



Anti-Austerity Message Guidance

An Evolving Document

We are at a moment in time that requires bold action; The pandemic has made a range of vulnerabilities and injustices obvious across America. As a result, the public is ready, even eager, for bold solutions to improve people's lives.

As advocates and communicators, we need to step up to this moment in time, and rethink how we engage the public and policymakers. The short summary that follows is an evolving document designed to highlight key learnings and best practices.

Keep in Mind:

- Deeply held cultural models undermine support for adequate, progressive public revenue. “Commonsense” ideas such as “Taxes take money out of my pocket” and “We have to live within our means” fuel austerity thinking as people assume our only choice in tough times is to tighten our belt.
- We need to tap into different commonsense ideas to assert a proactive case for why and how public revenue creates economic wellbeing. The way forward is for states to focus on people and communities, use public revenue for jobs, and keep money flowing in our communities.
- The Dos and Don'ts that follow are designed for the state-level budget conversation. However, the same principles apply to the federal budget conversation with the additional challenge of deflecting deficit critiques.

DO ...	DON'T...	Rationale	Example
Make the conversation about our shared aspirations	Focus on budget talk—dollars, shortfalls, etc.	People care about making a difference; just talking about dollars does not convey what we achieve with those dollars.	<i>We all want great schools, parks, health care and quality jobs.</i>
Orient around the solutions we need	Orient around the problems we see	<i>Dwelling</i> on problems too easily obscures solutions or suggests there are no solutions.	<i>Now is the time to invest in us and come out of this pandemic better than before which means...</i>
Make an explicit link to wellbeing, especially economic wellbeing and quality jobs	Assume people can connect-the-dots between dollars spent and economic impact, quality jobs or improved lives	People tend to assume taxes take money out of the economy and/or that progressives don't prioritize the economy. Our policies improve people's wellbeing and create jobs—we need to take credit for that.	<i>Every community needs solid foundations to thrive like great schools, parks, healthcare... Making needed improvements in roads and bridges means X good jobs... Every single lead pipe will be replaced, protecting all of us, but especially our children, from harm...</i>
Clarify how prosperity starts with, requires, thriving families and communities	Allow pro-corporate, trickle-down thinking to dominate; portray people as victims who need charity	People easily get on board with the commonsense idea that local economies are driven by people's ability to prosper.	<i>The way our economy rebounds is if there's money flowing. Our state should invest in communities, schools, health care and keep public workers employed, so that people have money in their pockets to spend in our local businesses.</i>
Stress that this is about making choices	Focus on the politics or politicians' motivations	A Choice Frame combats the idea that "we can't afford it" by showing the trade-off.	<i>We have a choice. Instead of continuing tax breaks for those at the top, we could put that money into...</i>
Center BIPOC communities with an interdependence and/or structural message	Allow BIPOC to be "othered" or blamed for "personal choices"	Too often BIPOC needs are neglected due to "blaming the victim" rather than highlighting how the system has failed.	<i>For too long, low income Black and Latinx communities have gotten ignored while the bulk of public investments go elsewhere. We can ensure that every community—Black, Brown, White, working- and middle-income—is a thriving community by...</i>
Incorporate an economic justice explanation; connect the dots on how tax codes are misguided/unjust	Rely solely on resentment of the wealthy	Most state tax codes are regressive. A clear, sticky way to convey this idea is the Upside Down Tax Code, with an explanation. This explanation provides a practical rationale for why the wealthy need to pay more.	<i>WA has the most upside-down tax system in the nation. A low-income person pays 17% of their income in state and local taxes while a middle-income person pays 7% and a wealthy person pays 3%. We can bring balance to the tax code and help our economy rebound by asking the wealthy to pay their fair share.</i>
Convey bold, strong optimism	Lean too heavily on "struggle," "crisis," etc.	When people are fearful, they are more cautious and more likely to support austerity measures.	<i>Our accomplishments are not just in the history books, like sending a man to the moon. We are about to defeat a worldwide pandemic. We are newly reminded of how great we can be when we band together.</i>

Gold Star Examples

[Invest in Washington Now: Choose People Over Cuts](#) This video reinforces how money flowing through the community creates a strong economy, uses a simple metaphor to explain what needs to be fixed, “the upside down tax-code,” and discusses concretely what the investment in schools and business will bring about - more jobs and more businesses.

[Tax breaks for the wealthy now will cost Montanans later – Daily Montanan](#) The Choice Frame is woven throughout this editorial, with concrete references to the difference this choice will make to the average Montanan.

[The People’s Budget](#) – All In For Ohio This signature ad is both aspirational and explanatory, with a compelling case for why different choices need to be made.