In the Hands of *the People:*

A GUIDE TO CLAIMING AMERICA'S STORY

topos

Think BIG

And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.

We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.

And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

– AMANDA GORMAN, "THE HILL WE CLIMB"

Introduction

Photo Credit: martin-dm

Stories show us what's possible. They shape our sense of identity, agency, and belonging. And when woven into a cultural strategy, they become the engine for lasting change. Throughout American history, collective struggles to expand rights, broaden opportunity, and strengthen democracy have drawn on patriotic stories of American values — stories that connect people across race, gender, geography, ideology, and other divides.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of our founding, partisan divisions run deep, and many everyday Americans feel sidelined. What stories of America can invite us to dream together and build together now? Can the 250th be our moment to tell an authentic, hopeful American story that celebrates and honors our progress toward equality, freedom, and opportunity while igniting the will to keep striving for a nation that truly fulfills these founding ideals?

A year ago, narrative strategists, researchers, and funders — guided by leading thinkers and changemakers — came together to meet this challenge. Over the past year, we analyzed the debates and discussions shaping the public conversation, studied the latest polling numbers, and, most importantly, listened closely to more than 4,700 Americans across the country.

Here's what we heard loud and clear: Americans are searching for a national conversation that recognizes their role — the role of the people. And there is a yearning for an honest, clear-eyed, hope-filled American story that brings people together in common cause.

Our multi-method approach — mapping the landscape, listening deeply, and testing frames at scale — brought forward a big idea that meets the urgency of now: ***In America, the people are supposed to be in charge.*** It's a deceptively simple yet profound idea that resonates across class, geography, faith, race, and ideology. Easy to grasp, repeat, expand, and rally behind, it feels both familiar and fundamental, yet it is almost entirely missing in the current public discourse and removed from people's current thinking about their lives and their roles in shaping their communities and the country.

When awakened, it's an idea that opens the door for a multitude of voices to share their own authentic stories of what it means to be American — and what a brighter, more just future could hold. Crucially, it makes space for both celebration *and* reflection, honoring our progress while being honest about the work we have left to do.

And what's striking is how this idea can shift people's thinking — and the conversation — in powerful ways. People understand this idea of America as a call to action, an invitation for every individual to use their voice and play their part. Americans from all corners talk about the need to respect our differences *and* the need to come together enough to exercise our power. This idea becomes a lens to make sense of our present day, and our history, and all the ways we have succeeded and not succeeded in putting all the people truly in charge. It sparks pride, honest critique, and the determination to keep pushing forward.

Fundamentally, **this core idea reclaims the American story as the story of US: The people. ALL the people.** Not the wealthy few. Not rulers. *We the People* are meant to be in charge. We've always been the force that drives America's progress, and we carry the responsibility to lead the way forward today.

Curious about the full methodology and approach that went into this year-long research effort? Dive into the details here.

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This Story is Yours to Tell

Again and again, the research shows that people are eager to celebrate authentic, honest stories of coming together for a common purpose, of doing the hard, vigorous, and virtuous work of building a nation where all Americans thrive. These stories are ready to be told, but they can't take root on their own. They need you — storytellers, advocates, organizers, artists, musicians, cultural influencers, community leaders and more — to give them voice, life, and power.

This guide is addressed to everyone who wants to help create a more constructive, more inspiring conversation about what it means to live in America today.

- → If you believe we would be better off with more connection and shared purpose, this framework helps people hear and value your messages.
- → If your story calls out for inclusion and empowerment, this is a framework that can help lift your messages into something broadly shared and morally powerful.
- → If you want this country to truly live up to its talk of democracy, equality, and opportunity, your stories within this framework can be wind in these sails.

We invite you to lend your voice, stories, art, and energy to ensure that the 250th anniversary of our founding becomes a recommitment to a core American idea — a narrative framework that says: ***In America, the people are supposed to be in charge,*** with all that it implies.

Effectively reviving the idea means weaving together all of our efforts so that we're not just fighting for change through policies and campaigns, but reshaping the Cultural Common Sense — the deep-seated, often unconscious beliefs that shape how we see the world and what we think is possible. And the most powerful culture change happens when organizers, artists, musicians, athletes, YouTubers, TikTokers, community leaders, and storytellers of all stripes (like you!) amplify this core idea in your own authentic voice.

You are welcome to use the approaches laid out in the guide as is, or adapt them to fit your audience, community, and context. This is not a script — it's a living framework, built to grow as we learn and work together. **Our hope is that you will take this narrative and make it your own — bringing to life this research-backed effort to move hearts, shift culture, and shape our collective American future.**

A word on terminology: *When we say "American," we mean all the people who live, work, and dream here — regardless of citizenship status.*

In America, the People are Supposed to be In Charge:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In America, the people are supposed to be in charge. It isn't just a patriotic catchphrase. It's a big idea at the heart of what has defined America since its founding: that people can cast off autocratic rule and claim the radical right to govern themselves. First reserved for a privileged few, this idea was written in universal language that Americans have spent 250 years striving to make real.

It's not a slogan, but shorthand for two deeply held, interconnected American beliefs:

→ **From the Ground Up.** There is a deeply held belief in bottom-up approaches — a sense that ideas and action should rise from the grassroots rather than be handed down from above. We are a nation built on the conviction that power and progress come from the many, not the few.

→ **A Voice, A Say, and Real Respect.** At its core, this is about empowerment and agency — the belief that ordinary people have a right to be heard, to have influence, and to be treated with genuine respect in shaping the world around them.

What does this idea mean?

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

*"**America is supposed to be for the people, run by the people.** Our politicians are supposed to work for us. This is largely not how it works anymore. If it ever did. At one point, it probably worked for the moneyed class, [but] I don't care about the moneyed class anymore. I care about everyone. And I think we need to make some radical changes to the system so that it works for everyone."*

– LIBERAL WOMAN, SUBURBAN CALIFORNIA

*"[When] everyday people don't feel in charge, it creates anger, frustration, bitterness. But **when everyday people feel like they're having an impact, it creates a sense of belonging."***

– MODERATE INDEPENDENT MAN, SUBURBAN COLORADO

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Each element has meaning

The people = ALL the people. In scores of conversations, the vast majority of people we spoke to made it clear that their understanding of *We the People* is expansive and inclusive. The people means ALL the people, including all of our differences in experience, identity and opinion.

It's a Goal. In contrast to saying "the people are in charge," which can spark pushback about whether that's ever truly been the case, this framing treats it as a guiding ideal — a work in progress. Saying "the people are SUPPOSED to be in charge" **focuses people's attention on HOW we make it real.** Our having a say is not something that we can give up on, even if our collective power is very much a work in progress.

Beyond Government and Politics. Being in charge is about ALL of the ways *We the People* come together and create the neighborhoods, states and nation that we live in. It is powerful precisely because it cuts directly to our ability to have real agency and a say in the world around us.

The People ARE
SUPPOSED TO BE IN CHARGE.

THE PEOPLE
are supposed to be
IN CHARGE.

THE PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO
be in charge.

IT'S A POWERFUL ORGANIZING *idea,* NOT A SLOGAN.

There are many other ways people can and do express this idea:

> ***...Our politicians are supposed to work for us.***

> ***We the people.***

> ***It's up to us.***

> ***...America is supposed to be for the people, run by the people.***

> ***The people's will.***

It's an idea that can be expressed in many different ways:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

> ***We don't want a monarch, we don't want a king**... it's the way our country was set up and I think it's worked for, what, 250? Almost 250 years. And so I want to keep it that way."*

– CONSERVATIVE MAN, SUBURBAN TEXAS

> *If we can ensure that we stand together and make sure that not one person or one group of people can take all the power, then we can make sure that we are having a better life than what most have had in the past. And so **keeping it of, and for, and by the people makes sure that WE maintain it is good for us."***

– LIBERAL MAN, SUBURBAN COLORADO

In America, the People are Supposed to be In Charge:

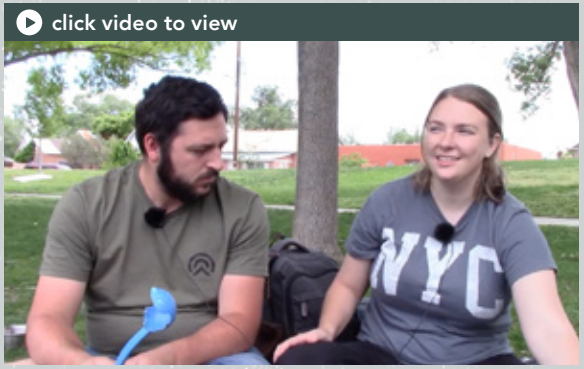
WHY DOES IT HAVE POWER?

In hundreds of conversations — from barbershops and church basements to public parks and kitchen tables — with people from all corners of the country, the idea ***that the people are supposed to be in charge*** emerged as the most deeply resonant and impactful narrative direction we tested. Here's why this idea does the heavy lifting:

- **It's a founding principle.** The idea that the people should be in charge is widely recognized as a core American ideal, something that has defined us from the beginning — in principle, if not always in practice. The idea of self-governance — real, active, and ongoing — is as deeply American as it gets, and people understand that for America to be America, this is something that we cannot give up on.
- **It meets our moment.** As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence — a milestone that celebrates the founding belief that power belongs with the people — the question of who actually holds power in America feels particularly urgent. Today we face profound questions about how to build a broad-based participatory democracy and ensure our economy and culture are aligned for the common good, not just in service to the privileged few. This narrative isn't just about our founding and our history; it's about meeting the moment we're in now.

A founding principle that meets our moment:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —



> *I think about the foundation of our country [when] people were determined enough to escape … the kind of conditions that we exist under right now.* ***If you read the Declaration of Independence, it's going to sound eerily familiar,*** *I think."*
>
> – LIBERAL MAN, SUBURBAN COLORADO

> **PARTICIPANT:** *"It's the country for us, by us, and it takes for us to keep it together . . ."*
>
> **INTERVIEWER:** *"What should we do with this [250th] anniversary…?"*
>
> **PARTICIPANT:** ***"Just remind everyone that the people are in charge, that we — our voice — does count."***
>
> – CONSERVATIVE WOMAN, SUBURBAN TEXAS

→ **It's inherently anti-authoritarian.** As a fundamentally American ideal, this narrative offers important opportunities to assert that inclusive, participatory democracy and a vigorous, open civil society is the American way. It reminds everyone that allowing our power to fall into the hands of an autocratic leader or a ruling class is not only dangerous and irresponsible, but un-American.

→ **It makes room for both pride and critique.** Research shows that the vast majority of people (76%) believe it is important to publicly discuss our nation's historical successes and strengths AND 73% believe it's important to address its failures and shortcomings (Topos, July 2025). In a sense, the history of America is the history of trying to make an ideal into reality. Importantly, our narrative invites us all into a clear-eyed, hopeful conversation about where we are and where we want to be without glossing over America's flaws or giving up on its promise. It builds on a shared sense that America is far from perfect, yet remains a remarkable and ambitious work in progress — one worthy of our collective commitment and dedication.

A principle that's inherently anti-authoritarian:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

> ***We don't have a dictatorship in here…*** *We have … two different political, three different political parties and everybody's got different views.* ***So the people vote for what they want."***

– CONSERVATIVE MAN, RURAL MAINE

> *There's no monarchy … And I feel like* ***that's what's important about America*** *… I think* ***that's what our founding fathers did. They came here and they said, 'No, we are here for everyone. I think no one person should be in charge.'"***

– LIBERAL WOMAN, URBAN GEORGIA

→ **It's a powerful *reminder.*** This is not an idea we need to invent or introduce, but one we need to bring back into focus. When asked what it means to be an American, most people talk about our individual freedoms and opportunities. Our collective responsibilities, our power, and what we need to do to exercise it isn't currently top of mind for most people — at least not in any hopeful or aspirational way that seems achievable. In fact, surveys consistently show that Americans believe they have little say. But when we bring the idea of ***the people being in charge*** back into focus — when we remind people that it's the beating heart of the American story, with examples of how that has happened and continues to occur — it awakens a sense of collective purpose, responsibility, and possibility.

→ **It's a call to action.** Built into the idea that ***the people are supposed to be in charge*** is the sense that it is up to each of us to contribute what we can. Our research shows that this reminds people of the important responsibilities and benefits of participation in community and civic life. And it reminds us that in America it is up to all of us to change the things we want to change, and not to give into fatalism or accept powerlessness.

A call to action:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

> *The idea that this nation was founded on was not, was not for one or few to be in control of everything.* ***We have the power, and if there are things we don't like, we can change them."***

– LIBERAL INDEPENDENT MAN, URBAN GEORGIA

> *I guess the older people, they really realize that because they were marching and protesting back in the Martin Luther King days... But* ***these young people, they're going to have to get out in the street. And I see them doing that, but they're going to have to do it more."***

– MODERATE WOMAN, RURAL COLORADO

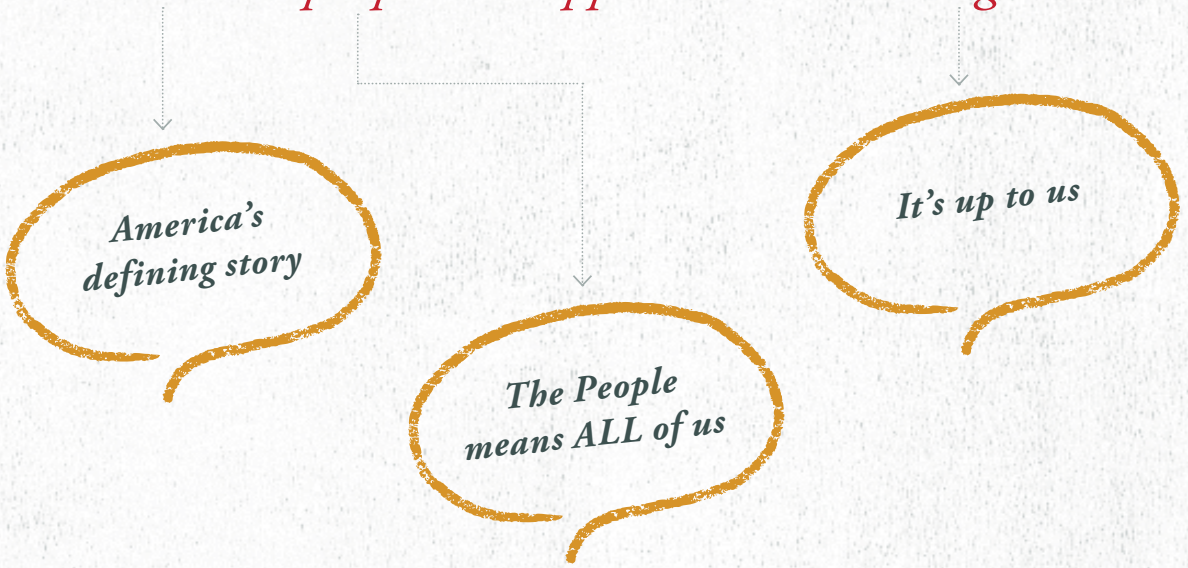
Bringing the Idea to Life: Three Narrative Directions

In America, the people are supposed to be in charge. The power of this big idea isn't just in the simple fact or assertion. The power lies in the stories we can tell grounded in this idea.

By reviewing the polling data, delving into the current public discourse and gathering insights from hundreds of conversations with people in rural, suburban, and urban areas of our country, we were able to zero in on promising ways to bring this core idea to life. We then tested some of these directions through a nationwide survey of over 4,500 people, using different images, messages, and metaphors to see what resonated.

The three narrative directions below each highlight a key element of the story. They aren't mutually exclusive, and in fact can overlap and reinforce one another. The illustrations and explanations below are examples of how these elements are already reflected in the cultural conversation These examples are merely starting points. The stories are yours to tell.

IN *America* THE *people* ARE *supposed to be in charge.*



Bringing the Idea to Life

AMERICA'S DEFINING STORY

Much of America's history — from technological, artistic, and civic innovation to social progress — can be told through a story of the creativity and agency of everyday people, rather than top-down organization and control. From pioneering breakthroughs in science and technology, to building an expansive public education system, to spreading jazz, rock and roll, and rap music across the globe — these stories reflect the nation's imperfect commitment to ensuring that ordinary people can shape its course. At their core, these stories — encompassing both our nation's deepest flaws and greatest achievements — trace back to the aspirational idea that ***the people are supposed to be in charge.***

One of the most powerful expressions of this idea is found in the country's social and cultural movements — stories of both progress and struggle. What began as a principle reserved for only a few has, over generations, been made more real through the hard, contested, and continuing efforts of Americans determined to put this radical ideal into practice.

At a time when so many Americans are at a loss about what they can do to shape the direction of the country, all of these stories present American history as proof that at every stage, the people have made the difference when they have found their power.

These are stories that are powerfully reflected in civil rights, labor, and people-powered movements. The idea is exemplified in the town hall and the block party as well as in stories of technological and artistic innovation. In the right context, they can be backed with cultural symbols like our flag, our national monuments and the founding documents.

Bringing the Idea to Life

AMERICA'S DEFINING STORY

The story of the creativity and agency of everyday people is *America's Defining Story.*

Women welders at the Landers, Frary, and Clark plant.
Photo Credit: Gordon Parks

Mission Control Center, Apollo 11. Photo Credit: NASA via AP

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima. Photo Credit: Joe Rosenthal

Protesters and members of the AFL CIO, We Are One Solidarity Day.
Photo Credit: Clarence Gatson.

We tested multiple versions of this story, including some of the images on the right, to illustrate the concept and learn more about how this historical framing resonates.

Here's what we found: Widely known accomplishments remind people that ordinary individuals, not just the powerful, have shaped this nation again and again. And this concept shows that self-governance isn't some lofty ideal — it's something we've lived in our most defining moments. Importantly, this direction also serves as an implicit call to action. About a third of respondents in the survey, volunteered that there's still work to be done, that we need to keep pushing forward because the work isn't finished.

Shifts by the numbers: In the survey, this approach boosted a sense of national pride. Among the control group, 70% feel "extremely" or "very proud" to be an American. After exposure to the concept, pride increased among both Republicans (+13) and Democrats (+11). Similarly, 43% believe that people working together can make a great deal of difference in solving problems, but those exposed to this concept were far more likely to feel that way: Democrats (+9), Republicans (+13) and Trump voters (+16). Although it elicits the strongest response with conservatives and older, white, more educated voters, it shows an ability to speak to younger and more moderate and liberal people as well.

Images incorporated into a concept board for testing.
See full concept boards.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Self-Governance, Accomplishments, Pride, Hope

Bringing the Idea to Life

THE PEOPLE MEANS *ALL* OF US

The idea that ***the people are supposed to be in charge*** places the collective "us" at the heart of what America is. Both our qualitative and quantitative research show that a strong majority of Americans across class, race, geography, faith, and politics believe that a country by, for, and of the people must truly mean ALL the people.

Diversity of experience, identity, and opinion lies at the heart of what most people believe makes America unique, dynamic, and innovative. And just as important is the ongoing challenge of coming together in ways that preserve that powerful diversity, while still finding enough common ground to make decisions, reach compromise, and move the country forward.

This part of the story can be illustrated with imagery and stories that showcase the country in all of its variety and richness — geographically, socially, ethnically, culturally, religiously, economically and in terms of opinion and experience.

The People means all of us:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

*We The People,' and that includes you. And **when people take that for what it says, 'We the People,' EVERYONE'S 'the People.'** Everyone in America has an opinion. And that's what I like about America."*

– CONSERVATIVE MAN, URBAN GEORGIA

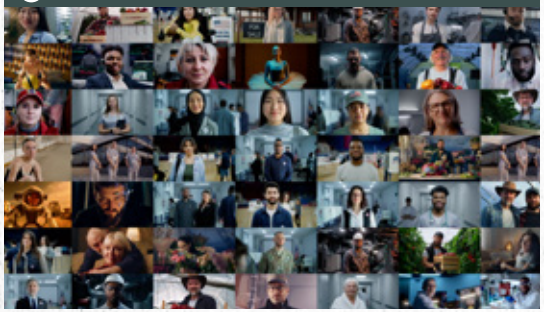
*Our founding fathers built this country on the fact that they wanted freedom for all… It was all men at the time, and you know, that has evolved as it should… the evolution of our country… but it's about the fact that **we are a people that will run our country and that we stand for freedom and the pursuit of happiness for all people,** the pursuit of justice…"*

– CONSERVATIVE WOMAN, SUBURBAN GEORGIA

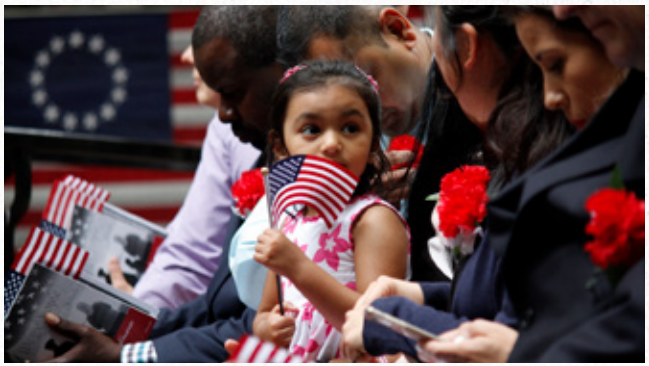
Bringing the Idea to Life

THE PEOPLE MEANS *ALL* OF US

click video to view



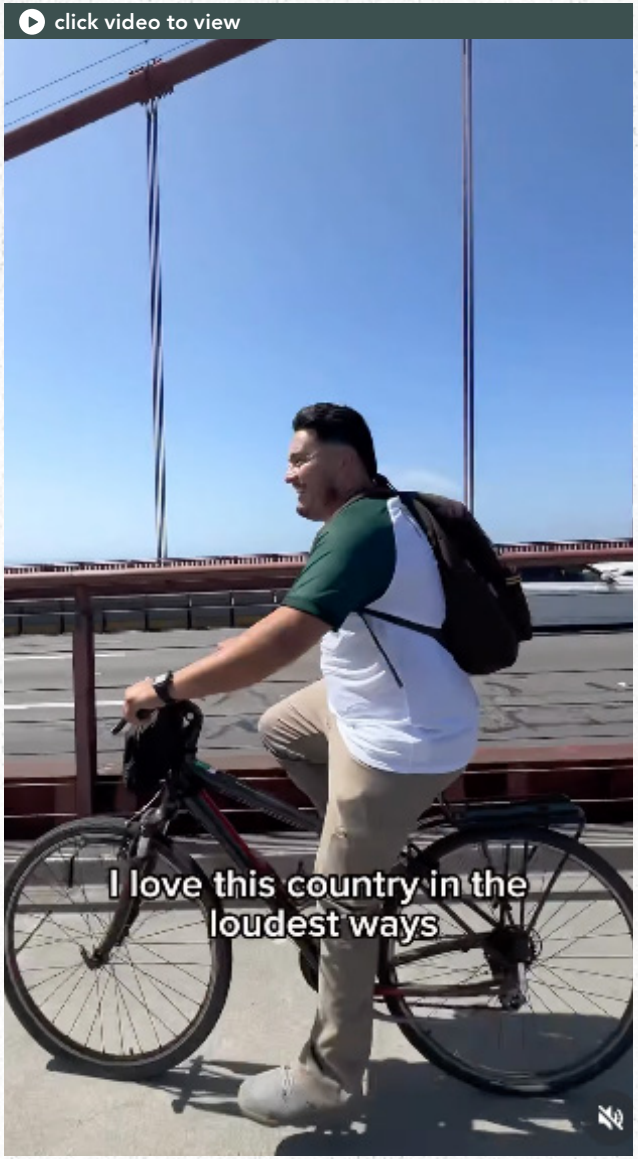
The people means all of us **celebrates diversity of identities, experiences, and perspectives. Video credit: EvgeniyShkolenko**



Naturalization ceremony in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 2019. Photo Credit: JanaShea

Artist Credit: Shepard Fairey

click video to view



Video credit: Gerrardo Baltierra

To bring this idea to life, we tested the **celebratory potluck image** on the right, paired with the message *"It's time to celebrate and reflect on America's first 250 years as the greatest potluck history has ever seen."*

Across the board, this concept was received as a hopeful message about contribution, cooperation, mutual appreciation and respect. Overwhelmingly, people say something positive about immigration, diversity or mention the "melting pot" in response to this concept. Many discuss food as a universal connector, and many directly tie diversity to American Identity.

Shifts by the numbers: The survey showed significant movement on voting motivation. When asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how motivated they are to vote in the "November 2026 General Election for U.S. Senate, Congress and other state and local offices and issues," 58% of the control group land at the high end (7-10) of vote motivation. Among those exposed to this concept, motivation increased overall (+5), especially among women (+8), and Harris voters (+11), and non activists (+12).

Image incorporated into a concept board for testing.
See full concept boards.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: Diversity, Hope, Inclusion

We also showed people an image of the **American flag made up of a mosaic of faces,** alongside the words: *"We the People — three words that put us in charge."* Even without additional context, people immediately saw it as symbolizing something fundamental and inspiring about America — a nation woven together from all of us, in all our diversity.

Shifts by the numbers: In the survey, this approach boosted a sense of national pride. Among the control group, 70% feel "extremely" or "very proud" to be an American. After exposure to the concept, pride increased overall (+5), especially among Democrats (+12), activists (+12), those who are 55 years or older (+12), and those who are nonreligious (+14). When asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how motivated they are to vote in the "November 2026 General Election for U.S. Senate, Congress and other state and local offices and issues," 58% of the control group land at the high end (7-10) of vote motivation. Among those exposed to this concept, motivation increased overall (+6), especially among women (+8) and Harris voters (+12).

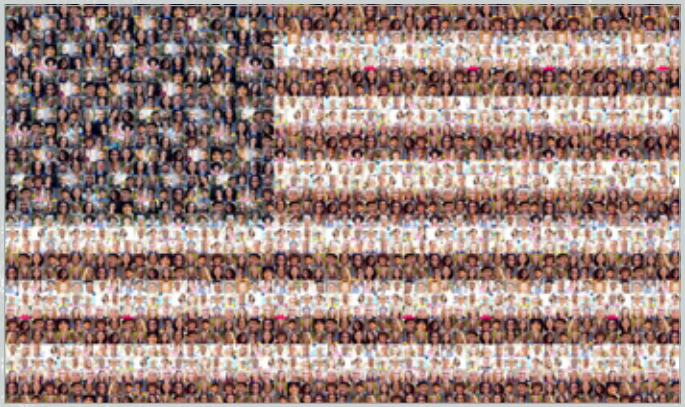


Image incorporated into a concept board for testing.
See full concept boards.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Pride, Empowerment, Responsibility, Solidarity

Reactions to the concept board:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

> ***All the different people in the flag catches my eye. I mean, because we are all made up of different types of people here.*** *I think that's really important, too… That's what we're based upon… it's people like that that make us all Americans."*

– CONSERVATIVE WOMAN, RURAL MAINE

> *It's the bigger picture. It's not just a few people, because* ***all different colors and races and everything make up the whole nation. And if you don't include all them, then it's not going to run right one way or another."***

– MODERATE MAN, URBAN COLORADO

Bringing the Idea to Life

IT'S UP TO US

A powerful theme emerged again and again throughout the research as we asked people to express their thoughts and feelings about America: people feel the country isn't run by or for everyday Americans — and they aren't sure what can be done about it. When we tested messages meant to inspire engagement, this sense of alienation often got in the way, turning potential hope into frustration, fatalism, or indifference.

Part of the power of the idea that ***the people are supposed to be in charge*** is that it speaks to these issues directly. It reminds us that:

- America is not just a nation of individuals, but a place where each person has a role to play and a responsibility to contribute toward an America of, by and for the people.
- Even if individually we may feel that we have little power and influence, when gathered together we can create and wield that power.
- We cannot give up on the idea of us being in charge without giving up on America itself.

It's a way to focus attention on collective action, responsibility and solutions, while also calling for individual responsibility and respecting personal agency.

This idea can be illustrated not only through images and stories of traditional civic participation — voting, attending a town hall, passing a petition — but also through the everyday ways people come together to solve problems and improve their communities. It shows up when neighbors organize to restore a playground or plant a community garden, when people rally after a natural disaster to clear debris and rebuild, or when parents band together to advocate for their kids' schools. It's visible in mutual aid networks, in community-driven efforts to expand broadband or protect clean water, in volunteer efforts at the local food bank, and in the countless ways people pool time, talent, and resources to shape their communities — and, by extension, the country.

Bringing the Idea to Life

IT'S UP TO US

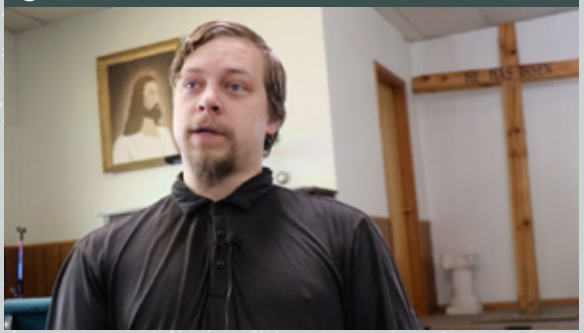
NOTE

It's about shared purpose, not total agreement. Americans from all walks of life are quick to point out that we are always going to disagree about things, and we wouldn't want it any other way. Crucially, for the people to really be in charge, we don't have to all agree, we have to come together enough to forge a path forward.

Coming together enough to work together:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view



> ***We have different perspectives, we have different viewpoints, but arguing over who's more right is less effective than figuring out how we can work these things together and move forward.*** *And you look through American history, a lot of things happened through those sorts of — I don't want to say compromises, but collaborations, really."*

– MODERATE MAN, RURAL MAINE

> *In this country… It's a hodgepodge of so many different people and so many different beliefs and values. And to me, the most important thing is that you respect everyone's values and their opinions.* ***And we're not always going to agree on everything… but just trying to find a way to peacefully become the best country that we can be for everyone that's here in our country."***

– CONSERVATIVE WOMAN, SUBURBAN GEORGIA

Bringing the Idea to Life

IT'S UP TO US

It's up to us **is about all the ways we pool time, energy, and resources to shape our communities — and, by extension, the country. Photo credit: FG Trade**

Habitat for Humanity volunteers, Asheville, NC. Photo Credit: jdwfoto

click video to view

Creative Community Crosswalks | Video Credit: Art on the Streets

click video to view

Walk the Vote | Video Credit: Margy Waller

click video to view

Video credit: More Perfect Union

When we tested metaphors and imagery to bring to life the themes of "It's up to us," participants connected strongly to visuals that conveyed both shared purpose and individual agency.

For example, we shared an image of a diverse group of people **gathered around a table, piecing together a puzzle of the American flag.** Here are just a few of the responses we heard to the idea this visual represents.

Reactions to the concept board:

HEAR FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

click video to view

Because ***there are a lot of people building the flag… That represents a lot of people doing their part to build a nation."***

– INDEPENDENT WOMAN, URBAN COLORADO
(QUOTE TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH)

We also illustrated the idea of collective action for shared purpose through a group of diverse **people painting a mural.** This concept board evoked not just intellectual agreement but an emotional response: pride in who we are, hope in what we can achieve, and a sense of possibility about the future. As one participant put it, "Working together strengthens our country."

Shifts by the numbers: Survey respondents who were exposed to this concept showed an 8-point increase in interest in voting (from 58% among the control group to 66% among those exposed to this concept), with even greater gains among those who had felt excluded or powerless in American life (+11 and +12 points). It also lifted national pride overall (from 70% to 74%), especially among men (+9) and middle-aged adults (+10)

Image incorporated into a concept board for testing.
See full concept boards.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: Pride, Hope, Possibility

Curious about the full range of concept boards we tested? Explore the complete methodology.

Putting it All Together

IN AMERICA *the People* ARE SUPPOSED TO BE *in Charge.*

Not a slogan, but shorthand for two deeply-held, interconnected American beliefs:

→ From the ground up

→ A voice, a say, and real respect

Remember: It's a goal, a work in progress that we can both celebrate and fight for.

Ways to emphasize elements of the story **to bring this idea to life:**

AMERICA'S DEFINING STORY	THE PEOPLE = ALL	IT'S UP TO US
→ Our founding ideal. → Our history of making it real. → America's task ahead.	→ Our differences make us stronger. → We come together enough to work together.	→ We have agency and responsibility. → Together we have power.
Metaphor and Image Examples: *Iconic, inspirational American imagery.* → Declaration of Independence and founding ideals → Civil rights → Unions and worker power	**Metaphor and Image Examples:** *America, in all our diversity.* → Potlucks, gatherings, and community building → Ways of showcasing contributions, diverse skills and knowledge → Activities with shared purpose	**Metaphor and Image Examples:** *Images of cooperation, successful outcomes.* → Attending a town hall or passing a petition → Restoring a playground or planting a community garden

FAQs

1. **Does this narrative speak to *all* audiences?** Part of the power of this narrative is that it speaks to the vast majority of Americans across race, class, geography, and ideology, with the caveat that we are NOT trying to appeal to hardened authoritarians, nor to people on either end of the ideological spectrum who believe that putting everyday people in charge has never been and never will be an American priority. Importantly, our recommendation that the 250th is a time for celebration AND reflection (in other words, that America is far from perfect, yet remains worthy of our collective commitment and dedication) is key to engaging this majority authentically.

2. **Why do we need both celebration and reflection?** One without the other can elicit hair-trigger pushback. Liberals tend to assume conservatives are blind to America's flaws, and conservatives tend to believe liberals are blind to America's virtues. The result is a tendency to argue from a righteously dismissive perspective rather than discovering a broadly shared ground. Being sure to include both, as well as stressing that America is a work in progress, helps avoid this unproductive dynamic.

3. **Did you explore other ways people talk about love of country?** We began with exploratory conversations and dozens of directions drawn from existing public discourse as well as ideas people raised themselves. Our researchers and analysts paid close attention to how these conversations unfolded — noting the avenues that sparked the kind of engagement we were seeking, and the ways they could go off track. Many seemingly promising directions failed to engage people as an organizing idea. Themes like American identity or America as a work in progress felt too abstract to spark emotional connection. Others proved too divisive: emphasizing American strength raised red flags for many liberals, while leading with diversity triggered defensiveness among some conservatives, despite broad areas of agreement. Some directions were counterproductive in this context. For example, focusing heavily on America's democratic legacy reminded people of partisan conflict and deep divisions. In contrast, the core narrative stood out: it had the clarifying and galvanizing power these other approaches lacked, while still leaving room to encompass them in the broader conversation.

4. **Why, in particular, are freedom and opportunity not more of a focus?** Freedom and opportunity are certainly top-of-mind American values. Americans share a desire for self-determination and the freedom to be who they are. However, freedom can mean different things to different people. And both values, in our research, were often interpreted in highly individualistic terms (freedom from interference, hard work, independence etc.).

   There still remains a strong cultural pull toward habits of hyper-individualized thinking and storytelling, so extra effort will always be needed to keep both halves of the story in the frame. We found that leading with a narrative rooted in shared power, collective self-determination, and responsibility like ***the people are supposed to be in charge*** can strike this balance.

FAQs

5. **People power isn't a new idea. How is this story any different?** This core idea is part of the long, rich tradition of organizing people for collective action in order to achieve political and social change. What sets this apart is how it takes the Cultural Common Sense — that people are powerful when they work together — and ties this to the country's founding ideals, our history of self-governance, and the social and cultural struggle that insists real power belongs to ALL of us.

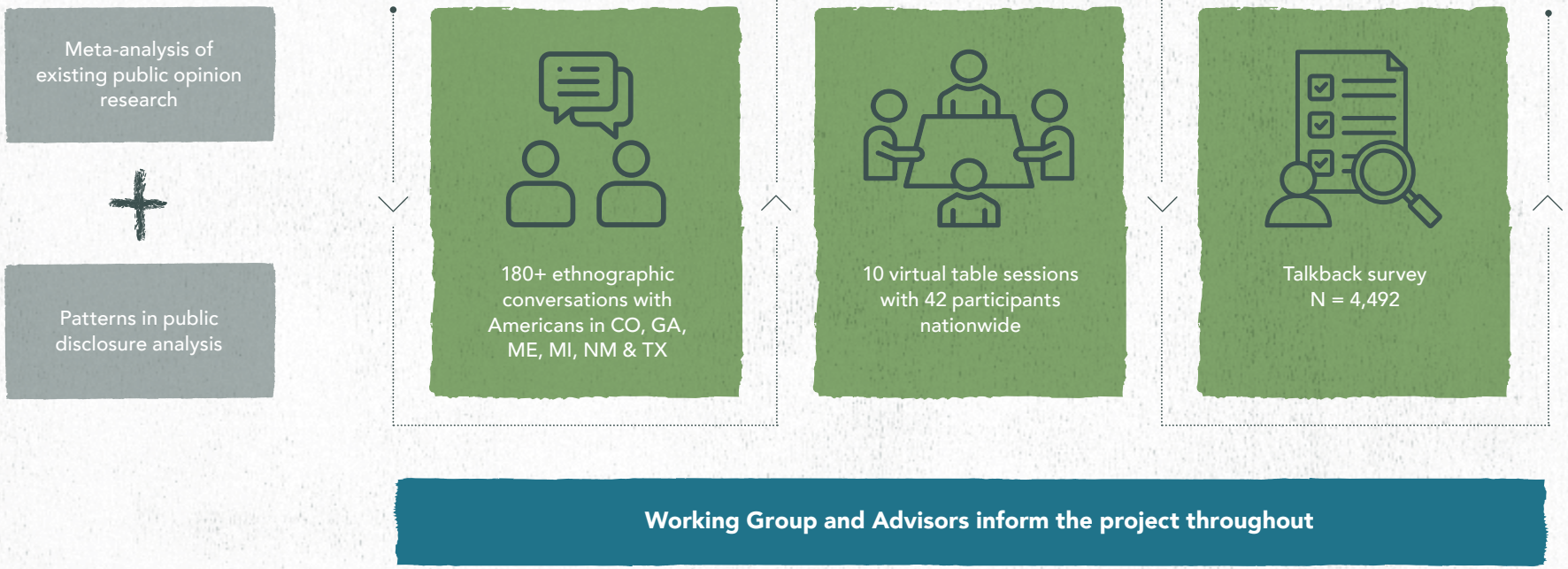
6. **Hasn't the idea of "the people" been used to discredit dissent and exclude marginalized groups?** The idea has been used in all sorts of ways, including as a means of exclusion and political rhetoric, and for that reason we were initially leery of the concept. In the course of the research, however, we found that the vast majority of Americans treat the idea as inclusive and as something that encompasses America's diversity within it. So, despite the many political entrepreneurs who have tried to co-opt and abuse the idea, it holds its idealistic promise.

7. **Does the narrative have reach beyond issues of democracy?** The idea that ***the people are supposed to be in charge*** is far broader than the institutions of government or partisan politics. In fact, when the idea falls too narrowly into electoral or partisan politics, it has less pull and power, as people already feel frustrated and unheard in these arenas. People value self-determination and mutual support playing out at every level — personal, community, national, both within government and without.

8. **What does calling people to action actually look like?** When we framed patriotism explicitly as a call to action (to reclaim the country from billionaires or the powerful few, for example) some people responded enthusiastically and many more reacted with weariness and fatalism. The recommended narrative calls to mind everyone's responsibility to play what role they can in their communities and civic spaces, and it invites people to think creatively about their own capacity for making a contribution. For some, this is about becoming active in politics or power-building. For others it is re-committing to representative democracy where we need to insist that our elected officials listen to us and act on our behalf. And for many, it is about mutual aid, connection, and getting involved in making their communities better.

Methodology

Building on previous research exploring American identity through the lenses of belonging and exclusion, diversity, freedom, and opportunity, this year-long project brought together the insights and perspectives of a diverse group of advisors and engaged stakeholders, combining them with rigorous research synthesis and original data collection. Each subsequent method took into account the learnings from the previous rounds, and regular check-ins with our Working Group and Advisors inspired and refined potential narrative directions. Thus, we present this powerfully resonant organizing idea with confidence, grounded in extensive testing and informed by the voices of Americans across geography, race, gender, and ideology.



Methodology

- In late 2024 and early 2025, two efforts laid the foundation for the qualitative and quantitative data collection:
  - **Meta-analysis of existing public opinion research:** We synthesized insights from over 125 recent research studies exploring Americans' thinking about our country, with the aim to understand the current moment and hypothesize about a potentially resonant, inclusive national narrative.
  - **Public discourse analysis:** To identify existing patterns in the public discourse around patriotism and love of country, we reviewed over 200 media items (including political convention speeches, public statements, debates, articles, blog posts, advertisements, memes, songs, music videos, and social media posts/comments). Topos analysts employed a customized AI tool, powered by a Large Language Model (LLM), to search media content for relevant material, and then refined emerging patterns through an iterative process.
- In the spring and summer of 2025, the above efforts informed the themes and ideas researchers explored in extensive qualitative data collection. Semi-structured, often spontaneous conversations elicited authentic engagement with the topics of American ideals and identity. This effort included:
  - **In-person ethnographic conversations** with over 180 diverse Americans in six states: Colorado, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, New Mexico, and Texas.
  - **10 virtual Table Session conversations** with a total of 47 participants across the country.
- In the final stage of research in July 2025, we developed and message-tested 9 concept boards employing narrative directions that emerged and were refined through the qualitative conversations.
  - The **survey** of nearly 4,500 Americans included open-ended questions measuring understanding of the proposed narrative direction and their resulting effect on attitude.

Curious about all the details? The full methodology is available here.

About

The US@250 Narrative Project: The stories we tell about our national identity and responsibilities matter. They shape our agenda, influence elections, guide civic participation, and either unite or divide us. As we approach the 250th, we need narratives that honor our ideals, hold us accountable, and inspire Americans to build a better, more just future. Over the past year, we brought together a diverse group of advisors and stakeholders, combined their insights with rigorous research and original data, and mapped the narrative landscape. We deeply listened to what Americans are thinking and feeling — and from that, lifted up authentic, resonant narratives of who we are and who we aspire to be.

Topos Partnership: When social issues organizations hit a wall, they come to Topos. For more than two decades we've been at the forefront of identifying the widely shared ideas that help or hinder progress. We lay the foundation for real, lasting change by focusing on the level of the Cultural Common Sense: the deeply held understandings that are pervasive and unquestioned — the simple "truths" that people share in daily conversations. These ideas sound like simple common sense but they have the power to direct people's views and behavior. This is the level at which we win and lose.

The Think Big Alliance is a nonprofit organization that fills a gap in the progressive narrative ecosystem by focusing on the battle for big, cross-cutting ideas. Think Big provides strategic, high-level analysis to connect and make meaning of existing, disparate efforts, including public opinion research, narrative trends, case studies, campaigns, and organizing efforts. We work alongside communities of practice to co-create, refine, deploy and share examples of these strategies in action.

With deep appreciation for the brilliance and dedication of our advisors and working group members: Andy Bernstein, Angela Peoples, Dee Davis, Eric Ward, Gabe Rose, Gabriella Cazares-Kelly, Jessica Depies, Luis Avila, Sarah Jaynes, Shayna Rose Triebwasser, Steve Moore, and Will Carter.