

We Draw the Line: Animating Engagement on Community Districting¹

Introduction

No matter our color, background or zip code, most of us believe that voters pick our leaders, our leaders should not pick their voters. To determine how we will be represented and how funds for schools, hospitals, and other essential services will be allocated, we come together every decade to draw new district lines that give each of our votes equal weight, each of our voices equal stature, and each of our communities equal resources.

Or at least, that is what's *supposed* to happen. But today, a handful of politicians in states across the country rig the process, drawing districts to serve their political interests instead of our communities' needs.

The districts we draw this year will shape our lives and our communities for the next decade. We must mobilize massive participation among the greatest possible number of people to pressure local lawmakers to draw fair districts, pass federal legislation ensuring every voter and every community has an equal voice and resources, and establish a clear record of community demands and desires so that we can challenge any attempts to rig the process in court.

Our opposition has succeeded in advancing their aims not by proving persuasive but by removing community districting from the public domain, rendering it an obscure and technocratic process while conducting it behind closed doors. Thus, even with the public on our side, it is very difficult for us to impact how districting gets done because the opposition has removed any levers for accountability, our base is relatively uninterested, and even our informed voters are hardened with cynicism about the efficacy of attempted interventions.

Our task, therefore, is to make this a process our base can enthusiastically, energetically, and relentlessly reclaim for our communities. The messaging guidance below is designed to reach and mobilize people who are in some way already active in their communities or engaged with their neighbors, but who are unfamiliar with this issue and who otherwise might not be politically active.

¹ This messaging guide draws on qualitative and quantitative research conducted by FrameShift, ASO Communications, and Jennifer Green. This research included 22 in-depth, one-on-one Zoom interviews conducted in March 2021, creative development with a team of 12 drama and comedy writers producing over 60 scripts across five strategic creative directions, and within-survey RCT testing with five conditions - including a total of 7 videos and 12 memes - with 4690 online participants in May 2021.

Defining Community Districting

Unfortunately, calling it *redistricting* unhelpfully suggests either that 1) this is a standardized, repeated process conducted among experts and bureaucrats, with no role for everyday community members, or 2) it is an undertaking where politicians *re-do* something for reasons that are not at all clear. Many people haven't heard of *redistricting* or if they have, are unfamiliar with its meaning, and the term itself is neither inviting nor intuitive.

We recommend shifting to *community districting* to name the process, complemented by *fair districting* as our demand. This conveys that this is a relevant local issue for all community members, while still ensuring (by retaining *districting*) that our meaning is clear to the advocates, policymakers, and officials involved.

Some engaged segments of our base are more familiar with and energized by *gerrymandering*, so there are contexts in which that term is helpful. Most people, though, do not understand gerrymandering; as such we are generally better served explicitly describing how some politicians are *carving up our communities*, *dividing our neighborhoods*, and *silencing certain voices* for their own political gain. This activates many of our audiences, especially when connected directly back to schools, hospitals, parks, and other public resources that politicians can unfairly provide or deny through districting.

We should use active language to define and describe the process of community districting and to visibilize the role of the listener. Current advocacy messaging relies heavily on passive constructions, with the personified agent "redistricting" as the sole actor. When real people are referenced in current messaging, they tend to be faceless bureaucrats or, at best, legislators and politicians -- still writing everyday people out of the picture. Our messages should define community districting as a process that *we the people* lead, and which certain politicians are trying to take out of our hands.

Elements of an Effective Message

- Lead with **race-forward values of equity and justice**.
- **Highlight the opportunity for lasting positive impact**. Activate urgency by making it clear that through community districting, our audience can deliver for their communities for **the next decade**. A lot can change in ten years, and we can impact that now.
- **Bring our audiences into the message as active agents** who can and should impact the process of community districting. In visuals, show people doing what you want target audiences to do like attending meetings, calling neighbors and speaking out.
 - **Mobilize our base by invoking movement legacy**: present fair districting as the next step in our fight for civil rights, equality, and liberty and justice for all.

- **Mobilize a broader audience by evoking warm feelings about diverse, collaborative communities:** present fair districting as our shared responsibility to keep our communities whole.
- **Connect districting to the impact in people's lives**, e.g., hospitals, schools, parks, and transit.
- Use visceral language of **division to describe how our villains** -- "certain politicians" -- are harming us for their own gain. Sample phrases:
 - Certain politicians are trying to **carve up** our neighborhoods for their own benefit
 - A handful of politicians are drawing district lines **to divide us**, so they can choose which voices to heed and which to silence
 - Politicians try to divide us, drawing districts to **silence our voices** based on what we look like, where we come from or how much money we have
- Where possible, close with a **clear call to action** or offer examples of what speaking out on districting can look like
- **Avoid partisan messaging**, which backlashes even with Democratic loyalists. Naming parties feeds a sense of politics-as-usual -- that this is simply what both sides do to win.
- Use a **positive and inspirational tone**. While the metaphor of "rigging the game" effectively educates audiences on gerrymandering and resonates for our base, cynicism dominates on this issue and locks people into inaction. To mobilize, we *must* impart a clear feeling that people can create change by speaking up for fair districting, and end on a positive note of hope, empowerment, and optimism.

Full Narratives

Base Targeted Message:

From the fight for Civil Rights to making our voices heard in record numbers this past election, when we band together across race and place, we can create lasting change. But right now, power-hungry politicians are dividing our communities in an attempt to silence people based on what we look like or where we live. So let them know: when it comes to our districts, we draw the line. By joining together to speak out on fair districting, we can continue the legacy of those who fought to make this a place of liberty and justice for all -- and ensure our communities thrive for the next ten years and the generations that follow.

Broader Message:

Whether we're digging a neighbor out of the snow, cooking up a Sunday block party, or planting a neighborhood garden, nobody knows our communities better than the people who live in them. But for too long, a handful of politicians have divided us into districts serving their political interests instead of our communities' needs. They want to take community districting out of our hands so they can pick and choose who counts, tearing our neighborhoods apart for the next ten years. By joining together to speak out for fair districting, we can make our communities whole and deliver what our schools and families need for a decade to come.

Sample Talking Points

- No matter our color, background or zip code, most of us believe that voters pick our leaders, our leaders should not get to pick their voters.
- Fair districting sets the foundation for the next ten years.
- The districts we draw this year will shape our lives and our communities for the next decade.
- When we draw the map, we choose what hospitals, schools and resources are funded in our neighborhood.
- A handful of politicians have divided us into districts that serve their political interests instead of our communities' needs.
- By joining together to speak out for fair districting, we can make our communities whole and deliver what our schools and families need for a decade to come.
- No matter what we look like or where we come from, when it comes to having a say over who represents us, most of us want similar things. We want a transparent process we can trust, where communities remain whole and where voters have an equal voice.
- [Defining Community Districting] Every 10 years, Americans participate in the Census. Then, we provide our input to local and state officials who draw political maps that determine what district we live in, who represents us, and how they will allocate resources for our communities.
- [Defining Community Districting] No matter our color, background or zip code, most of us believe that voters pick our leaders, our leaders do not pick their voters. To determine how we will be represented and how funds for schools, hospitals, and other essential services will be allocated, we come together every decade to draw new district lines that give each of our votes equal weight, each of our voices equal stature, and each of our communities equal resources.