

RESEARCH SUMMARY

RCN Research with AAPI Communities (2018-2022)

Last updated February 21, 2025

The Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is incredibly diverse, complex, and powerful. AAPI communities have played an integral role in American history since its earliest days, and yet they are among some of the most politically underrepresented populations in the country.

In recent years, AAPIs have grown increasingly influential as voters. In the 2020 election, Asian Americans were essential in securing victory for Democrats in the Senate and the executive branch in swing states like Georgia and Arizona. The number of AAPI voters who cast their ballot in 2020 in battleground states like Pennsylvania and North Carolina [exceeded](#) the presidential margin of victory. Meanwhile, the last couple of decades have seen record increases in turnout among AAPI voters. Between 2000 and 2020, Asian Americans made up the [fastest growing](#) racial or ethnic group in the U.S. electorate.

Despite the integral role AAPI communities play in our country and in the voting booth, when it comes to political outreach and messaging research, they remain largely overlooked and oversimplified – treated as one homogenous voting bloc. In the critical 2022 midterm elections, Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote's [Asian American Voter Survey](#) found that only about half of AAPI registered voters were contacted by *either* major party.

Whether from India or the Philippines, China or Cambodia – and whether their families have lived in the U.S. for several generations or immigrated in recent years – Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. have been reduced to one broad demographic term. While it's true that we talk about AAPIs broadly here, we also recognize that there can be significant differences between each ethnic group and that we must keep this in mind when conducting research and making recommendations on how to best connect with the diversity of the community. In our work we have not been able to address all of those nuances but we do our best to lift those differences when available while making broad recommendations.

In large part, AAPI voters lean Democratic – and like the majority of Americans, their priority issues in recent years have been healthcare, jobs, and the economy – AAPI communities are not a monolith. They may have a shared experience of living within a country that is rife with structural racism, but their personal experiences and preferred solutions can vary widely. Where they live in the U.S.; which of the dozens of Asian countries or Pacific Islands their families descend from; their economic and immigration status; what religion they practice; how many generations they've lived in the U.S. – all of these factors and more have a profound impact on the American experience of AAPI communities.

Too often, advocacy organizations that seek to reach Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are left out of large messaging research, including on economic justice, criminal justice reform, immigration, and other key issues. This is compounded for advocacy organizations outside of the coasts, who are often expected to use the same concepts and ideas used with communities on the coasts. Those messages and approaches frequently miss the real experiences and opinions of AAPI communities in the Midwest and the South, and the nuanced ways that strategic racism manifests in those environments.

While there is much left to learn about what words resonate with which AAPI voters, we know that messages rooted in the [Race Class Narrative \(RCN\)](#) [messaging framework](#) work. RCN weaves together economic empowerment, racial justice, and gender equity, using empirically tested and field proven language in concert with organizing to mobilize and persuade voters. Since the [inception of the RCN](#) in 2017, we have oversampled [AAPI communities nationally](#), across the [Midwest](#), and in [Texas](#) to identify what moves AAPI voters to be a part of a national, multi-racial coalition that can win on the issues people care about – from economic well-being to climate justice to reproductive freedom. Though much has changed in our political discourse over the past five years, across our research, RCN messages have consistently succeeded in motivating AAPI voters, whether on issues of revenue or criminal justice.

This toolkit takes a look at what we've learned between 2018 and 2022 about how to most effectively mobilize AAPI communities from agreement to action.

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UNDERSTANDING RACE CLASS NARRATIVE

Our opposition relies upon racist dog whistles as a tool to pit everyday people against one another, marginalizing people of color to ultimately keep power and resources firmly in the grasp of the rich and well connected. All too often, movement organizations promote disjointed, obscure narratives that don't advance a clear argument or speak to Americans' economic concerns, while also failing to push back against our opposition's use of racial division.

Winning narratives must be strong enough that our base sings them from the hilltops, bringing the persuadable middle to our side and moving those who feel civically unmotivated to act. These messages must inoculate against the opposition's use of hate and fear and call out how people of color are being scapegoated for the ill intentions and personal gain of greedy corporations, a few wealthy elites, and the politicians who serve them.

[The basic RCN messaging framework follows four parts:](#)

1. **Lead with a shared value** that names race and class.
2. **Explicitly name the villain(s) and how they use racial scapegoating** as a weapon that economically harms all of us or point out racial division as a tool of the opposition.
3. **Emphasize unity and collective action** to solve the problem(s).
4. **Connect joining together to achieving desired outcomes.** Give a call to action urging people to be active participants in creating change.



WHO RACE CLASS NARRATIVE IS FOR

When thinking about who RCN messages are for, we typically divide the American electorate into three distinct groups: the Base, the Persuadable Middle, and the Opposition.

Base (~23% of adults)	Persuadables (~59% of adults)	Opposition (~18% of adults)
Our base audience believes wealthy individuals achieved their success because they were given more opportunity, people of color face greater barriers to economic success than white people, and the government should create opportunities for advancement. They're more likely to be under 40, be Black or Latinx, live in the Northeast, and be Democrat. RCN messages should engage and inspire the Base (those who are already with us) to mobilize them into action.	Persuadables are divided on most issues but lean marginally toward progressive worldviews on class. They are more likely to be women and independents, but otherwise closely reflect the demographics of adults across the country. RCN messages are meant to first shift the Persuadable audience's beliefs and attitudes on our issues, then inspire Persuadables (those who can be with us) to take action.	Our opposition believes wealthy individuals achieved their success because they worked harder than others, that people of color who cannot get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition, and that the government should get out of people's way. They're more likely to be men, over 50, white, Republicans, and from the Midwest. RCN messages are not intended to move or even reach the Opposition.

***Note: The percentages for our base, opposition, and persuadable middle come from original [RCN research](#) with Demos conducted in May 2018. Five years later, it would be incredibly useful to reassess these audience breakdowns, with specific data for how AAPI audiences divide into these three audience categories.*

It's easy to assume that all people of color in the United States would automatically fall into the base. However, several years of RCN research has found this to be untrue.

People of color have a diverse range of perspectives that vary widely depending on factors like race, religion, and zip code. As a result, there are many voters of color who fall squarely into the Persuadable Middle with the potential to be influenced – and moved to action – if reached with the right messages.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are no different. **Though they can be found in all three audiences, there are millions of AAPI voters who fall in the persuadable middle, and they should be reached with messages tailored to the wide variety of beliefs and life experiences that exist across AAPI communities in the U.S.**



KEY GUIDANCE: USING RCN with AAPI COMMUNITIES

Race Class Narrative research, now led through the permanent infrastructure of [We Make the Future](#) and [We Make the Future Action](#) (WMTF/A), has been oversampling AAPI voters in messaging projects for the last five years, gathering insights into AAPI messaging preferences nationally, across the Midwest and in Texas. By researching the most effective messages in collaboration with AAPI advocates that speak to and mobilize our AAPI base, we believe we can persuade the AAPI persuadable middle and repel our opposition – both within and outside the AAPI community – to build a multiracial democracy that benefits us all.

GENERAL FINDINGS: AAPI BELIEFS on RACE and CLASS

In October of 2018, while under Demos, we conducted a [messaging project](#) to identify findings and recommendations from a national online survey of Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders. Here were some of our key findings.

There are three dimensions that shape perceptions within RCN:

1. **First, whether one feels there is too little or too much attention paid to race and racial issues in America today.** Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are more likely than others to agree there is too little attention paid to race, while Asian Americans and Native Americans divide more evenly.

<i>In general do you think there is too much, too little, or about the right amount of attention paid to race and racial issues in our country these days?</i>		
	Asian American	Pacific Islander
Too Little	38	57
Too Much	33	29

2. **Second, whether one wants government to create opportunities for advancement or get out of their way.** Asian Americans and Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders are more supportive of government creating opportunities, while Native Americans, who have a history of conflict with the federal government, prefer government get out of their way.

<i>If you had to choose, would you prefer government...</i>		
	Asian American	Pacific Islander
Provide opportunities for advancement	60	57
Get out of the way	26	28

3. **Third, whether one believes wealthy Americans achieved success because they were given more opportunities than others or because they worked harder than others.** In this dimension, all three groups tend to agree that the wealthy were given more opportunities than others.

<i>Which of the following is the primary reason wealthy Americans have achieved financial success? Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they....</i>		
	Asian American	Pacific Islander
Were given more opportunities than others	55	63
Worked harder than others	30	21

AAPJ people surveyed also strongly favored a policy agenda rooted in equality: ending discrimination against people of color in jobs, housing, and education; expanding Medicare to ensure healthcare for all Americans; overhauling our criminal justice system to eliminate racial and other biases; and creating a fair immigration process that keeps families together and includes a roadmap to citizenship for current immigrants.

Here are some other helpful findings from our 2018 research:

- Calls for unity resonate strongly across AAPI communities – particularly the phrase “work together,” which generates more intense support.
- Calling out our national identity (i.e. “As Americans...”) is very effective with AAPI voters.
- AAPI audiences strongly agree that focusing on and talking about race is necessary to move forward toward greater equality.
- Both Asian Americans and Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders feel included in the term “white, Black, or brown.” While Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders respond even more when we include “Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders” in a statement, Asian Americans prefer the broader statement.
- Racism is a top concern among AAPI groups. Each holds strong concerns about bias against their own group.
 - Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are also concerned about religious discrimination and worry about discrimination against Muslims.
- All groups agree that African Americans and Latinos face greater obstacles than white people. They also believe their own racial group faces greater obstacles to success.

A substantial number of Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders *do* believe that people of color are mostly responsible for their own condition, but they believe this with low intensity. For Asian Americans, 41% agreed, but only 7% of those agreed strongly. For Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, 44% agreed, but only 11% of those agreed strongly.

MESSAGING FINDINGS

CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE

LEAD with shared values — community, safety, prosperity — in a way that names race and class while bringing people together.

- I.e., “Most of us work hard for our families.” “Every child deserves to pursue their dreams.” “Our strength is our ability to work together.”

CALL OUT divide-and-conquer tactics and connect them to the outcomes they create.

- I.e., (tactics) “Hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich.” “Divide us based on what someone looks like.” (outcomes) “Rig the rules to enrich themselves.” “Exploit immigrants’ labor while denying rights.”

NAME the villain and their tactics. It is more important to highlight the tactics they employ than merely naming them.

- I.e., It’s not just that politicians divide us based on what we look like, but that they do it to rewrite the rules in order to line their pockets. It’s not just that they generate fear based on race, but that they do it to benefit the wealthy few at our expense.

CREATE a unity of purpose by describing people working together.

- I.e., “working together” “knit together a landscape of people from different places into one nation.”

EVOKE race. Talk about race and class and explicitly mention “white, Black, and brown.” This type of message generates greater support than a colorblind appeal. Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders respond even more when we include “Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders,” while Asian Americans feel more included with a broader statement (“white, Black, or brown”).

- I.e., “put the interests of working people first, whether white, Black, or brown.”

MOVE to action. Provide a positive call to action that centers unity and change and when possible, alludes to past successes.

- I.e., “We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past.”

AVOID the opposition frame and **DO NOT REPEAT** accusations, even to refute. Instead, expose how certain politicians and billionaires try to undermine social services by shaming and blaming the people who use them.

POLICY PREFERENCES and ISSUE RESPONSES

In 2020, we conducted another [RCN research project](#) on messaging specifically in the Midwest, with some deeper explorations of the views of African American voters, Latinx voters, and AAPI adults.

We tested different approaches to promote progressive policies and to most effectively combat opposition claims. These were our most effective messages for engaging our base and persuading the AAPI middle on these policy and issue arguments across states and oversamples:

Progressive Policies	AAPI Adult Support
Ensure people’s voting rights by allowing for election day registration and automatic voter registration.	76% (29% <i>strongly</i>)
Make sure every child can get a quality education by raising taxes on the state’s largest corporations and the wealthiest 1% of residents.	76% (33% <i>strongly</i>)
Bring greater fairness to our criminal justice system by ending mass incarceration and punishment for drug use and providing comprehensive training to police to curb bias.	74% (25% <i>strongly</i>)
Protect our air, water, and land by transitioning to locally made clean renewable energy.	84% (33% <i>strongly</i>)
Ensure people have the freedom to decide for ourselves	74%

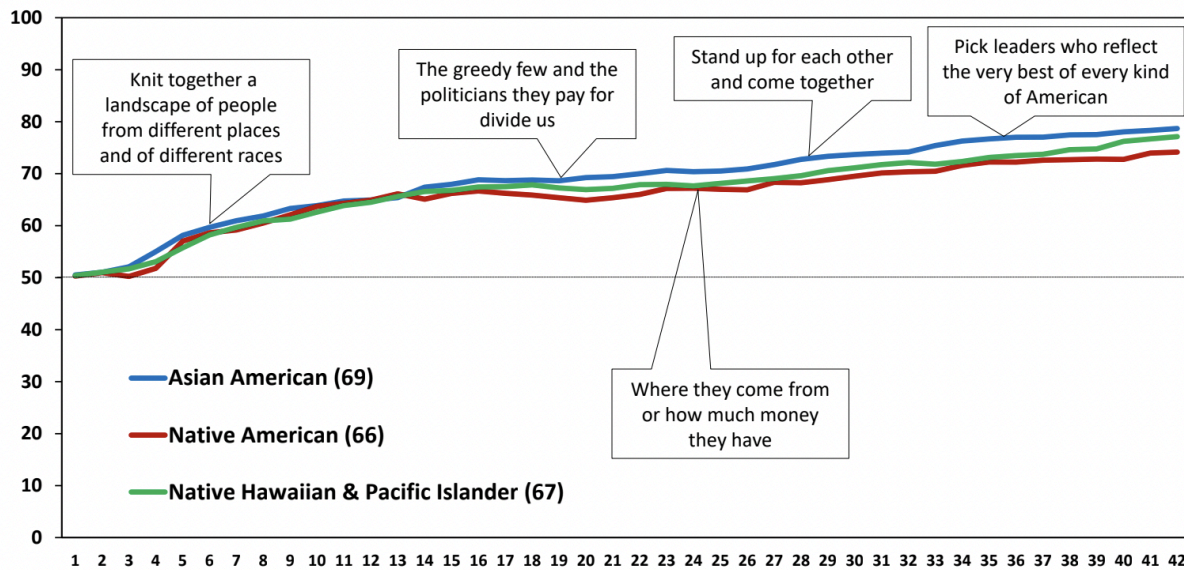
whether and when to have children through access to reproductive healthcare including, prenatal care, contraception, and abortion care.	(32% <i>strongly</i>)
Make sure anyone can access public programs that provide support for food, healthcare and housing, regardless of their immigration status.	67% (21% <i>strongly</i>)

EXAMPLE NARRATIVE

The following narrative, “America’s Strength,” was our top performing message across AAPIs and Native Americans surveyed in our 2018 RCN research project.

AMERICA'S STRENGTH
America’s strength comes from our ability to work together – to knit together a landscape of people from different places and of different races into one nation. For this to be a place of freedom for all, we cannot let the greedy few and the politicians they pay for divide us against each other based on what someone looks like, where they come from or how much money they have. It’s time to stand up for each other and come together. It is time for us to pick leaders who reflect the very best of every kind of American. Together, we can make this a place where freedom is for everyone, no exceptions.

This message registered the strongest convincing ratings, dial ratings, and share ratings across Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders surveyed.



The y axis in this graph represents the degree to which the message was convincing.

The “America’s Strength” message unites us by defining our country’s strength in our ability to work together. It’s stronger than a more traditional “Colorblind Economic Populism” message for two reasons. First, it taps into people’s desire to come together and work together, and it combines race with class as one of the reasons for their success. Secondly, the message includes another dimension beyond inequality, combining race and class, that resonates across audiences.

DIVING INTO THE ISSUES: SAMPLE CONTENT and NARRATIVES

FREEDOM to LEARN

In October of 2021, WMTF teamed up with Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications, and the National Education Association to [examine](#) voters' views on issues related to education, from equity and funding to critical race theory. This research included an oversample of AAPI voters.

The following message, "Tell Hard Truths," was the top message with AAPI and Democratic voters.

TELL HARD TRUTHS
<i>No matter our color, background, or zip code, we want our children to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what's right. But for years, certain politicians have denied many children the quality education they deserve. Now those same politicians want to control what kids learn in class, excluding important figures like Martin Luther King Jr. from our history because they stood up to racism and pushed to change our country for the better. By joining together and speaking up at school board meetings and voting in local elections, we can make our schools places where every child belongs and can thrive, and this a country where we respect and support each other across our differences.</i>

The "Tell Hard Truths" message moved AAPI persuadables toward believing education funding should be increased and also heightening support for teaching critical race theory.

RAISING REVENUE

In January of 2022, WMTF partnered with Frameshift and ASO Communications to test messages with the power to build public will to demand that elected leaders act on our behalf and fund programs we care about; that federal money designated to support states goes into the community and not into corporate tax cuts; and that corporations pay working people and their state what they owe. The project oversampled AAPI voters. The messaging highlights from this research can be found in our [Fund Our Future](#) toolkit.

The following content, our “ARP Track,” was effective across people of color surveyed – especially those who make less than \$120,000/year – and it was incredibly effective with AAPI voters.

Track 3: ARP

IMPACT

This track was particularly effective across POC, especially in the <120K income group.

- ↑ **We should increase state gov funding:**
 - Everyone: 9%
 - AA: 11%
 - AAPI: 25%
 - Middle class (30-120K): 14%
 - Blue collar: 19%
- ↑ **Make corporations pay fair wages:**
 - POC 2020 Non Voters: 12%
 - Non College Men: 8%
- ↑ **Everyday ppl can act together to rewrite rules:**
 - Latino Voters: ~ 13%
 - POC Voters: ~ 9%
- ↑ **Want to call state representative:**
 - Non Voters: 14%

PROPELLED ACTION

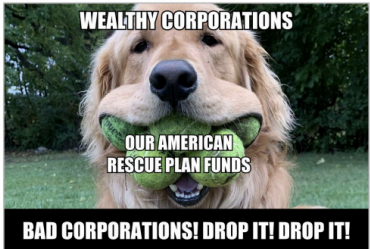
Why?

This track focused on ARP funds and how the wealthiest are keeping us from what we need. This gave people something CONCRETE to justify demanding more.

This was the most emotionally activating track - evoking the most energy and anger in the open ends, especially amongst <30K income respondents. Participants wrote paragraphs in the open ends, which is highly unusual. “GREED” was a recurring word.



[Click here to play](#)



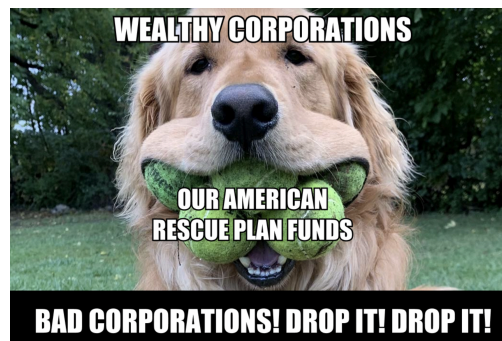
[Download here](#)

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ARP Creative Content



[Watch here.](#)



[Download here.](#)

Our “Outcomes” track also performed especially well with AAPI audiences, moving them in support of making corporations pay fair wages.

Track 6: OUTCOMES



[Click here to play](#)



[Download here](#)



[Download here](#)

IMPACT

This track had a strong impact on POC, in particular, moving them across metrics.

↑ Increase funding for state gov:

POC: 7%
POC Men: 17%
Latino: 10%
POC College: 13%
Non College Men: 15%

↑ Increase taxes on wealthiest:

POC: 8%
POC Men 12%
POC Parents: 14%
<30K: 13%
Non Voters: 14%
Women: 8%
POC College: 12%
College Women: 13%

↑ Make corporations pay fair wages:

AAPI: 11%
<30K: 12%

↑ Want to call state representative:

75-120K: 16%
Left of Center Parents: 20%

PROPELLED ACTION

Why?

This approach presents concrete, desirable, outcomes from revenue. In the ad, the concept of corporations “cheating the system” and avoiding responsibility was crystal clear to viewers, who were angry that those who can afford it don’t pay what is owed.

While it shifted beliefs across the spectrum - especially for POC, middle class (75K-120K income) and left of center parents of all races were the most likely to take action.

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Outcomes Creative Content

		
Watch here.	Download here.	Download here.

Lastly, our “Sweet Humor” track especially moved AAPI audiences to support increased funding for the state government.

Track 5: SWEET HUMOR

IMPACT

This ad had a strong pattern of impact with college educated, over 120K income respondents across race.

↑ **Make corporations pay fair wages:**

- All College Educated: 12%
- POC College Educated: 9%
- White College Educated: 15%
- Women College Educated: 13%
- Over 120K income: 13%

↑ **Increase funding for state gov:**

- AAPI: 29%
- POC Parents: 16%

Did not propel action.

Why?

Like Track 1, the ad depicts industrious doers and contrasts them against a wealthy “taker.” But in this ad, animated forest creatures tell the story, which college educated and higher income folks found surprising and delightful.



[Click here to play](#)



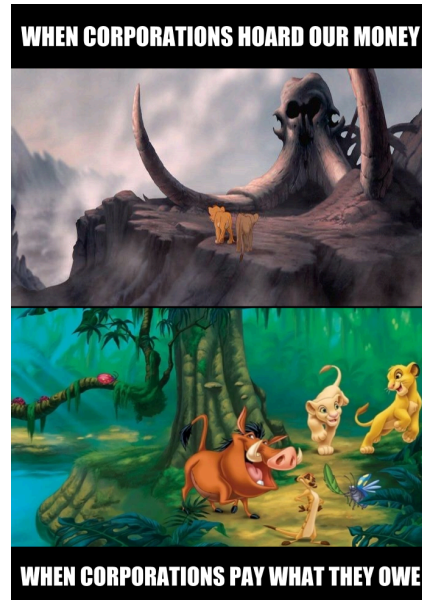
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Sweet Humor Creative Content



[Watch here.](#)



[Download here.](#)

TEXAS RACE CLASS NARRATIVE

In March of 2022, WMTF partnered with Texas for All, ASO Communications and Lake Research Partners to research what messaging was most effective with Texas voters on a variety of issues, with an additional sample of AAPI Texans.

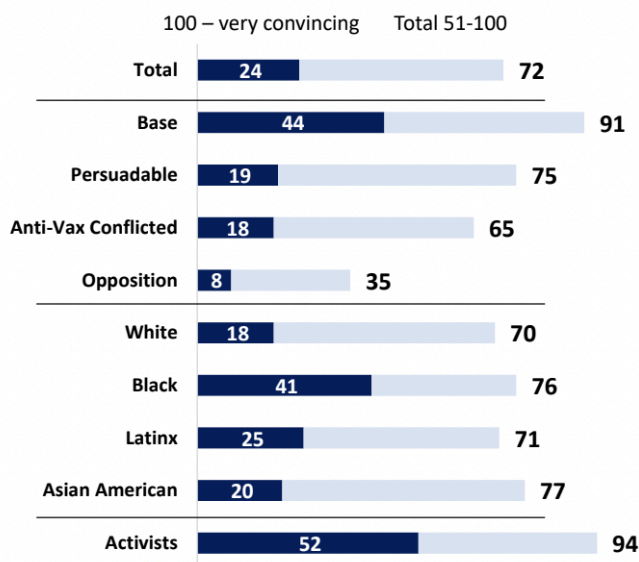
2022 was a critical election year in Texas, and including AAPI voters in our messaging research was valuable to groups on the ground conducting voter outreach. Having data across race on several important election issues gave organizers the opportunity to better tailor their outreach depending on race, issue, and geography in the state. Of many messages tested, “Worth More – Education and Energy” was a top-performing message with AAPI voters.

WORTH MORE – EDUCATION AND ENERGY

Texans across race, place, and background know our worth. We are worth paychecks that equal the true value of our work, quality schools that teach the truth of our past, and clean air, water, and energy that our families can depend on. We are worth more than the politicians in power in our state who abandon us in times of trouble, then hope we'll shame and blame Black, brown, and new Americans for our struggles. Our vote is our power. And when we join together as voters, we can elect new leaders who recognize our worth and chart a better future where every Texan in every corner of our state has the power to thrive, no exceptions.

Worth More – Education and Energy*

How convincing did you find this message?



WHAT WORKS

- ✓ Everyone dials up at references to education and clean energy for their families (“We are worth paychecks that equal the true value of our work, quality schools that teach the truth of our past, and clean air, water, and energy that our families can depend on.”)
- ✓ Base voters dial up at the reference of the villain’s actions as “abandon[ing] us in times of struggle.”
- ✓ Base and Persuadable voters dial up to “our vote is our power.”
- ✓ Persuadables, and Conflicted voters dial up at a future-oriented solution of “we can elect new leaders who recognize our worth and chart a better future.”)
- ✓ Effectively alienates Opposition voters.
- ✓ Higher convincing ratings among the Base, Black voters, and Asian American voters compared to version with voting and choice.

WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X Persuadables plateau when we describe divide and conquer tactics (“then hope we’ll shame and blame Black, brown and new Americans for our struggles.”)

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Check out our resources and toolkits on other issues on our website.](#)

To stay up to date on We Make The Future's work, [please sign up here.](#) You can support toolkits like this by [donating to our work.](#)

CONTACT INFO

For any questions, reach out to us at [info@wemakethefuture.us.](mailto:info@wemakethefuture.us)