Them Down"](#) Trabian Shorters, Chronicle of Philanthropy
- 10 [Framing Racial Equity in Adolescence: Messaging Strategies for Social Change, Frameworks Institute and Health+ Studio](#), November 2021
- 11 [PolicyLink Race & Equity in America: Annual Attitudinal Research, 2021 Findings](#)
- 12 Anat Shenker-Osorio, Resistance School at Berkeley [Shifting Public Opinion Through Strategic Messaging and Metaphors](#)
- 13 <https://www.twincities.com/2021/08/27/jamila-mame-why-ill-vote-yes-to-limit-the-rate-of-rent-increases-in-st-paul/>
- 14 The Curb-Cut Effect describes a phenomenon whereby laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as people who are disabled or people of color, often end up benefiting all of society.

