



Public Education is Popular (and Our Opponents Know it)

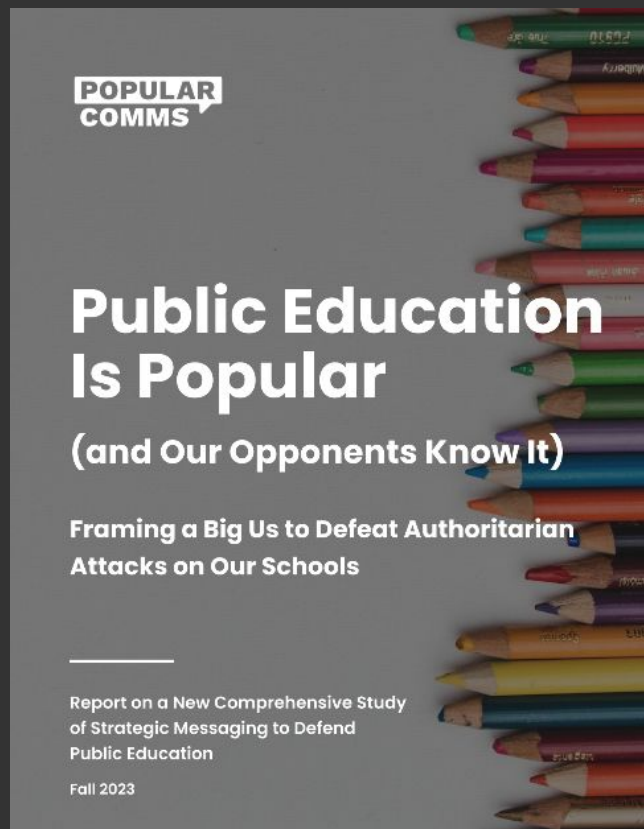
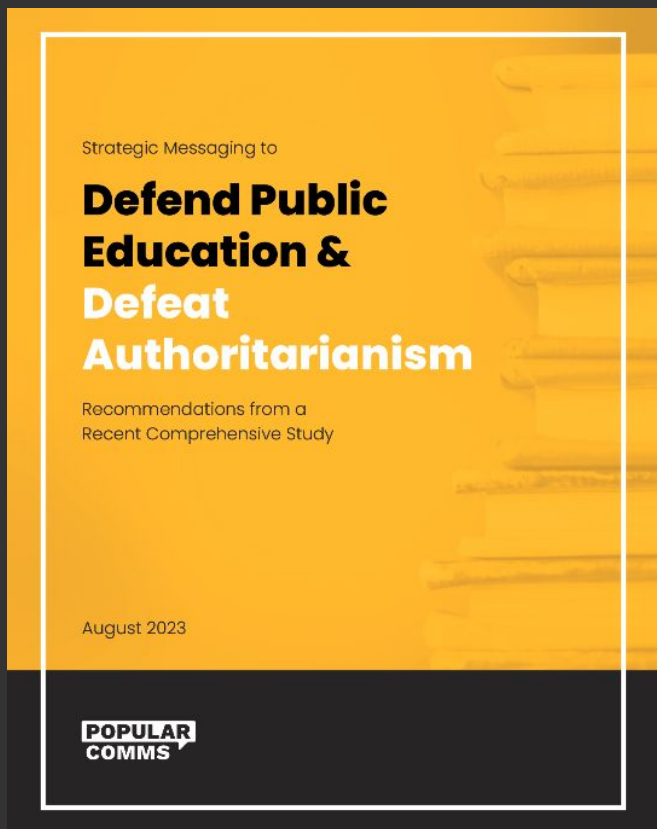
Framing a Big Us to Defeat Authoritarian
Attacks on Our Schools

Anna Bakalis, Cicia Lee, Allison Troy | June 2024



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Agenda:

1. **What We're Up Against:** Authoritarian attacks on public education
2. **Study Design & Results:** Testing anti-authoritarian messages against these attacks
3. **Messaging Recommendations:** Using these insights on the ground
4. **Exercise and Q&A**

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Attacks on Public Education: Old Story, New Chapters



Attacks on Public Education Are Attacks on Multi-Racial Democracy



It's an old story

With new chapters

Anti-“CRT”



Book Bans



Attacks on Trans Kids



School Privatization & Vouchers



- **The problem:** public schools are “failing” children and parents
- **We should not:** “Throw more good money after bad” by funding public education
- **The solution:** Restore “parents’ rights” and “full school choice” through voucher schemes

School Privatization & Vouchers

Pair share: What are common responses you have used or have seen in response to these opposition messages?

- **The problem:** public schools are “failing” children and parents
- **We should not:** “Throw more good money after bad” by funding public education
- **The solution:** Restore “parents’ rights” and “full school choice” through voucher schemes

How many of you responded with...

“Voucher programs are used to divert funding away from already public schools and into private and charter schools that are not accountable.”

“Private voucher schools choose who they want and increase segregation or inequities by race, ethnicity, and income and often exclude certain kids.”

How many of you responded with...

“For decades, a small group of powerful and well-funded politicians and special interests have sought to defund our public schools. They know that if we fight each other, we’ll be distracted while they continue to use voucher schemes to take money from our public schools while benefiting wealthy private schools.”

“Many of us feel conflicted or or worried that we don’t know enough to make the right choice about vouchers, school options, public school budgets, or more.”

“Our children deserve every opportunity to succeed and pursue their dreams. They should have access to all of the best technology, learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors that will prepare them for a bright future.”



Testing Anti-Authoritarian Rhetoric (Our Study)



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How to Defeat Authoritarian Rhetoric on Public Education?

Pro-Public
Schools Message

vs

Expected
Authoritarian
Message

“Which message do you prefer?”

Tested across North Carolina, Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, across geographic/demographic groups.

Vs.

Counter-Argument

Big Us, Small Them

Meet Them Where They Are

Positive Vision

Authoritarian

School Vouchers & Privatization

Counter-Argument

Big Us, Small Them

Meet Them Where They Are

Positive Vision

Authoritarian

Critical Race Theory

Counter-Argument

Big Us, Small Them

Meet Them Where They Are

Positive Vision

Authoritarian

Transgender Athletes

Counter-Argument

Big Us, Small Them

Meet Them Where They Are

Positive Vision

Authoritarian

Book Bans

1. Counter-Argument

The approach we see as most commonly used by our side; often what our instincts tell us to say.

Broad approach: Prove the other side is wrong.

Factually:

“Voucher programs are used to divert funding away from already under-funded public schools and into private and charter schools that are not accountable to taxpayers.”

“Our public schools don’t teach Critical Race Theory. And they are not teaching our white students that they are the oppressors.”

1. Counter-Argument

The approach we see as most commonly used by our side; often what our instincts tell us to say.

Broad approach: Prove the other side is wrong.

Morally:

“Private voucher schools choose who they want and increase segregation by race, ethnicity, and income and exclude kids with disabilities or other challenges.”

2. Big Us, Small Them

1. Start with **shared values**, rooted in what our children deserve.
2. Name a small but **powerful culprit** who threatens those values.
3. Call out the **divide-and-conquer strategy** seeks to pit us against each other (based on differences like race, gender, sexuality, country of origin, etc.).
4. Invoke a **big, inclusive multi-racial “all of us”** that is more powerful than the small them.

2. Big Us, Small Them

Shared values

“Every child in this community deserves a quality education that prepares them for a bright future.”

Powerful culprit

“Yet for decades, a small group of powerful and well-funded political activists, politicians, operatives, and lobbyists have sought to defund our public schools.”

Divide-and-conquer strategy

“This is the same old strategy that opponents of public education have been using for decades: pit us against each other while they defund our public schools.”

Big, multi-racial “all of us”

“It is our responsibility as parents & educators to come together across race and differences to protect our children’s freedom to learn and thrive.”

3. Meet Them Where They Are

Validates people's feelings, including negative emotions.

People may feel afraid, confused, or overwhelmed, especially when it's a topic they are not familiar with.

Inoculate against opposition's attacks and return to shared values.

“As parents, we all know it can be a real struggle to figure out what information to introduce to our children and at what point in their development.”

“But we cannot let our discomfort lead to censorship or stripping away our children's fundamental freedom to learn.”

4. Positive Vision

Leads by describing a positive future, rooted in an abundance frame.

- Completely ignores the opposition's frame.
- Does not name culprits.

“As the next generation of American leaders, our children deserve a quality education that fully prepares them for a bright future in a changing world. They should have access to all of the best technology, accurate and up-to-date learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors.”

Methodology



Sample Size (weighted)

State	Likely Voters	Less Likely Voters	Other	Modeled Margin of Error
Florida	n = 296	n = 307	n = 282 rural voters	3.4%
North Carolina	n = 328	n = 244		4.3%
Pennsylvania	n = 307	n = 211		4.8%
Virginia	n = 339	n = 187		4.8%
Washington	n = 387	n = 280		4.3%



Respondents were recruited via dynamic online sampling to obtain a sample reflective of the population.



Post-stratification performed on age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and 2020 presidential vote. Weighting parameters were based on voter file data.



The modeled margin of error of the aggregated results is 1.9%

[Full Methodology](#)

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Which messaging type do you use or see the most in your own work?

① Click **Present with Slido** or install our [Chrome extension](#) to activate this poll while presenting.

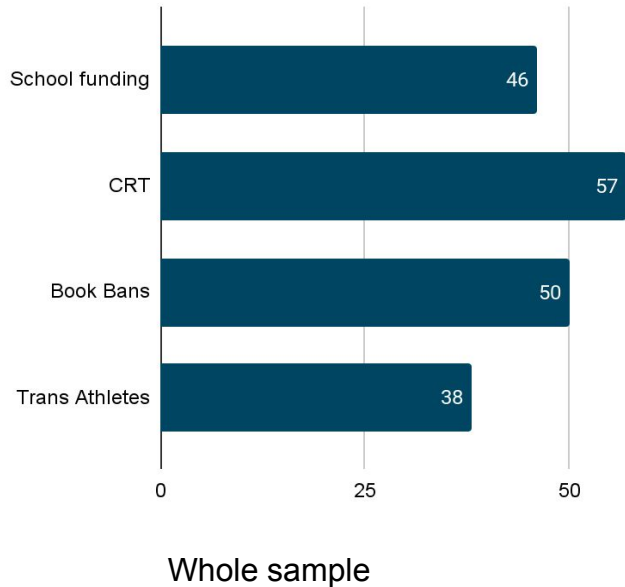


**Results: Our vision
for public ed is
popular**



Counter-Argument Messaging

% Choosing Counter-Argument Message

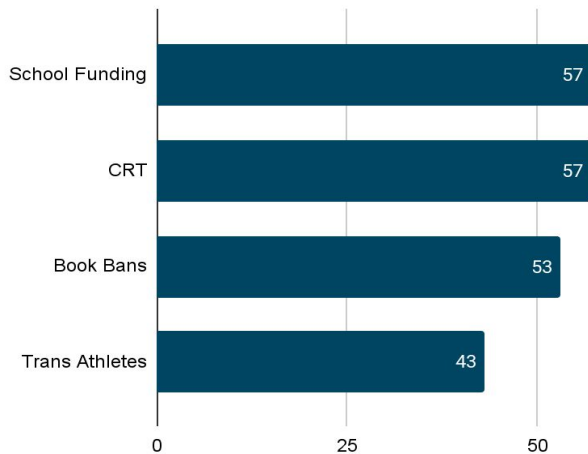


These types of messages do not seem to resonate strongly with the multi-racial working-class.

- These messages may inadvertently:
 - Seem like they are punching down by using less approachable language and terminology
 - Play into the opposition's strategy to frame our position as "out of touch" and elitist

Big Us, Small Them Messaging

% Choosing Big Us, Small Them Message



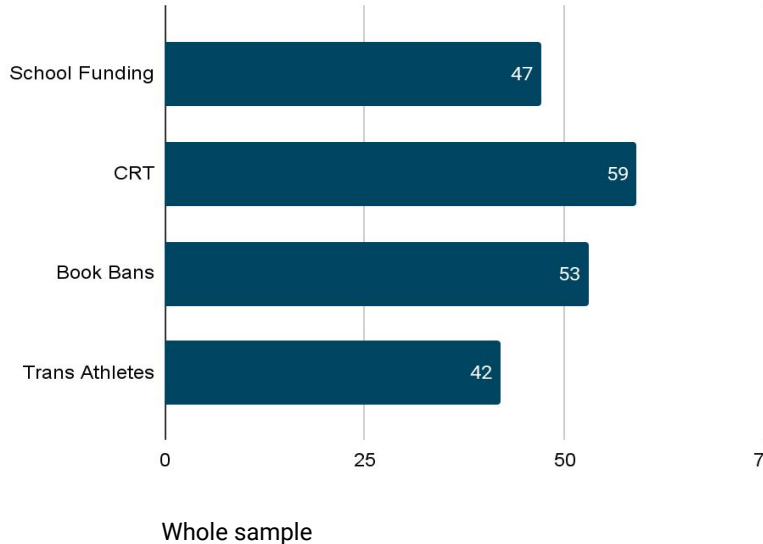
Whole sample

With the exception of the message on Transgender Athletes, these messages received majoritarian support. **This style of message is consistently landing.**

- This type of message was chosen across broad swaths of the electorate:
 - Across all 5 states
 - Particularly popular with younger voters and voters of color of all educational backgrounds
 - Extremely popular with Democrats while also drawing support from Independents and Republicans

Meet Them Where They Are

% Choosing Meet Them Where They Are Message



This style of message often preferred by:

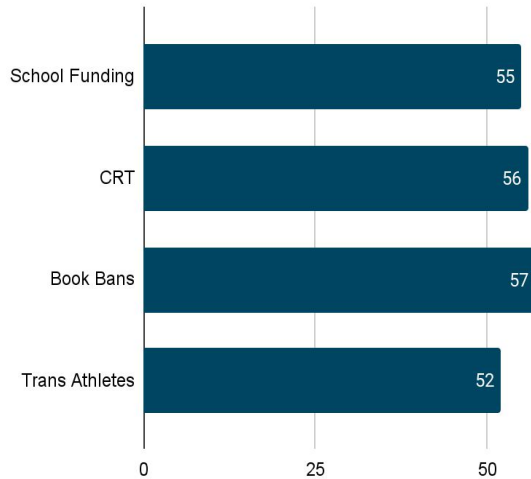
- Middle-aged and older voters (and less popular with younger voters)

Recommendations: Consider your audience

- Validating emotions and perspective taking could be especially helpful for people less familiar with a topic or issue.
- Could be considered condescending with people who are familiar/higher information.

Positive Vision

% Choosing Positive Vision Message



Whole sample

This style of message is consistently landing.

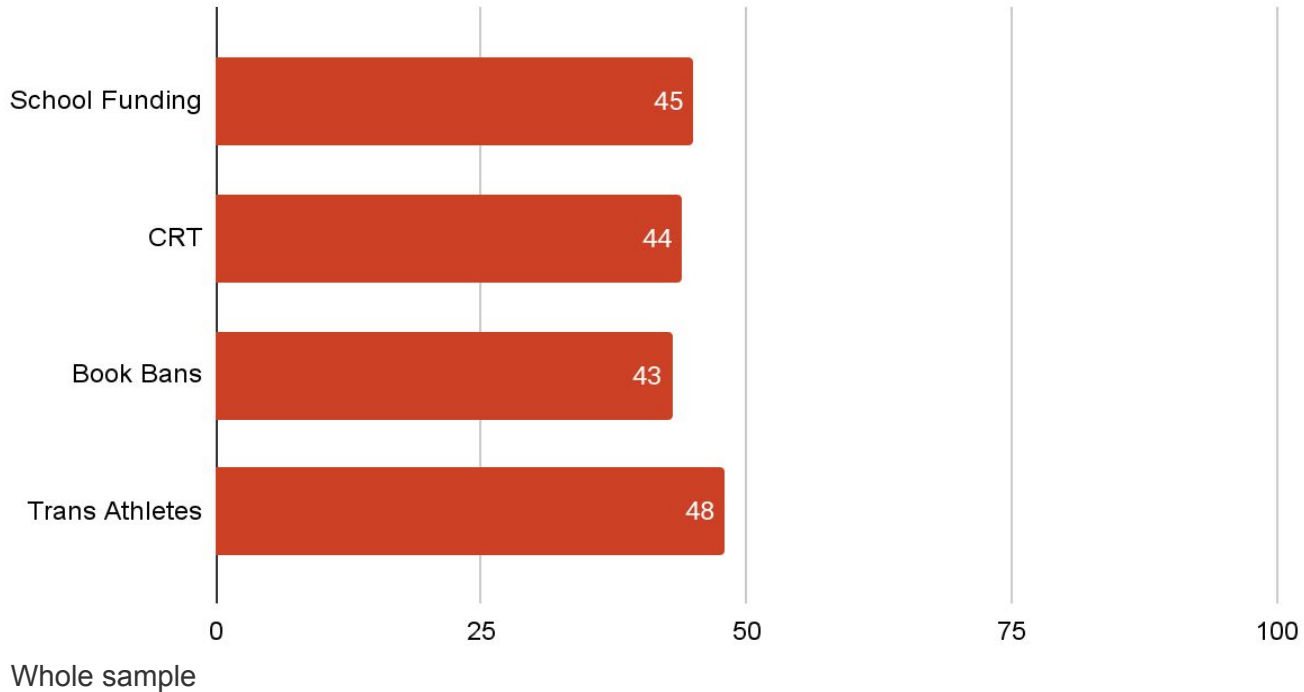
- Often the most popular message type with Democrats, but also draws strong support from Independent and GOP voters
- Appeals across race, education, and age

Recommendations: This type of message should be an important part of our messaging strategy but should not be used in isolation.

- We still need to directly engage with our opponents attacks

Their message ALWAYS loses to our positive vision

% Choosing Authoritarian Message



Our Vision for Public Schools is Popular!

The authoritarian agenda is not popular!

- A vision of strong public schools wins against every attack they are throwing at us.
- A strong vision for public education is an antidote to authoritarian attacks.

What to do/say: Messaging roadmap

1	Values: Root in shared values
2	Villains: “Punch up” at a small but powerful “them”
3	Motives: Tell a bigger story about their motives for keeping us divided while defunding our schools
4	Positive vision: Paint a picture of abundance
5	Action: Describe a “big us” and give a specific call to action

Values

Philadelphia families and educators believe every student deserves the freedom to learn and pursue their dreams. But instead of making sure our schools have the resources

Villains

needed to thrive, a small group of opportunistic politicians, backed by billionaires, are stripping funding from our schools using voucher schemes, while attacking educators and targeting kids based on their differences. They know that if we fight each other, we'll be

Motive

distracted while they take money from our public schools. But our students deserve a quality education that fully prepares them for a bright future in a changing world. They

Vision

should have access to a well-rounded education, socio-emotional supports, accurate and up-to-date learning materials, and supports that provide safe spaces for all. That's why

Action

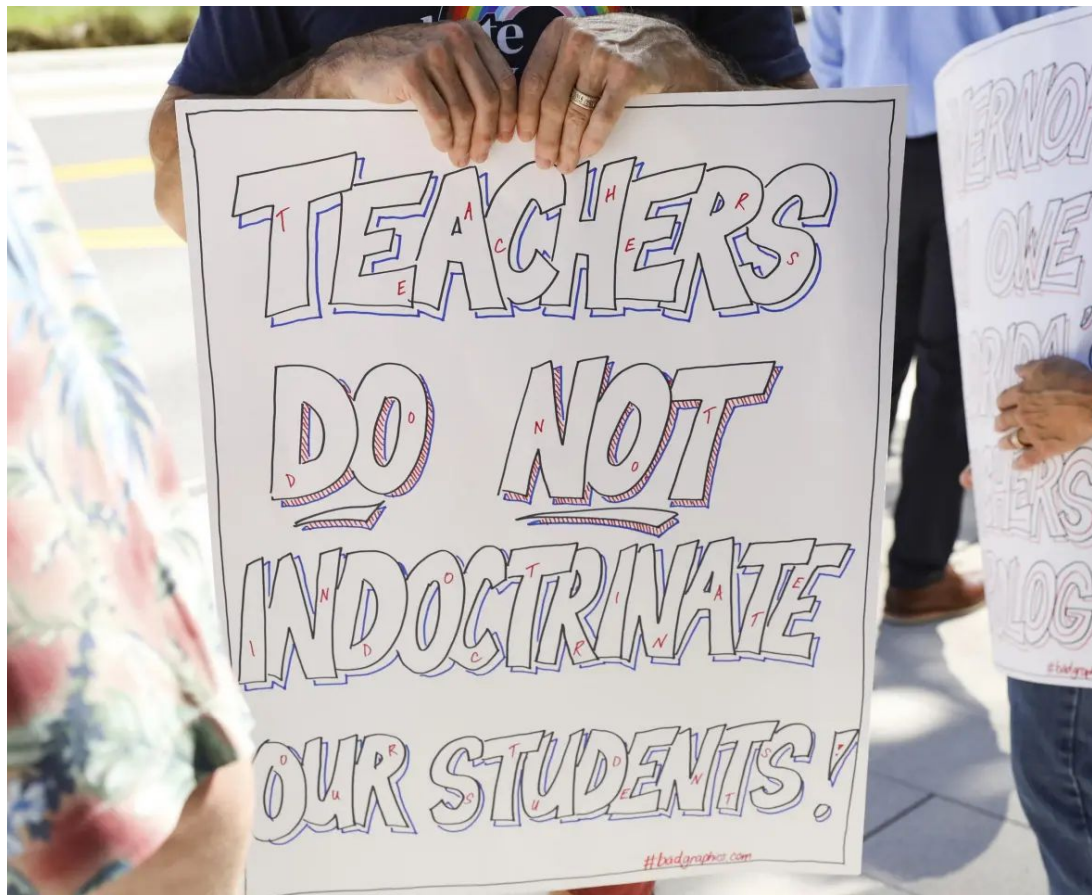
we're coming together as Philadelphia parents and educators, across race and zip code, to sign this petition demanding Gov. Shapiro uses public funds for public schools and vetoes the voucher program.

(Place) (people) believe in (shared value). But instead of delivering what kids need, (small group of villains, powers-that-be) are trying to (bad thing and motive). But our kids deserve (positive vision, rooted in shared values). That's why we're coming together, (who's coming together), and want you to join us in (specific call to action)

What to Avoid

1	Condescension
2	Punching down (or over) at other parents
3	Using jargon or inaccessible terms
4	Coming at people with just the facts
5	Parroting our opponents' frame

Avoid: parroting our opponents' frame



Exercise: Draft your response

Using the messaging roadmap, work with your group to draft a response to the scenario on the handout at your table.

1	Values
2	“Punch up” at villains
3	Motives for dividing us
4	Positive vision
5	“Big us” call to action

(Place) (people) believe in (shared value). But instead of delivering what kids need, (small group of villains, powers-that-be) are trying to (bad thing and motive). But our kids deserve (positive vision, rooted in shared values). That’s why we’re coming together, (who’s coming together), and want you to join us in (specific call to action).

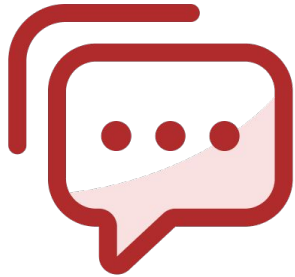
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How was trying out that exercise?

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Audience Q&A Session

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What section was most useful to you?

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Give us feedback!
2-min. Evaluation &
Survey: bit.ly/44Fgbl5

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Application: social media

Values



Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley

@RepPressley

Everyone has a right to read, learn, & see themselves reflected in our literature.

This [#NationalLibraryWeek](#), I'm giving librarians their well-deserved flowers & continuing to fight against book bans nationwide.

Action

Congress must pass my [#BooksSaveLives](#) Act to do just that.

Villains



Ayanna Pressley @AyannaPressley · Apr 28

From **bans on books** to **bans on our bodies**, Republicans are stopping at nothing to rip away our freedoms.

Motive

?

Vision

?

Application: Book bans (Exercise 3)

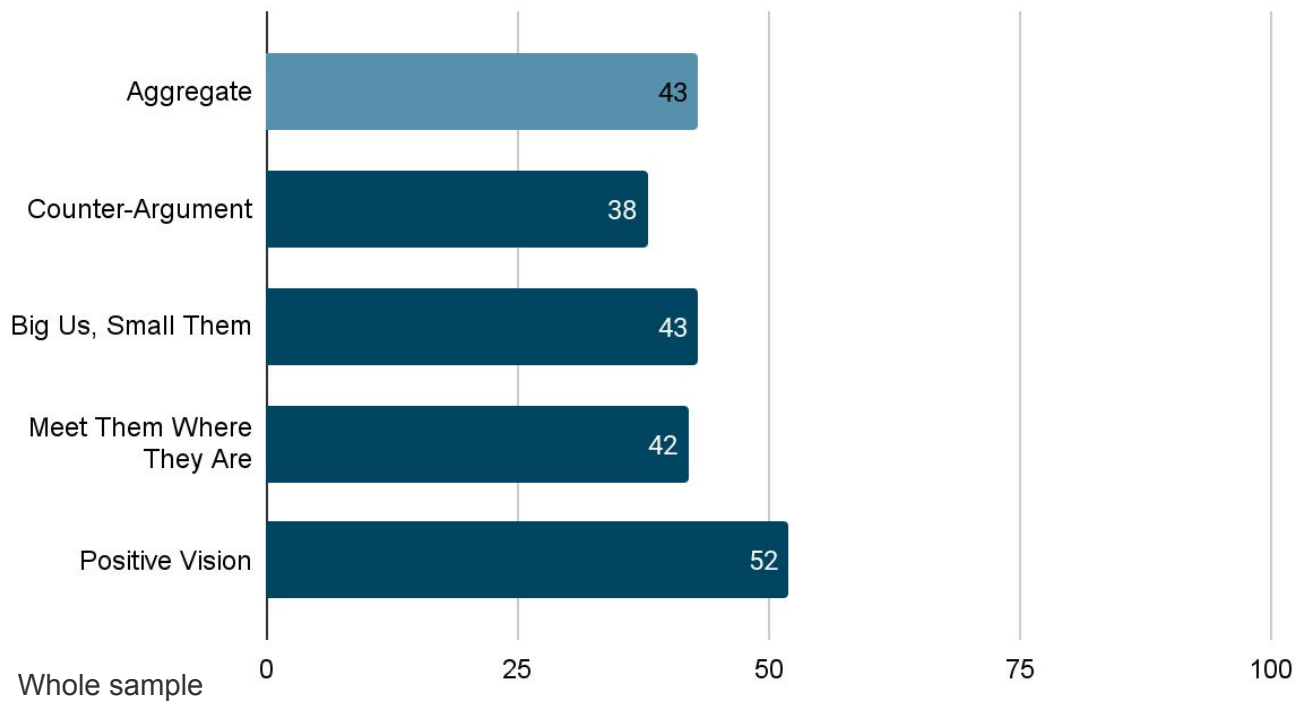
Reading books is a deeply validating experience. When students in our marginalized communities read books about characters like them, they feel validated and seen. They receive the message: You matter.

But some opportunistic politicians are attempting to ban books by and about LGBTQ people, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color - these groups who have been historically underrepresented in books. These are cynical attempts by right-wing billionaires to stir up fear and anger in our communities to divide us in order to discredit public education.

When kids read books about someone different from them, they learn to see others as fully human. We shouldn't be taking away resources from our students, we should be fighting for them to have more—more education resources and socio-emotional supports, updated technology and access to a diverse curriculum. We need all parents, educators, district leaders and elected officials to stop the book banning agenda and make sure our children have everything they need to learn & thrive.

Transgender Athletes Results

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



Transgender Athletes Takeaways

Our messages on trans athletes in our studies mostly performed worse than authoritarian messages for other categories.

- Small bright spot: 53% of respondents in PA chose the *Meet Them Where They are Message* on trans athletes and their rights.

Positive vision is the only category that outperformed the authoritarian frame, but this approach does not directly address the topic...

Transgender Athletes Takeaways

What do we do with this?

On the one hand, we recognize that authoritarians are attempting to use this as a wedge issue to shift the conversation away from our popular public education agenda.

On the other hand, sticking to “positive vision” message is often neither possible nor the right thing to do. **We cannot protect transgender people by avoiding the topic.** When majority opinion appears to be on the wrong side of history, **our job is to figure out how to move public opinion.** For this, more research and organizing will be necessary.

Recommendations – What to DO/SAY:

Play Offense → Defense → Offense.

1. Start with our popular positive vision for strengthening, improving, and investing in quality public education.
2. Then provide a story that inoculates against the new lines of authoritarian attack, while standing up with and for groups that are being targeted.
3. Then bridge back to our positive vision again.

We don't have to choose between popular messages and persuasive messages that shift what is popular; we can do and must do both.

Authoritarian Populist Attacks:

Obfuscates the economic power at the very top. Taps into economic anxiety, but channels it into anger at *social elitism* and *scapegoats*.

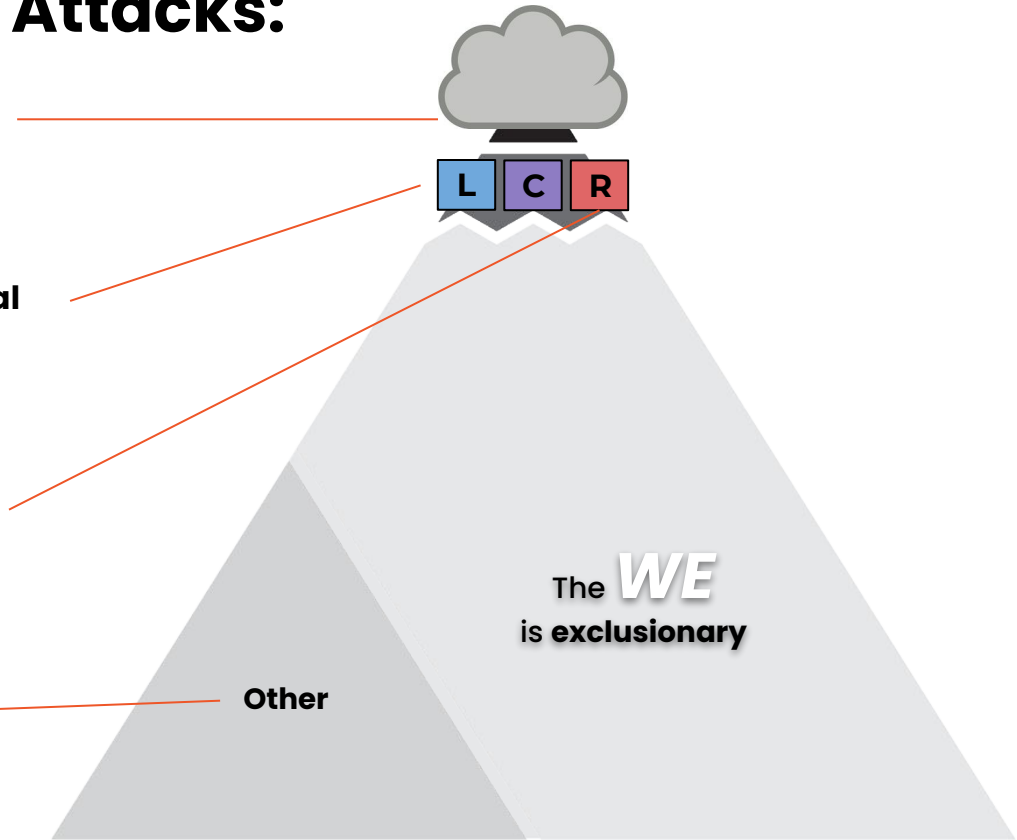
Pretends to punch up by pointing at the **social elitism** of upper strata liberals.

- Targets: Media, Hollywood, Academia, Democratic Politicians

Gains **outsider cred** by punching up at the career politicians / establishment leadership of the Republican Party. (Think Tea Party and Trump's rise.)

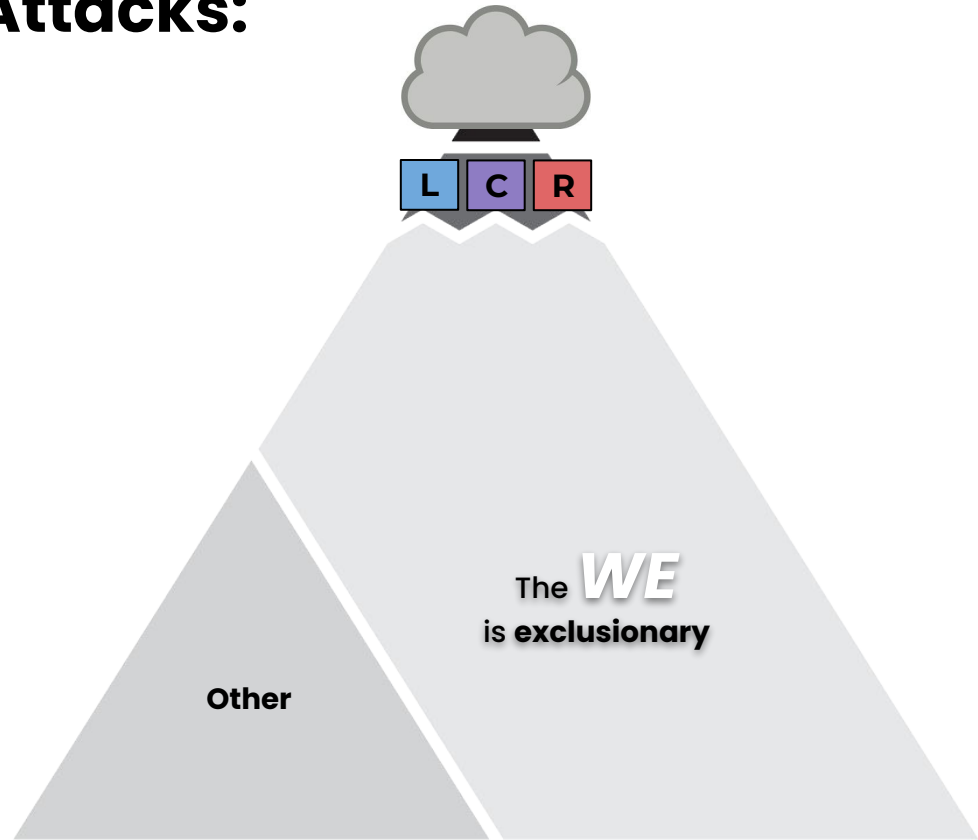
Really punches down at the most vulnerable by strategically fomenting prejudice:

- Racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia



Authoritarian Populist Attacks:

TRUMP: Well, he's right. He did beat Medicare. He beat it to death. And he's destroying Medicare because all of these people are coming in, they're putting them on Medicare. They're putting them on Social Security. They're going to destroy Social Security. This man is going to single-handedly destroy Social Security. These millions and millions of people coming in, they're trying to put them on Social Security. He will wipe out Social Security. He will wipe out Medicare. So he was right in the way he finished that sentence. And it's a shame.



Progressive Populist Response:

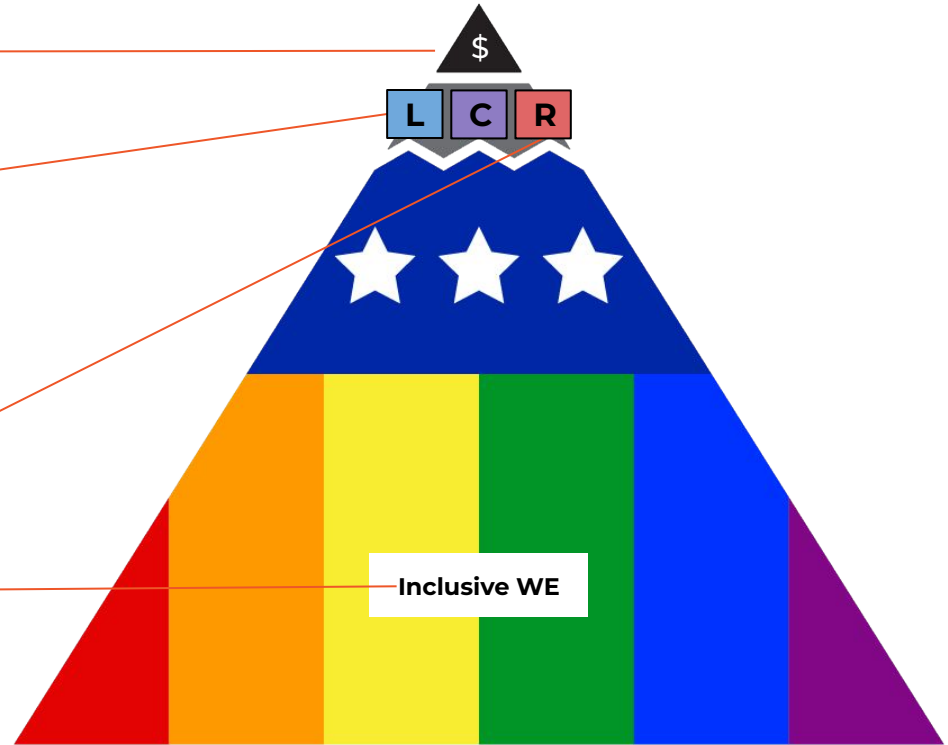
Punches up by pointing at the **economic power** at the very top.

Calls out corporate wing of the Democratic Party that leaves us behind:

- For failing to take on Wall Street, big corporations, and money in politics.
- For failing to stand up and fight for everyday working people.

Calls out the divide-and-conquer strategies (e.g., strategic racism) of the Republican Party.

Articulates a *We The People* that includes **all of us**, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, country of origin.



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Be on the people's side. Win.

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How to Defeat Authoritarian Rhetoric on Public Education?

We tested each of the authoritarian message categories (on school funding, CRT, book bans, and transgender athletes) against four different types of pro-public education messages:

1. Counter-Argument
2. **Big Us, Small Them**
3. Meet Them Where They Are
4. Positive Vision

WHAT TO DO/SAY

Final Review

WHAT TO AVOID

1	Values
2	“Punch up” at villains
3	Motives for dividing us
4	Positive vision
5	“Big us” call to action

1	Condescension
2	Punching down
3	Only using facts
4	Students as victims
5	Parroting opposition

Our Agenda for Public Schools is Popular!

Our opponents' agenda is not popular!

- A vision of strong public schools wins against every attack they are throwing at us.
- A strong vision for public education is an antidote to authoritarian attacks.

Authoritarians aim to divide us to prevent us from unifying around a shared positive future that most people want.

- Against this, we need to fight offense AND defense.
- We still need to fight defense: vulnerable people are being put at serious risk.

Recommendations – What to AVOID:

Condescension: Avoid rhetoric that plays into the authoritarian narrative that frames liberals as condescending over-educated affluent elites.

Punching down (or over) at other parents: Related to avoiding condescension, keep your narrative focused on the powerful actors who are plotting to divide us and undermine and defund public education — not on ‘backward’ parents and community members.

Recommendations – What to AVOID:

Parroting Our Opponents' Frames:



Recommendations – What to AVOID:

Coming at people “with the facts”: We know from numerous studies that most people most of the time leave rational arguments more committed to their prior beliefs than they were before the argument.

- This approach can also play into the “condescending elitist” narrative (Subtext: “I am highly educated and I know the facts, while you are ignorant and backwards.”)
- The good news is that **stories**, in contrast to rational arguments, can be disarming and persuasive. They invite empathy and perspective-taking, and open up space for people to reconsider prior views.

Recommendations – What to AVOID:

Introducing vulnerable and targeted students as victims first:

It's not fair, but psychologists have long recognized a common tendency to blame victims, rather than sympathize with them.

- The good news is that the simple act of *first* establishing individuals as protagonists with goals (e.g., a student who has a dream about their career) and *then* introducing how something or someone is threatening or stopping them, invites empathy and perspective-taking.

Recommendations – What to DO/SAY:

Provide a STORY that helps people make sense of the new authoritarian attacks; a story that:

- Inoculates against authoritarian appeals by naming **culprits** and their **motive**, i.e., what they stand to gain by inventing new ways to divide us against each other.
 - Claims **unity** as our value, casts our opponents as **dividers**.
- Claims and grounds people in **shared positive values** about providing quality public education and a safe and positive learning environment that sets up our children for a bright future.
 - Claims **responsibility** as our value: responsibility for our children's future.

Recommendations – What to DO/SAY:

Appeal to Shared Values:

- Invoke shared values, including *freedom, fairness, opportunity, community, belonging, unity, responsibility, protecting schools and children from harm, anti-extremism, and the common good vs. the political agenda of a few.*
- In school board fights, we can claim the interests of all students—regardless of their race, gender identity, or any other difference—as the *popular* interest.

Our values are popular: let's talk and act like that's the case!

Recommendations – What to DO/SAY:

Paint a Picture of Abundance:

- Add textured descriptions about our students' aspirations and needs and how we can be providing for them, e.g., “the best technology, learning materials, and support from our teachers, nurses, and counselors that will prepare them for a bright future.”

▶ Recommendations – What to DO/SAY:

Play Offense → Defense → Offense.

1. Start with our popular positive vision for strengthening, improving, and investing in quality public education.
2. Then provide a story that inoculates against the new lines of authoritarian attack, while standing up with and for groups that are being targeted.
3. Then bridge back to our positive vision again.

We don't have to choose between popular messages and persuasive messages that shift what is popular; we can do and must do both.

What to Emphasize: Consider Your Audience

Mobilizing **Democrats**

Positive
Vision



Any Message

Bipartisan, or mostly
Republicans, requiring
persuasion

Positive
Vision



Meet Them
Where They
Are

**AVOID
Counter-
argument**

Younger audience (under 35) OR
older audience (50+)

**Big Us,
Small Them**



Positive
Vision

Parents & middle-aged

Meet Them
Where They
Are



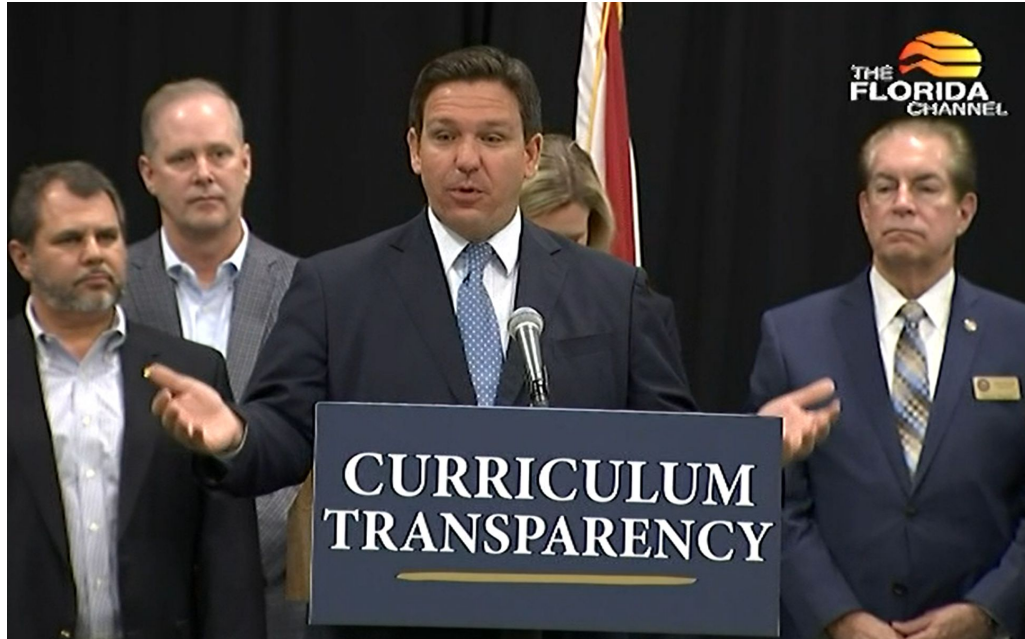
Positive
Vision

Anti-“CRT” Rhetoric



- **The problem:** CRT is a “woke ideology” being taught in schools.
- **The outcome:** White students are being harmed by being taught that they are the oppressors.
- **The solution:** Restore “parents’ rights” by banning “CRT”

Book Bans Rhetoric



- **The problem:** dangerous materials promoting a “woke” agenda and harming innocent kids.
- **The dangerous materials:** “sexually explicit and pornographic,” teaches kids they are “oppressors,” promotes “hate and division.”
- **The solution:** Restore “parents’ rights” and “transparency” by banning books.

Transgender Athletes

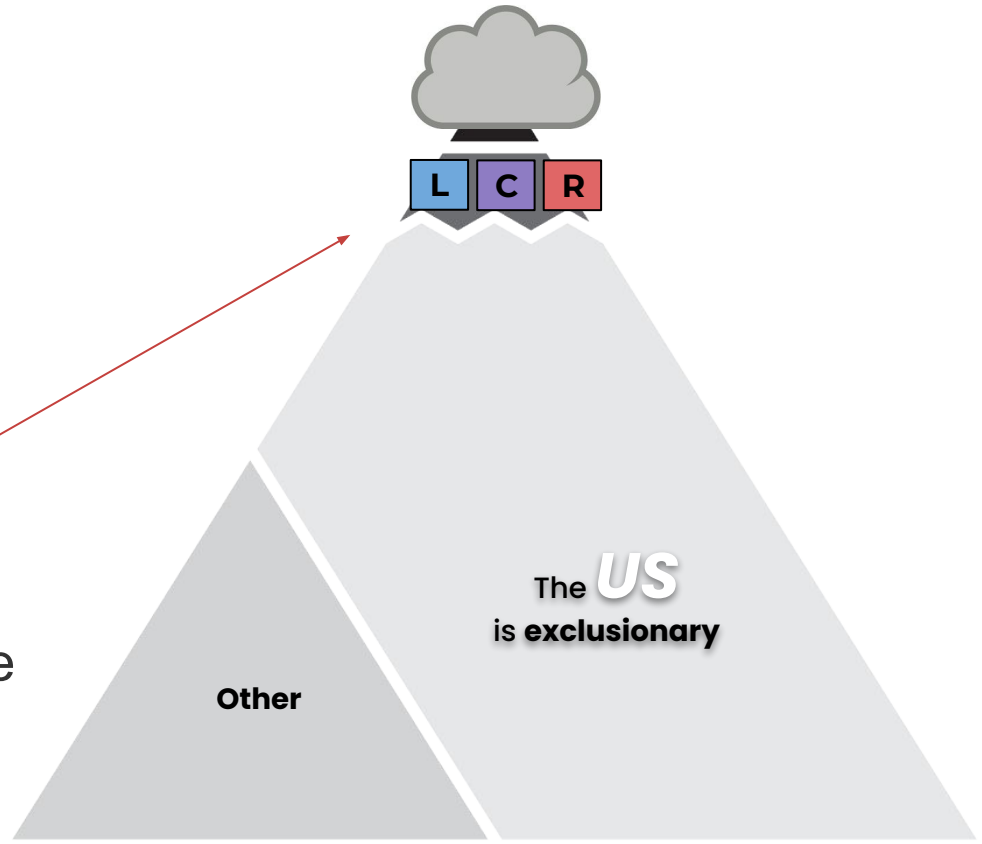
Rhetoric



- **The problem:** ensuring “fairness in girls’ athletics”
- **They claim common sense:** “radical activists” are trying to “change our common sense” when it comes to biological differences between boys and girls
- **Conclusion:** “Opportunities for girls and women are precious, and we must safeguard that future.”

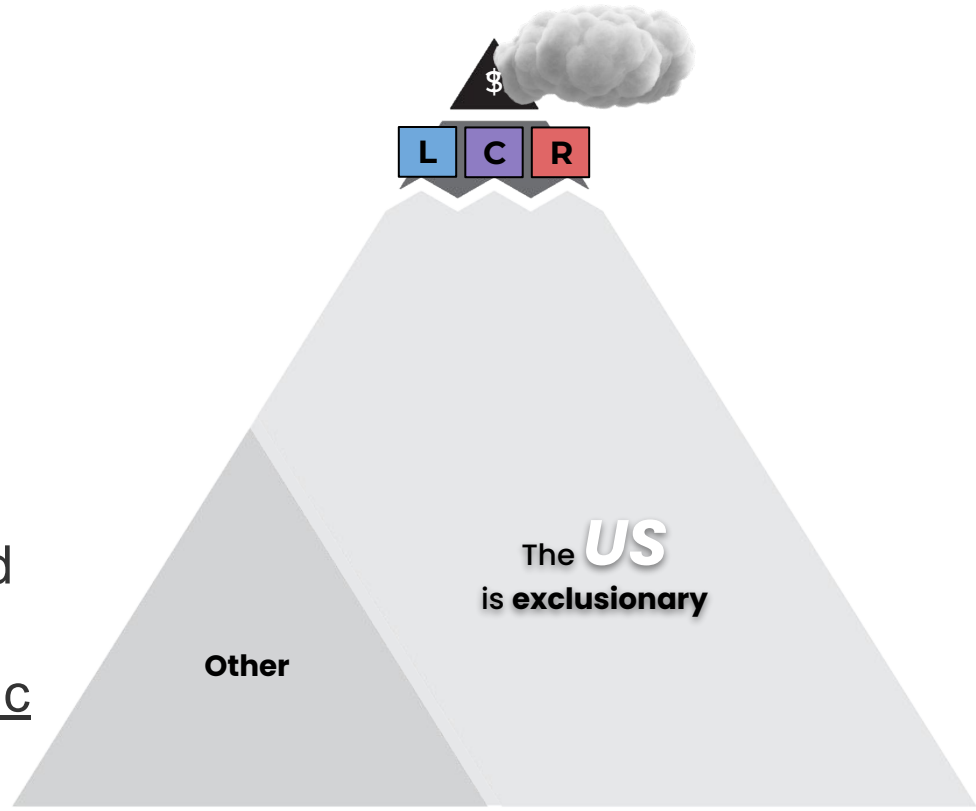
Authoritarian Rhetoric – Themes

Claims anti-elitism: Punches “up” at “wokeness,” “radicals,” and intellectual elites as culprits – framing them as threats to children and parents – while obscuring the role of the far more powerful culprits at the top



Authoritarian Rhetoric – Themes

While actually punching down:
Creating an exclusionary “us”
(white, cisgendered, Christian),
while attacking people of color,
immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and
non-Christians. Sows and uses
division to foment distrust in public
education, teachers, and unions



1. Counter-Argument

The approach we see as most commonly used by progressive groups; often what our instincts tell us to say.

- We think the public should know the truth
- We think it's important to point out the consequences of their approach

“Voucher programs are used to divert funding away from already under-funded public schools and into private and charter schools that are not accountable to taxpayers.”

“Private voucher schools choose who they want and increase segregation by race, ethnicity, and income and exclude kids with disabilities or other challenges.”

2. Big Us, Small Them

(influenced by Race/Class Narrative)

Begins message by naming **shared values**.

“Every child in this community deserves a quality education that prepares them for a bright future.”

“Our children should all have the freedom to learn, to pursue their dreams, and to access a quality education that prepares them for success in a changing world.”

2. Big Us, Small Them

Names a **powerful culprit** responsible for the problem.

“Yet for decades, a small group of powerful and well-funded political activists, politicians, operatives, and lobbyists have sought to defund our public schools.”

“But recently, a small group of politicians and political activists...”

- *“...have been trying to strip away our children’s freedom to learn our nation’s history.”*
- *“...want to take away our children's freedom to participate in school activities because of who they are and discriminate against them based on their gender.”*

2. Big Us, Small Them

Names the **motive** of the other side's rhetoric.
Calls out the **divide and conquer strategy**.

“They’re inventing ways to divide us against each other based on race and difference. It might sound new, but this is the same old strategy that opponents of public education have been using for decades: pit us against each other while they defund our public schools.”

2. Big Us, Small Them

Creates a big “us” in the community, rooted in values and what we ALL deserve. Invokes solidarity: We will win by coming together across difference.

“Supporting our community and all the families who live here means that we have to come together to support and fully fund our public schools.”

“It is our responsibility as parents, community members, and school board directors to come together across race and differences to safeguard our children’s freedom to learn and thrive.”

3. Meet Them Where They Are

Validates people's feelings, including negative emotions.

People may feel afraid, confused, or overwhelmed, especially when it's a topic they are not familiar with.

"It can be painful to learn about our nation's past. So many of us have experienced feelings of confusion, anger, or sadness when we learn something difficult or surprising about our country's history."

"It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you've never met a person who is transgender."

3. Meet Them Where They Are

Persuasion with perspective taking: considers the perspective of someone else.

“Each of us, at some point in our lives, has known what it’s like to feel different in some way, based on how much money we have, our race, our religion, or what we look like. No one likes to feel like they don’t belong.”

3. Meet Them Where They Are

Persuasion: Finds common ground in shared values, and builds a big “us” based on those shared values - We all want to feel like we belong, we all want freedom and fairness.

“The recent discussion about transgender students in school athletics is important because it provides us with an opportunity to reflect on how we want to treat our children, some of whom might look different or talk about their identity in ways we didn’t expect or aren’t familiar with. We don’t want any of our children treated unfairly or unkindly because of who they are. As members of this community, we can choose to include transgender students to make sure they are treated fairly too, including being part of a team.”

4. Positive Vision

Creates a big “us” in the community, rooted in values and what we all deserve. Uses approachable, everyday language.

“Our future depends on every child from every corner of our state receiving a great education where they live and play. We do not need to settle for the scraps that have been offered in the past. If we come together as a community we can fight to make sure that the abundant resources that are available for our schools are used to their fullest so that our children all get everything they need to see themselves in what they learn about, and to learn without limits.”

Message Roadmap

SHARED VALUES


VILLAIN(S): SMALL THEM

MOTIVE


SOLUTION: BIG US + Call to Action

POSITIVE VISION


Putting it all together




Our schools should provide our children with the **freedom to learn** the truth about our nation's history, and school board meetings should be a place where we work together to make this happen.




But recently, **a small group of politicians** and activists have tried to **strip away our children's' freedom** to learn about our nation's history. These extremists have politicized our community meetings and made them feel more like a political rally than a place to do the work to ensure a quality education for our children.



They are using phrases like "Critical Race Theory" and inventing new ways to **divide us against each other** based on race. It might sound new, but this is the same old strategy that opponents of public education have been using for decades: divide us against each other while they defund our public schools. Every child in this community **deserves the freedom to learn** with an education that prepares them for the future, and we can provide that by **coming together** across race and working closely with parents, the school board, and the members of our community to ensure our children get the education they need.

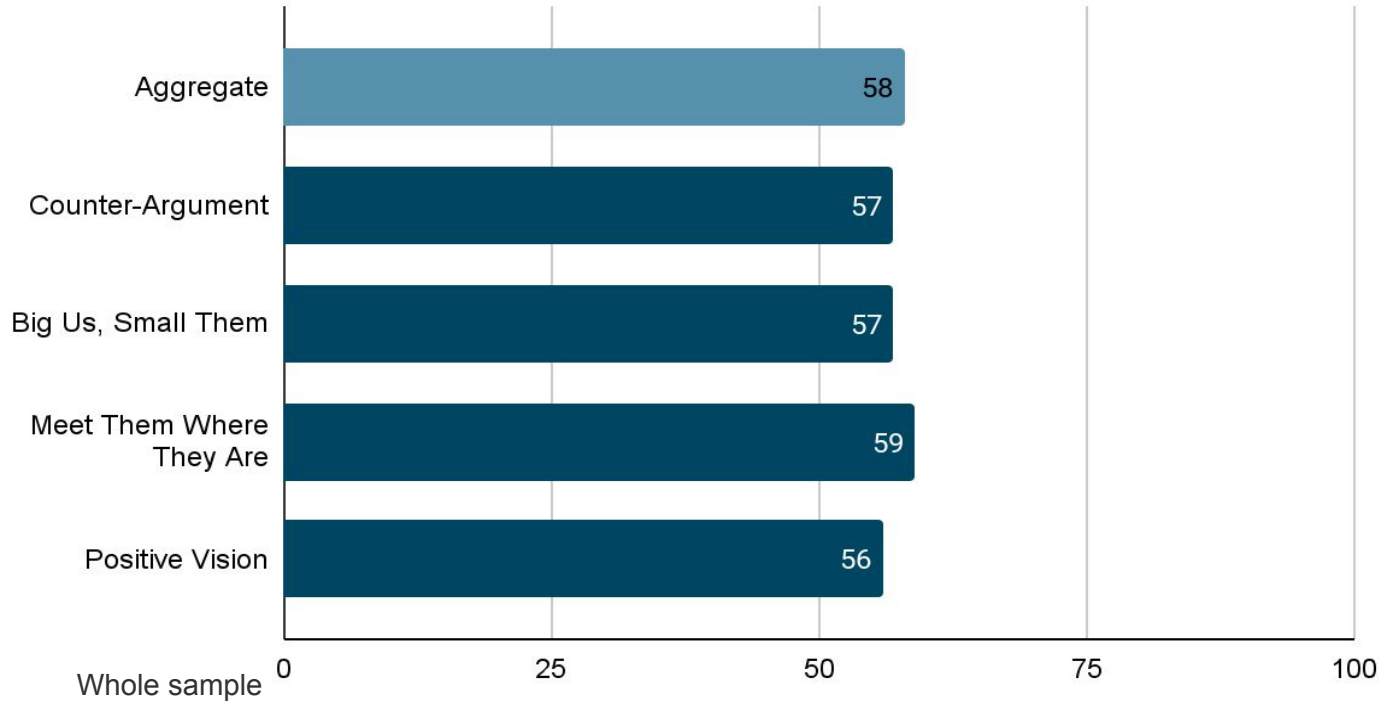


If we **come together as a community** we can fight to make sure that the **many resources that are available** for our schools are used to their fullest so that our children all receive the support and resources they need to see themselves in what they learn about, and to learn without limits.



“Critical Race Theory” Results

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



“Critical Race Theory” Takeaways

Banning “critical race theory” in schools is not a majoritarian position!

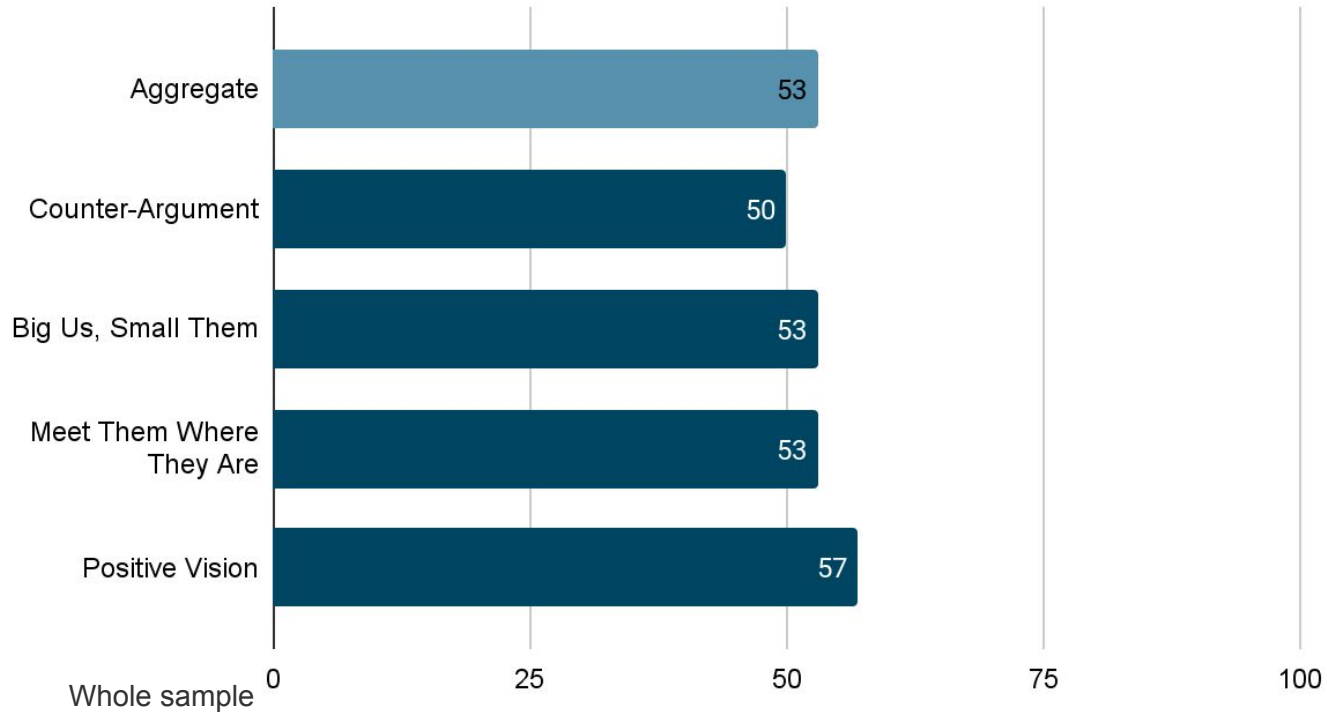
- **The opposition is weak on this topic.**

There are multiple ways to land a successful message about teaching about race and racism in public schools. We should do so confidently!

- We have more people already on our side than we may realize:
 - 38% GOP respondents
 - 59% respondents in rural Florida
 - 58% white voters, 60% voters of color

Book Ban Results

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



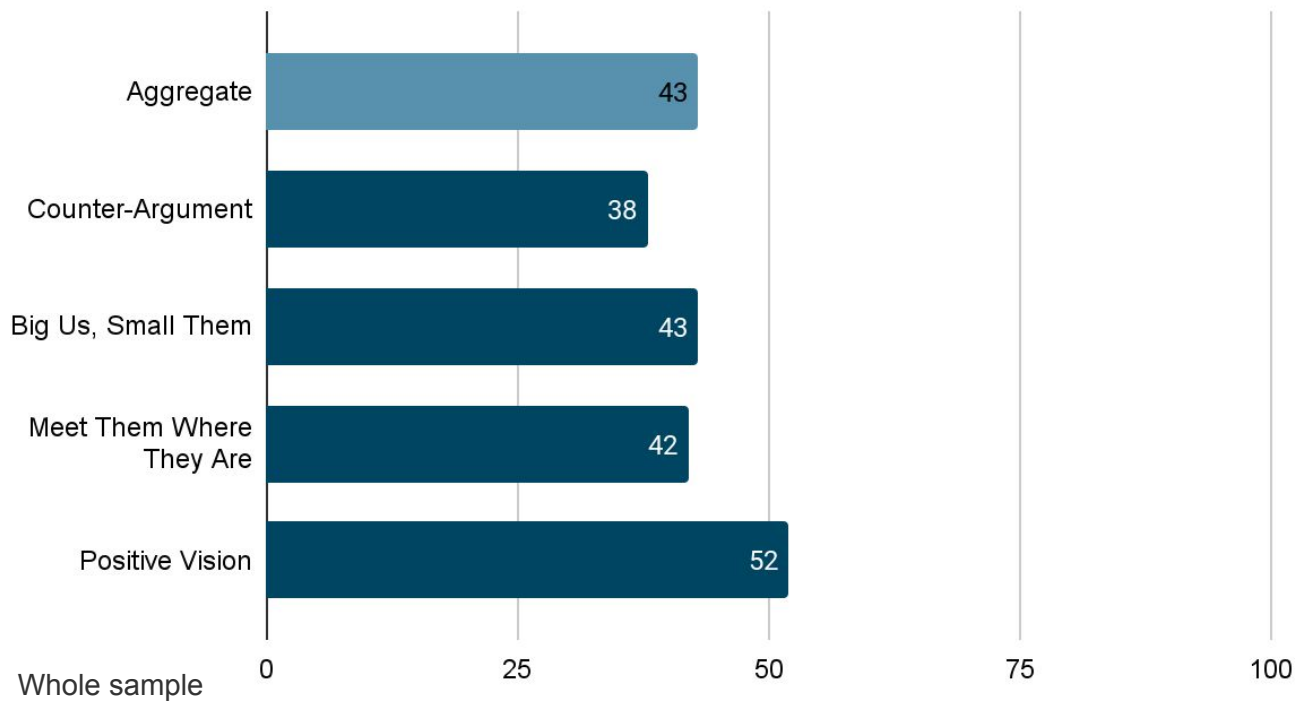
Book Ban Takeaways

Banning books is not a majoritarian position!

- Counter-Argument underperformed, relative to the other categories. All other categories drew majoritarian support
- There are multiple ways to land a successful message opposing book bans.
- **The opposition is weak on this topic.**

Transgender Athletes Results

% Choosing Anti-Authoritarian Message



Transgender Athletes Takeaways

Messages countering the authoritarian “fairness in athletics” frame generally performed worse than anti-authoritarian messages for other categories.

- Small bright spot: 53% of respondents in PA chose the *Meet Them Where They are Message* on trans athletes and their rights.

Positive vision is the only category that outperformed the authoritarian frame, but this approach does not directly address the topic...

Transgender Athletes Takeaways

What do we do with this?

On the one hand, we recognize that authoritarians are attempting to use this as a wedge issue to shift the conversation away from our popular public education agenda.

On the other hand, sticking to “positive vision” message is often neither possible nor the right thing to do. **We cannot protect transgender people by avoiding the topic.** When majority opinion appears to be on the wrong side of history, **our job is to figure out how to move public opinion.** For this, more research and organizing will be necessary.

Authoritarian Playbook

1. **Weaponize fear.** (embrace language of violence, promote punitive culture)
2. **Undermine institutions.** (eliminate checks/balances, ensure strong executive power)
3. **Exploit religion.** (conflate national identity with religious identity)
4. **Target outsiders.** (blame domestic problems on marginalized/minority groups)
5. **Rewrite history.** (exert control over schools, media, and access to knowledge - censorship)
6. **Divide & conquer.** (hate speech, encouraging violent actors)
7. **Erode truth.** (press becomes enemy of the people, deliberately spread misinformation)

Authoritarian Populist Attacks:

Obfuscates the economic power at the very top. Taps into economic anxiety, but channels it into anger at *social elitism* and *scapegoats*.

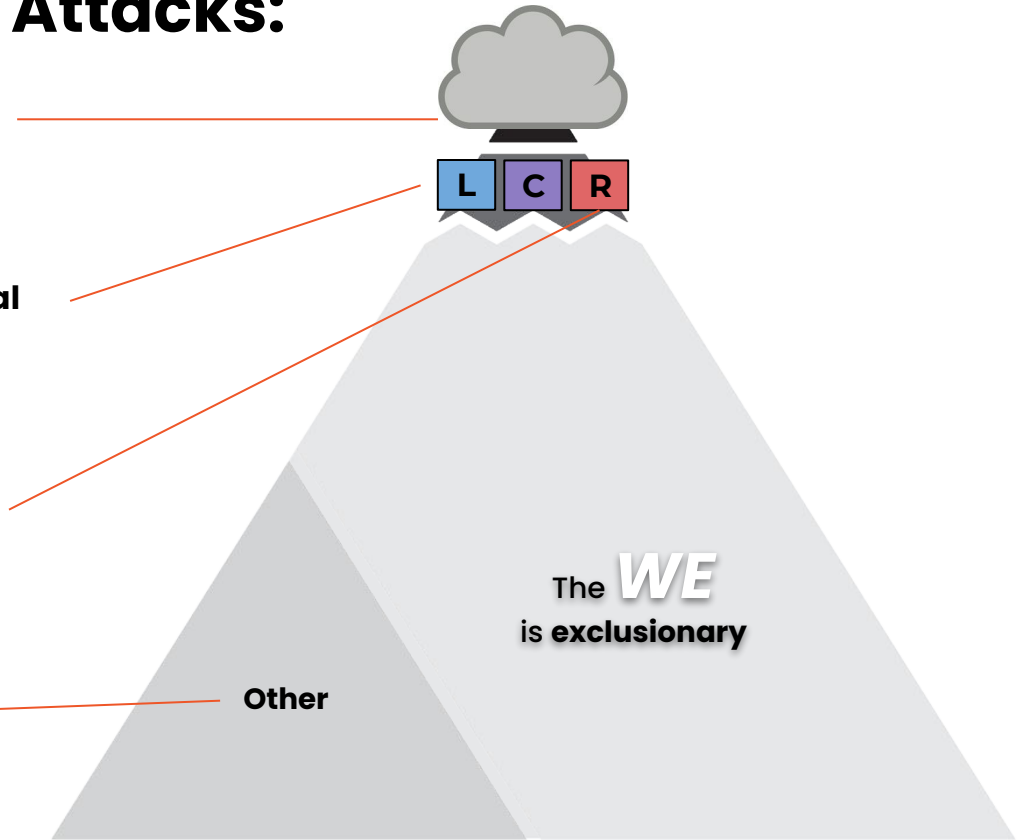
Pretends to punch up by pointing at the **social elitism** of upper strata liberals.

- Targets: Media, Hollywood, Academia, Democratic Politicians

Gains **outsider cred** by punching up at the career politicians / establishment leadership of the Republican Party. (Think Tea Party and Trump's rise.)

Really punches down at the most vulnerable by strategically fomenting prejudice:

- Racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia



Authoritarian Rhetoric – Themes

- **Claims shared values, especially freedom and safety** from threats
 - Fear-mongering, but under the guise of protecting parents' and students' freedoms from radical attacks
 - Claims “common sense” in divisive identity issues
- **Communicates an exclusionary “US”** (white, cisgender, Christian)
- Sows division and **distrust in public education, teachers, and unions**

Respond to this message

The people in charge seem to think that throwing more good money after bad will magically fix our public school system, but every time we've done that the money disappears and the problems are still there.

There needs to be more accountability for our public schools and our kids should no longer be locked in to schools that are failing to meet their needs.

We need to expand school voucher systems that would allow families to send their children to schools as they choose.

Full school choice will result in better education and safety for all of our children and will waste less taxpayer money on schools that are currently failing our community.

How we typically think of the problem: How to cut through THEIR framing to win?

				Vs.	
Counter-Argument	Big Us, Small Them	Meet Them Where They Are	Positive Vision		Authoritarian
Support for School Funding					
Counter-Argument	Big Us, Small Them	Meet Them Where They Are	Positive Vision		Authoritarian
Critical Race Theory					
Counter-Argument	Big Us, Small Them	Meet Them Where They Are	Positive Vision		Authoritarian
Transgender Athletes					
Counter-Argument	Big Us, Small Them	Meet Them Where They Are	Positive Vision		Authoritarian
Book Bans					

What if, instead, we thought about them trying to beat OUR popular vision?

Positive Vision

Gut Funding

Ban CRT

Ban Trans Athletes

Ban Books