

Public
Rights
Project

Leading with clarity

A messaging toolkit for mayors and local leaders

2026

Introduction

This messaging toolkit is designed to help mayors and local leaders communicate clearly, consistently, and confidently about the work you do to protect civil rights — in court and beyond.

Whether you are preparing public remarks, engaging the press, or addressing fellow elected officials, this toolkit can help you make informed communication choices grounded in your community's values, experiences, and priorities.

Our core frames

Framing is how we define the issue so our audience sees it in a specific way.

Framing answers the question:

“How should people think about this story?”

The following frames can help evaluate the efficacy of your messaging. They are not intended to be used as public-facing copy. Internal Public Rights Project polling found that the following frames were most effective for our core audiences:

Rights/defense frame

The fight for civil rights isn't over when legislation passes; it requires ongoing enforcement and vigilant protection.

Freedom/offense frame

Cities and local communities are on the front lines of expanding and defending our freedoms.

In addition to the most effective frames listed above, we also tested with the public a **rights/offense frame** (local leaders are working to protect all people's civil rights so that we can ensure our multiracial communities thrive) and **freedom/defense frame** (the federal government is trying to coerce our communities to abandon their freedoms through threats to funding and basic safety.)

While not the most effective frames, there are instances and audiences where they might be useful. They are detailed in the [further study section](#).



Our core audiences

Mayors communicate across a broad political spectrum. This toolkit focuses on two important audience groups in blue and purple communities: **liberals and moderates**.

With both, internal polling suggests simply talking about this work provides a meaningful boost, and that audiences generally like hearing about it. That means the question is not whether to raise the issue, but *how* to do so in a way that feels credible, clear, and effective. Internal polling also strongly implies that most people believe that local communities are where rights become real and want their local elected leaders to defend their civil rights.



Liberals are starting from a higher baseline of awareness of and support for ongoing local and state litigation against the federal government. While the **rights/defense frame** still works with this audience, they are more receptive to a proactive message that emphasizes taking action to protect and expand rights. They respond well to language that connects local leadership to civil rights, inclusion, and solidarity, and to messages that frame legal action as part of a broader effort to advance justice and support vulnerable communities.

- Liberals responded strongly to **offense frames** that talk about local legal action as a proactive tool for progress. Messages that positioned local leaders as actively using their power to challenge federal abuses, expand protections, and move communities toward greater equality increased liberals' likelihood of supporting candidates who bring lawsuits against the federal government.
- Because liberal audiences already agree that civil rights matter, the strongest messaging for them focuses less on explaining the stakes and more on activating support to expand protections and challenge abuses.

Moderates are more likely to respond to the **rights/defense frame** that emphasizes protection, response, and harm prevention. Today, they see the federal government eroding their everyday rights and want to hear that reflected back to them. With individual cases, they want to understand what's at stake, what the city is doing, and why local action is necessary. For this audience, messaging should be steady, practical, and concrete, with a clear explanation of how legal action helps protect communities and prevent damage.

- For moderates and audiences with low awareness of local litigation, rights-based frames increased support for local governments taking legal action against the federal government.
- For moderates, the strongest framing was a rights/defense frame that emphasized protecting communities, preventing harm, and making sure rights are enforced in real life.
- For low-awareness audiences, rights-based framing provided an accessible entry point for understanding why local governments should take legal action against the federal government.

While **conservatives** are not likely to be persuaded by either frame, **rights/defense frame** did not create meaningful backlash. We observed some backlash with language about defending “freedom” from federal or state abuse, especially when tied to local governments taking legal action. This is likely because conservatives tend to view government as something to *protect freedoms from* rather than the protection mechanism itself. Conservatives also showed some resistance to the **offense frames**. By contrast, focusing on protecting existing rights created little to no conservative backlash, making the **rights/defense frame** a safe option for leaders who want to avoid alienating conservative audiences.

- A **rights/defense frame** is less likely to cause backlash among conservative audiences. Rights protection should be framed around people, services, and local responsibility.
- When the message led with “protecting freedom” and named the federal administration, conservative audiences were less open to local action.



Applying the messaging

This toolkit is focused on how to talk about the broader work of local elected officials protecting civil rights.

When communicating about specific topics like immigration, abortion access, or voting rights, we recommend using this messaging alongside trusted issue-specific guidance and any relevant legal, policy, or partner input. Public Rights Project can also work with you directly when communicating about individual legal cases.

Do

- **Do adapt this messaging** based on your audience, local context, and policy issue.
- **Do name the specific right or freedom:** replace broad, catch-all terms with the concrete rights you are referring to at the moment.
- **Do add specific, concrete facts about the human impact of the issue/case** you're working on to customize the messages below. Details like the number of people impacted or the specific programs or services threatened are meaningful to your constituents and help ground the messaging.

Don't

- **Don't use abstract buzzwords:** avoid terms like protecting democracy, democratic institutions, the civic fabric, etc.
- **Don't lean on legal jargon.**
- **Don't hedge or soften your message** to the point where it loses clarity or urgency — speak plainly and directly to the fight ahead.
- **Don't default to sanitized “both sides” phrasing** that obscures the real stakes for communities. It suggests this is a neutral policy disagreement rather than an intentional rollback of civil rights.

Messaging

This section includes message tables across five key topics:

	Building local government power through collective action	9
	Protecting accessible, fair, and safe elections	11
	Protecting the services communities rely on	13
	Protecting access to health care, work, and opportunity	15
	Protecting local decision-making	17

Each topic includes core messages for persuadable moderate and action-oriented liberal audiences, designed for adaptation across communications needs.



Building local government power through collective action

Persuadable moderates

The federal government should not be able to coerce cities to abandon the people we serve.

When essential services are put at risk, we can stand together to protect those resources and make sure the federal government keeps its commitments to our communities.

We partner with the Public Rights Project coalition to connect with other cities, make the case in court and in public, and defend the rights, services, and local protections our communities rely on.

Public Rights Project's impact includes:

- \$22 billion in funding protected through litigation.
- More than 80 jurisdictions are standing together in litigation over funding cuts.
- 33 jurisdictions and local leaders challenging federal election executive orders.

Action-oriented liberals

When the Trump administration attacks our rights or tries to override local decisions, we stand with other cities to protect our authority, defend the resources people rely on, and make clear that federal politicians will not dictate our future.

By joining the Public Rights Project network, we're connected with local leaders across the country to coordinate strategies, share expertise, and take collective action to protect our communities.

Public Rights Project's impact includes:

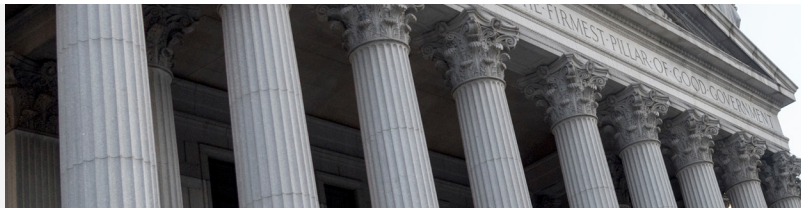
- \$22 billion in funding protected through litigation.
- More than 80 jurisdictions are standing together in litigation over funding cuts.
- 33 jurisdictions and local leaders challenging federal election executive orders.



Building local government power through collective action

MESSAGING IN ACTION >>

Persuadable moderates

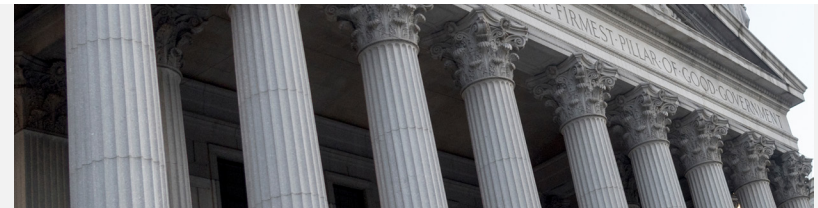


News article 8/20/2026

Gotham City goes to court to protect public health funding

As federal cuts threaten disease tracking and emergency response, Gotham City, with support from Public Rights Project, is joining more than 25 cities in a lawsuit to defend the funding local research centers need to keep communities safe.

Action-oriented liberals



News article 8/20/2026

Gotham City joins more than 25 cities to secure funding for local research centers

City leaders say the lawsuit, supported by Public Rights Project, aims to secure federal funding that helps local research centers track disease, improve public health response, and keep communities safer.



Protecting accessible, fair, and safe elections

Persuadable moderates

When voting access is threatened, we have a responsibility to act. Whether election resources are cut or roadblocks are put in place, we will use every available tool — including the courts — to protect fair, secure, and trusted elections and ensure every eligible voter can make their voice heard.

Ballot drop boxes and mail-in ballots help eligible voters return their ballots safely and on time. When those options are restricted, local leaders need to act quickly to protect reliable ballot access and ensure every eligible voter can cast a ballot on time.

Last-minute changes to elections create confusion, delay results, and burden election workers. We will fight back against last-minute interference by state and federal governments to preserve voting access, protect election workers, and ensure every eligible ballot is counted accurately.

Action-oriented liberals

Voting is a fundamental right. Every eligible voter should be able to cast their ballot safely, fairly, and without interference. We're working with other cities to pursue legal action against federal politicians who are trying to strip us of our rights. Together, we can protect the right of every voter to have their voice heard.

No one should have to choose between casting a ballot or earning a paycheck. It's crucial to defend and expand our right to vote, whether through ballot drop boxes, mail-in ballots, early voting, or other ways that allow us to ensure voting access for all.

We deserve elections that belong to the people, not politicians trying to change the rules at the last minute. With the Trump administration threatening voting rights across the country, we will use every available legal tool to protect the workers who keep our elections running and every eligible voter's ability to cast their ballot safely and fairly.



Protecting accessible, fair, and safe elections

MESSAGING IN ACTION >>

Persuadable moderates

Press release 7/20/2026

Following Gotham City's challenge, federal court keeps ballot drop boxes in place for voters

By keeping ballot drop boxes in place, the ruling helps ensure eligible voters can cast their ballots securely, safely, and on time.

Civil rights

Action-oriented liberals

Press release 7/20/2026

Gotham City expands ballot drop box access and defends the right to vote

Following litigation with 15 cities, Gotham City is expanding voting access and helping Gothamites balance their civic duty with work, caregiving, and other responsibilities.

Civil rights



Protecting the services communities rely on

Persuadable moderates

Federal funding helps keep essential local services like housing, public safety, and education systems running. When that funding is cut, our communities feel the impact first. As local leaders, we have a responsibility to work with other cities and use the courts when necessary to protect these resources.

Public health funding helps our city spot outbreaks early, respond quickly, and keep people safe. Federal cuts threaten our ability to respond to disease outbreaks and public health emergencies. We're standing with other cities to protect the resources to spot health threats early and support our communities' needs.

Keeping communities safe requires giving first responders the tools, resources, and support they need to do their jobs effectively. That's why we're standing with cities across the country to protect the funding and policies that help law enforcement, firefighters, emergency responders, and violence prevention programs work together to keep people safe.

Action-oriented liberals

When federal funding is cut, families lose housing support, seniors lose access to care, children lose critical services, and our communities become less safe. That's why we're standing with other cities and fighting these cuts in court.

Families should not have to wait until a health crisis becomes an emergency to get help. We need to work with other cities to protect public health funding so families can get the vaccines, emergency care, prevention services, and health support they rely on.

Safe communities are built through investment, not just enforcement. Violence prevention programs, community-based organizations, and support for victims and survivors have a proven track record of reducing harm and improving lives. We're standing with cities across the country to protect the funding and policies that make these investments possible, particularly in communities that have experienced both violence and over-policing.



Protecting the services communities rely on

MESSAGING IN ACTION >>

Persuadable moderates

Public health protections only work when we have the funding to deliver them

That's why we're joining a lawsuit in collaboration with more than 30 cities to demand the federal government deliver the funding our communities are owed and keep schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods safe.

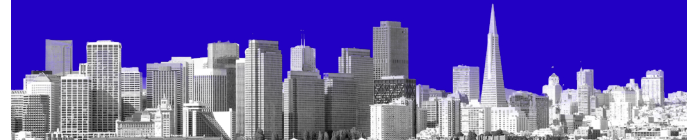


SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Action-oriented liberals

Keeping families healthy should not depend on political games in Washington.

Our neighborhoods need the resources to spot outbreaks early and keep daily life moving safely. We're joining more than 30 cities in court to stand up to the federal government and secure public health funding that keeps our neighborhoods safe and healthy.



SOCIAL MEDIA POST



Protecting access to health care, work, and opportunity

Persuadable moderates	Action-oriented liberals
People need to be able to access reproductive care, make private medical decisions, and trust that health care providers can do their jobs without intimidation. When those protections are threatened, we work with our partners and neighbors to enforce the law and protect access to care.	Reproductive care is health care, and everyone should have the freedom to make their own health decisions without political interference. Attacks on our right to access care fall hardest on women and our LGBTQ+, Black, and brown neighbors who are already facing barriers to care. We need to fight federal abuses of power to make care easier to access for anyone who needs it.
When federal immigration policies discourage people from seeking health care, food assistance, or housing support they are legally eligible to receive, families suffer — and the effects are felt across our entire city.	When the federal government uses fear to block immigrant families from receiving basic support, we cannot stay silent. Families shouldn't be afraid to take their child to the doctor, seek food assistance they're entitled to, or find a place to live. We will take legal action to challenge unlawful intimidation and protect every family's right to seek support without fear.
When immigrants' legal status is threatened, families can be separated, and communities can lose neighbors who help keep our cities strong. As mayors, we can stand together in court to enforce these legal protections and keep families rooted in the neighborhoods they call home.	Immigrant families have built homes, started businesses, cared for neighbors, and strengthened our cities. They should not have their futures upended by the Trump administration. As mayors, we can stand together in court to defend immigrants' right to contribute to the cities they helped make strong.



Protecting access to health care, work, and opportunity

MESSAGING IN ACTION >>

Persuadable moderates

BROADCAST INTERVIEW SOUNDBITE



“No family should be scared away from food assistance they are legally eligible to receive. Gotham will stand with other cities to enforce these protections and make sure immigrant families can access the basic support they are entitled to.”

Action-oriented liberals

BROADCAST INTERVIEW SOUNDBITE



“No family should be forced to go hungry because the Trump administration wants to play politics with people’s ability to eat. In Gotham, we’ll work to ensure every family can put food on the table and build a life in the community they call home.”



Protecting local decision-making

Persuadable moderates

The challenges facing our communities are often too big for any one city to take on alone. When we work with other mayors, we can share expertise, use public resources wisely, and act faster to protect the people we serve from serious threats.

Clean water systems and disaster preparation only work when resources actually reach our communities, and local leaders have the ability to make decisions based on what people need most. When federal environmental funding is cut or frozen, we can hold the federal government accountable to its commitments and keep critical protections in place.

When ICE raids spread fear, they make it harder for families to use the schools, emergency services, and local services they depend on. As city leaders, we can work with other cities to challenge unlawful tactics and defend the local protections that keep our neighborhoods safe.

Action-oriented liberals

We do not have to face attacks on our communities alone. When we stand together with other mayors and local leaders, we can act with greater strength, protect our neighbors more effectively, and take on fights that would be harder to win on our own. Together, we can make sure our communities have a real say in the decisions that impact their lives.

We deserve clean air, pure water, and safe roads, bridges, and services we can count on. The federal government should not be able to pull resources from the places most exposed to pollution, flooding, heat, and extreme weather. By standing with other cities, counties, and Tribes, we can keep critical funding flowing and prepare our communities for the climate threats they are already facing.

ICE raids tear families apart, spread fear, and force parents to think twice before taking their kids to school. We know what keeps people safe, and it isn't unaccountable federal agents. We should have a real say in the decisions that shape our lives. That's why we're challenging these unlawful tactics in court.



Protecting local decision-making

MESSAGING IN ACTION >>

Persuadable moderates

– Blog post

Gotham goes to court to protect clean-air protections

Federal cuts could stall the anti-smog programs Gotham already relies on to monitor pollution and protect public health. Mayor Pamela Isley is taking legal action to keep those safeguards working.

Action-oriented liberals

– Blog post

Gotham is fighting for cleaner air and stronger anti-smog programs

As federal cuts threaten local clean-air efforts, Mayor Pamela Isley is taking action in court to protect and expand Gotham's anti-smog programs so every neighborhood can breathe cleaner air.

Further study

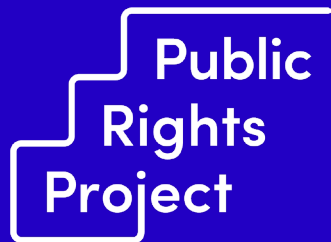
These findings should be used as directional guidance for messaging strategy, not as public polling.

The rapid message test was designed to compare how different frames performed, identify persuadable audiences, surface potential backlash, and help guide internal decisions about messaging. The results should not be used to make public claims about what voters or any specific electorate believe overall.

Audience	Messaging insights	
Majority	69% of people agree that when the federal government attacks people’s rights in their community, their local government should take action to protect those rights. 62% of people are likely to vote for a local government official who actively brings lawsuits against the federal government when it abuses its power.	69% of people agree that civil rights are lived and felt in our communities and want their local officials to protect them. Across many demographics, rights-based messaging increased agreement with this idea.
Young men ages 18-34	For young men, freedom frames caused backlash when paired with messaging about local government action to protect rights and freedom. This finding suggests that reminders of freedom can make rights protection feel like government overreach.	With this audience, don’t open with broad claims that “our freedom is under attack” or that “local governments must defend freedom.”

Audience	Messaging insights
Women	Women were persuaded by multiple message frames, but each frame played a different role. Rights frames helped build agreement that local officials should protect civil rights, freedom frames helped increase support for candidates who take legal action, and defense frames persuaded women to want to learn more.
Latino audiences	- For Latino audiences, both rights and freedom frames were highly persuasive in increasing agreement that local officials should protect civil rights in their communities. - Freedom frames also moved Latino respondents toward electoral support, increasing their willingness to vote for candidates who actively bring lawsuits against federal abuse.
Black audiences	- For Black audiences, a rights/offense frame increased agreement that local officials should protect civil rights and take action when rights are attacked. It also increased the likelihood of support for candidates who take legal action. - A freedom/defense frame made Black audiences less likely to seek information.

Audience	Messaging insights
White audiences	- Freedom frames decreased support among white audiences for local action to protect civil rights, while rights- and offense-based messages created backlash around local governments taking action when rights are attacked. - In particular, rights/offense frames decreased their likelihood to support a candidate who takes action. - Freedom/defense increased their interest in learning more about ways their local government can get involved.
Audiences who identified with another race	Among audiences who did not identify as Latino, Black, or white, freedom/defense significantly increased their support for local governments taking action and the candidates who take action.



About Public Rights Project

Public Rights Project helps local governments protect civil rights. We represent cities and counties in court, train government lawyers, and activate a national network of local leaders to respond to emerging threats. Since 2017, we've worked alongside local government officials in all 50 states to support communities and people's rights.

Public Rights Project

490 43rd Street, Unit #115
Oakland, CA 95609

(510) 738-6788

publicrightsproject.org

