



Open the Government 2018 Research

Messaging Toolkit

June 2018

Table of Contents

How to Use This Toolkit	3
Polling Key Takeaways	4
Open the Government 2018 Research: Core “Elevator Speech”	6
Message Frame.....	7
Audience-Specific Messaging.....	11
Messaging in Practice: Broader Policy Reforms.....	14
Talking About Today’s Key Issues	15
Messaging in Practice: Specific Legislative Priorities	17
Communication Do’s and Don’ts	20
Guidance: How to Write an Op-Ed	21
Support for This Project	22
Advisory Committee.....	22

How to Use This Toolkit

SKDKnickerbocker partnered with Open the Government to create a toolkit designed to help you communicate the results of Open the Government's 2018 research on transparency, accountability, and ethics and make the case for effective oversight.

Goals

This messaging toolkit is designed to accompany Open the Government's 2018 research by helping you do the following:

- Use clear, simple and persuasive language to communicate about accountability, oversight and transparency.
- Engage, move and motivate stakeholders to take action on your policies and legislative priorities
- Target specific audiences based on party affiliation.
- Share findings across your own local media markets through tactics like pitches, op-eds and more.
- Generate support for accountability, oversight and transparency.

Included below is a messaging framework to explain the results in easy-to-digest and widely applicable language; this messaging can be used to motivate, engage and move your stakeholders. The "message triangle" is a visualization of how to frame accountability and transparency and stay on-message by focusing on core components of persuasive writing and storytelling: the problem, the solution, the visualization, and the central message behind it all.

Under this framework, there is message guidance to motivate specific groups of stakeholders – such as Democratic, Republican, or independent audiences – and tips on how to adapt the poll results when advocating for legislative reforms. Finally, the toolkit includes guidance on how to use the research findings and message guidance to contribute to specific issue areas and conversations in your local media markets, through op-eds and letters to the editor.

This toolkit was also informed by prior research commissioned by the Democracy Fund Voice, specific to public support for democracy.

Polling Key Takeaways

Below are some of the highlights from Open the Government's 2018 poll.

Trust in government is low. When asked to name their top concerns about government, voters said they worried that public officials don't play by the same rules as everyone else, make decisions in secret, and often act under the influence of special interests.

Distrust in government is not a partisan issue. Trust in government is low across political parties. Democrats have a slightly lower level of trust in government than Republicans; Independents have a lower level of trust than either party; but overall, regardless of party, Americans distrust the government. The rationale behind that distrust, however, has a partisan edge (40 percent of Democrats think the White House needs more accountability than other institutions, compared with 10 percent of Republicans.)

When it comes to trust in government, more Democrats single out the White House as needing more accountability. Across the electorate (Independents, Democrats and Republicans), 40 percent of voters believe *all* government agencies need more accountability. However, more Democrats (40 percent) singled out the White House over all other agencies (29 percent).

Oversight is seen as a means to achieving accountability. Forty-five percent of the electorate views government oversight as a tool to legitimately investigate cases of wrongdoing, compared with 29 percent who say oversight is partisan-motivated.

Transparency, along with oversight, can lead to accountability. More than half of voters (53 percent) believe that transparency – allowing access to information – makes government more accountable to the people.

Lawmakers and public officials should follow the same ethics standards, ensure government records official business, and prevent creation of secret laws. When asked to score their agreement with these proposals on a scale of 1 to 9 (most favorable), voters scored each of these above a 7.

Voters believe *we can* achieve accountable government. Most voters (62 percent) believe that an accountable government is possible, compared with just 23 percent who say it is not possible.

Voters think they can play a major role in achieving that accountability. More than half (53 percent) of voters believe they have the largest role to play in holding the government accountable, while 36 percent say it is the courts' responsibility and 32 percent say it is the main responsibility of government institutions and agencies.

The idea of Russian interference in the 2016 election divides Republicans from both Democrats and Independents. Voters across parties mostly agree on issues calling for government accountability. However, when Robert Mueller and the Russia investigation were named, Democrats became more concerned and were motivated to pass effective oversight policies. Independents (32 percent) were also twice as likely as Republicans (16 percent) to take oversight action regarding the investigation into election interference.

Useful Statistics

The following are findings from the poll to help you show the need and make the case for oversight, transparency, and accountability:

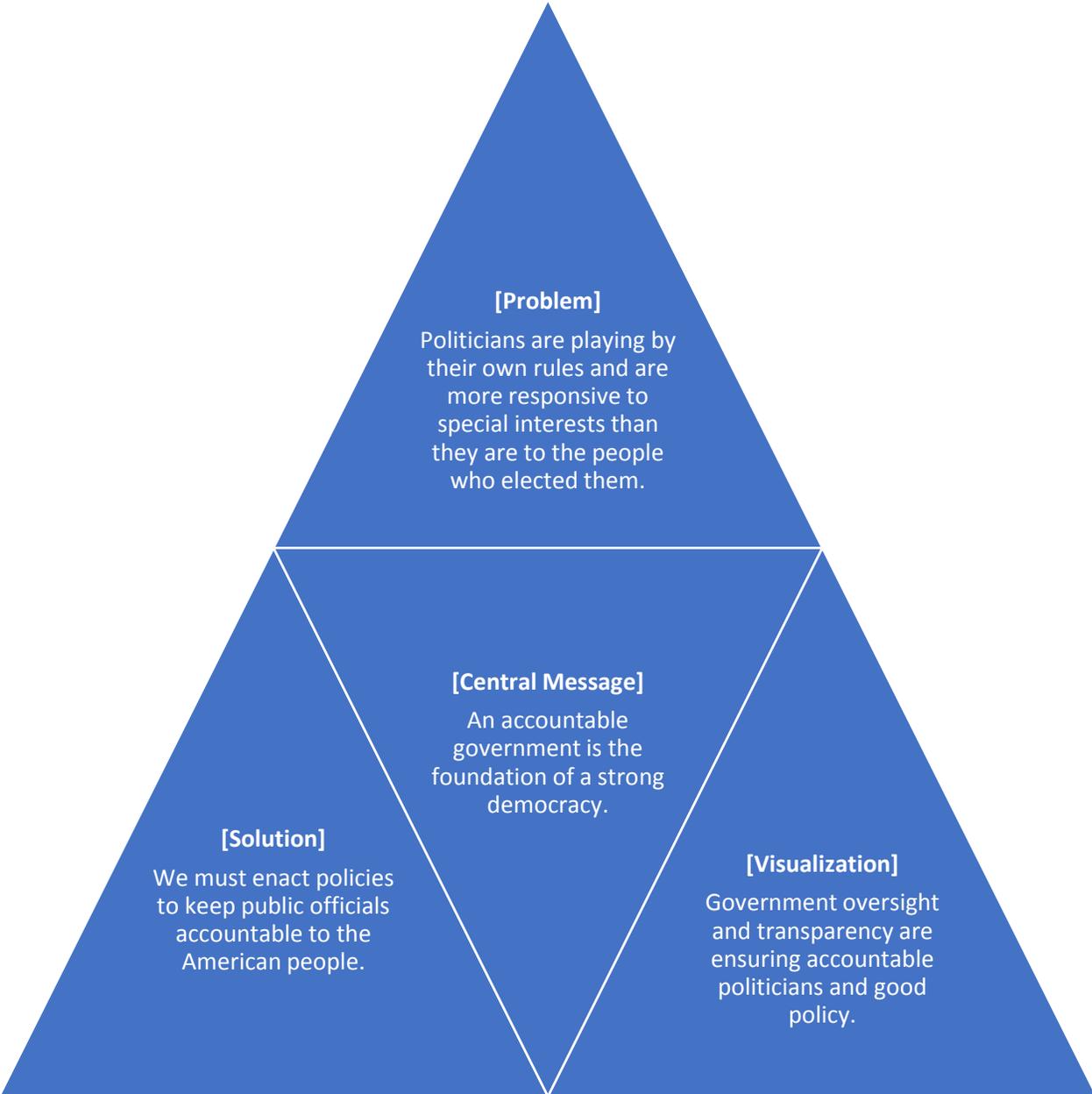
- 52% of voters want to see new laws to improve government accountability, oversight and transparency
- 81% of voters think decisions made in secret are bad for democracy
- 85% of voters agree that they have a right to know what the government is doing
- A majority of voters (53%) believe they themselves have the largest role to play in lawmaker accountability – more than other entities including the courts, government institutions, the media and NGOs.
- 58% of voters feel they are not able to hold the government accountable – lack of transparency is likely part of the reason
- 72% of voters say government accountability efforts fail more often than they succeed
- Despite skepticism, 62% of voters believe accountability in government is possible
- 64% of voters are interested in identifying ways to get involved with non-governmental nonprofit organizations to work toward greater accountability in government
- 80% of voters believe that if lawmakers and public officials are held accountable, they will perform better on issues like the economy, health care and national security
- Over 40% of voters worry that oversight decisions are politically motivated by the party in power

Open the Government 2018 Research: Core “Elevator Speech”

The “elevator speech” is brief, concise messaging that summarizes the poll’s findings for a broad audience and makes the case for oversight.

“Across party lines, Americans believe that laws can be strengthened or enforced to hold the government accountable. Voters on both sides of the aisle share concerns that politicians are playing by their own rules in order to enrich themselves and their campaign contributors, instead of being responsive to the people who elected them. Through fair oversight and public transparency, we can ensure accountable politicians, better policy, and a stronger democracy.”

Message Frame



The Central Message:

An accountable government is the foundation of a strong democracy.

Supporting Messages:

- When those in government are held accountable, policymaking improves on the issues that matter to most Americans – including the economy, health care and national security.
- Public officials who are held accountable will do a better job representing their constituents’ interests in Washington.
- Distrust in government isn’t a partisan issue; Democrats, Republicans and Independents agree that there should be more transparency and accountability in government.
- We can prevent fraud, abuse, and corruption by holding public officials accountable to the same set of rules as the rest of us.
- Americans believe that they have the biggest role in holding the government accountable through their vote.
- A majority believe that accountability in government is possible by imposing strong, enforceable rules on politicians and government officials.
- Voters’ confidence in the political process and policymaking increases when voters know what is happening in government and believe politicians are acting in the public interest.
- Additional research from Democracy Fund Voter Study Group confirms that American voters’ support for an authoritarian-style leader is at its lowest point since 1995.¹

Additional Evidence:

- 81% of poll respondents believe that policymaking done in secret harms our democracy.
- 84% believe that when lawmakers or public officials act in their personal interests instead of the public interest, democracy is harmed.
- 80% believe that if lawmakers and public official are accountable, it will improve their performance on issue areas like the economy, health care, and national security.
- Voters across parties agree that government accountability, oversight, and transparency help our democracy work better.



¹ Lee Drutman, Larry Diamond, and Joe Goldman. “Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism.” *Democracy Fund Voter Study Group*, available at <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2017-voter-survey/follow-the-leader>.

The Problem:

Politicians are playing by their own rules and are more responsive to special interests than they are to the people who elected them.

Supporting Messages:

- Trust in government is low across party lines. Voters don't believe politicians are being held accountable to the people who elected them.
- When voters do not trust that politicians and public officials are held accountable for their actions, our democracy is weakened.
- Despite a polarized political climate, voters across all parties – Democrats, Republicans, and Independents – agree we need a more responsible and accountable government.

Additional Evidence:

- Over half of voters (58%) feel they are not able to hold the government accountable, and nearly three-quarters (72%) of voters say government accountability efforts fail more often than they succeed.
- On a scale of 1-9, 5 being neutral and 9 being a high level of trust, voters across party lines rank their trust in government at an average of 4.17 – underscoring just how low trust in government is today. Independents have the lowest level of trust at an average score of 3.82
- When asked to rank their top concerns about government, voters are most concerned about the following:
 - That lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do;
 - That government lacks accountability; and
 - That Congress is mishandling taxpayer money.

The Solution:

We must enact policies to keep public officials accountable to the American people.

Supporting Messages:

- Despite their lack of trust in government, voters continue to believe that a more accountable government *is* within reach.
- Voters across party lines say new laws – rather than enforcement of existing laws – are needed to improve government accountability.
- Voters believe there are a number of potential reforms that could better hold politicians accountable.
- Voters believe we can strengthen government by implementing policies that require officials act in the public's interest, not for their personal benefit.
- It is critical that government oversight efforts are *applied equally and enforced fairly* and are not politically motivated.

Additional Evidence:

- Voters overwhelmingly believe accountability in government *is possible*: 62% believe this is possible, compared to just 23% do not.
- The top three proposals voters want to see with respect to oversight, accountability, and transparency are:

- Requiring all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards;
- Ensuring the government keeps records of official business; and
- Preventing the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about.
- More than half of voters (52%) want laws to improve government accountability, rather than simply enforcing existing laws – including 45% of Republicans. Only one-third of voters (34%) believe enforcing existing laws is sufficient enough to ensure greater accountability, oversight, and transparency.
- There are a number of potential reforms that voters believe will promote accountability, trust in government, and good policymaking that lawmakers could enact and would enjoy strong public support. These proposals will help ensure those in government do the jobs they were elected or appointed to do, and make better policies for Americans and their families (see page 14 for additional detail):

Reforms to Promote Accountability
Requiring all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards
Ensuring the government keeps records of official business
Preventing the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about
Requiring lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them
Ensuring that government decisions are transparent and based on best available evidence
Ensuring that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers/public officials are able to do their jobs without interference
Overseeing whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest or misuse federal resources
Implementing greater protection for whistleblowers so that government employees can report waste, fraud and abuse
Preventing lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit financially from their policy decisions

The Visualization:

Government oversight and transparency are ensuring accountable politicians and good policy.

Supporting Messages:

- Transparency promotes accountability by providing access to taxpayer funded and public information that guides government decisions.
- Fair and equal oversight not only helps ensure laws and regulations are followed closely and effectively but promotes better policymaking on the issues that matter most to Americans and their families.
- With good oversight and accountability, politicians do what they were elected to do.

Additional Evidence:

- 60% of voters think government information belongs to the public.
- More than eight in ten voters (81%) think decisions made in secret are bad for democracy.
- Half of voters (50%) worry that oversight efforts are not fairly and equally enforced.

- A compelling reason for government oversight is that it will lead to greater accountability for public officials, according to more than half of voters (58%).
- Voters are more confident in an accountable government's ability to shape policies on important issues like health care and the economy – in other words, the ability to do what officials were elected to do.

Audience-Specific Messaging

According to Open the Government's poll findings, unique groups of constituents responded differently to specific messages. Below are examples of how to frame the issue of oversight and accountability and craft messages that resonate with key audiences:

Media: Trust in government is low. The one common belief that Republicans, Democrats and Independents all share is their distrust of government and desire to enact or enforce laws that will hold public officials accountable.

- *The Message: In an age of political gridlock, Democrats, Republicans and Independents agree on one thing: neither party places much trust in the government and both think there's more we can do. Efforts for greater accountability may bring voters from both sides together.*



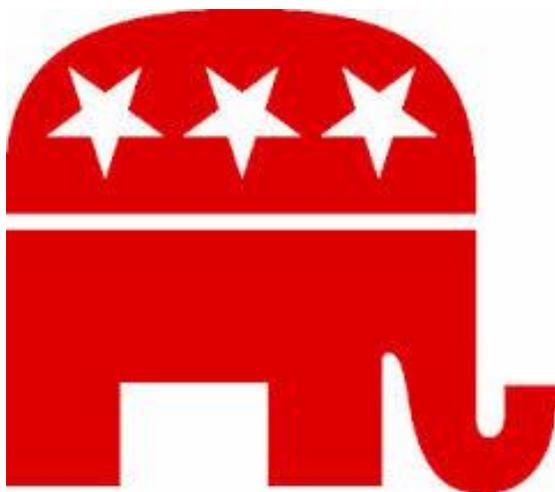
Politicians and Political Elites: Despite waning trust in government, voters continue to support democracy and believe oversight, transparency and accountability help strengthen it. Messaging to engage politicians and political elites should underscore that voters are more confident in public officials' performances when government is held accountable.

- *The Message: Voters are more confident in their public officials on issues like the economy, health care, and national security when they believe those officials are being held accountable.*



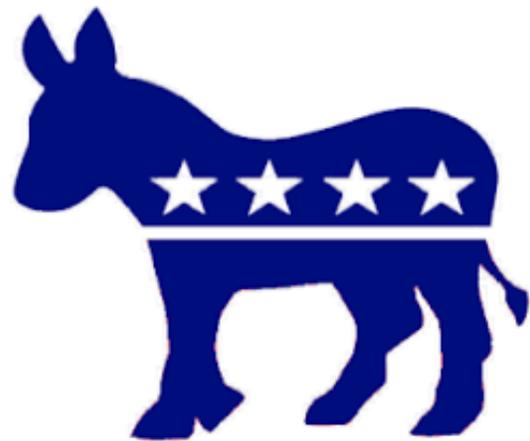
Republicans: Despite one-party rule in Washington, Republicans' trust in the government is limited: Nearly half (47 percent) of Republican voters believe all areas of government require greater accountability, with a quarter of them focusing specifically on Congress. Republicans respond well to finding ways to improve "checks and balances" and increase access to "unbiased information." Republicans were also much more interested in national security: 37 percent of Republicans said national security should be lawmakers' top priority, while only 11 percent of Democrats said the same.

- *The Message: We need greater oversight and transparency across all levels of government to improve checks and balances and increase access to unbiased information. More accountability, especially over Congress, is critical to ensure national security and protect the Constitution.*



Democrats: An overwhelming number of Democrats (76 percent) say America is on the “wrong track,” while only 19 percent of Republicans agree. Democrats are also more likely to prioritize health care. Twenty-five percent of Democrats want lawmakers to focus on health care, compared with only 14 percent of Republicans who said the same.

- *The Message: America is on the wrong track. Public officials aren’t being held accountable to their constituents. We need better oversight and transparency laws to ensure lawmakers are prioritizing the issues that matter to Americans, like health care, rather than being responsive to special interests.*



Independents: Independents have the lowest level of confidence in government accountability. On a scale of 1-9, with 9 being very accountable, Independents rated our government at just a 3.93. That’s lower than Republicans (4.45) and Democrats (4.85).

- *The Message: Public officials both in DC and across the country must be held accountable if they have engaged in back-room dealing with special interests for personal gain. Strong bipartisan oversight of politicians will help ensure everyone is playing by the same rules and will restore trust in our government.*



Messaging in Practice: Broader Policy Reforms

Voters indicated their support for a number of potential reforms to promote accountability, trust in government, and good policymaking. These proposals should be framed as helping ensure our public officials do the jobs they are expected to do and make better policies for Americans and their families. The following are examples of how to apply the messaging framework to specific policy proposals:

- 1. Support for policies that require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards:** One of the top concerns for voters is that “lawmakers and public officials don’t play by the same rules” as average people. Language to advance policies that require those officials to follow the same set of standards should highlight “rules” that apply to everyone.
 - The Message: *We need to create a set of ethics standards for all lawmakers and public officials. Those in government should play by the same rules as everyone else.*
- 2. Support for requiring the government to keep public records of official business:** 85% of voters agree that they “have a right to know what the government is doing” and “government information belongs to the people.” When advocating for policies to ensure the government keeps public records of official business, stress that that information belongs to the taxpaying public and that transparency is a critical means to accountability
 - The Message: *Government information belongs to everyone and the public deserves access to it. We need to pass laws that ensure the government keeps public record of its official business in order to keep politicians accountable to voters rather than special interests.*
- 3. Opposition to enactment of secret laws that the public does not know about:** 81% of voters agree that “democracy is harmed when decisions are made in secret.” To voice opposition to such laws, highlighting existing “secrecy” will generate public support for new oversight laws.
 - The Message: *Voters overwhelmingly agree that secret laws and other policies made behind closed doors harm our democracy. Those in Congress and the executive branch must do their work with openness and transparency so that Americans can hold them accountable for their decisions.*
- 4. Support for requiring lawmakers and public officials to recuse themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them:** When it comes to accountability, transparency and oversight efforts, voters say the most important outcome is rooting out “fraud, abuse and corruption.” Stressing those words will help generate support for passing a law that requires officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that may financially benefit them.
 - The Message: *Officials who vote in favor of legislation that financially benefits them are abusing the system. We need strong, enforceable rules to root out this kind of corruption.*
- 5. Support for ensuring government decisions are transparent and based on best available evidence:** Voters see transparency as compelling because they want to better understand how their government operates and uses taxpayer dollars. Language to ensure transparent decision-making should stress the public’s investment in understanding the policymaking process.

- The Message: *All Americans deserve to know how government decisions are being made and how their taxpayer dollars are being used. We need to ensure public officials are utilizing unbiased information and clearly communicating new policies with their constituents.*

6. Support for ensuring officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers/public officials are able to do their jobs without interference: Over 40 percent of voters worry that decisions are politically motivated by the party in power. Language that supports allowing investigators to do their jobs without interference may be more successful if it mentions the threat of partisanship.

- The Message: *In an era of political gridlock, it's especially important to ensure investigations of public officials are conducted fairly and without interference. No one is above the law, and we have to put mechanisms in place that allow unbiased, independent investigations of officials suspected of wrongdoing – regardless of party.*

7. Support for oversight policies to prevent lawmakers and public officials from maintaining conflicts of interest and misusing federal resources to benefit their own businesses: Voters are interested in ensuring public officials cannot financially benefit from their positions. Language in support of more oversight for potential conflicts of interest should stress the threat of financial benefit.

- The Message: *We need to know all the potential conflicts of interest that exist for public officials to ensure they do not use their positions for personal financial gain. Transparency and accountability on potential conflicts of interest will help root out fraud, abuse, and corruption.*

8. Support for implementing greater protection for whistleblowers so that government employees report waste, fraud and abuse: Most voters are motivated by making sure the government roots out corruption, waste and fraud. Language that aligns protections for whistleblowers with the threat of the corruption will generate support on this proposal.

- The Message: *Corrupt officials shouldn't be able to exploit our system to enrich themselves. We need to protect the whistleblowers who call out corruption, waste, fraud, and abuse.*

9. Support for preventing lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit finally from their policy decisions. Voters strongly agree that public officials *should not* be able to financially benefit from their decisions and want to see taxpayer money spent appropriately. Language calling to prevent public officials from owning such businesses should reference the taxpayer.

- The Message: *Taxpayer dollars should be spent on policies that help the public, not decisions that enrich public officials by helping their businesses.*

Talking About Today's Key Issues

You can use the results of Open the Government's poll to talk about some of the key issues dominating the national dialogue in the context of why we need increased oversight, transparency and accountability. Below are examples, but the core messaging can be used to fit the issues of most importance to your organization.

Russian Interference in the Election

This is a deeply polarizing issue. Democrats are more concerned about Russian interference in the 2016 election and interested in Special Counsel Mueller's investigation than Republicans. Language that mentions Trump or Russia is polarizing. Phrasing that focuses on ensuring "no foreign government can impact our elections in the future" can be a less divisive way to discuss these issues. To advocate for more oversight, transparency, and accountability with respect to election interference, use language that points to future threats from foreign governments without naming Trump, Mueller investigation, or Russia specifically.

- *"We should investigate any outside influence over the 2016 election because it has important implications for our democracy in the future. More oversight will ensure foreign governments stay out of our elections in years ahead."*
- *"If any foreign government interfered in the 2016 election, then they should be held accountable. We want to send a message to other countries that they can't meddle in U.S. elections."*

Scientific Integrity

Voters want public officials to make transparent and evidence-based decisions. To explain why public officials *should not* misconstrue scientific facts, reference science as part of a transparent decision-making process.

- *"Public officials should be fully transparent with the scientific evidence used in making decisions that impacts the public. That way, Americans can feel more confident in the decision-making process."*
- *"Public officials shouldn't misconstrue scientific evidence or hide it to achieve their own political ends. We need to ensure major decisions are based on scientific facts."*

Whistleblower Protections

Across parties, voters want to know when public officials are engaged in wrongdoing, especially when it benefits themselves and special interests. The poll found that voters believe whistleblowers need protections, so they feel confident enough to come forward. When advocating for greater transparency, you should explain how more protections for whistleblowers will force public officials to prioritize constituents.

- *"We need to implement stronger protections for whistleblowers so that government employees can alert the public to waste, fraud and abuse."*
- *"Whistleblowers help ensure the government is focused on helping real Americans, not special interests."*
- *"Politicians and public officials shouldn't be making deals behind closed doors. Whistleblowers help reveal wrongdoing so that bad actors can be held accountable."*

Promoting Ethics

Voters worry that public officials aren't complying with a specific set of ethics standards. They are also highly concerned about the influence of special interests and how public officials are spending taxpayer money. By referencing money, you can more effectively cite the role of ethics in promoting accountability, oversight and transparency.

- *“When public officials aren't following strict ethics standards, they're more likely get away with spending taxpayer money on luxuries like first-class flights.”*
- *“With enforceable ethics standards, we'll know more about how public officials are spending taxpayers' money.”*

Discussing National Security

Over half of voters are concerned that public officials are using secrecy in the name of national security to hide mistakes and bad decisions. When discussing national security, you can recognize the need for some confidentiality, while still advocating that more transparency is needed.

- *“Some national security information will remain confidential. However, that's no excuse for government officials to use secrecy to cover up their mistakes. Transparency reduces the risk of repeating mistakes.”*
- *“If public officials have made bad decisions related to intelligence and national security, they should be transparent about them. With more transparency, Americans will feel confident in the government's ability to protect our nation.”*

Messaging in Practice: Specific Legislative Priorities

Open the Government's poll revealed the key wording that motivates the public on issues of oversight, transparency and accountability. Specific phrases and concepts to keep in mind include:

- Making sure politicians are playing by the same rules as regular people
- Rooting out government fraud, abuse, and corruption
- Fair, unbiased, and bipartisan
- Improves checks and balances

Below are examples of how you can apply the poll's findings to better connect with voters on specific legislative priorities.

Support for S.65/H.R. 371, The Presidential Conflicts of Interest Act of 2017: Throughout the polling results, the use of “taxpayer money” was consistently one of voters' top reasons for improving government oversight. Among the proposals most favored by respondents were “requiring lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them” and “oversee whether lawmakers have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources.”

When advocating for the Presidential Conflicts of Interest Act, which targets financial conflicts of interest of the president and vice president, phrases like “taxpayer money,” “financial benefit,” and “misuse of federal resources” resonate with stakeholders. It is also important to note that any messaging regarding the president will be polarizing to general audiences.

- *The Message: Americans deserve to feel confident that the government is spending their taxpayer money on the issues that are important to them and their families. The Presidential Conflicts of Interest Act will ensure presidents and vice presidents always make decisions with the public in mind, rather than misusing federal resources for their own financial benefit.*

Support for S.1989/H.R. 4077, The Honest Ads Act: Voters across parties agree it is important to “stop foreign attempts to interfere” in U.S. elections. However, when words like “Russia” and “Robert Mueller” are invoked, Democrats become much more responsive than Republicans.

Therefore, to successfully position the Honest Ads Act - which would promote transparency about online political ads and ensure they are not being financed by foreign countries – focus on broadly addressing “foreign interference”. Using broader language will help ensure the law appeals to a wider, bipartisan audience.

- *The Message: Americans need more information on who pays for online political ads so that we can ensure foreign countries and outside interests aren’t influencing our elections. The bipartisan Honest Ads Act will make access to this information a reality.*

Support for S. 2644/H.R. 5476, The Special Counsel Independence and Integrity Act: Half of voters polled by Open the Government were concerned that government oversight is not fairly enforced. Respondents also named “ensuring that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their jobs” as one of the most favorable potential policy reforms.

When you are talking about the Special Counsel Independence and Integrity Act – which imposes restrictions on the firing of the Special Counsel – emphasis on words and phrases like “fairness” and “ensuring officials can investigate wrongdoing” will help motivate the public to support the bill.

- *The Message: Voters want officials investigating government wrongdoing to be able to do their jobs without fear of being fired for personal or partisan reasons. We need to pass the Special Counsel Independence and Integrity Act because it ensures fairness and preserves checks and balances in government.*

Support for S. 1454, The True Incorporation Transparency for Law Enforcement Act (TITLE Act): When asked about transparency, voters want to ensure fraud, abuse and corruption are rooted out and that laws and regulations are fairly enforced.

When advocating for passage of the bipartisan TITLE Act – which targets anonymously owned corporations hiding assets from tax authorities and law enforcement – stressing words like “fraud,” “abuse” and “corruption” may rouse public support.

- *The Message: Because of gaps in corporate transparency, criminals masquerading as corporations are covering up fraud. We need to pass the TITLE Act to crack down on anonymous corporate ownership and the corruption that comes with it.*

Support for S. 953, The White House Visitor Logs Transparency Act: When asked how transparent the U.S. federal government is, the average poll respondent leaned toward “not transparent at all.” When asked which about the most compelling reasons for government transparency, voters said that

transparency “makes government more accountable to the people” and “allows voters to have more insight into the governing process and know what is going on.”

Language that cites “the people” and “understanding what’s going on” will help move the needle when it comes to passing the White House Visitor Logs Transparency Act. Again, any messaging regarding the president will be polarizing to general audiences.

- *The Message: If voters don’t have insight into the workings of our government, they cannot hold the government accountable. Enacting the White House Visitor Logs Transparency Act is one simple and easy step Washington can take to ensure the public is aware of what’s going on at the White House.*

Support for H.R. 4043, The Whistleblower Protection Extension Act of 2017: Voters surveyed by Open the Government support whistleblowers and believe that government employees need better protections, so they can “blow the whistle” on waste, fraud and abuse within the government. They were also concerned that public officials don’t play by the same rules as everyone else.

When advocating for the Whistleblower Protection Extension Act, which provides additional protections for whistleblowers, referencing potential “waste” or “abuse” will help your argument resonate with the public.

- *“Government employees are closest to public officials and the most likely to know what’s going on behind closed doors. We should pass the Whistleblower Protection Extension Act to ensure they confidently come forward whenever they see our officials committing waste, abuse, or fraud.”*

Communication Do's and Don'ts

Below are some essential do's and don'ts to keep in mind when communicating about issues of oversight, transparency and accountability.

Do	Don't
Do connect these issues to their outcomes in more tangible areas such as how it will help lawmakers “do what they say they will do.”	Don't talk about oversight and transparency in a vacuum.
Do focus on accountability as the key value, with oversight and transparency as processes that address voters' desire to be able to hold government accountable.	Don't forget that voters have a crisis of trust in government, so solutions that call for government officials to be the implementer have to be demonstrably fair and effective.
Do give a “national security” caveat to discussions of transparency.	Don't single out one branch of government when addressing a broad audience.
Do talk about everyone “playing by the same rules” and about following regulations and laws effectively and fairly.	Don't demonstrate oversight with examples that will be seen as partisan motivated.
Do find ways to demonstrate oversight used to investigate wrongdoing and particularly bipartisan success stories.	
Do show Republicans how these proposals will make current laws more effective.	

Guidance: How to Write an Op-Ed

When issues related to government accountability come up in the news cycle – such as a new development in Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation or debate over national security surveillance – contributing an op-ed is a great way for your organization to establish credibility and get your message out. You can use the key findings and messages from Open the Government’s 2018 polling to support proposed solutions to policy issues regarding accountability, oversight and transparency.

Below is a preliminary template you can use to structure an op-ed around your own specific policy goals:

OP-ED TITLE

By AUTHOR, ORGANIZATION

TOPIC: [Introduce your topic and explain why it is relevant to your audience’s lives.]

PROBLEM: Because of [topic], [insert here your specific problem; e.g., “we need to ensure the president and vice president aren’t weighing in on issues that financially benefit them”]. We currently lack this form of accountability and voters’ trust in our government is continuing to erode because of it. Americans are no longer confident in our officials’ abilities to make good decisions on the most important issues ranging from health to the economy to national security.

ARGUMENT AND SOLUTION: That’s why it is absolutely critical that we pass [insert proposed legislation here]. [Proposed legislation] will ensure that taxpayer money is being spent on the issues American voters care about – *not* on the issues that benefit public officials.

Whenever government officials – from the Hill to the White House to state legislatures – make policy on behalf of their constituents, those decisions should be made with the needs of the public in mind, rather than influenced by special interests or party affiliation. In an age of political gridlock, the need for greater government accountability is something both Democrats and Republicans can agree on.

POTENTIAL INADEQUACIES AND NAYSER: It is true, as [your opponent] says, that this proposed legislation may not go far enough in solving [refer to your topic].

RESTATE THE PROBLEM, SOLUTION/CALL TO ACTION & STAKES: But without implementing [proposed legislation], we have no chance at solving [topic]. An accountable government is at the foundation of a strong democracy. That is why we must pass [proposed legislation] and hold our public officials accountable.

One-sentence biography of the author and description of your organization.

Support for This Project

This project was made possible thanks to the generous support of Democracy Fund Voice, the Bauman Foundation, Open Society Foundations and the Wallace Global Fund.

The Winston Group and Lake Research Partners conducted the public opinion research for this project.

Advisory Committee

Gary Bass
Executive Director, Bauman Foundation

Noah Bookbinder
Executive Director, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington

Danielle Brian
Executive Director, Project on Government Oversight

Kevin M. Goldberg
Legal Counsel, American Society of News Editors

Kevin Kosar
Vice President, Policy, R Street Institute

Lisa Rosenberg
Executive Director, Open the Government