

Messaging Guide

Transgender Youth and the Freedom to Be Ourselves

Building Our Choir with a Race Class Gender Narrative



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INTRODUCTION

Organizers know that advancing justice and safety for transgender people in the U.S. will require building a strong, vocal, and durable multiracial coalition championing a trans-inclusive, progressive vision for the country. Yet there has been little to no public opinion research or targeted narrative development focused on building that base by contextualizing trans issues within the broader fight for racial, gender, and economic justice. Instead, colorblind messaging dominates LGBT advocacy. Where race is mentioned, it is usually to name disparities – a simple acknowledgment of the increased violence and discrimination trans people of color face. Frequently, talking points on LGBT policies have been formulated to calm audiences’ discomfort with transgender people, tacitly reinforcing a conservative worldview around race and class and further siloing trans issues from related progressive causes.

The right has exploited ignorance about transgender people and our lack of an affirmative, race-forward message to advance anti-trans attacks, further splinter and impugn the left, and sabotage progressives on a broad range of issues. Over the last ten years, Republicans in state legislatures have increasingly turned to anti-transgender rhetoric and legislation as a powerful complement to their arsenal of racist dog whistles used to whip up fear and consolidate power. In 2021, they have refined this strategy in the form of a moral panic over transgender youth, introducing over 100 bills across the country to criminalize medical care for trans youth and bar trans young people from participating in school sports. Recently, they have paired these attacks with fear-mongering about Critical Race Theory, mobilizing their base with a potent mix of racist and transphobic tropes. Progressives cannot ignore these attacks hoping that simply sticking to economic issues alone will save us. Our appeals on any topic will always be filtered through the noise of this unrelenting fear-mongering and scapegoating on the right.

New research by ASO Communications, Transgender Law Center, and Lake Research Partners finds that we can cultivate resistance to these attacks, build cross-racial solidarity, and advance a shared vision for the future by weaving together our shared values, experiences, and demands across races and genders. This new approach builds on the [Race Class Narrative](#) to tell a convincing story of how our opposition uses strategic racism and transphobia to harm us all; and how, by coming together, we can ensure we all have the freedom to be ourselves and support one another. Using a Race Class Gender Narrative, we can mobilize our progressive base (particularly Black, AAPI, and Gen Z audiences), marginalize our opposition, and move persuadables across race.

¹Online nationwide survey conducted July 29 - August 5, 2021 among 1000 adults, with additional oversamples of 100 Black adults, 100 Latinx adults, 100 AAPI adults, and 100 Indigenous adults, as well as a separate sample of 95 activists collected August 13 - September 24, 2021. Quantitative research was preceded and informed by eight focus groups with base and persuadable Black, AAPI, and Latinx cisgender men and women and two mixed race and gender groups, one with parents and one with Gen Z adults.



FULL NARRATIVES

The following narratives proved compelling to our base and persuadables, increasing support for our policies and enthusiasm to join together with people across races and genders to create positive change. Campaigners and organizers across movements should use these narratives for creative and social media content, visuals, public messages, calls to action, spokesperson materials, and more.

FREEDOM FROM BOXES

Most effective message at moving voters away from opposition sports policies and towards supporting transgender student athletes, as well as driving enthusiasm to join together with others to create change. This was particularly strong with Black and Latinx respondents.

Whether we are Black, white or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not, we want the freedom to be ourselves. But some people try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders. We see this in how schools tell Black kids how to keep their hair or send girls home for the clothes they wear. And in how certain politicians exploit lack of familiarity with transgender people, excluding trans kids from healthcare, school, or sports. They stoke fear so we turn against some group instead of demanding what our families need. By joining together, we can make this a place where we are all free to thrive and support each other for who we are.

AUTHENTIC SELVES

Our top message for persuadables and the highest or second highest rated narrative for respondents of every racial group. This message also increased people's excitement to join together with others to create change.

Across our races, backgrounds and genders, we want to be treated with dignity and respect. But today, certain politicians are pushing laws that restrict our freedoms because of the color of our skin, what's in our wallets, or because we are transgender. They exploit divisions and fears among us so they can get and hold onto power, denying us the basic rights, resources, and respect all people deserve. By [rejecting this division/passing protections against discrimination], we can ensure each one of us has the freedom to be ourselves, pursue our dreams, and have a good life – no exceptions.

YOUTH POWER

Strongest message for our base and Gen Z respondents.

Young people across time, race, and movements for equality have always helped lead the way. But now as before, certain politicians are trying to get and hold onto power by silencing young people – stoking fear against Black and brown kids leading protests for racial justice, and taking advantage of unfamiliarity with transgender people to punish students for being their authentic selves. Whenever a powerful few have tried to pick and choose who counts, there have always been those of us who showed up for each other and built welcoming communities. Now it's our time to show up, reject division, and chart a better future for all of us, no matter our ages, races, or genders.

²Narratives adjusted slightly from messages originally tested based on findings from dial test.



ARCHITECTURE OF A RACE CLASS GENDER NARRATIVE

1. Open with a shared value, explicitly naming or evoking race, gender and class. Effective opening values include the following: freedom to be ourselves, treating each other with dignity and respect, and the golden rule/treating others as we'd want to be treated.

"Whether we are Black, white or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not, we want the freedom to be ourselves."

2. Name the villains who violate our values, expose their motivation of getting back into or holding onto power, and position them as a barrier to what our families need.

"But some people try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders. They stoke fear so we turn against some group instead of demanding what our families need."

3. Call out how the villains:

exploit divisions across races

"We see this in how schools tell Black kids how to keep their hair or send girls home for the clothes they wear."

and exploit the lack of familiarity with transgender people

"And in how certain politicians exploit lack of familiarity with transgender people, excluding trans kids from healthcare, school, or sports."

4. Deliver a unifying call to action with which the audience can bring about a positive vision or outcome, aligned with the initial shared value.

"By joining together, we can make this a place where we are all free to thrive and support each other for who we are."

THE OPPORTUNITY: CREATING A BROADER "WE"

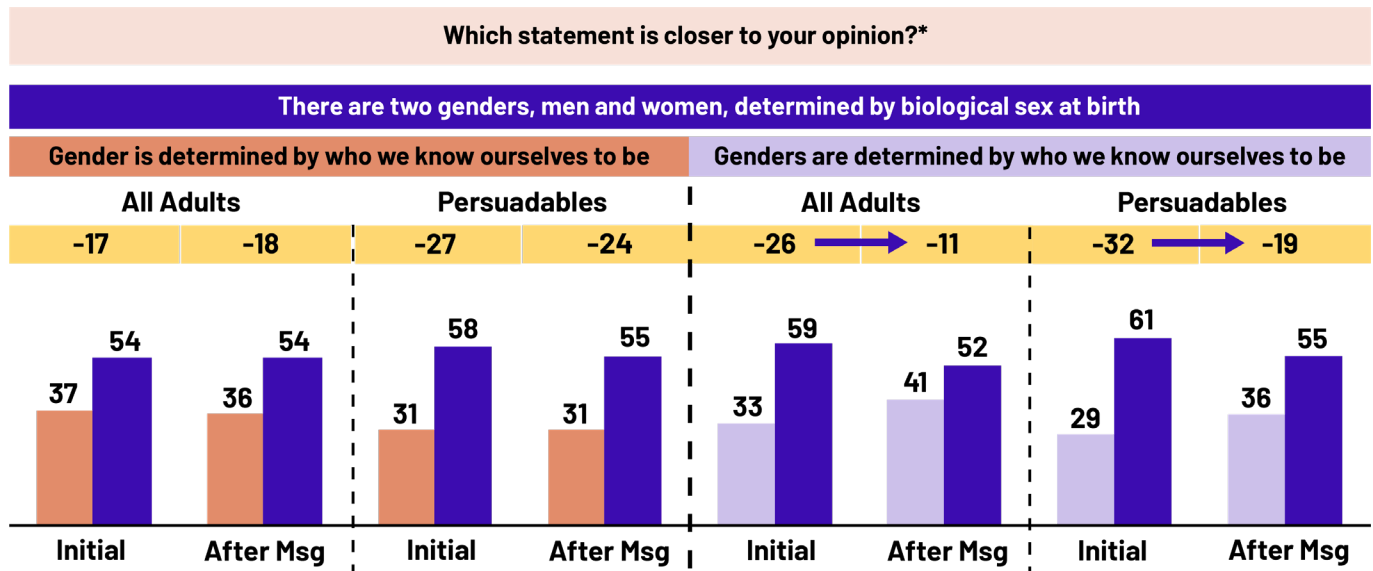
Evoking a sense of personal connection to an issue is critical to driving engagement and action. Without that, we can at best elicit sympathy, a passive and often patronizing attitude that alienates our base and fails to generate sustained interest from persuadable audiences. Moving people towards empathy – an ability to identify with another person's experience – is therefore key in activating cisgender audiences around trans issues.

Unfortunately, our focus groups echoed past research in finding concerningly low connection to, understanding of, and familiarity with transgender people in the U.S., including among our traditional progressive base. Even where people expressed support, it was for a category of people they clearly perceived as wholly separate from and unrelated to their own lives. The implicit and occasionally explicit line people drew between their own communities and transgender people frequently had a racial dimension, with comments indicating many participants largely associated being transgender with being white, or associated acceptance of transgender people with whiteness.

We found several effective paths towards interrupting this othering framework and increasing empathy and a sense of shared fate and community with transgender people, especially among Black, Latinx, AAPI and Indigenous audiences.

First, rather than separating out and exceptionalizing trans people’s experience of gender, we should present and discuss our genders as a spectrum on which both cis and trans people exist. A freedom from boxes metaphor is particularly effective at moving people towards this more encompassing understanding. People of all races and genders want to be free to fully express ourselves and connect authentically with others, and can identify with the feeling of being boxed in and told what to do based on what we look like or where we come from. Most of us chafe against the stereotypes and narrow expectations others project on us. Positioning this limitation in contrast to the core value of freedom to be ourselves helps energize base respondents. By anchoring our discussion of gender in this relatable experience, we make our audience part of the story and position cis and trans people on one shared continuum of experience. For instance, we found that base respondents agree strongly when we say “people should be respected, trusted, and empowered to make decisions about our own lives and bodies, whether...transgender or not” – a helpful insight for aligning and developing joint messaging on transgender and reproductive justice. Our research also suggests that pluralizing and personalizing genders – making statements about “genders” or “our genders” instead of “gender” as a singular and abstract concept – subtly helps orient people towards our worldview.

The increased agreement with the “genders” statement after messaging suggests that pluralizing genders helpfully shifts people towards our worldview.



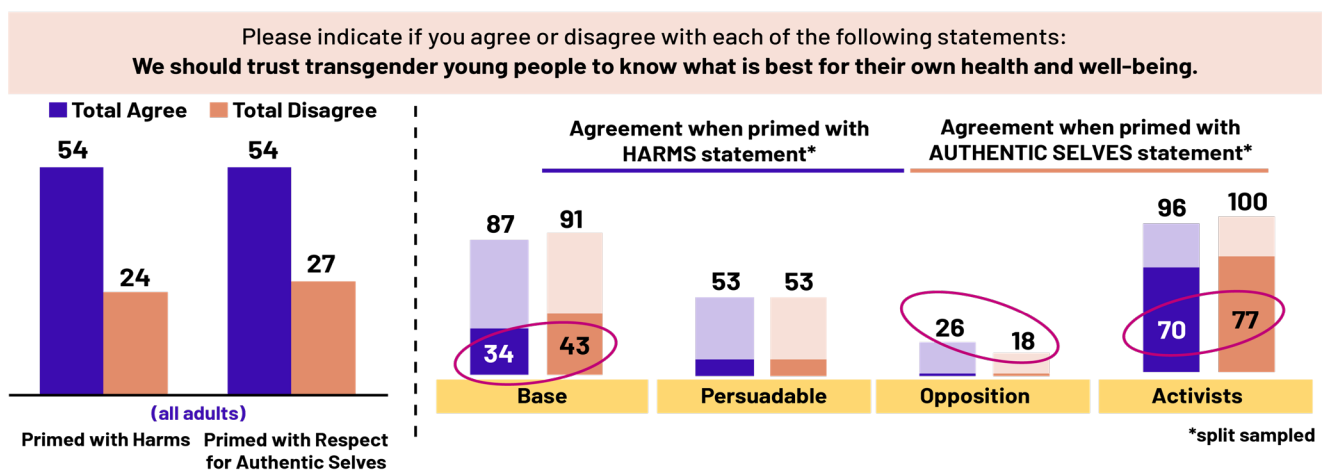
These statements were split-sampled. This data does **not** represent shifts in individual opinion.



Second, we can successfully adapt the Race Class Narrative to reframe attacks on trans youth as part of a broader offensive opposition strategy, and highlight our shared values and interests across races and genders. The resonance of a Race Class Gender Narrative with communities of color suggests that the perception of transgender issues as a ‘white person problem’ is at least partly a function of dominant (colorblind) advocate messaging. In our survey, white people were the only racial group to rate the opposition message we tested above all of our side’s messages; Black and AAPI respondents rated all of our messages as far more convincing than the opposition, while Latinx and Indigenous people rated some but not all of our messages above the opposition. We can and should connect justice for transgender people to issues of racial and economic justice, and by doing so we move our base and persuadable audiences on key metrics of support. In short, a Race Class Gender Narrative can successfully make the case for a broader ‘we’ and solidarity across races, backgrounds, and genders.

Finally, to shift people from ignorance or indifference to empathy and advocacy, we must ground our messaging in the values, visions, and desires we share across genders rather than in the unique harms, horrors, and discrimination trans people suffer. While it’s important to acknowledge discrimination in order to combat it, we should not lead with or primarily define trans people by the harms inflicted upon us. When we primed people with a statement about the “crushing weight of discrimination” trans youth face, for example, our base and even activists were less likely to trust trans young people to know what’s best for their own health and well-being than when, in contrast, they were primed with a statement about how we should all be free to express our authentic selves.

Priming Experiment: Base adults and activists are more likely to agree with strong intensity that we should trust transgender young people to know what is best for their own health and well-being when they are primed with the authentic selves statement, which also better alienates opposition adults.



*We asked all adults their agreement with the phrase “we should trust transgender young people to know what is best for their own health and well being” immediately after asking their agreement on EITHER a statement focused on harms (“We need to protect vulnerable transgender kids, who already face bullying and crushing discrimination in schools, public spaces, and health care, which threatens their physical and mental health”) or a statement focused on authentic selves (“We need to respect each other for who we are, transgender or not, and support all young people to be their authentic selves and pursue their dreams”)

THE CHALLENGE: ENGAGING THE SPORTS DEBATE

Right now, our opposition wins the debate on trans youth in sports against any and all arguments we have tried for our side. There is a huge gap in awareness and concern, with most base and persuadable respondents unaware of proposals regarding transgender girls' participation in sports, while a strong majority of our opposition has heard some or a lot about it. When pressed, our audiences hold contradictory views, with a third supporting both a policy to ensure transgender student-athletes can play on the team that matches their gender identity and a policy to require that student-athletes play on the team matching their "biological sex." Our base and persuadables want to support transgender student-athletes, but are extremely susceptible to our opposition's argument that excluding trans youth is necessary to protect the fairness of women's sports.

We suspect there are two key factors differentiating views on sports from other issues. First, people primarily understand sports through the individualistic lens of competition, where if one person wins then another, by definition, loses. Entrenched in this zero-sum framework, people resist and dismiss our calls for sports policies that benefit our collective good, the core of a Race Class Gender Narrative. Second, opposition rhetoric on sports is more directly transphobic and dehumanizing than their discourse on other issues. With bathrooms or schools broadly, for example, our opposition often tries to claim some degree of sympathy for transgender people and win over persuadables with coded language, "slippery slope" arguments, and dog whistles about bad actors pretending to be trans in order to "take advantage" of nondiscrimination policies. There is far less buffer in their attacks around sports, where they use the physicality of the issue to directly spout dehumanizing stereotypes about transgender women and girls.

Since the Race Class Narrative was designed to inoculate against dog whistles and make the case for collective action for our collective good, it makes sense that this approach falls short on sports, specifically. That said, a Race Class Gender Narrative does help us call into question the motives of people introducing these bills and even cast doubt on their necessity as a matter of state legislation (as opposed to sports association/local school policy). At present, no arguments we tested bested the opposition in a direct debate on sports policy.

In addition to using the Race Class Gender Narrative to build long-term solidarity and resistance to anti-trans attacks, we recommend two complementary paths to counteracting the sports-specific challenges we identified:

1. As much as possible, shift conversation around sports from a competitive to a collective frame.

Our best-testing way to accomplish this was through a message that positioned supporting transgender women athletes as part of the broader fight for equality in girls' and women's sports. By connecting attacks on trans women athletes to

the long legacy of discrimination against all women athletes, this message both shifted our audiences from an individual to a collective mindset and disrupted transphobic conceptions of transgender girls and women as actually male:

Women's sports have never existed on an equal playing field. For too long, we have devalued women's sports, and we see this in the way that professional women athletes are underpaid compared to men and how transgender women athletes are targeted, attacked, and forced out of their sport. And instead of striving for equality in sports, certain politicians are distracting us from the real issue by blaming transgender women, instead of helping make sports a better place for all women.

This argument outperformed the opposition's claims with AAPI adults, lost by only 6 points with persuadables (and by 8 points overall), and garnered a notably high "unsure" response across the board, suggesting it helpfully caused people to question their understanding of the issue. A version of this message that named how elite competitions question and disqualify Black women athletes yielded even greater support from our base, but considerably increased the margin by which we lost persuadables and all racial groups, including Black adults.

[Current messaging recommended by the Movement Advancement Project](#) offers another approach to rendering this issue more collective by highlighting teamwork and other values young people learn through sports. While this framing loses to the opposition by 10 or more points both overall and with persuadables, it puts us slightly above water with Latinx and Indigenous adults and draws in overwhelming support from AAPI adults.

2. Reduce the potency of opposition attacks through race-forward, deep, story-based, and culturally specific public education on who transgender people are.

While we can counteract transphobic dog whistles and coded attacks using a Race Class Gender Narrative, the best antidote to the barrage of direct transphobia and dehumanization our opposition employs around sports is for our audiences to get to know a transgender person. Past research has consistently demonstrated the power of personal storytelling in shifting attitudes towards transgender people. There is simply no substitute for that deep and long-term work. While there have been and are many powerful trans public education efforts, our research suggests that they have not broken through on a dominant scale – or, to the extent they have, they have reinforced the association between transgender people and whiteness in communities of color, including among our progressive base. We hope the Race Class Gender Narrative can serve as an opening to deeper multiracial public education efforts within progressive movement spaces, including community-based storytelling conducted effectively, responsibly, and at scale.

EMBRACE/REPLACE

Say this...	Instead of...	Because...
<p>Our genders</p> <p>Genders</p>	<p>Gender</p>	<p>Pluralizing genders enables greater agreement with our worldview and helps activate more expansive attitudes towards our genders and transgender people.</p>
<p>Respect each other for who we are, transgender or not</p> <p>Support all young people to be their authentic selves and pursue their dreams</p> <p>Each one of us should have the freedom to be ourselves, no matter the color of our skin, how we worship, or our genders</p>	<p>Protect vulnerable transgender kids</p>	<p>Promoting the creation of a positive good (the freedom of self expression) is more effective than appeals to ameliorate harm (protecting transgender young people from violence and discrimination). It generates support and trust from our base for transgender young people to know what is best for their own health and well-being.</p>
<p>Some people in power try to put us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders.</p> <p>Certain politicians push laws that restrict our freedoms based on the color of our skin, what's in our wallets, or because we are transgender.</p>	<p>Transgender kids face crushing bullying and discrimination, which threatens their physical and mental health.</p>	<p>The container/box metaphor is extremely effective across racial and ethnic groups for explaining what the villains are doing and how it harms all of us. It resonates with persuadables, builds empathy, and galvanizes our base to oppose those in power who seek to limit us based on who we are and control what transgender people can or cannot do.</p>



		Focusing on the unique harms that transgender people face, on the other hand, further distances our audiences from the discussion, othering transgender people and at best eliciting pity. It also decreases our base and even progressive activists' trust in transgender young people to know what is best for their own health and well-being.
<p>Whether we are Black, white or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not</p> <p>People of all races, backgrounds, and genders</p> <p>No matter what we look like, where we come from, or how we express our genders</p>	<p>All of us / Everyone/ We all</p>	<p>For a Race Class Gender Narrative to be effective, it's important to build connection by naming what we share across our differences.</p> <p>Explicitly naming specific races and genders can be more helpful than broader references to "races and genders," but both approaches perform well.</p>
<p>Certain politicians exploit divisions among us to try to get back into power.</p> <p>Some people in power fuel divisions based on race and exploit our lack of familiarity with transgender people so they can deny our communities the resources, jobs, and healthcare we all need.</p> <p>A handful of politicians stoke fear, trying to get us to turn against some group instead of joining together to demand what all of our families need.</p>	<p>Our opposition is racist/transphobic.</p> <p>Politicians divide us.</p>	<p>Framing the strategic racism of our opponents as fueling or exploiting existing divisions between us generates stronger agreement than directly blaming them for those divisions. This is an especially important distinction when talking about how our opposition stokes fear of transgender people. Our target audiences know that transphobia is widespread – and often themselves feel unsure about transgender people – so they do not buy statements attributing fear and division to certain politicians.</p>

		By acknowledging our audience's own questions, concerns, and lack of familiarity with what it means to be transgender, though, we can remind them of their better values and intentions, and help them recognize how certain politicians take advantage of and manipulate their unease. It is helpful to echo and link how they "exploit" division across races and lack of familiarity with transgender people.
Certain politicians... Some people in power... A powerful few...	Politicians The wealthy/powerful	To credibly name a villain, it's critical to make clear that you're implicating specific individuals (e.g., <i>certain</i> or <i>some</i> politicians) as opposed to vilifying whole categories of people.
[Certain politicians]... trying to get back into power/ get and hold onto power. who want to block us from joining together to demand what we all deserve. ... who want to pick and choose who counts.	Transphobes/racists	In addition to naming our villains, we must expose the motivations behind their actions. "Getting back into power," "getting and holding onto power," exclusion and control broadly, and blocking us from demanding the resources we need all currently resonate with base and persuadable audiences in explaining why the opposition introduces these attacks on transgender people.

