

The Race Class Narrative

**And why is it an effective response to
political scapegoating?**

1. Introduction

Communication research from the United States and the UK shows that political messages using racist dog whistles or other divide-and-conquer narratives are more effective than the messaging used by progressive organizations. These messages are more persuasive to people in the middle and are more likely to be picked up and repeated. The research also shows that the strategic choice made by many single-issue organizations, to avoid speaking about racism and to focus only on their own issue, is less effective. In doing so, they lose from scapegoat politics. Similarly, communications that center racism or other forms of exclusion as the main frame fail to compete with scapegoat rhetoric when it comes to persuading the undecided middle. For an example of this kind of research, see [The UK Race Class Narrative Report \(2022\)](#).

Why should my organization respond to scapegoat rhetoric?

Scapegoat rhetoric is essentially a distraction strategy. By focusing attention on divisions between people and setting groups against each other, it diverts attention away from solvable problems and from those responsible for them. The boss who exploits their workers benefits from conflict between Dutch employees and migrant laborers. A divided workplace will not stand together for higher wages.

Scapegoat politics pits segments of the population against each other by using covert or overt forms of racism, transphobia, and similar tactics. It relies on framing that creates an “in-group” and portrays others as a threat.

As long as public discourse is dominated by scapegoat rhetoric, there will be no real progress on your organization’s issue either. Every progressive organization is affected by scapegoat politics, even if you don’t run campaigns on migration, trans rights, or racism.



2. Research to an effective response

The “Race-Class Narrative,” developed and tested by Anat Shenker-Osorio and Ian Haney López, is an effective response to scapegoat rhetoric. It:

- Persuades a larger portion of the “persuadable middle”;
- Persuades a larger portion of the people of colour;
- Is more frequently shared by activists and organizational supporters;
- Provokes a stronger reaction from opponents;
- Outperforms racist dog whistles in message competition.

The research examined the impact of specific campaign messages on four audience groups:

- Political opponents who are unlikely to be persuaded;
- The persuadable middle;
- The base supporters of progressive organizations;
- Progressive activists.

The effectiveness of a message was measured based on:

- Support for or rejection of the message;
- Whether the message is understood and remembered;
- Whether the message is persuasive;
- Whether recipients are willing to share and repeat the message.



3. What is the Race Class Narrative?

The Race Class Narrative provides a structure and building blocks for developing an effective message that can be used across campaign communications. It's a narrative that centers shared values, disarms scapegoat rhetoric, and calls out those responsible for scapegoat politics, in a way that also resonates with people who do not identify as "progressive," such as BBB or VVD voters.

A Race Class message is built using the following steps:

1. Start with shared values

- Start by naming a value that resonates broadly, such as: "Working hard is about taking care of your family." Do not start with the problem or by highlighting a specific group.

2. Inclusive reference to identity

- Your message should name identity in the context of the shared value, while emphasizing that it doesn't matter where someone comes from or what they look like. You should always include your audience's identity in the phrasing. For example: "Whether you're a farmer or a migrant worker from Romania, everyone works hard to support their family."

3. Point to specific actors responsible for the problem

- Name individuals or entities responsible for the issue, not vague categories. So instead of saying: "It's the fault of the capitalists," say: "It's the landlords and real estate speculators who have made housing unaffordable."

4. Name racism and transphobia as divide-and-conquer strategies

- Call out politicians who try to blame migrants or people of color for broader social problems, and explain how they use this to distract from their own failed policies and prevent people from uniting across lines of difference to address inequality together.

5. Offer a hopeful vision for the future

- Your message should present a positive outcome to strive for. For example: "Neighborhoods where everyone has access to a good, affordable home."



6. Name injustices and barriers that undermine the shared value

- Identify specific injustices and obstacles that prevent people from living out the shared value. For example: "Slum landlords who exploit hardworking migrant workers and take the money they would rather send home to support their families."

7. Focus on outcomes, not policies or procedures

- Yes, laws and rules need to change to solve problems in working-class neighborhoods, but you won't convince people with stories about legislative processes or democracy. Show people the outcome.

8. Be an advocate for solutions, not just an opponent of problems

- Communicate what you support and the change you want to see, don't just focus on what you're against. Anger alone doesn't move people; it's the combination of anger, hope, and action that drives engagement.

9. Clear calls to action without hesitation

- Use bold, assertive language and avoid vague or abstract phrasing when presenting the actions that need to be taken.

This checklist provides a structured approach to crafting a Race-Class message that communicates effectively and combats racism. By following these guidelines, you can develop messaging that resonates with a broad audience and achieves real impact.



Pitfalls in using this narrative

A classic communication mistake is putting the opposition on a pedestal. In this case, centering white people who perceive anti-racism or trans rights as a threat to their own status. What the Race-Class Narrative does instead is emphasize that we share common interests, despite our differences.

The fact that a strongly anti-racist or pro-trans rights message persuades a smaller portion of the undecided middle does not mean that activist groups shouldn't use it. A provocative or explicit message can be effective in shifting the Overton window or putting an issue on the political agenda. It's up to more moderate organizations to focus on persuading the middle ground.

More background materials

[ASO Communications Message Guides](#)

[The Race Class Academy](#)

[Hoe politici met racisme weggomen dankzij hondenfluitjes](#)



We are Stroomversnellers

Stroomversnellers is a collective of experienced campaigners, organizers, facilitators, and trainers. We are all (or have been) active in environmental organizations, grassroots movements, trade unions, and anti-racism initiatives. Through trial and error, we've learned how to run effective campaigns, build organizations, and create real social change.

We're always learning and we love to share our knowledge and experience with others.

Because the world doesn't move in the right direction on its own, in fact, quite the opposite. A better society can only be built by many well-prepared people working together. That's why we support groups fighting for social and ecological justice with advice, strategy or brainstorm sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we can grow, build power, and change the world.

Toolbox for Movements

This guide is part of our [Toolbox for Movements](#), a growing collection of short digital guides with essential knowledge on strategy, movement building, direct action, and organizing. A solid foundation for new activists, and a fresh perspective for experienced changemakers. You'll find all our published guides there as well.

We love learning too

So if you have ideas for improving this guide, or want to add your own experiences, let us know!

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