

Liberatory Narrative Brief:

Calling Out Power. Centering People.
Reclaiming Democracy.

A Narrative Memo on the 2025 Government Shutdown and Its Impact on Working Families, Democracy, and Collective Care.



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WHY WE CHOSE A LIBERATORY NARRATIVE FRAMEWORKS

A Message from Annessia Hardy



When I started leading Alabama Values Progress, I noticed how often messaging in our movement defaulted to what was “broadly appealing” or “safe for the middle.” We were told that to win hearts and minds, we had to water down our truth, to speak in language that wouldn’t make people uncomfortable.

But I also noticed who was left out of that equation. The same communities that bear the weight of injustice — Black, Brown, immigrant, rural, poor, and working-class folks — were rarely centered in the data that shapes most message testing. Our experiences were treated as outliers, not the foundation. That didn’t sit right with me. I knew we needed to build something different.

That’s why we began developing liberatory narrative frameworks, an approach that centers lived experience, history, and collective truth, rather than relying solely on polling or messaging models designed to appeal to the status quo and comfort. However, when the data doesn’t reflect our people, the story it tells will always be incomplete.

We also can’t ignore the history behind that imbalance. Research and data have long been weaponized against marginalized communities — from the pseudoscience used to justify slavery, to redlining that stole generational wealth, to today’s policy “experiments” that exclude marginalized communities from the findings. These aren’t neutral omissions; they’re patterns of control and erasure.

So, when we talk about narrative at Alabama Values Progress, we’re not just talking about messaging; we’re talking about power. We’re talking about reclaiming the right to tell our own stories, define our own values, and shape the public imagination around who deserves care, safety, and freedom.

Liberatory narrative work isn’t about rejecting data. It’s about expanding it, grounding our strategies in truth and context, not fear or convenience. Because if our messages don’t speak to the people most impacted, then we’re not building a democracy that includes all of us.

This is why we lead with liberation. Not because it’s easy, but because it’s honest and because our communities deserve nothing less.

Annessia Hardy

Executive Director, Alabama Values Progress

LIBERATORY NARRATIVE MEMO

TO : Movement Partners and Allies

SUBJECT: Narrative Guidance on Messaging Around 2025 Government Shutdown

FROM: Alabama Values Progress

DATE : October 18, 2025

Context

The U.S. government shutdown is being framed as a budget standoff, but it's much more than that. This moment exposes a deeper pattern of disinvestment, control, and racialized harm in the United States.

Alabama Values Progress offers this narrative guidance to help movement partners, advocates, and communicators connect the dots between this shutdown, the erosion of democracy, and the ongoing effort to divide and destabilize our communities.

We believe messaging must be rooted in history, racial analysis, and democracy, directly calling out white supremacy and centering the lived experiences of Black, Brown, and working-class communities.

Limitations of Populist Message Framing

Why “partisan gridlock” misses the mark.

- Framing the shutdown as partisan dysfunction erases the truth: this is not about disagreement, it's about deliberate harm. Shutdowns have long been used as political tools to starve programs that help working people and to advance ideological agendas that prioritize control over care.

Why “pivoting to healthcare” without context falls short.

- While healthcare is a critical concern for millions, reducing the shutdown conversation to healthcare access alone risks obscuring the deeper issue. This is a manufactured crisis designed to destabilize every system that keeps people safe. When extremists defund government, they're not just attacking healthcare, they're attacking food security, education, wages, and democracy itself.

RECOMMENDED FRAMING

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FRAME

What's happening now isn't "just politics." It's part of a long history of using government control and disinvestment to harm vulnerable communities. Politicians have repeatedly used fiscal threats to roll back progress. This latest shutdown continues that legacy and deliberate act of harm disguised as fiscal discipline.

DOG WHISTLE CALL-OUT FRAME

When politicians talk about "wasteful spending" or "big government," they're blowing an old dog whistle. That language has always been code for cutting the programs that sustain Black, Brown, poor, and working-class families — from SNAP and Medicaid to education and housing. These shutdowns are designed to pit communities against each other while shielding the wealthy from accountability.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND IMPACT

The government shutdown isn't just a political standoff — it's an economic crisis for millions of working families. Every day it continues, families lose income, food access, childcare, and stability. Elected officials are using people's livelihoods as leverage. When families can't pay rent or put food on the table, it's not a budget debate — it's a failure of leadership and a deliberate act of harm. True economic justice means investing in the systems that keep people secure: stable income, healthcare, housing, and education.

DEMOCRACY & AUTHORITARIANISM FRAME

This shutdown is not a policy debate — it's a power grab. By halting government operations, GOP officials are forcing through an agenda they couldn't win democratically. Authoritarians use chaos to justify control: destabilize systems, then claim they don't work. Each shutdown weakens trust in government and erodes the foundation of democracy itself. The GOP currently controls both the House and the Senate. They are not helpless observers; they are the architects of this crisis. Their refusal to govern responsibly and their choice to use people's livelihoods as bargaining chips is an abuse of power, not an act of leadership.

CONNECTING THE DOTS FRAME

The same officials driving this shutdown are behind the attacks on education, voting rights, and DEI programs. These are not isolated fights. They're all part of an organized effort to shrink democracy, divide communities, and silence movements for justice.



USAGE GUIDANCE

HOW TO LAYER THESE FRAMES

The narrative frames can be used either as stand-alone talking points or layered together for a stronger impact.

- **Start with History (Frame 1)** Ground people in truth — shutdowns aren't new. They're part of a long pattern of disinvestment and control that harms Black, Brown, and working-class communities.
- **Call out the Dog Whistle (Frame 2)** Call out coded language like “wasteful spending” and “big government.” These phrases are designed to divide us and hide who really benefits — the wealthy and powerful.
- **Center Economic Justice (Frame 3)** Make the harm real and local. Talk about missed paychecks, delayed SNAP, and families struggling to make ends meet. This connects policy to lived experience.
- **Expose the Power Play (Frame 4)** Remind audiences the GOP controls both the House and Senate — this is not gridlock, it's a choice. The shutdown is part of an authoritarian playbook that undermines democracy.
- **Connect the Dots (Frame 5)** Show how the shutdown ties to voter suppression, anti-DEI efforts, and attacks on public systems. Help people see these fights as one struggle for care and democracy.

This layered approach allows us to move people from History → Dog Whistle → Economic Impact → Connecting the Dots

CONCLUSION

This is not just about reopening the government; it's about reclaiming our vision for what government should do.

This moment calls for courage in our messaging, not pivots that avoid root causes. If we are to effectively counter white supremacist dog whistles and authoritarian narratives, we must name them, place them in context, and offer a clear, people-centered vision of safety and democracy.

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P.S. "IF WE CAN'T NAME IT, WE
CAN'T UPROOT IT. IF WE CAN'T
UPROOT IT, WE CAN'T BE FREE."

- ANNESHIA HARDY, EXEC. DIR.
ALABAMA VALUES PROGRESS



ABOUT US

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Alabama Values Progress is a 501C4 non-partisan media advocacy organization that leverages culture, media, and content to amplify pro-democracy voices, values, and policies. We work to hold elected officials accountable and counter mis/disinformation around the socio-political issues.

This messaging guide is to help organizers, advocates, and everyday people name what's happening, build collective understanding, and take action. There's power in the collective, and this is our contribution to that fight.

If your organization is mobilizing around this issue or would like to collaborate, we'd love to connect.

CONTACT US

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