

An aerial photograph of a coastal landscape. The top portion shows a clear blue ocean meeting a sandy beach. Below the beach is a wide expanse of scrubland with dark green and brown vegetation. The bottom portion of the image is dominated by a dense, textured area of reddish-brown and dark brown scrubland.

PASSING THE MESSAGE STICK

Messages that build widespread public support for transformative change on First Nations justice, now and beyond the referendum.



We pay respect to our Elders and acknowledge the Traditional Owners who've cared for country since time immemorial. Sovereignty over this land was never ceded - it always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

What is a Message Stick?

For time immemorial, we have used message sticks to communicate with each other – between Aboriginal Nations, Clans and Language groups. We pass our message sticks to one another, with our stories engraved, granting us safe passage through other groups' Country. Message sticks are the original token of authenticity of First Nations voices and messages.

This research – from the very early days of ideation, through to the report that's in your hand now – has been created for us, and by us, at every stage.

Please pass this report on as far as you can.

Artist Credit

Tarsha Davis is a proud Kuku Yalanji woman from Far North Queensland, now based in Melbourne. Her works are inspired by memories of being on country with family and community, and are reflective of her connection to country and her passion for social health.

Tarsha uses her art practice therapeutically, working with Aboriginal communities and young people to empower them to connect to culture and share stories.

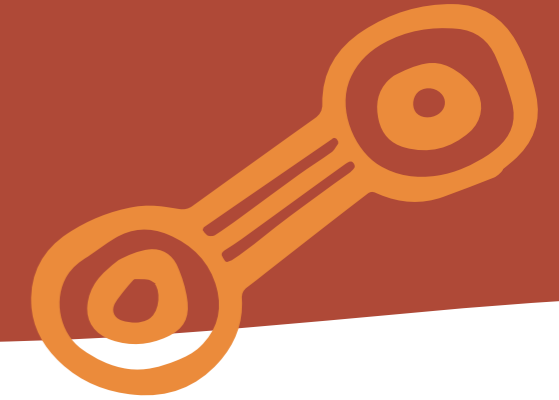
Tarsha's artwork is featured throughout the Passing the Message Stick report.

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WARNING: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following report may contain images of deceased persons.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are the first storytellers – and right now, the whole country is listening.

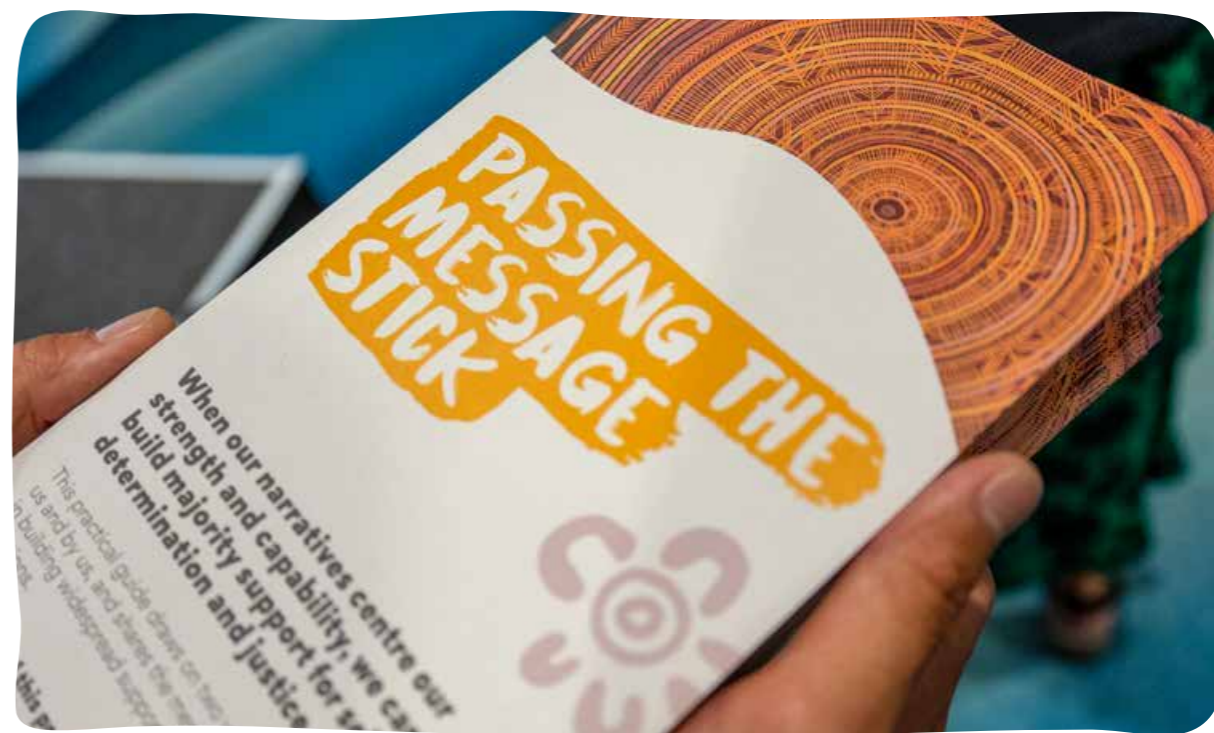
As First Nations people, we are the first storytellers – and right now, the whole country is listening.

The words we use to tell our stories matter. When we share our strengths, solutions and vision for change, we build widespread support for the changes our communities have been calling for, for decades.

Passing the Message Stick is a groundbreaking multi-year First Nations-led research project designed to shift public narrative in support of First Nations justice and self-determination.

We launched the foundational research in 2021 and it has been widely adopted by First Nations organisations, advocates, journalists, activists and allies. The biggest finding was that when we lead from our strengths and expertise, we can win big change. This is a critical antidote to the pervasive deficit language that harms us and holds us back. You can find the full recommendations at passingthemessagestick.org.

In 2023, this next phase of research expands on the foundational report to find persuasive messages that build support for transformative change, such as treaties, truth-telling and representation, now and beyond the referendum.



Why we've done this research now

This is a historic moment, not only because we're going to a referendum, but because of the momentum that has built around First Nations justice. Treaties, truth-telling and self-determination are all within our grasp, but our ability to capture this depends on the level of ambition set in the referendum and whether we win the narrative for transformative change.

The good news is our research shows our target audiences resonate with our vision for transformative change, particularly when they have the social proof that others are also in support. For this reason, now is not the time to play small.

This research aims to equip tens of thousands of First Nations advocates, communicators, ACCOs, ally organisations and community members – with the messages needed to win a resounding Yes and the case for transformative change.

We believe that if we build a groundswell of public support and win a resounding Yes, then a wave of transformative change for First Nation justice will follow - because public momentum and demand gives governments a political mandate to act on bold policy reform.

This message research project has two interconnected goals:

- 1.** Finding the frames and messages to build long-term, widespread support for ambitious, transformative change for First Nations communities - like treaties, truth-telling, representation and justice.
- 2.** Finding the frames and messages to enable a resounding Yes win in the referendum, and build the public momentum and political will necessary to achieve long-term, systemic change.

Those who oppose First Nations justice are using this moment in the referendum to stoke fear and racism, dividing the nation for their own political gain.

We need to counter this with a much stronger story that invites everyone to join us in creating a better and fairer future. We do this by singing from the same song sheet - with shared values, stories of our strength and taking action together.

This is a resource to inform both communications in the referendum, and campaigns for transformative change over the years to come.



MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

If we were going to summarise our recommendations into a message that works in this moment and is just a few words long, it would be: Yes, let's listen.

Everyone can understand the simple idea that if you listen to the people most impacted before you make decisions, you'll get better outcomes. This is a great message to share, because it taps into a universal value of listening and respect, and is underpinned by the expertise of our communities.

Another simple idea to share is **Yes, to move forward together.** It brings everyone into the story of how we can work together towards our vision for the future. Our communities have been advocating for solutions for decades. We can use this moment as a vehicle to fast-track treaties, land rights, truth-telling and justice, with the referendum being a step on the journey not the final destination.

This report has five key recommendations for how we build widespread support for transformative change and win a resounding Yes in the referendum:

1. SHARED VALUES

Values are how we build alignment across audiences, helping us reach people with different backgrounds, experiences and political persuasions. The research shows when we share values like equity, listening and respect, people are more likely to support us and their support stays strong in the face of the racist 'No' messages.

2. CLEAR VISION

Most people see this moment as bigger than the referendum, and an opportunity to bring about more meaningful change. When we connect this moment to our bigger vision and our solutions, more people support us.

3. CREDIBLE THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is a story of how we can get from where we are to where we want to be. A simple formula for writing a theory of change is: If we do this, then this will happen (better outcome), because (explaining our reasoning). To be shared widely, a theory of change must have two key ingredients: it must be credible and compelling.

4. FIRST NATIONS STRENGTH & LEADERSHIP

People are more supportive when they hear messages of strength, optimism and capability. Because the referendum is ultimately a vote about how people perceive us, we need to flood the airwaves and conversations with stories of our strength, leadership and solutions.

5. A CLEAR SEQUENCE

Both First Nations people and those who are persuadable need to understand the process. We summarise this as: first, we vote and everyone has a say on the principle of whether we should have a representative body. Secondly, through a consultation process, First Nations people will shape the model to ensure it is representative.

See Chapter 3 for more details on the recommendations.

How to use this guide

First and foremost, this guide is designed for storytellers. It's for First Nations advocates and allies, for community organisers and leaders of grassroots movements, it's for journalists, policy-makers, decision-makers and anyone who uses the power of story to generate change.

It's divided into four chapters that are best understood and applied together.

Here's what's included:

Chapter 1: The moment we're in

We're in an unprecedented moment of opportunity: the national mood is on our side, and there's a huge groundswell of support for First Nations justice. Read this chapter to understand the social and political context about the moment we're working within.

Chapter 2: How to win a narrative

Read this to understand the theory and methodology that underpin the project. You'll find an overview of why messaging matters, advice on how narratives work and how to shift them, plus insights into our audience segmentation and research methodology. This chapter also includes a recap of the foundational messaging recommendations we released in 2021, proven to build support for First Nations justice and self-determination.

Chapter 3: Messaging recommendations

Chapter 3 includes practical advice drawn from our findings. While the context and theory is valuable, if you're pressed for time, we recommend skipping ahead to this chapter. It's packed full of practical tips, including five recommendations for your messages, advice on the strongest frames from the research, plus insights on how to craft messages, do truth-telling and understand First Nations audiences. Read the recommendations for practical advice on how to shift your messaging in line with a strength and values-based narrative.

Chapter 4: Conversation toolkit

Chapter 4 is a practical resource to guide your conversations with family, friends, colleagues and members of your community. You'll find principles of persuasion, an overview of common concerns and some frequently asked questions with suggested answers.



OPENING LETTER - DR JACKIE HUGGINS AM

I've worked in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs for over four decades now – and I've seen it all. I've watched policies come and go, governments rise and fall, and I've seen our representative bodies like the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and ATSIC erased with the stroke of a pen.

I was 11 years of age at the 1967 referendum, and although just a child, I felt the weight of the moment and understood the significance of no longer being counted under the Flora and Fauna Act. We were recognised as human beings in this country, and that must live on.

And now, more than fifty years later, we find ourselves facing another pivotal moment. An opportunity for our people to truly have a say on the policies that affect us; an opportunity for us to contribute our strength, knowledge and expertise to make this country a better place for everyone.

“ It's my dream to see a permanent representative body for our people in this country, and I see that can be achieved through a referendum to enshrine a Voice to Parliament.

Passing The Message Stick began back in 2019, when I was co-chair of National Congress. In that role, and in my decades of work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in this country, I'd been rolling out deficit language – sharing statistics of how bad things are, unknowingly reinforcing negative and harmful stereotypes about our communities. For too long we've been speaking in the deficit, responding to racist narratives and rebutting arguments that undermine our strength and solutions. But deficit is not how we see ourselves, and that's been the driving force behind Passing the Message Stick.

In 2021, we released our foundational messaging advice to replace the deficit narrative with stories of our strength and in doing so, build widespread public support for self-determination and justice. Uptake of these messages has been beyond what we ever imagined – they've been widely adopted by First Nations organisations, advocates, journalists and allies, and have profoundly shaped communications of organisations as diverse as ABC, Yoorrook Justice Commission, GetUp and Common Ground.



Our latest research builds on these foundational principles and is the product of an ongoing collaboration between generations of First Nations advocates. It's been a pleasure to sit on the project steering committee alongside two powerful young women, our next generation of leaders – Larissa Baldwin-Roberts (CEO, GetUp) and Millie Telford (First Nations Justice Director, Australian Progress), and to have the support of Kirsty Albion (Executive Director, Australian Progress) and the GetUp and Australian Progress teams. I'd also like to thank more than 50 First Nations fellows who've participated in two Passing the Message Stick Messaging and Communications Fellowships, the project is richer for their contribution.

From land rights to stopping black deaths in custody, fighting racism and inequality, keeping kids in communities, as well as treaties, truth-telling and representation – we have the solutions and know what our communities need. We've spent the last eight months researching the most persuasive messages to build widespread support for transformative policy change that centres this expertise, including how to build public momentum and political will for more ambitious change, starting with a resounding Yes in the referendum, and beyond it.

“ I'm so proud of this work, and it fills me with hope for what's next. Messages are passed through story, and storytelling has been at the heart of our culture since time immemorial.

We encourage you to take these findings in your hands and heart, and share them widely – to create transformative change and centre our strength and solutions in public policy across the country.

We can win, and we will win.

Waddamooli,

Dr Jackie Huggins AM FAHA

Bidjara / Birri Gubba Juru

Author, historian, advocate and Elder in Residence at Australian Progress

OPENING LETTER - LARISSA BALDWIN-ROBERTS

What's most extraordinary about this moment is the momentum we're surrounded by.

This momentum was seeded by the Elders who've gone before us, leading protests, building grassroots power and tirelessly advocating for justice. From the Freedom Ride to the Tent Embassy, we know what it takes to build people's power and speak our truth in the face of injustice. We are strong, resilient and we have the solutions.

In the last few years alone, we've seen support for First Nations-led movements grow rapidly, with hundreds of thousands of non-First Nations Australians turning out on the streets on Invasion Day and at rallies calling for an end to Black Deaths in Custody. We've seen generational shifts that go beyond acknowledgements of country, coming to terms with our brutal past and what that means for our present and our future. First Nations self-determination and justice are on the national political agenda for the first time in a long time.

“ The moment we're in is so much more than a Yes or No binary – it's about justice, truth-telling, treaties, and representation. Most of all, it's about hope and ambition and using the platform of the referendum to turn the possibility of transformative change into reality.

Usually, change happens slowly. But sometimes, critical moments turn 'usual' on its head – creating an appetite for new ideas and opening the door to previously unthinkable reforms.

For us, the referendum creates one of these moments. It's not the end of the road, but it's an important step in the right direction. Right now, people are paying attention, the mood is shifting in our favour and consensus is on our side. What happens next is up to us.

“ Together, we will win better policies by listening to what we - First Nations people - have to say about the things that affect us and our communities. This will lead to meaningful changes that improve our everyday lives. It starts with winning a resounding Yes, then using this groundswell of public support to influence the political decisions that come next - on truth-telling, treaties, land rights, justice, housing, health, cultural heritage and more.

We know that overwhelming public support is one of the most effective ways to influence political decision-making and long-term policy change.

It's going to take all of us, contributing all the tools of the progressive movement to win this – from building power and capacity of First Nations communities, to organising allies, dedicating resources, leaning into persuasive conversations, leveraging your relationships, talking to the media and more.

My call to action to each and every one of you is this: join us in singing from the same song sheet, repeating the same values-based messages that share our vision, strength and credible theory of change. The recommendations are yours to use – please, embrace them in your conversations, your campaign materials, your organisational statements and your media interviews.

The messages contained in this guide are proven to build widespread public support in our favour. Use them, and we can - and will - win.

Larissa Baldwin-Roberts

Widjabul Wia-bul / Bundjalung

CEO, GetUp



GLOSSARY

The referendum campaign and this report includes lots of phrases and words - so let's start off with some definitions.

While we have differing levels of understanding of these words and phrases, it's important to remember that for many people, including both First Nations and non-First Nations, awareness of the upcoming referendum is only just starting now.

When we start with a shared basis of knowledge in our messaging and conversations, and find common ground through shared values, we can more easily connect with people who may not be familiar with various policies or terminology. We do this so that everyday people can engage in the conversation without prior knowledge and feel both connected and motivated to act.

That's why in our messaging guide, you will notice that we rarely mention the Uluru Statement from the Heart or the Voice to Parliament. Instead, we focus on shared values, vision for the future and how we can use this moment to build a mandate to get us there.

Transformative change

To us, transformative change means treaties, truth-telling, land rights and land back, decision-making and veto rights, First Nations-led justice and fully resourced Aboriginal community controlled organisations. It's the change that realises the aspirations our communities have been fighting for for decades; the change that'll make a real difference to the lives of everyday people; a change that's enduring and guarantees a better future for the generations to come.

Deficit language

A deficit is a deficiency, failure or disadvantage. When deficit language is used in reference to First Nations communities, it reinforces the idea that our communities are vulnerable, dysfunctional and suggests that we are the problem, taking responsibility away from governments and those causing harm. This is a deliberate tool that is used against us, and we need to avoid falling into their trap by sharing our truth in a way that's grounded in our strength, and motivates action

Racist No campaign

The racist No campaign, led and funded by right-wing agendas, is using racist rhetoric that intentionally feeds the stigma of Aboriginal 'dysfunction', validating paternalistic policies and deficit discourse that promote assimilation and undermines what our old people have been fighting for to regain control over our own lives. The racist No campaign seeks to spread fear and division for their own political gain.



First Nations Grassroots No / Progressive No campaign

First Nations grassroots movements have always led the charge for transformative change. Across all social change movements, the right of refusal is a powerful strategy to push for more ambition than what's currently on the table. The grassroots No / progressive No campaign is demanding more ambitious change, and raising important questions and concerns about the upcoming referendum.

Progressive Yes campaign

The majority of people equally support all the big changes our communities are calling for, from treaties, to truth-telling and representation. The progressive Yes campaign aims to win a resounding yes and supercharge these campaigns for justice. When the majority of people vote with us, we will build the mandate needed for transformative policy change beyond the referendum.

Uluru Statement from the Heart

The Uluru Statement from the Heart was issued to the Australian public in 2017, after 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates came together for the First Nations National Constitutional Convention. This gathering was convened by the bipartisan-appointed Referendum Council and was held after the Council had travelled around the country and met with over 1,200 First Nations people as a part of the regional dialogues.

The statement has been described as an invitation to “walk with us in a movement for a better future” and “calls for a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament, and for Makarrata – a coming together after a struggle – through a process of treaty-making and truth-telling.”

Voice to Parliament

As described on the Australian Government website, the Voice to Parliament would be “an independent and permanent advisory body. It would give advice to the Australian Parliament and Government on matters that affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples”. The Prime Minister has recently released the principles of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, developed by the First Nations Referendum Working Group and endorsed by the Australian Government. You can read the detailed design principle [here](#).

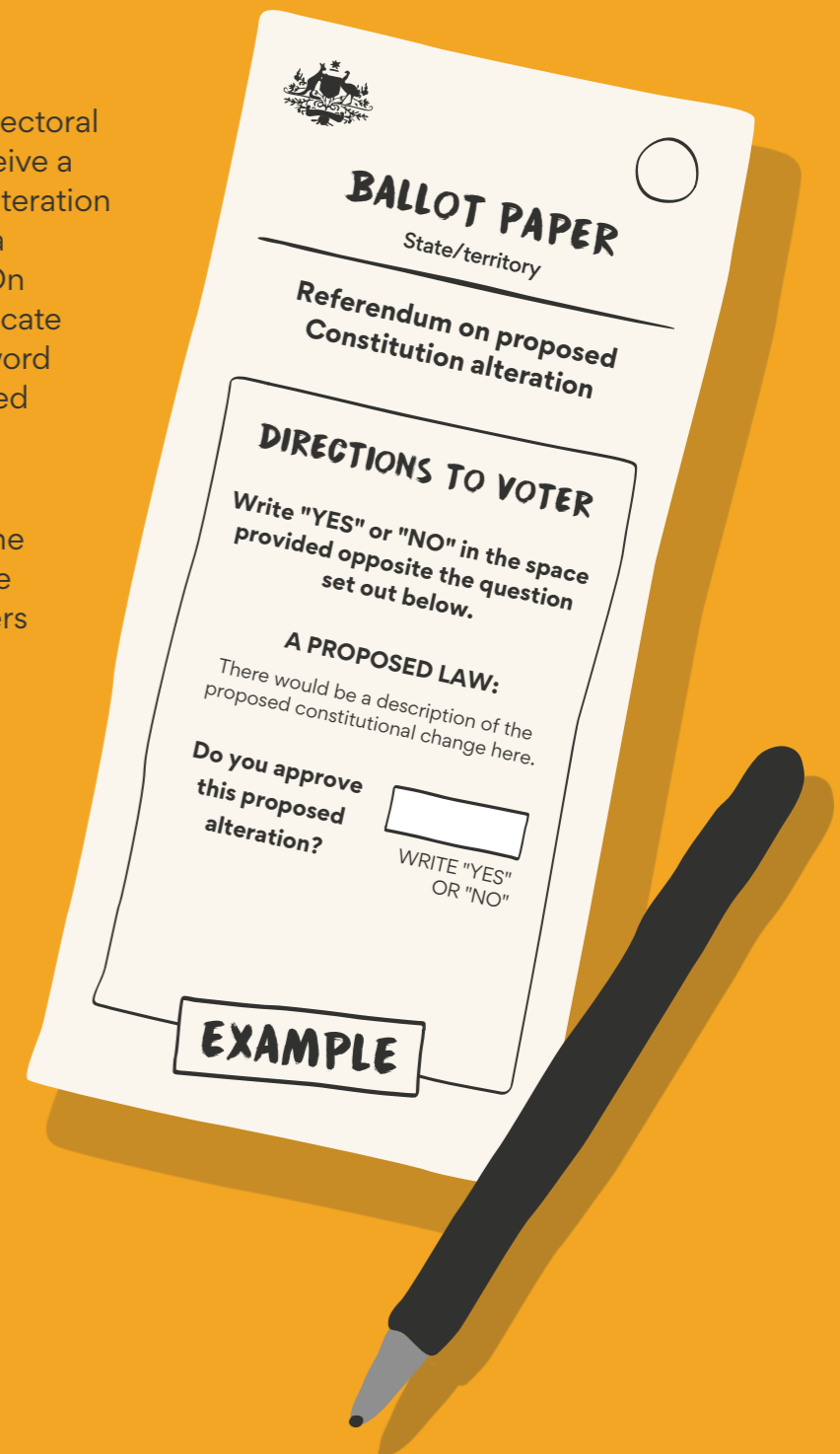


Why do we say “write Yes” rather than “vote Yes”?

As described on the Australian Electoral Commission website, you will receive a ballot paper with the proposed alteration to the Constitution, followed by a question asking if you approve. On the ballot paper, you need to indicate your vote by clearly writing the word Yes if you approve of the proposed alteration, or the word No if you do not approve.

Throughout this report, we use the term ‘Write Yes’ (rather than ‘Vote Yes’) as a way to familiarise readers with how voting will work on the day. **We also say ‘Write Yes’ rather than ‘Vote for the Voice’, because ‘Yes’ means so much more: ‘Yes’ to transformative change, ‘Yes’ to treaties, ‘Yes’ to truth-telling, ‘Yes’ to ending black deaths in custody and ‘Yes’ to justice.**

That’s our end goal, with Voice just one step along the way.



HOW WE REFER TO OURSELVES

A note on how we refer to ourselves, and the use of Aboriginal and First Nations throughout this research.

We prefer to be known by distinct and diverse nations, clans and tribes, and have great pride in reclaiming those identities over collective terms. In a survey of GetUp supporters, First Nations people clearly indicated a dislike of the term 'Indigenous', which has been co-opted by all levels of government.

As a collective, we generally prefer terms that highlight diversity, such as First Nations, First People and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, over the melting pot of 'Indigenous'. More often than not, we use colloquial terms like mob, Koori and Murri.

In a global context, some people noted that 'First Nations' is more associated with people in Canada and the United States, and our persuadable group of middle Australia doesn't generally know or use this term.

For this reason, in the focus groups and survey, we used "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" first, and "Aboriginal people" thereafter. This was a pragmatic decision, to use a short term that most people already know and understand.

In the context of messaging, the use of 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous' can reinforce unhelpful black and white binaries. Often, people don't consider People of Colour and migrants as 'non-Indigenous', which can erase ethnic diversity, an important consideration when crafting values-based messages.

We acknowledge how you refer to yourself is a personal choice.

Recommendations for allies

Wherever possible, allies can best serve First Nations causes by taking the lead from First Nations people and elevating their voices. There will also be times when allies need to speak up as themselves, as allies.

Phrases like "First Nations people know what's best for their communities" and "we are standing with First Nations people by [doing X]" are helpful ways to show your solidarity.

It's going to take more than First Nations people speaking up to shift the narrative, so please back us and share our messages loud and clear, in all types of forums, with as many people as you can.



CHAPTER 1:

THE MOMENT WE'RE IN

Read this to understand the social and political context we're operating within. Skip ahead to Chapter 2 to learn the theory behind public narratives, Chapter 3 for our messaging advice and findings, and Chapter 4 for the conversation toolkit.

A MOMENT OF OPPORTUNITY

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reclaim our strength and build the power and political will that could catapult First Nations justice in this country.

Our movements have never been stronger, with First Nations communities leading campaigns for systemic change on all fronts – from land rights, to deaths in custody, cultural heritage protection, climate change, health, housing, education, disability justice and beyond.

We have seen huge growth in protest movements that have challenged the status quo, contributed to a global reckoning with racism and built widespread demand for the aspirations of our communities. It's clear that momentum for change is growing, and big wins are within our reach.

This moment is only possible because of the decades of protest, activism and advocacy led by our Elders and young people, who have created fertile ground for us to share our truth, reclaim our strengths and fight for our rights as the oldest living culture in the world.

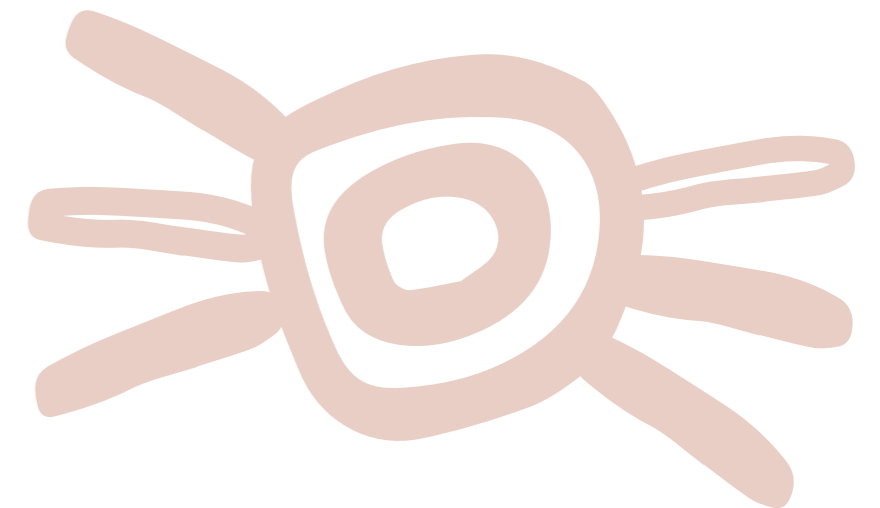
We now find ourselves operating within a political context of state, territory and federal governments committing to treaties, truth-telling and representation processes, and First Nations justice being firmly centred on the national political agenda. Governments around the country have put our demands on the table because they've seen the power and growth of our movements over the last decade, and can see the power of the voters is overwhelmingly in our favour.

Our research shows the majority of Australians support First Nations justice and self-determination. The national mood is on our side and there's a huge groundswell of support for us to tap into and mobilise.

While mainstream media narratives still operate in deficit frames, public attitudes and beliefs are changing. Both progressives and conservatives support transformative change over and above small-scale business-as-usual policy approaches. Non-First Nations people generally care about equity and have an overall sense that something needs to change. There is widespread recognition that our laws will work better if we listen to what First Nations people say about the laws that impact First Nations people.

Momentum is on our side

- > **Support levels for treaties** are very similar to support levels for the referendum - this is across the board, with the base, persuadables and opposition.
- > The majority of **persuadables agree with the statement “this continent has always been the land of Aboriginal people, so they have a rightful place in making decisions here”**. The response, “well, it's their land” came up in multiple focus groups.
- > Persuadables agree there has been government inaction, and understand that even well-meaning governments make mistakes. They support proactive policies to address inaction and injustice (e.g. implementing recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody).



OUR VISION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

This is a historic moment, not only because we're going to a referendum, but because of the momentum that has built around First Nations justice. Treaties, truth-telling and self-determination are all within our grasp, but our ability to capture this depends on the level of ambition set in the referendum and whether we win the narrative for transformative change.

The good news is our research shows our target audiences resonate with our vision for transformative change, particularly when they have the social proof that others are also in support. For this reason, now is not the time to play small.

This referendum year is a moment where we can set sight on the change that realises the aspirations our communities have been fighting for for decades, and build a mandate for the change that will make a real difference to the lives of everyday people: a change that's enduring and guarantees a better future for generations to come.

It's time to restore our right to make decisions for ourselves, our families, our communities and our homelands. Our people and our culture are strong and resilient and, just like everyone else, we thrive when we can set our own course.

In our foundational research, we found that the majority of people agree we need more First Nations leadership and Australia would benefit if First Nations values were at the centre of decision-making.

The moment we have right now to affirm this position is the referendum. It is up to us to set ambitious benchmarks for what this looks like by articulating our vision for structural change and demonstrating the majority of people are with us.

Our challenge is to build a movement that will fight for systemic change, and use this moment as a vehicle to fast-track treaties, land rights, truth-telling and justice, with the referendum being a stop along the journey but not the final destination.

We must articulate the large-scale, systemic change we want to see when it comes to justice reforms, access to services, land rights, representation and more. Amending the constitution won't deliver us the systemic change we need, but we can use this political moment to reinforce the key principle that there is no justice without First Nations justice.

We have an opportunity to have a conversation with ourselves, as a nation, about who we are, who we want to be and what we stand for. Whether we've been here for five years, five generations or 5,000 generations, everyone has an important role to play.

We need to hold these conversations carefully, respectfully and in a way that encourages truth-telling. **This Passing the Message Stick research provides guidance on how to use this moment to transfer power to our communities and use persuasive messages to shift the narrative.**

The shared stories we tell have the power to generate change. Together we can build a collective vision for the future - one that centres First Nations justice and elevates the demands our communities have been fighting for for generations - like stopping black deaths in custody, land rights, cultural heritage protection and keeping kids in community.

What do we mean when we say 'transformative change'?

“ To us, transformative change means treaties, truth-telling, land back, decision-making and veto rights, First Nations-led justice and fully-resourced Aboriginal community controlled organisations. It's the change that realises the aspirations our communities have been fighting for for decades; the change that'll make a real difference to the lives of everyday people; a change that's enduring and guarantees a better future for the generations to come.”

- Larissa Baldwin-Roberts, CEO, GetUp



“ We have an opportunity to have a conversation with ourselves, as a nation, about who we are, who we want to be and what we stand for. Whether we’ve been here for five years, five generations or 5,000 generations, everyone has an important role to play.



WHAT IT'S GOING TO TAKE: BUILDING OUR MOVEMENT

This is an important moment to build the power of First Nations-led movements and win the narrative for transformative change, shifting the goal posts of what's possible.

To win, we must listen to, and be led by, First Nations communities. However, everyone has an important role to play and there's plenty of work to do.

We know that when we get the right message, delivered by the right messengers, to the right audience at the right time, we win campaigns. Over time, we generate the sustained attitude shifts that mean the next campaign is easier to win. In doing so, we build momentum for long-term change.

While it's clear that momentum for change is growing and big wins are within our reach, we're also seeing a nasty culture war that is giving rise to racism, hurling attacks on First Nations people and spreading harmful narratives and misinformation that hurts and undermines our communities. We cannot allow them to take us backwards.

Our research shows there is even greater support for transformative change than there is support for the referendum itself, which tells us there is appetite for more ambition. It is the role of advocates and allies to set sights on the aspirations of communities and demonstrate that winning the referendum is a step in the right direction but not the final destination.

On the referendum itself, there is a diversity of views, especially within First Nations communities, and that is okay. There is strength in the diversity of our opinions, perspectives, experiences and different approaches to creating change.



So what does this mean for our movement and what about the No campaigns?

As advocates and allies, we must be aware of the different roles within a social movement and how our role, alongside the role of others, contributes to our vision and goals. Whilst we may have different purposes, styles, skills and needs, it is vital we understand and respect these different roles, and aspire to compliment each other as opposed to undermine each other.

When you zoom out of the Yes or No binary on the referendum, and focus on the values that are held widely and deeply by many First Nations people, you can see we have a shared vision for the future that has been passed down by many of our old people. What unites us is our commitment to justice and fighting for change for our people. Undeniably, these shared values and vision is what sets us apart from those working against us.

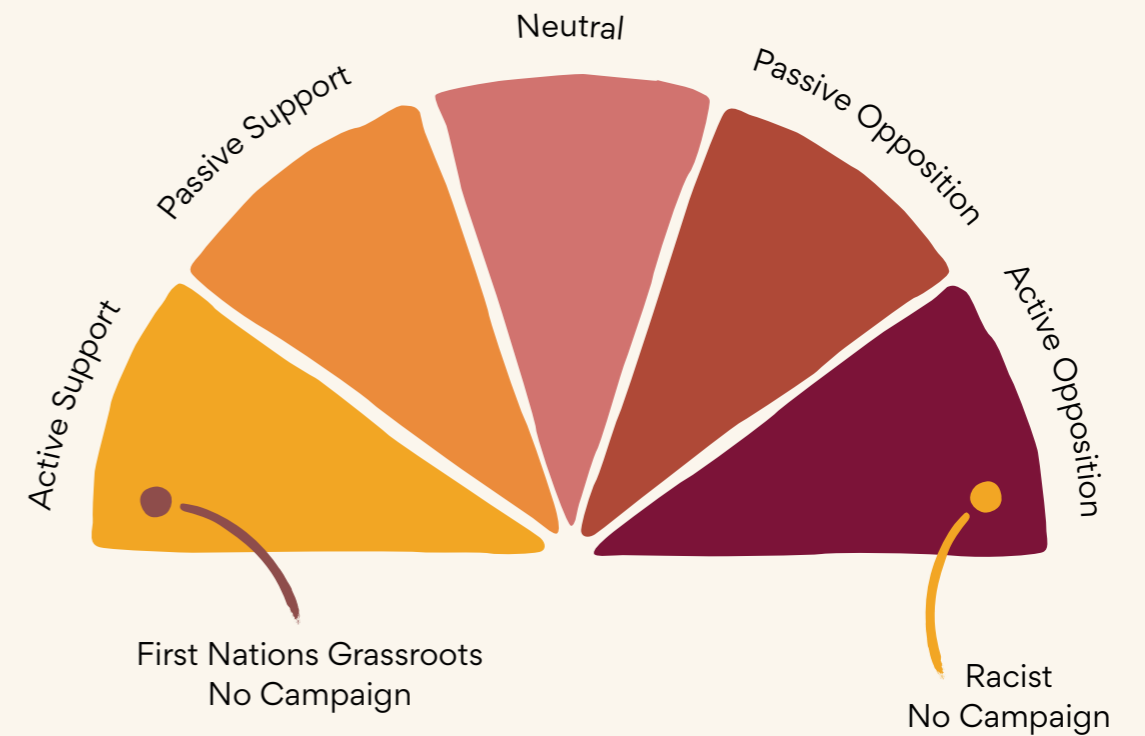
By using this spectrum of allies, we can identify where different people, or specific groups of people, may sit in regards to their support or opposition for First Nations justice and transformative change.

Take note of where we see the ‘First Nations grassroots No campaign’ and the ‘racist No campaign’ on these two spectrums and how they differ to one another.

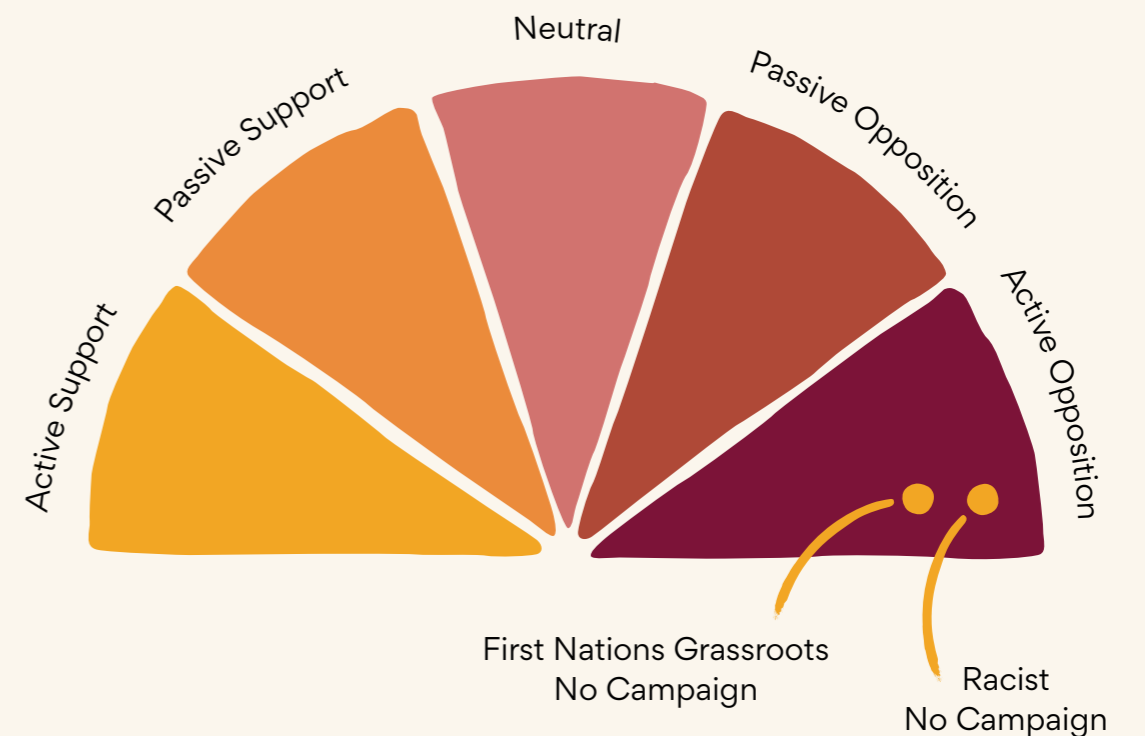
The racist No campaign articulates a racist rhetoric that is intentionally feeding the stigma of Aboriginal ‘dysfunction’, validating paternalistic policies that promote assimilation and undermines what our old people have been fighting for to regain control over our own lives.

In comparison, the First Nations grassroots No campaign argues that the referendum proposal lacks ambition and questions whether the Voice to Parliament will lead to substantive change, especially given the mistrust of governments and long history of reasons as to why this is the case. Instead, there are calls for the demands of communities to be met, such as land back now, treaty before voice and stopping Black deaths in custody.

Spectrum of Allies: Support for First Nations Justice and Transformative Change



Spectrum of Allies: Support for the Referendum





There are a number of important questions and valid concerns that community members have raised, and many people are asking if the referendum is enough. The reality is that we need to go well beyond the referendum and a representative body in order to achieve justice for First Nations people, and therefore we have a responsibility as a movement to demand change that goes beyond what is on the table.

If we are clear on who is in support of transformative change for First Nations justice, and who is actively working against us, then we can be clear on who are our allies and focus on how we can work together and build the power of our movements. If we shift each wedge on the spectrum of allies one step in support of our vision, we are more likely to win and in doing so, we will weaken and alienate our opposition.

This is why we must focus beyond the Yes or No binary, and lift our story to a bigger vision for change. Together we can build the case for what comes beyond the referendum, and build a mandate for it during the campaign.

This is also why we must not attack or dismiss other First Nations people, especially those who are demanding more ambition. Just like the climate movement argues that net zero by 2050 is not enough, and the union movement has consistently supported the right of refusal of workers as an important negotiation tactic to gain more, First Nations communities always have and always will fight for justice for our people and cannot be expected to settle for anything less.

Implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Bringing Them Home Report and listening to communities who are fighting against fracking and cultural heritage destruction could go a long way in demonstrating that the government is serious about First Nations justice.

How we win and how we oppose the racist No campaign is by flooding the airwaves with stories of First Nations strength, leadership and vision for the future.

By elevating the stories of those who are already driving solutions in their communities, we can articulate the bigger case for transformational change that is well within our reach.

But we all have an important role to play, and this is our collective responsibility. For allies, showing up in solidarity looks like hundreds of thousands of conversations, in communities right across the country, raising ambition and setting sights on the aspirations of First Nations people. **Together, we can reframe the narrative around where we're going as a nation - but it requires us to be brave enough to talk about the world that we want to live in.** The power of these conversations is what will see us through the next decade of change.

Together, we can supercharge pathways to truth-telling, treaties and self-determination by providing a political mandate to hold governments accountable and leave them with no choice but to follow our lead.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The gravity of this moment is bigger than the referendum itself, and what happens over the coming months will set the political agenda for decades to come.

A resounding, overwhelming Yes, where the referendum is won by a landslide majority, has the power to send a strong message and create the political mandate for transformational change.

However, a No vote, or even an underwhelming Yes that just scrapes over the line, validates the racist rhetoric and says the jury is out on First Nations people. This would take us back a generation in our advocacy and we cannot afford to go there.

To understand why this moment is so important, we must acknowledge where we've come from and who got us here. For many years we have been on the backfoot with conservative governments. In particular, the Northern Territory Intervention, brought about by the Howard government and maintained under Labor, did a lot of damage to our advocacy.

It's the strength and determination of First Nations people who have worked tirelessly to bring about change, advocating for community-led solutions to replace these racist and paternalistic policies.

Now our young people are rising up, carrying on the legacy of our Elders and have provided countless opportunities for non-First Nations people to get behind us and support our demands. Over the last decade we have seen significant growth of grassroots protest movements that have built the momentum for big change that is now within our grasp.

The important thing to understand in this referendum campaign, is that whilst it is a Yes or No vote, it is not a political preference and our research shows that people will vote based on their attitudes and beliefs about First Nations people. We need to lift the message up, beyond the Yes or No binary, to connect through shared values, to have room to move and persuade people. This is where we see alignment across different audiences.



People believe that when the vast majority of the country writes Yes, it creates a mandate for change. That's why we need messages that activate First Nations communities and the base, to persuade the middle who are influenced by what they hear the most.

It's critical that we drown out the racist, stigmatising narrative that speaks to dysfunction and is used to justify heavy-handed government control over First Nations communities. This rhetoric is really damaging and is only going to get worse unless we combat it. Allowing these narratives to go unchecked could take us back decades and leave the next generation fighting to claw back to where we are now.

When we hear these stories, and see the unfair media presence that is elevating them, we need to get louder. We need our stories of strength and our value proposition for a better future to be heard over and over and over again.

Our vision for transformational change has the power to connect with the hearts and minds of everyday people. Together we can lift up many different voices to sing from the same song sheet, sharing stories of First Nations strength and leadership.

Whilst the opposition will be selling fear, we'll be offering hope and a pathway to a better future. They'll be stoking division based on race, we'll be inviting everyone to come along on the journey with us.

WHERE THE NUMBERS ARE AT

- > Our sample data - collected in February 2023 - shows current numbers on the referendum are approximately **56% Yes** and **34% No**. Earlier research had support at 65%, which dropped earlier this year, coinciding with the Federal Liberal party campaign for No and 'culture war' media coverage around Invasion Day.
- > Our research found 42% of First Nations people have heard very little or nothing about it, and 24% would write No.
- > Students, carers and full time workers are more likely to write Yes than retirees and those not working. This demographic data helps us to better understand our base and persuadables.

THE GOOD NEWS IS:

72%*

of people agree that respecting First Nations knowledge, culture, stories and languages will help us move together towards a better future.

65%*

agree First Nations communities are strong and capable, and rich in culture and knowledge.

73%*

agree we must be honest about Australia's ugly history regarding Aboriginal people, including massacres, stolen land, stolen children and violent repression of language and culture.

64%*

agree First Nations communities and experts have come up with many solutions to improve the lives of First Nations people, and what we need now is for governments to act on these solutions.

WHY WE NEED TO WIN A RESOUNDING YES

More than half the population (56%) believe this moment is bigger than the referendum, and an opportunity to bring about more meaningful change. There are similar levels of support for treaties, representation, land rights and policies for equity and justice, and persuadables want to see a better future for everyone.

A win that carries an overwhelming majority would create a pathway to treaties, truth-telling, justice and much more. Our research shows that most people are already with us - they are ready to move away from the status quo and there are similar levels of support for the transformational changes that we're talking about. What happens next is up to all of us.

If we build a groundswell of public support and win a resounding Yes, then a wave of transformative change for First Nations justice will follow - because public momentum and demand gives governments a political mandate to act on bold policy reform.

A resounding Yes would open doors to the future we have been fighting for, whereas a No or an underwhelming Yes would see those same doors closed for decades to come.

This moment is about creating the foundations for what comes next beyond the referendum.

So it's time to get organised. The best way to overcome misinformation and algorithms pushing racist, fringe narratives, is to flood mainstream media, social media feeds, community meetings and living room yarns with stories of First Nations strength and ambition.

This messaging guide will help you do just that.





CHAPTER 2:

HOW TO WIN A NARRATIVE

Learn the theory and methodology behind the project. This chapter includes an overview of why messaging matters, advice on how narratives work and how to shift them, plus insights into our audience segmentation and research methodology. You'll also find a recap of the foundational Passing the Message Stick recommendations released in 2021, proven to build support for First Nations justice and self-determination.

WHY MESSAGING MATTERS

“ **A good message doesn't say what's popular, it makes popular what needs to be said**”

- Anat Shenker-Osorio, strategic communications and messaging expert and advisor to Passing the Message Stick

Messages define what is important and what we perceive to be true. The shared stories we tell have the power to generate change. The messages we communicate shape how others perceive events, causes and responsibilities.

When we get the right message, delivered by the right messengers, to the right audience, at the right time, we win campaigns. Over time, we also generate the sustained attitude shifts that mean the next campaign is easier to win. We build momentum for long-term change.

Campaign messages have a job to do. Your strategic objectives will dictate which messages you select for each communication. Strong messages empower our supporters and neutralise our opponents' arguments. If we want our messages to resonate we need to tap into what our audiences already believe to be true, and extend their thinking with new ideas or information. Challenging entrenched narratives and shifting public attitudes requires a deep, intentional approach to communicating.

Messages need to be adopted, repeated and amplified to deliver narrative change.

“ **[Narrative change] is much more than a campaign and goes far deeper than simply creating and using new messages. Narrative change happens through a wide variety of actions, experiences and settings that combine to shift the dominant story people receive, internalise, and act on, consciously and unconsciously.**”

- First Nations Development Institute, United States



HOW TO CHANGE A NARRATIVE

We change the narrative by all singing from the same song sheet – across First Nations organisations, civil society organisations, First Nations spokespeople and allies. Together we can flood conversations and social media with our aspirations for change, and in turn shape the national media narrative.

We need to avoid negating and repeating the opponent's frame and instead be more compelling than them. **We will know we are shifting the national narrative and mood when we hear people repeating our messages, and when people are more comfortable about engaging in a conversation.**



UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

A message is like a baton - it gets passed on by people.

The vast majority of the population are either with us, or persuadable - meaning they don't have strongly held beliefs about us.

When we share compelling, values-based messages with our base, they become motivated to share those messages with their persuadable friends, family and colleagues. This is how we reach and persuade the vast majority of the public.

The goal of our research is to find the best messages to energise our base, persuade the majority in the middle, and repel our opponents.

Our research methodology divided audiences into three broad categories - the base, persuadables and opponents. On the issue of the referendum, we found that First Nations people sit across these categories and are largely persuadable.

A note on the First Nations audiences

First Nations people are the most important audience in campaigns for transformative change for our people. On the principle of *nothing about us without us*, we need to invest significant resources in engaging our communities. Right now, First Nations people are largely persuadable on the referendum, with many undecided on how they'll vote. Almost half of all First Nations people have heard nothing or very little about the referendum on a Voice to Parliament.

We're also the most important audience because we're the most powerful messengers. Our research shows 2 in 3 non-First Nations voters will ask their First Nations friends, colleagues and neighbours how they should vote in the referendum.

Base

The base are people who strongly support First Nations self-determination and justice. The most important part of the base is us, First Nations people - although it's important to note not all First Nations people sit in the base on the issue of the referendum.

If we craft messages that resonate with the base, they are more likely to be shared and heard by persuadables.

Approximately 20% of people are in the base.

The base are more likely to include younger people, students, carers, full-time workers and women.

Base
20%

Persuadables

Persuadables are the majority of people in the middle who don't have firm views on First Nations people, or self-determination and justice. They toggle between conflicting ideas and support the ideas they hear most - in fact, our research tells us they agree that First Nations people have been treated fairly *and* unfairly.

Approximately 65% of people are persuadable.

The messages we use directly influence these people - so it's our job to craft messages that win their support.

When it comes to persuadables' views on the referendum - 61% are leaning towards a Yes vote, 28% are leaning No and 12% are undecided.*

Persuadables
65%

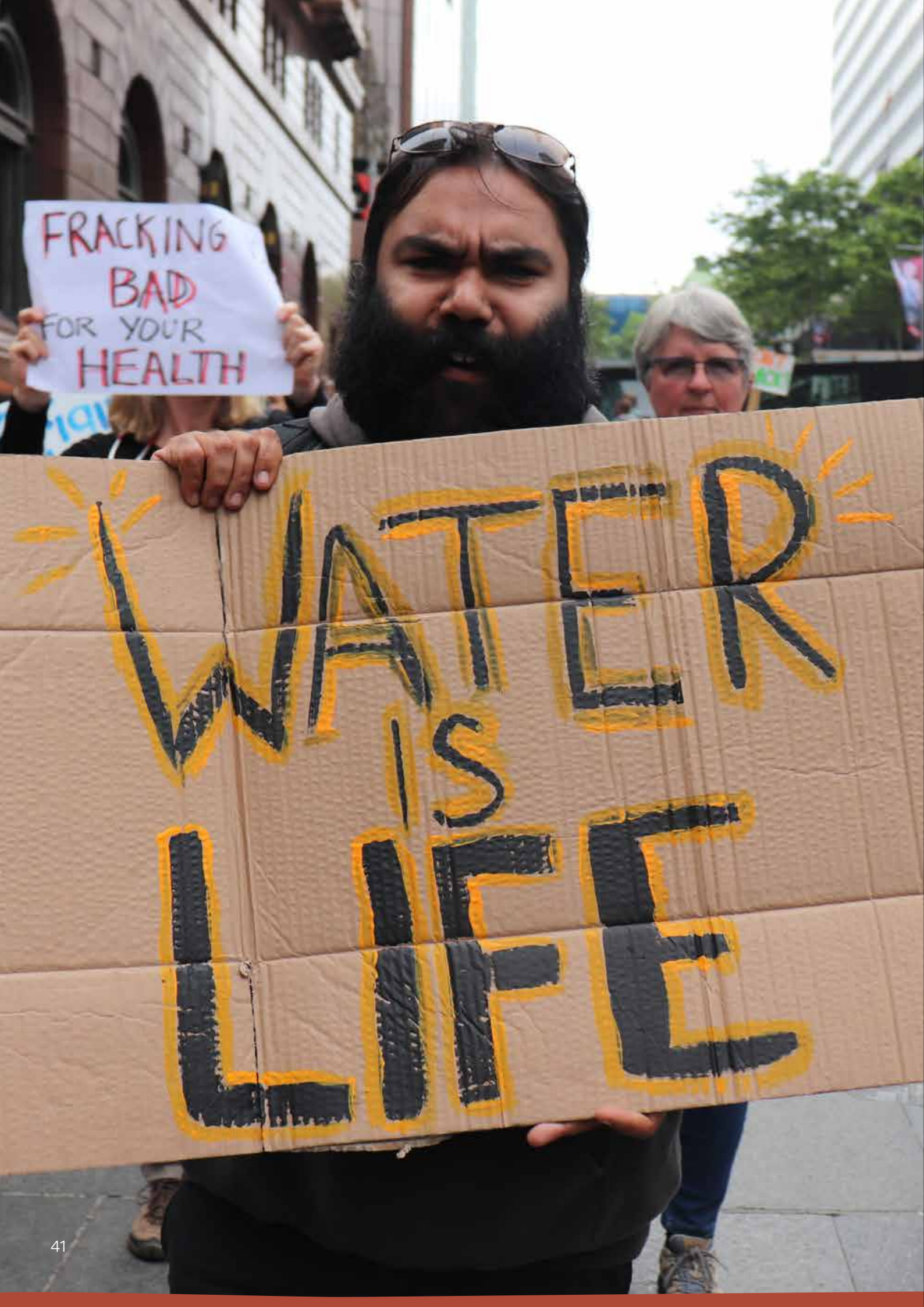
Opponents

Opponents are people who strongly oppose self-determination and justice. They will never support First Nations policy reform on the grounds of equity or justice, and we don't need them to.

Approximately 15% of people are opponents.

They are more likely to be older men and retirees.

Opponents
15%



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Language analysis

Qualitative research

Quantitative research

1. A thorough language analysis

The research began with a thorough language analysis. We conducted interviews and a survey of First Nations advocates and allies to understand our vision for transformative change in our own words, and how the referendum fits into it.

We followed this with an analysis of 1,500 phrases from First Nations organisations, spokespeople, media reporting, pop culture, social media, policy papers and academic reports.

We analysed the language patterns, frames and metaphors to give us an understanding of how we talk about ourselves and the solutions we have, how government and opponents talk about us, and the dominant national narratives shared about First Nations people.

This informed the next phase of our research - focus group conversations digging into dominant narratives to test responses across different audiences.

2. Qualitative research through focus groups

We conducted eight general population and seven First Nations focus groups between November 2022 and January 2023.

3X
First Nations base

2X
general population base
(testing opinions based on gender and geographic areas)

4X
First Nations persuadables
(family and friends of advocates)

5X
general population persuadables
(testing opinions based on gender and geographic areas)

1X
general population opponents

Each focus group ran for two hours, and we ensured a mix of regional, remote and metropolitan areas across different states, as well as diversity of ages and genders.

The focus groups helped us to test:

- > The beliefs our base, persuadables and opponents hold, and where First Nations audiences sit across these segments.
- > Alternatives to the status quo messages, which are typically framed in the deficit.
- > Ideas to bridge the difference in aspirations between our base and persuadables.
- > Barriers to gaining support

3. Quantitative research to test and find the strongest messages

We wrapped up the research with a quantitative survey. A representative sample of the population - 3,000 people, including First Nations - completed the survey.

The 'dial survey' gave us word-by-word data on the messages that resonated most strongly with our base, and performed best with persuadables, while repelling our opponents.



WHAT'S A FRAME, AND HOW CAN WE USE THEM TO WIN?

A frame is like a picture frame, it helps our audience focus on what we want them to focus on, and excludes or blocks ideas outside it.

For example, when you think of the word 'restaurant', things like food, cutlery, tables, chairs and diners fit into the 'frame', while things like an elephant or car don't fit. You'd be surprised or confused if an elephant or car suddenly appeared in a restaurant, and the same applies to our messages.



When we add something that doesn't 'belong' in a frame, it becomes difficult for the reader or listener to follow what's happening – and this waters down the effectiveness of our messages.

When we craft messages, we use 'frames' to explain issues in a certain way. This helps our audience to understand the problems, solutions and context, and see things the way we see them (ensuring we're on the same page, which helps to build support for our asks).

COMMON MESSAGING CHALLENGES

Deficit narratives

Deficit language like 'dysfunction', 'special treatment' and 'lack of capacity' fuels the opposition argument and weakens our messages.

Hedging language

Hedging language is cautious and vague, and undermines our confidence. It makes us seem untrustworthy at worst, and wishy-washy at best. It's the inclusion of unnecessary words like 'we seek to' or 'we aim to' through our messages. The good news is, hedging is easy to remove once we know what to look for, and makes our messages stronger and more concise. Remove hedging by asking yourself if every word is necessary, and if not, delete it.

Passive voice

Messages that are passive fail to name a villain (or agent) who is causing the problem. When we fail to point out who is causing the problem (e.g. a racist policing system, or X government minister), people assume we are the ones who cause the problem. Naming a specific person causing us harm is one of the most powerful ways to overcome passive and deficit language.

Negation

Negation is when we say what we're 'not', and we do this all the time when we rebut opposition messages. The problem is, people don't remember whether we say something is true or not, they just remember the association. For example, we say "our families are not dysfunctional" and people remember "families are dysfunctional". It's important we never negate the opposition frame, and instead speak from our power, strength, knowledge and capability.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

These are foundational principles proven to build widespread support for First Nations self-determination and justice. These are your 'go-to' and should underpin our messaging on all topics, including the referendum and beyond.

1. GROUND MESSAGES IN SHARED VALUES

Powerful values like fairness, taking care of one another, freedom, and knowing what's best for ourselves can build support for self-determination and justice. By crafting messages around a shared value, we bring audiences along, and show how the barriers we face violate widely-held values, like respect and equity.

2. RECLAIMING STRENGTH

Stories of strength and leadership build support for First Nations justice. Stories of our knowledge, skills and expertise help people to believe we're capable of making good decisions and support our demands for self-determination.

3. NAMING UNFAIR BARRIERS, BEING EXPLICIT ABOUT WHO CAUSES HARM AND WHY

We need to shine a light on who causes the problems we face, and why. This helps the audience to understand who is responsible for the problem, and understand it can be fixed. Base and persuadable voters agree governments have made mistakes in the past that have harmed First Nations communities, and resonate strongly with statements like "even sometimes well-meaning governments get it wrong".

4. COMBINE TRUTH AND ACTION

The strongest messages acknowledge truth-telling alongside a forward-focused vision for a better future. When we combine truth-telling with clear asks and solutions, we gain the support of both our community and persuadables. Messages that focus on injustice without solutions perform poorly with base and persuadables.

5. CREATE A COLLECTIVE 'WE'

Research shows First Nations people want self-determination, while the remainder of the base and persuadables want a united national identity. We can weave these ideals together by sharing a positive vision of our shared future.

6. EXPLAIN BIG CONCEPTS IN SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Many people don't understand concepts like self-determination, systemic racism, colonisation and equity. We need to put these terms in plain language and use metaphors to convey our messages. When we do, we get wide support.

7. NEVER NEGATE - DON'T REPEAT THE OPPONENT MESSAGE

Whenever we try to myth bust, or say the opponent's message is untrue, we're helping them by repeating their message. Don't engage in the opponent frame, instead, we need to speak from our strength, share our truth and combine with action.

CASE STUDY: MESSAGES FOR MARRIAGE EQUALITY

When the messaging on the United States marriage equality campaign shifted, public support grew 20% over a decade. They did this by changing the campaign frame from a rights frame to a frame of love, family and commitment.



FROM

TO

A rights and legal-centric frame - talking about the benefits of marriage and legal protections. This was not persuasive.

A frame of love, family and commitment - talking about marriage in the way that centred love and family, the way most people talk about marriage.

This is an example of shifting the narrative from policy and a rights-based frame (full of jargon and facts) to a values frame, like love, which everyone can relate to.

The benefit of shifting from a policy frame (which only a few people are experts on) to a values frame (which everyone is an expert on), is that you open the door to many more messengers, in this case both LGBTQIA+ people and allies.

Here in Australia, the marriage equality campaign tapped into two broad values:

- > Equality - all families are equal
- > Love - with the phrase: "love is love"

This enabled a positive, future-oriented campaign that anyone could pick up and share in their communities, and delivered an overwhelming majority of 62% in support. Importantly, people weren't just voting for the rights of LGBTQIA+ people to marry, they were also demonstrating support for the community more broadly, especially for gay and lesbian people, recognising more work is needed for policy change for trans and gender-diverse people.

The majority Yes vote created a mandate for further change, significantly shifted the public discourse, and forced decision-makers to act in line with how their electorate had voted, even when they didn't want to.

This provides valuable guidance for the upcoming referendum. Learning from marriage equality, we must:

- > Shift to values-based messaging and avoid legalistic and policy detail in our public narratives.
- > Create a positive, future-oriented campaign, whilst also acknowledging the truth.
- > Lead with the voices of people most impacted, supported by allies.
- > Build the case for what comes beyond the referendum, and build a mandate for it during the campaign.

The Commons Library has pulled together a range of resources drawing on the lessons of marriage equality campaigns here and overseas - [see more here](#).

CHAPTER 3:

MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

Read this for practical recommendations to apply to your own campaign messaging, plus advice on framing, message structure and how to incorporate truth-telling.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

When writing messages to build support for transformative change, and winning a resounding Yes, we recommend you include:

1. SHARED VALUES

2. CLEAR VISION

3. CREDIBLE THEORY OF CHANGE

4. FIRST NATIONS STRENGTH AND LEADERSHIP

5. A CLEAR SEQUENCE – FIRST WE VOTE FOR A REPRESENTATIVE BODY, THEN WE DECIDE THE MODEL

1. SHARED VALUES

Values are how we build alignment across audiences, helping us reach people with different backgrounds, experiences and political persuasions. The research shows when we share values like equity, listening, respect and self-determination, not only are people more likely to support us, but their support stays strong in the face of the racist ‘No’ messages.

Our messages are most effective when we start with a shared value (see the section on proven message structure below). We want to make the value something we can all relate to, not just special for us, for example:

- > “When we listen to each other and work together, we all benefit”
- > “We’re all better off when we’re treated with respect, regardless of our skin colour, income or where we live”.

Values bring us together, and being a shared life experience, they’re something everyone is an expert on. This means people will be more confident sharing our messages. Regardless of someone’s expertise when it comes to facts and figures, they’ll be able to talk from what ‘feels right’. **This is how we can shift millions of people into advocates.**

Messaging expert and collaborator, Anat Shenker-Osorio, often says “taking your policy out in public is embarrassing” - because policy level detail is best left to the policy experts. The general public, on the other hand, will resonate much more with the values behind an idea. When you lead with ‘the head’ and facts, it is more likely to create a debate. If you lead with ‘the heart’ and values, you’ll find more common ground and can lay the groundwork for a respectful, strengths-based conversation that can move people across political perspectives.

Listening, respect and equity are three values that were consistently strong in our research – but there are many others you can tap into including self-determination, justice, empathy and inclusion.

See page 73 for an example message grounded in equity. Read on for more about the values of listening and respect.

Listening

Our base and persuadables overwhelmingly agree that listening to First Nations people when making laws and policies that impact them will lead to better laws and policies.

Listening is a value that's closely linked to respect and inclusion, as well as the frame 'community knows best'. What is especially useful about this value is that it makes sense listening will lead to meaningful improvements in peoples' lives.

What this could look like in your messaging is saying things like:

- > ***"We should all have our say - especially in decisions that impact us."***
- > ***"We can make better laws and policies by listening to what First Nations people have to say about things that impact them."***
- > ***"We can have a fairer and better future when First Nations people have a seat at the table and a greater say in their future."***

Values are best communicated when they are shared, and this is true for listening. One of the most powerful messages we found was the idea that policies are better when the people impacted shape them. The following message was very effective in building support of persuadables:

"Just as laws impacting country people, older people or people with disability, will be better if we hear what they think – it is common sense to hear what First Nations people have to say when making laws and policies that impact them."



Respect

The value of respect is very powerful and it resonates strongly with persuadables.

This idea of respect can extend not just to individual people, but also to our culture, history and knowledge. Here are two messages that performed well in our research, both centred around the value of respect:

- "Recognising and respecting Aboriginal peoples' knowledge, cultures, stories and languages will help us move together towards a better future".
- "Just as New Zealand has embraced Māori culture, we can create a future where we respect and value First Nations people and take pride in the oldest living culture in the world."

Some other ways you can bring respect into your messages include:

- > ***"Writing Yes in the referendum is a way for me to say I respect and value First Nations people and culture."***
- > ***"Over the next decade, we can work together to leave future generations more united, where First Nations people are respected, listened to and treated with dignity."***
- > ***"Writing Yes says we're ready to respect First Nations people and hear their perspectives."***
- > ***"Writing Yes is a way for all of us to say that we care what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people think, we respect their culture and traditions, and we believe that they are the right people to decide what is best for their future."***

EMBRACE

- > "Over the next decade, we can work together to leave future generations more united, where First Nations people are respected, listened to and treated with dignity."
- > "Writing Yes says we respect First Nations people and want to hear First Nations perspectives."
- > "Yes: to listen and respect."

REPLACE

- > "This will add more bureaucracy and make it harder for rural and regional communities to close the gap."
- > "Creating a separate race-based representative body will divide us."

WHY

Starting with shared values like equity, listening, respect and self-determination establishes shared common ground with our audiences. They are then more likely to support us and reject racist No messages.

2. VISION

More than half the population (56%) believe this moment is bigger than the referendum, and an opportunity to bring about more meaningful change. There are similar levels of support for treaties, representation, land rights and policies for equity and justice, and persuadables want to see a better future for everyone.

Support for these types of transformative policies jumps 10% when we connect our asks to solutions and bigger vision.

Here are some examples of how you can include vision in your messages:

- > ***“This is an important step towards a fairer society and meaningful improvements in the quality of life for First Nations people.”***
- > ***“If a clear majority write Yes in the referendum, we will send a strong message that we want justice, equality and a better and fairer future for First Nations people.”***
- > ***“We can have a fairer and better future when Aboriginal people have a seat at the table, to deliver meaningful outcomes in health, housing, land management and more.”***
- > ***“We can work together to create a future where First Nations people are respected, listened to and treated with dignity, and future generations are more united.”***

EMBRACE	REPLACE	WHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Write Yes to move forward together.” > “We have the opportunity to build support for solutions First Nations communities have been calling for for decades like treaties, truth-telling, land rights and representation.” > “Just like New Zealand has embraced Māori culture, we can create a future where we respect and value Aboriginal people and take pride in the oldest living culture in the world.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “This is just a small and insignificant change that won’t mean much.” > “Poverty, disadvantage and despair will only be fixed through economic participation.” > “This will drive a wedge through our culture by dividing Australians based on race. Special treatment for First Nations people won’t solve our problems.” 	<p>The referendum discussion provides an opportunity to build momentum for transformational, meaningful change.</p> <p>We can use this moment to build ambition for long-term power shifts and our research shows audiences are receptive to a long-term vision.</p>

Yes, and...

Another effective way of building ambition into messages is to use the “Yes, and...” framework. “Yes, and...” is a simple way of connecting the moment we’re in (the referendum) with our bigger vision for what comes next.

Here’s an example:

- > ***“I’m supporting Yes in the referendum, and transformative change beyond it, including treaties, truth-telling, land back and stopping deaths in custody.”***

EMBRACE	REPLACE	WHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Write Yes in the referendum.” > “Australians are saying Yes to First Nations people having the right to decide what’s best for our future.” > “Write Yes to build widespread momentum for transformative change.” > “We are saying ‘Yes’ to transformative change, ‘Yes’ to treaties, ‘Yes’ to truth-telling, ‘Yes’ to ending black deaths in custody and ‘Yes’ to justice.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Vote for the Voice.” 	<p>‘Yes’ represents our asks for transformative change far beyond the referendum. On the other hand, ‘the Voice’ brings up many questions, including who will be represented and how it will work.</p>



3. CREDIBLE THEORY OF CHANGE

One of the most important ingredients for a persuasive message is a **credible theory of change**. A theory of change is a story of how we can get from where we are to where we want to be.

A simple formula for writing a theory of change is: **If** we do this, **then** this will happen (better outcome), **because** (explaining our reasoning).

IF → **THEN** → **BECAUSE**

To be shared widely, a theory of change must have two key ingredients:

1. **It must be credible** – so when you share it with other people they believe it and want to support it.
2. **It must be compelling** – it needs to be inspiring and get people motivated to act, so they will share it, volunteer their time and make it happen.

Persuadables also resonate with theories of change that talked about ‘a step in the right direction’.

Our theory of change

“If we build a groundswell of public support and win a resounding Yes, then a wave of transformative change for First Nations justice will follow – because public momentum and demand gives governments a political mandate to act on bold policy reform.”

1. Credible

Our theory of change needs to be believable. One of the challenges when talking about constitutional recognition is that it doesn't make logical sense that changing a 100+ year old document will change peoples' lives. A lot of people are sceptical that symbolism will create meaningful outcomes, and readily point to examples like Kevin Rudd's Apology to Stolen Generations, and the record number of children still being taken away today.

To make our messages credible we need to talk about the tangible outcomes that will come from an elected representative body or lift our story to a bigger vision for change.

An example of a credible theory of change talking about specific outcomes is:

- > ***"If First Nations communities are represented in shaping national policies, then there'll be better outcomes in housing, health and more, because we know what's best for our communities."***

This is a credible theory of change, particularly with persuadables. It's common sense that policies will be better when the people most impacted shape them (be they First Nations people, people with disability, regional people), so it makes a very believable theory of change.

2. Compelling

Whilst the message above is credible and compelling to persuadables, it's not the most compelling message for the base - they want to see transformative change. Messages that combined credibility with a compelling and visionary theory of change really inspired our communities and allies.

The most compelling theory of change that we found in our research was:

"If the overwhelming majority of people write Yes, then we can create a wave of transformative policy changes - like treaties, land rights and equity - because of the momentum and the political mandate of voting together."

Here's an example of a different structure for a theory of change:

- > ***"Most people are with us and ready to show their support, because of the hard work of our Elders and communities. When we turn this momentum for change into a resounding Yes vote, much more will be possible."***

Persudables also resonated with the history of the marriage equality survey as evidence that things do change when the majority write Yes. Here's what we tested:

"If an overwhelming majority of people write Yes in the upcoming referendum, governments will be forced to enact the policies that First Nations people have been calling for. Just like with marriage equality, governments will be compelled to represent their electorates."

These are all more compelling to our base because they demonstrate the referendum is a step in the right direction to enabling the momentum required to create a wave of transformative changes. **Part of what makes these so credible is that it moves the hero of the story from the government to the general public.** Because there is a general mistrust of governments around First Nations policy-making, especially in our communities, people are more hopeful and believe it more when the change comes from the people.

People generally agree that the mood has significantly shifted in the general public in the last ten years. People are more open to listening, celebrating and learning about culture, and wanting things to change. When we bring everyday people into the story, not only is it more believable, but it encourages anyone who hears this message to get others on board and spread positive messages for Yes.



Here's a people-centred version of the meaningful outcomes message:

- > ***“If the overwhelming majority of people write Yes in the referendum, we’ll create pressure on the government to listen to First Nations people and deliver policies that create meaningful outcomes.”***

We found a number of other messages that have strong theories of change:

“Every representative body for First Nations people in the past has been torn up by subsequent governments who didn’t like what they were saying. When the majority of us write Yes in the referendum, we can create a permanent representative body that will represent communities and can say what needs to be said.”

“When we all vote to bring First Nations culture and knowledge into the centre of our democracy, we take an important step towards being a country, like New Zealand, who respects and values First Nations people and culture.”

“When First Nations knowledge has to be considered in policy-making, we have an opportunity to create climate policies that protect Country for future generations, because First Nations people are experts in land management and biodiversity.”

“If the majority of people vote No, then the changes our communities have been fighting for for decades will be taken off the table, and it will take our advocacy back a generation.”

Include ‘a step in the right direction’

One of our challenges is that people don’t trust the government to listen, and so wonder whether a Voice to Parliament will actually be meaningful.

We therefore need to be careful not to oversell or undersell the tangible outcomes from a Voice to Parliament. Our research shows that when you tell people “vote for a Voice for Parliament to create a better future for First Nations people”, they don’t believe it. You need to talk more about the tangible outcomes in housing, health, education or issues impacting people’s lives.

On the other hand, if you undersell it and call it an advisory body, then people think it’s a ‘toothless tiger’ and worry that it is meaningless. That is why we recommend calling it a representative body, and speaking to the outcomes that come from greater representation.

One way to help people understand how this relatively small change of a Voice to Parliament can help us get to a better future, is to say:

- > ***“Writing Yes won’t change everything, but it’s a step in the right direction”.***

Combining truth and action, this message can acknowledge it’s not everything, but it’s something we can build on.

EMBRACE	REPLACE	WHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Writing Yes won’t change everything. But it’s definitely a step in the right direction to win the bigger changes we’ve been asking for.” > “When the overwhelming majority of people write Yes in the referendum, we’ll create pressure on the government to listen to the voices of First Nations people, and deliver policies that create meaningful outcomes.” > “We know our communities best. So when we have a say over policies that impact us, they work better for us.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Voice is the first step.” > “The Voice will only be an advisory body. Parliament will have the final say.” > “The Voice will only be a small change.” > “The Voice will be a huge change.” > “It is impossible to close the gap on life expectancy, on incarceration, on mental health issues our people face.” 	<p>Our theory of change says how we can get from where we are to where we want to be. It needs to be clear, inspiring and believable, neither overselling nor underselling.</p> <p>To acknowledge the work of all our Elders and campaigners over many years, it’s also important to say “a step in the right direction” or “the next step” rather than “the first step”.</p> <p>If we say the Voice to Parliament will be small, people hear ‘weakness’ and ‘toothless tiger’, and if we say it will be a huge change, people may not feel ready for it.</p>

4. CENTRE FIRST NATIONS STRENGTH AND LEADERSHIP

Our research found that attitudes towards First Nations people is a big driver of voting intention. Most people feel genuinely positive towards our people and culture, they recognise we have been unfairly treated and want to see meaningful improvements to our lives.

There is, however, a small minority, our opponents, who remain quite hostile to us. Their strategy is to cast us as the problem, with racist stories of dysfunction and deficit. Many people have never met a First Nations person, so stigma, stereotypes and stories in the media shape their perspectives.

Our research shows persuadables are more supportive of us when they hear messages of strength, optimism and capability.

Because the referendum is ultimately a vote about how people perceive us – we need to flood the airwaves and conversations with stories of our strength, leadership and solutions.

Some of the messages about strength and leadership that tested well include:

“This is an important step towards a fairer society and meaningful improvements in the quality of life for First Nations people.”

“If a clear majority write Yes in the referendum, we will send a strong message that we want justice, equality and a better and fairer future for First Nations people.”

“Just as New Zealand has embraced Māori culture, we can create a future where we respect and value First Nations people and take pride in the oldest living culture in the world.”

We must lead a respectful debate

Overwhelmingly people accept that First Nations communities are diverse with varied perspectives. Persuadables are very understanding of the idea that some First Nations people don't want a Voice to Parliament because they are advocating for more ambitious policy changes.

When you attack or undermine First Nations people with a different perspective, you do two things, you feed into the idea of our dysfunction, and you polarise our community into defensive positions.

We need space for respectful conversations and debate, so that everyone can be informed in making the right decision for them and their community. To do this, we must avoid attacking First Nations people.

EMBRACE	REPLACE	WHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Listen to our strength, knowledge and expertise.” > “Over many decades Aboriginal communities have come up with solutions to improve the lives of Aboriginal people. What we need now is for governments to act on these solutions.” > “Right across Australia there are examples where Aboriginal health, housing, education and justice are significantly improving. These programs are most successful when they are created, run and controlled by Aboriginal people who have the cultural knowledge and hands on experience of what works best.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > “Our communities are damaged and we need help.” 	<p>We have the right to have power and control over our own lives. Negative, deficit language undermines strength, so we must avoid including it in our messages.</p>

5. A CLEAR SEQUENCE – FIRST WE VOTE FOR A REPRESENTATIVE BODY, THEN WE DECIDE THE MODEL

The First Nations’ Referendum Working Group, made up of representatives from First Nations communities, has said the Voice must be representative of communities, including remote communities, and chosen by First Nations people. The Government has agreed to this.

This message is especially important when talking to First Nations audiences.

Our communities and persuadable audiences are very committed to seeing that the model is reflective of the diversity of our Nations, regionally representative and who is elected is decided by our communities. In fact, 73% of persuadables believe that the Voice must be genuinely representative of the diversity of First Nations communities across the country (compared with only 5% disagree).

Talking about details of the model and policy only strengthens the opposition’s messaging (“we don’t have the details”) and creates more confusion. Instead, we can share details about how **we make sure the model is representative.**

Here’s how:

STEP 1.

First, we vote – everyone will vote on the principle of whether we should have a representative body.

STEP 2.

Second, there’ll be a consultation process to decide the model – the government has committed to a consultation process with First Nations communities after the referendum. It’s up to us to make sure the body is truly representative.

EMBRACE

- > “First, we all vote on the principle of the matter – then with a mandate for Yes, we move to a thorough consultation process with First Nations communities to make sure the model is regionally representative. It doesn’t make sense to conduct a consultation process without the mandate from the Australian community first.”
- > “We want something that will last, that won’t get torn down by politicians who come and go.”

REPLACE

- > “Don’t worry about the detail, the Voice is harmless.”
- > “The detail will be revealed in due course.”
- > “Advisory body”, “mechanism.”
- > “Double majority.”
- > “Enshrine in the Constitution.”

WHY

Language like ‘advisory body,’ ‘mechanism,’ ‘double majority’ and ‘enshrining in the constitution’ are hard for public audiences to grasp. Instead of talking about technical details, be clear about the two-step process to ensure the model properly represents First Nations people.

Saying the detail will be revealed in due course suggests details are being withheld, or hidden, from the public.



CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE

When we all sing from the same song sheet, and are powerful in our voice, story and messages, we can win majority support for our demands.

When our narratives centre our strength and leadership, are grounded in our tested frames, and follow the proven messaging structure, our messages will be shared widely by the base, who in turn, persuade the middle. Together, this is how we shift public discourse and bring the majority of people to support our asks.

In addition to the messaging recommendations, here are some further considerations on how to craft a message:

Understand the central proposition

Use the proven messaging structure

Embrace frames such as momentum, equity and community knows best

Combine truth-telling with action

Understand First Nations audiences

PROVEN MESSAGING STRUCTURE

Shaping stories with this proven structure helps to ground messages in strength, draw attention to the institutions and people who cause us harm, share our expert solutions and paint the picture of how they help realise a better future for all of us.

Here's an example template you can follow to help craft effective messages:

Start with a shared **VALUE** - these typically appeal to all audiences. Using a common sense statement that most people agree with is a strong way to open.

Then describe the **VILLAIN** who causes us harm - typically an institution or government policy. Be as specific as possible - who is involved, what are they doing, and what's their motive?

Next, share your **VICTORY**, or a clear ask and solution. We know what's best for our communities, so ground your victory in our strength, expertise and capability.

Close with a positive **VISION**, painting a picture of a better future for everyone. This provides hope to our base and persuadables who genuinely want things to be better for First Nations people, in a society that respects and values everyone.

An example of the VVVV structure in action

VALUE

"We can have a fairer and better future when First Nations people have a seat at the table and a greater say in their future.

VILLAIN

But all too often governments have ignored First Nations people when making important decisions about them.

VICTORY

Communities themselves are best placed to understand and respond to the challenges and opportunities before them.

VISION

If a majority of people write Yes in the referendum, the government will be accountable to the public to act on the advice of First Nations people."

A CENTRAL PROPOSITION

Good campaigns are built around a single proposition – an overarching message that is repeated over and over in communication materials and conversations. A single proposition must be easy to understand, emotionally compelling and morally strong. It is best when it rejects the opposition’s message.

> **“Let’s listen” is an example of a strong proposition.**

Everyone can understand the simple idea that if you listen to the people most impacted, before you make decisions, you’ll get better outcomes.

It is an obvious truism because it exists in many aspects of real life. You listen to your kids before buying their birthday present. The local council should listen to the community before deciding if they’ll build a library or a football field.

No one (except the opponents) can disagree with the statement: “we will make better laws and policies about First Nations people when we listen first”. And when opponents disagree, they sound ridiculous: “no, let’s not listen to First Nations people”.

Here’s how the “Let’s listen” proposition could guide your communications:

- > **“Let’s listen to First Nations people”**
- > **“Yes, let’s listen”**
- > **“Yes: listen and respect”**
- > **“Do you think we should listen to First Nations people before policies are made that impact them?”**

FRAMES TO EMBRACE

1. Momentum

The frame that resonated most with our communities and the base, and also tested well with persuadables, is the idea that the vast majority of people writing Yes in the referendum will create momentum for broader transformative change beyond the referendum.

“In our democracy, the voting public has the final say and the Government must respect the will of the people.

First Nations people have been calling for change for decades but historically, governments only act if they feel pressure from voters.

With a resounding Yes vote in the referendum, we will have the momentum for big reforms and could see huge changes including treaties, land rights, truth-telling and justice.

Over the next decade, we can work together to leave future generations more united, where First Nations people are respected, listened to and treated with dignity.”

The idea of **social proofing** - that the majority of people support **First Nations justice** - is very powerful and adds authority to a momentum message.

For example:

- > **“Over the next decade we could see huge changes in First Nations justice – from treaties, to representation, land back, environment, equity and justice. The majority of people are with us and ready to show their support, because of the hard work of our Elders and communities. When we turn this momentum for change into a resounding Yes vote, much more will be possible.”**

2. Equity

One of the most promising findings is how strongly Australians believe in the value of equity. Equity is the idea that people should have what they need to thrive - and nobody, regardless of income, race, gender, or geography, should be left behind.

The idea of equity is deeply ingrained. Persuadables believe that being locked out of democracy and decision-making is an inequity that should be fixed, making this a strong frame to embrace in our messaging.

The equity frame is a fundamental building block for our movement to win a resounding Yes, and transformative change beyond it.

Here's an example of a message in the equity frame:

“Everyone should be treated fairly and equally respected. We should all have our say - especially in decisions that impact us.

But First Nations people are not treated fairly with decisions often being made top down by governments without considering their ideas and perspective.

Writing Yes in the referendum can help to make our system fairer so that everyone has a chance to be heard.

This is an important step towards a society that respects First Nations people and cultures and leads to meaningful improvements in the quality of life for First Nations people.”

3. Community knows best

We know what's best for our communities, and this frame allows us to lead with the strength, knowledge and leadership of our communities. People strongly support the idea that when people who are most impacted have a say, you get better outcomes, so lean into it:

“People are better off when they are free to set their own course.

Yet the government keeps locking us out of decisions and forcing their policies on us, insisting they know what's best for Aboriginal people.

But we know what our communities need. 40 years ago, when government health services were failing us badly, we took the driver's seat and set up Australia's first community health centres. Today, our services are the best in the country and the government models their health, legal aid and childcare systems on ours.

Our people are strong and resilient and when we are free to choose our own path, the whole country benefits.”



4. First Nations-led solutions

Persuadables strongly support First Nations-led solutions, they respect the knowledge and expertise of First Nations communities, and agree that policies are most effective if they're shaped by the people they affect. For example, the majority of persuadables agree that First Nations people have very specific knowledge and expertise (e.g. fire and environmental management), and showed respect and support for their contribution to policy solutions.

Here's an example message using the solutions frame:

“When we listen to each other, share our knowledge and work together, we all benefit. Aboriginal people have a valuable contribution to make on land and fire management and much more.

But governments have often refused to hear or take up this advice.

Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to say that we want to hear the wisdom of the oldest living culture on earth. We can all benefit when we listen to the knowledge of Aboriginal communities.

We can have a fairer and better future, when we include First Nations expertise in our democratic process.”

5. Who we could be as a nation

Persuadables are motivated by respect for First Nations culture, with the majority agreeing treaties would help create a united national identity that respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture.

One of the things the base and persuadables want most is to create a better future, where we are more equal and united and we respect and value First Nations people and cultures as an integral part of our society.

Most people agree that recognising and respecting First Nations knowledge, culture, stories and languages will help us move together towards a better future.

Messages that paint a picture of our aspiration to be a better nation, one that celebrates and respects First Nations people as the oldest continuing culture on earth, are proven to build support amongst persuadables.

This is particularly true when we bring in the comparison to Aotearoa (New Zealand). People can plainly see they are better at respecting, valuing and celebrating Māori culture and communities, than we are at respecting First Nations here, and it's something people aspire to.

“We want a country that values all people, whether they have been here five years, five generations or five thousand generations.

But too often First Nations people have been ignored when we discuss who we are and what sort of country we want to be.

Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to show that we value First Nations people and cultures and want to hear their perspectives.

Just as New Zealand has embraced Māori culture, we can create a future where we respect and value Aboriginal people and take pride in the oldest living culture in the world.”

6. Representation

Representation and constitutional recognition are two frames being used to talk about the referendum.

Our research shows representation is more meaningful than constitutional recognition, which many First Nations people reject as only symbolic change. Using constitutional recognition also puts the author of the story as Australia, rather than our communities, and in doing so, makes invisible our aspirations like truth-telling, treaties, equity, land rights and representation.

EMBRACE: REPRESENTATION

What's inside the frame?:

- > Decision-making
- > First Nations strengths
- > We know what's best for our communities
- > We choose representatives from our communities
- > Parliament listens and acts on our advice and demands

What's outside the frame?:

- > Racist ideas of deficit and dysfunction

REPLACE: CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

What's inside the frame?:

- > Symbolism
- > 100+ year old document
- > Australia's founding document
- > Colonialism and history in a positive light

What's outside the frame?:

- > Equity and justice
- > Aspirations of our communities
- > Meaningful outcomes
- > Truth-telling our about history
- > First Nations people, culture and communities

HOW TO DO TRUTH-TELLING

Truth-telling is a critical element that underpins all of our campaigns, and must be done right. We need to use honesty and stories of healing to pair together the full impact of the truth, with the ‘action’ or better future we want to create. Mentioning “brutal atrocities” in passing and moving on, without an action or ask, isn’t helpful.

Here’s an example of how to pair truth-telling with action to create a better future:

“We must be honest about Australia’s ugly history regarding Aboriginal people including massacres, stolen land, stolen children and violent repression of language and culture so we can work together and focus on building a better and fairer future for everyone.”

If we have limited space to go into detail (such as a social media post), it works well for base and persuadables to allude to hard truths using language like:

- ***“We need to have a true and honest conversation about our past, so we can build a better future together”.***

EMBRACE

- “We must be honest about Australia’s ugly history regarding Aboriginal people including massacres, stolen land, stolen children and violent repression of language and culture **so we can work together and focus on building a better and fairer future for everyone.**”
- “It is important to be honest, to own up to mistakes we’ve made and hurt we’ve caused so we can build trust and make amends. It is time to begin a process of healing with a sincere and truthful conversation about how Aboriginal people have been treated and what has been taken from them. When we face the truth with open hearts we can build a better future together for us all.”

REPLACE

- Long lists of negative statistics.
- Descriptions of our brutal history and present policies without an action or ask.

WHY

Pairing truth with action helps non-First Nations people move past guilt to action. It’s also consistent with the First Nations strengths frame. If we only talk about the violence and dispossession that has been done to First Nations people, it’s too easy for audiences to hear deficit instead of strength.



UNDERSTANDING FIRST NATIONS AUDIENCES

In our research, we found many First Nations people are undecided about how they'll vote, and want to have conversations in their communities and with other First Nations people.

The main concerns that came up were:

- 1. Questions about the representative body and making sure it is truly representative** of the diversity of communities and elected or selected through communities. There was significant misinformation that the proposal is to lift Tony Abbott's hand-selected 'advisory body' into the constitution. The most important information to share is:
 - > The model is not a done deal. The sequence of events is first people will vote in the referendum on the principle of a permanent representative body, and then there will be a consultation period with First Nations communities to decide the best model.
 - > The government has agreed to the First Nations Referendum Working Group's principles, including that representatives will be elected by First Nations people and will be regionally representative, including remote communities.
- 2. The advisory nature of the body – and will it make a difference.** There are concerns that the body doesn't have any direct decision-making powers, and can only advise the government on policies. Some of the information that is useful to share is:
 - > There have been five national representative bodies, some of which have been highly effective, but have been wound up when the government of the day doesn't support what they say.
 - > The representatives will be people elected by and accountable to communities, who can't have their funding cut when they speak truth to power.

3. Mistrust of government – there is a long history of reasons not to trust governments, even when they say they are acting in our interests. The idea of putting more faith in millions of people voting together in support of justice could lead to more change was really powerful. This included conversations like:

- > We have a whole range of aspirations our communities have been calling for, and the act of millions of people writing Yes in a referendum, this year could really accelerate the change we want to see over the coming years.

One of the other concerns that First Nations audiences had is that this could lead to people feeling like all wrongs are righted, and that the conversation skims over historical and current wrongs, and focus on a positive future, trivialising the impacts of invasion and colonisation.

It is true, the base and persuadables do want to focus on a better, more united future. But all audiences are comfortable with combining strong truth messages with building a better future together.

We're the best messengers

Our research shows us that the most persuasive messengers on First Nations justice issues are First Nations people. Local leaders who already have established reputations are often more convincing within their local communities than spokespeople from another city or state. For each audience you want to reach and engage, think about who they are likely to find credible and listen to.

More than two thirds of voters surveyed told us “I'd like to hear the views of Aboriginal people before I vote in the referendum”.



CHAPTER 4:

CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

A practical toolkit to guide your conversations about transformative change on First Nations. justice, now and beyond the referendum.

THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONS TO BUILD OUR MOVEMENT FOR FIRST NATIONS JUSTICE, NOW AND BEYOND THE REFERENDUM

As organisers, activists and changemakers, conversations are a powerful tool to build connections, share information and give people the opportunity to get involved. Through conversations, we build relationships, encourage action in our local communities and in turn, we build the power of our movements for justice.

Conversations about setting an agenda for transformative change on First Nations justice require time, truth-telling, respectful listening and sharing.

We win when we lift the conversation up to a place where most people agree and can speak with confidence – to shared vision and values like equity and respect, and who we want to be as a nation.

Leaning in to shared values, empathy, our strengths and our solutions is the best way to approach a conversation, because this will ultimately be a referendum on how people see us, as First Nations people, and whether they believe things need to change.

We've developed this toolkit based on our message research findings on what works with both First Nations and non-First Nations audiences.



Tips for persuasive conversations

Before you have any conversation, it's important to set clear communications goals. Are you trying to engage your audience on this issue? Do you want to listen to their vision for change? Are you trying to recruit people to attend an upcoming event?

We don't need to cover every element of the campaign narrative in every conversation. However, we should be clear beforehand about what we want each specific conversation to communicate.

To engage and persuade audiences on any issue, we must engage their hearts and minds and motivate them to take action. **In each conversation, try to use a combination of thinking, feeling and action messages (see below for examples).**

Your task is to ask questions, listen with empathy, share your story and experiences (why you think, feel and act the way you do), and thank them for raising their questions and concerns.

By doing this, you open up space for an honest conversation where you can build connections, listen without judgement, share your vision for the future and help the other person see where they fit, what they can do and get them to commit to taking action.



FRAMEWORKS OF A PERSUASIVE CONVERSATION

The Four C's

The Four C's provide a framework to meaningfully engage with others and have persuasive conversations that lead to action. This framework can be used in conversations on any issue.

1. Connection

Let the person know who you are, why you care about this issue, and ask them why they care about it too. The best types of conversations build connection in a way that finds common ground through shared values and experiences. For example: *"Hi, I'm having conversation about the upcoming referendum, because I care about First Nations justice."*

2. Context

This is your chance to briefly share background information on the issue and explain how the action you're taking is important. Be honest about the challenges, but also the opportunities and hopes too. You also want to hear from them about their context eg. have they been involved before and if so, how? Ask questions to draw out how they feel, any questions they have and what their vision is for the future.

3. Commitment

Ask the person to take a particular action, this builds their commitment to the cause and gives them something meaningful to do. Be specific about the date, time, and place. For example: *"Can we count on you to join us at _____?"* or *"Will you join me in doing _____?"* or *"Can you commit to having 5 conversations with your family and friends by the end of the month?"*

- If they say yes, move on to the catapult.
- If they say no or are unsure, remember there are many reasons why people might be hesitant. If appropriate, go back to building connection by asking questions, as they might have important questions or concerns, or they might not be sure about the theory of change and how that particular action is going to make a difference.

4. Catapult

Think about the catapult as a springboard to more, whereby you increase their commitment and the chances of them following through by asking them to take on an additional role or responsibility and have a plan for how to get there. Here are some examples: *"Who in your family and friends can you talk to about the upcoming referendum?"* or *"Can you bring a friend to the upcoming event?"*

Following up with people afterwards, to check in about how they went with the action they committed to, is a great way to strengthen relationships, address any barriers that may have arisen, ensure we are doing what we say we're going to do and in turn, build the power of our movements for long-term change.



Thinking, Feeling, Action

Another framework to guide persuasive conversations is the Thinking, Feeling, Action structure – which helps to lift conversations out of the detail and into the shared experience and action.

MESSAGE	WHAT'S INCLUDED	EXAMPLE
Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Facts and figures > Informational narratives 	<p><i>“First, we vote - everyone will vote on the principle of whether we should have a representative body, and then we decide the model. The government has expressed an intention to lead a thorough consultation process with First Nations communities to develop a truly representative body. We must demand this and hold them accountable.”</i></p>
Feeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Vision > Stories and lived expertise > Emotion > Inspiration and ambition 	<p><i>“Right now, we have an opportunity to say enough is enough. We respect First Nations people and we believe that they are the right people to decide what is best for their future. Together we can say ‘Yes’ to transformative change, ‘Yes’ to treaties, ‘Yes’ to truth-telling, ‘Yes’ to ending black deaths in custody and ‘Yes’ to justice. Together, we can build momentum for transformative change.”</i></p>
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Specific behaviours > Tangible actions 	<p><i>“Getting involved can be as simple as talking to five members of your friends and family about why you are writing Yes and why you care about the referendum being a step in the right direction towards treaties, truth-telling and justice. Ask them why they think it’s important for First Nations people to have a say in the laws and policies that impact First Nations people”.</i></p>

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR YOUR CONVERSATIONS

PRINCIPLE	WHY
<p>Values - always start with shared values like equity, respect, inclusion and self-determination that many people agree with.</p>	<p>When we’re trying to persuade people on an idea, we want to find common ground. This is why we start with values. Values build alignment across the political spectrum, and give people the confidence to take a stand without being an expert on facts.</p>
<p>Empathy - in conversations, media and social media interactions, have empathy for your audience and treat them with respect. Don’t bombard them with facts or start arguments.</p>	<p>The opposition is sowing fear and division, turning the conversation into an argument. This makes people feel uncomfortable and like they’re not smart enough if they don’t know the facts. We are empathetic and don’t attack First Nations contributors to this conversation.</p>
<p>Bring people into the frame - focus on people and communities, rather than facts and figures, mechanisms and policies.</p>	<p>Ultimately this referendum is a vote on First Nations people, whether or not people support us and want to see change. When we focus just on mechanisms and policies, it dehumanises the conversation. When we are describing a problem, we must also say who is causing it, as well as the people (all of us) who can be a part of the solution.</p>
<p>First Nations strength and leadership - lead with stories of our strength and leadership, show that when we lead, we get the best outcomes for First Nations communities and for everyone.</p>	<p>People don’t know stories of Aboriginal strength and leadership, but when they hear them they are much more supportive of us having control over our lives.</p>
<p>Combining truth with action - we need to share our truth in a way that’s grounded in our strength, and motivates action.</p>	<p>Both base and persuadables understand that truth-telling helps all of us move forward together, and that truth-telling must translate into action. So combine your truth-telling with a clear ask or action that our audience can take.</p>
<p>Solutions - share the positive, tangible and practical solutions our communities have been calling for for decades.</p>	<p>People want to support a more positive future, so we need to focus on the solutions that can exist if everyone supports us. Make them tangible and practical, for example, on housing, health, cultural heritage, land management and education.</p>

RESPONDING TO COMMON CONCERNS

1. Requests for more details about how the representative body will operate

Both First Nations and non-First Nations base and persuadable audiences have significant concerns about how the Voice to Parliament will be genuinely representative and meaningful – and this is especially important for mob. Calls for more detail do resonate with persuadable audiences, but instead of getting stuck in conversations about detail and repeating the opposition frames, be clear and transparent about the process from here.

Messages that communicate the two-step process help overcome calls for more detail. For example:

- > “First, we’ll vote on the principle of the matter – then once we have the mandate, there will be a thorough consultation process with First Nations communities to make the representative body truly representative.”
- > “First everyone will vote on the principle of a representative body, and then we’ll all be part of a consultation process to shape what it looks like. The government has committed to principles of representation, and it’s up to us to make sure it is.

2. Uncertainty about whether this will deliver substantive change

It is fair enough that First Nations people are sceptical about whether the referendum will deliver change, especially when we’ve been calling for meaningful change for generations. Whilst we see this as a step, it is not the final destination and it’s up to all of us to win the narrative, and demand transformative change now and beyond the referendum

We have an important opportunity to hold meaningful conversations about the world that we want to live in, how we centre First Nations justice. Instead of telling someone who’s sceptical they are wrong, ask questions about what they think and generate discussion about what transformative change can look like and how we get there. From there, you’ve established shared values and vision, critical elements of a persuasive, winning messaging.

3. Concerns because not all First Nations people agree

Just like any community or social movement, First Nations people have a diversity of opinions, perspectives and approaches to creating change and this needs to be respected.

In our research, we found many First Nations people are largely persuadable on the referendum and almost half of all First Nations people have heard nothing or very little about the referendum on a Voice to Parliament. Overwhelmingly, we heard that most First Nations people want to have conversations in their communities and with other mob before they decide how they will vote.

What this tells us is that more resourcing is needed to support First Nations communities to come together in culturally safe spaces to learn, share, ask questions and have critical conversations amongst one another.

4. Concerns about the increase in racism and harmful narratives

We are seeing a massive culture war that is giving rise to racism, hurling attacks on First Nations people and spreading harmful narratives and misinformation that hurts and undermines our communities. We cannot allow them to take us backwards.

As seen in our foundational message research, we need to name who is causing the harm and provide a credible motive for why they’re choosing to do so - in this case, it may be a certain politician and their racist, ignorant or discriminatory actions.

We want to follow the ‘people do things’ rule. It helps people understand that the problems we face are made by people, and can be solved by people.

But remember we need to avoid engaging in the opposition frame, either walk away from these discussions or reframe the debate back on your terms using the frames and messages that we know work.

Refer back to Chapter 3, page 81, where we explore other key concerns that came up particularly within First Nations communities, including mistrust in government, questions about the representative body and making sure it is truly representative, the advisory nature of the body and whether it will make a difference.

EXAMPLE Q&As

Will this make a practical difference in the lives of First Nations people?

“Laws and policies work best when the people affected by them have a say in how they work.

Writing Yes won't change everything but it's a step in the right direction to win the bigger changes we've been calling for.

If the overwhelming majority of people write Yes, then we can create a wave of transformative policy changes - like treaties, land rights and equity - because of the momentum and the political mandate of voting together.”

I want to write Yes, but I'm not sure because we haven't seen the detail

“There are two key steps in this process. First, we vote - everyone will vote on the principle of whether we should have a representative body. Second, First Nations communities will get to make sure the model is truly representative. The government has committed to a thorough consultation process and we'll need to make sure this happens.”

I care more about securing tangible changes that will improve the lives of First Nations people, like raising the age or stopping deaths in custody. Doesn't this referendum debate distract us and take focus away from immediate actions for justice?

“With the referendum upon us, our challenge is to build a movement that will fight for the systemic change that our communities have been calling for, and use this moment as a vehicle to fast track treaties, land rights, truth-telling and justice, with the referendum being a stop along the journey but not the final destination.

More than half the population believe this moment is bigger than the referendum, and an opportunity to bring about more meaningful change. The national mood is on our side and there's a huge groundswell of support for us to tap into and mobilise.

Together, we can build a political mandate to hold governments accountable and leave them with no choice but to follow our lead.”

If First Nations people don't agree, why would I write Yes?

“There are a range of diverse views within First Nations communities, as there always are in any community.

Some First Nations advocates who have been fighting for transformational change for generations do not think the proposal will create sufficient change. That's fair enough.

We agree that change needs to be much bigger than this - and we see a representative body as a step in the right direction, moving us towards bigger change. When a clear majority of Australians write Yes in the referendum, it will send a strong message that we want justice, equality and enduring change. On the other hand, a No vote will set back First Nations justice for decades.”



EXAMPLE ISSUE-BASED CONVERSATIONS

To win a resounding Yes and build the momentum for transformative change, we need to have conversations within our own communities – whether it be First Nations communities, the disability justice movement, the climate movement, the health sector or our local suburbs.

We need to tailor our conversations to the context and the person we're talking to.

Here are some examples of how you could have this conversation with different people.



Someone who cares about transformational change for First Nations justice, including treaties and truth-telling

THINKING	<i>“First Nations communities have fought tirelessly to bring about change and justice for our people. Many of our Elders have paved the way, and now younger generations are stepping up and carrying on their legacy.”</i>
FEELING	<i>Over the next decade we could see huge changes in First Nations justice – from treaties, to truth-telling, land back, equity and justice. The majority of people are with us and ready to show their support. When we turn this momentum for change into a resounding Yes, much more will be possible.</i>
ACTION	<i>Writing Yes won’t change everything, but it’s a step in the right direction towards bigger changes that our communities have been fighting for. It will be up to all of us to hold governments and the public accountable to what comes next, beyond the referendum.”</i>

Someone who cares about law reform and justice

THINKING	<i>“Everyone wants to be treated equally and be free to live our own lives, but too often police target us in the streets, because of the colour of our skin. Our politicians have known this since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and yet consecutive governments have let this report gather dust rather than implement the recommendations that would prevent our loved ones from dying.”</i>
FEELING	<i>When governments are too slow to act, it’s up to everyday people to create the conditions that make change possible. By writing Yes in the referendum, we could elect our own representatives to talk truth to power and have a say on policies and issues that affect us.</i>
ACTION	<i>If millions of people across the country write Yes, we can create the political pressure necessary for governments to listen to and act on the solutions that our communities have been calling for.”</i>

Someone who cares about education

THINKING	<i>“First Nations people are the first scientists, the first astrologists and the first teachers. Our knowledge systems have been passed down over generations, standing the test of time. But today, the western education system largely ignores our expertise, and instead promotes a racist curriculum that leaves our children feeling unsafe, unsupported and more likely to leave without a full education.”</i>
FEELING	<i>But we are not alone, everyone learns in different ways. Most people agree that we must be honest about our history, and when we respect First Nations knowledge and expertise, we can create a better and fairer future that everyone can benefit from.</i>
ACTION	<i>When millions of us write Yes, we will send a message that the country is ready to listen to and learn from the wisdom and perspectives of First Nations people which will lead to better outcomes on education, health and more.”</i>

Someone who cares about self-determination

THINKING	<i>“We’re all better off when we are free to set our own course and make decisions for ourselves, our families and our communities. But too often, successive Governments have forced their own ideas on how we, as First Nations people, should lead our own lives. Decisions about our health, our education and our homelands keep being taken away from us.”</i>
FEELING	<i>We all know what it feels like to be excluded from decisions that impact us, but like everyone else, we know what’s best for our communities. From land rights to stopping black deaths in custody, protecting cultural heritage and keeping kids in communities – we have the solutions and know what our communities need. It could make a big difference for our advocacy to have a representative body that speaks truth to power without fear of being abolished or having funding cut.</i>
ACTION	<i>If millions of people across the country write Yes in the upcoming referendum, it could create huge political pressure to realise the aspirations our communities have been fighting for, for decades.”</i>

ALLY VOICE

Someone who cares about disability justice

THINKING	<p><i>“When we listen to the solutions of people most affected, we get better outcomes. But successive governments have failed to listen to First Nations communities and act on the solutions that they are advocating for.”</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>As someone who knows what it feels like to not be listened to, you have a powerful story to share about why you care about First Nations justice – together we can say we’re ready to listen to First Nations communities and hold the government accountable to acting on the solutions put forward by those most affected.</i></p> <p><i>We’re more powerful when we support each other, imagine if our whole community came out in support, we could help create a resounding Yes.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>Writing Yes in the upcoming referendum is a way to show respect and a commitment to listening to the expertise of First Nations people.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about climate change

THINKING	<p><i>“As the first scientists and first environmentalists, Aboriginal communities have looked after Country since time immemorial and have a valuable role to play in addressing the climate crisis.</i></p> <p><i>But for too long, governments have refused to hear or take up this advice.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>When we listen to each other, share our knowledge and work together, we all benefit. Together we can send a message to government that it’s time to listen to and respect the leadership of Aboriginal communities in shaping policies that protect our climate and future generations.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to say that we want to hear the wisdom and expertise of the oldest living culture on earth.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about racial justice

THINKING	<p><i>“In recent years, we’ve seen a global reckoning with racism and more and more people are willing to challenge the status quo.</i></p> <p><i>But we know that government policies continue to discriminate against First Nations communities, as well as migrants and more recent arrivals, based on the colour of our skin.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>Whether your family has been here for five years, five generations, or five thousand generations – everyone should be treated fairly and equally respected.</i></p> <p><i>Together we can create a future free from discrimination, where we respect First Nations people and value their knowledge and solutions on issues that affect us all.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>We all have an important role to play. Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to say we want to listen to First Nations people and make our system fairer for everyone.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about health

THINKING	<p><i>“Taking care of one another is what community is all about.</i></p> <p><i>That’s why 40 years ago, when government health services were failing First Nations people, community leaders took the driver’s seat and set up Australia’s first community health centres. Today, these services are the best in the country and the government has modelled their health, legal aid and childcare off First Nations-led solutions.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>Imagine a society where First Nations values and leadership are at the heart of government policy and decision making. We could ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare, regardless of the colour of your skin, gender or where you live.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>By writing Yes in the referendum, we can create this society and show that when you listen to the expertise of First Nations communities, everyone can thrive.”</i></p>

THANK YOU & NEXT STEPS

Our steering committee would like to thank all of the incredible people, partners and donors who have made this project possible.

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And a huge thank you to the teams at GetUp and Australian Progress, for providing all of the back of house support and project management that makes this project a pleasure to be a part of.

And finally, to you, everyone coming on this journey with us. The success of this project depends on all of us passing the message stick. We encourage you to embrace these recommendations, test new ways of communicating, share lessons with our communities and team mates and get in touch if there's anything we can do further to support you.

NEXT STEPS

Our immediate next steps include rolling out presentations, workshops and messaging guides around the country. Head to passingthemessagestick.org to sign up to a presentation or workshop near you.

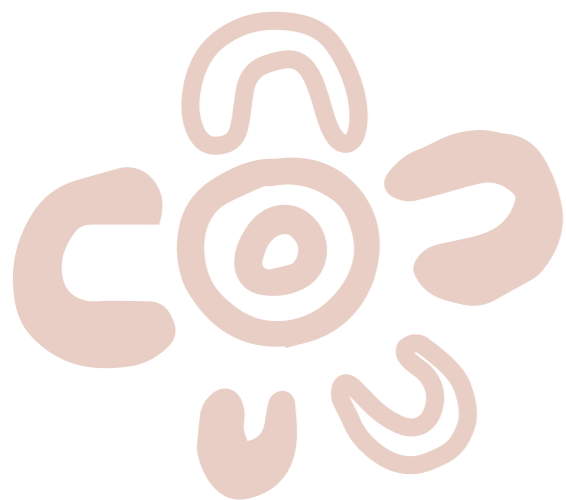
In the same way that this latest research builds on the foundations developed in 2021, we will continue to dig deeper into specific messaging challenges on key issues that are relevant in our current political context.

Our next phase of research will focus on law reform and justice, delivered in partnership with the Dhadjowa Foundation, and will focus on developing persuasive messages that shift public narratives and build support for justice campaigns and movements led by family members whose loved ones have died in custody, grassroots activists, organisers and community members.

Future funding will allow us to run additional First Nations Message and Communications Fellowships and similar in-house training programs to grow the network of trained advocates who are changing the narrative and passing on the message stick. Additional funding will also allow us to dig further into other issue areas, to find and test messages that build support and further shift persuadables in favour of our own solutions.

Get in touch

Share your feedback and ask us questions by contacting our Passing The Message Stick team via email info@passingthemessagestick.org.



NOTES

OUR DONORS



ORGANISATIONAL PARTNERS





We encourage you to take these findings in your hands and heart, and share them widely - to create transformative change and centre our strength and solutions in public policy across the country.”

- Dr Jackie Huggins AM

