



"This is a Regime of the Bullies for the Billionaires, Hell-Bent on Destroying Lives"

5 Questions for Anat Shenker-Osorio



Interview 1/26



“This is a Regime of the Bullies for the Billionaires, Hell-Bent on Destroying Lives”

Anat Shenker-Osorio is a political communications expert: She studies why some political messages persuade while others fail – shaping campaigns on issues from clean energy to workers’ rights. Her original research and testing methods have driven progressive policy wins and electoral victories globally. She is principal of ASO Communications, host of the podcast “Words to Win By,” has advised U.S. and international organisations, and her writing and research have been profiled in leading publications.

For Campact’s TTRex, Diba Shokri asked her five questions about the current political situation in the U.S.¹

1. Anat Shenker-Osorio, there’s a lot of coverage of U.S. politics in German media right now: America’s war with Iran, ICE’s use of violence, Trump’s personal antics in Washington – still, it’s hard to keep track. From your perspective, which political development would you like to highlight for a European audience?

In April 2026, the Roberts Court² decimated what was left of the “Voting Rights Act” – an Act passed in 1965 thanks to the heroic struggle of the Civil Rights Movement to end “Jim Crow,” essentially segregation. What a lot of people know of the Civil Rights Movement is the bus boycotts, the sit-ins, and the abolishment of “whites only” drinking foundations. But the Voting Rights Act is what actually ended this segregation, because it was, fundamentally, about ensuring that Black people can achieve true political power. Not just that they’re able to vote – but that their vote is undiluted by the way in which the election maps are drawn. Section 2 of the “Voting Rights Act,” essentially, ensured that a large-enough minority community with a systematically different pattern of voting behavior had a vested interest in having its own representative district.

Now that the Court has just dismantled that section, it has opened the doors to mid-decade redistricting in states where state legislature is currently controlled by Republicans³ – **basically the elimination of Black political power**, both in national and state elections.

For the midterm elections in November 2026, this means that, in order to win 51 percent of the seats, Democrats are going to have to win a lot more than 51 percent of the votes. Which goes against this thought that Democrats could “fix this by the midterms” – and affirms that our current situation is a product of America’s original sin: continuous and unaddressed “White supremacy”.⁴

2. What messages is the extreme right in the U.S. sending out right now, and how have their messages changed in recent years?

In some ways, there's nothing new. Remember, when Trump came to power the first time, going down his golden escalator, saying "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best [...]", "[...] they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists [...]"?⁵ That theme of spreading hideous lies about immigrant communities – that's one of their greatest hits, and they're always going to play permutations of it.

But what's interesting is that, for authoritarians, there's a fundamental narrative problem. Because the way that their story works is this: "There's this terrible group of people who are very bad, for all these reasons, but I, as the strong man, am going to make your life better by taking care of them." So, they claim that there is an "enemy," and also that they have vanquished that enemy. But if they have vanquished their enemy – then there is no enemy! **That is the fundamental paradox of authoritarian messaging. In order to justify their political project, in order to be able to say, "We've been successful but you still need us," they have to keep expanding the list of enemies. And that's what's happening right now.**

For example, the MAGA regime is now also attacking the "Southern Poverty Law Center" – an organization that came out of the Civil Rights movement, and that, in previous administrations, used to work with the Department of Justice, including Republican administrations. Or, another example: Now it's not just immigrants who have criminal records, but all immigrants. They've also introduced the idea of denaturalizing people, of taking away granted citizenship, as well as the idea of taking away birthright citizenship – which is in our Constitution! Critically, it became part of the Constitution through the 14th Amendment, after we outlawed enslavement. It is an absolutely pivotal part that affirms the rights of all people born here, and distinguishes the U.S. from most other countries.

So, in some way, the narrative is the same. But in order to achieve the same effect and serve authoritarian expansion and preservation of power, it must be constantly escalated and expanded. **The MAGA right knows no mechanism for moderation.**



3. What messages are Democrats and civil society groups in the country sending out in the meantime? And how are they doing that?

For a long time, civil society used the language of “rule of law,” “democracy,” and “institutions.” And the way that sounded was: “We stand for the rule of law, and these actions are destructions of the rule of law, and they are violating the norms, and eroding our democracy.” **And then, certainly in the top posts of the Democratic Party, their dominant messages have been: “People care the most about their economic needs, cost of living, egg prices”** – which is understandable. I also understand the instinct of using that kind of messaging even with something as horrific as the war in Iran, to say: “Look, instead of spending money on things that are your priority as a person living in the U.S., health care and so forth, they’re spending money on bombs.” But what that does is imply that the reason why, for example, bombing a school full of children, is wrong is because it’s expensive. And that is a morally bankrupt argument.

And there is a way to make the economic argument, without falling into that trap. Which is: **“This is a regime of the bullies for the billionaires that is hell-bent on destroying lives. From Epstein to ICE to Iran.” You can say “This money is your health care, your grocery bill, your gas bill” – but without ceding the idea that an Iranian life has no value other than “It’s expensive to end it,” which is disgusting.**

This kind of habituated “We’re going to keep using language, as if we were in the olden times, where norms and institutions mattered,” is just not up to the actual task. Most average voters have no real understanding of what it actually requires to get out of authoritarianism. **What it requires is sustained nonviolent direct action. A mass uprising of everyday people.**

4. Almost ten years ago, you co-created the now widely used “Race Class Narrative” (RCN) – a communication concept, or messaging tool, that has been described as “a simple way to disarm the culture war from the right”⁶ and “to neutralize the use of dog-whistle racism.”⁷ Given the extreme situation in the U.S., elements of which you just described: does it need an update?

Sadly, the “Race Class Narrative” is more applicable than ever. **We have updated it to now also offer lessons for combatting anti-trans and other gender-based attacks – in addition to fearmongering and hate-baiting based on race, religion and ethnicity.** We also are seeing it gain wider traction among what I would argue are more effective candidates and leaders. New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, for example, gave a truly beautiful speech on July 3rd about our 250th Anniversary that was a stinging rebuke of the way the ruling regime celebrated this event. Among the things he said were these:

“The powerful have always known their answer. America, in their view, is an arena of supremacy, where only a select few are allowed freedom, where not all are created equal. America, if you ask them, becomes less the more people it welcomes. America, they will tell you, belongs only to those with the right accent or the right shade of skin. The rest of us, they insist, should be grateful for merely being allowed to visit. How small they are, how

weak, how unoriginal. **At every moment in our past, those who led through exclusion and isolation have tried to win power and enrich themselves by turning us against one another. Division is the oldest trick in politics, and the cheapest.** But time and again – including 250 years ago – **those forces of division have been vanquished by the forces of progress.”⁸**

James Talarico, running for Senate in the very tough terrain of Texas, Abdul El-Sayed, running for the same office in Michigan, and Andy Beshear, the Democratic governor of a pretty Republican state of Kentucky, offer other examples of using versions of the “Race Class Narrative,” tweaked to their own style.

If anything has changed, besides the aforementioned need to attend to division by gender, it’s the need to foreground this even more: **a message that nobody hears, by definition, cannot persuade them.** This is obviously the most intuitive truth – yet it’s one that center-left politicians and many NGOs, steeped in the polite language of institutions, norms and procedures, are not built to internalize. **We keep seeking to sound like the reasonable adults on the scene – to give well-reasoned oratory in the midst of the unrelenting screaming of 24/7 content.** Instead, we have to prioritize first breaking a signal through the noise – getting folks to stop scrolling in the first place.

5. The Democrats lost the last national election in November 2024, with devastating consequences. Now, the midterm elections in November 2026 are just a few months away. From your perspective as an experienced political messaging expert: which messages need to reach whom right now, and how?

Democrats have already done the most effective thing they can to win this year’s election: lose the last one. Because **in modern American politics – and this, by the way, is an increasingly global trend – elections are an exercise in “throwing the bastards out.”** Which means: When their preferred “team” is out of power, voters turn against the ruling party by coming out to vote in greater numbers – and, to a lesser degree, other voters switch parties for certain races.

I say this to give some real-talk perspective around how vital a role messaging and campaigning play. It’s not nothing – especially when we win and lose things by 1 percentage point. But also, because it’s important to understand that **a lot of electoral politics is the product of baked-in behaviors, in particular of what we call “negative partisanship.”⁹** Which isn’t so much a deep love of “my” team but rather a loathing of the other side – a voting to take or keep “them” out of power.

All of this said, what’s vital for those folks we desperately do need to persuade – either to vote in the first place, rather than sit out, or to vote Democratic – is to feel that their vote has a chance at changing the present conditions they despise. In other words: It’s not enough to simply repeat widely shared complaints, for example, about prices. There is no message any politician can deliver about prices that’s louder than the cash register – people know they are broke and don’t need to see an Instagram post from a Democrat to realize it. **What they**

need is to feel that voting could potentially impact what is upsetting them. One thing we have been testing out is to tap into people's desperate desire for agency – for an answer to the question of "What am I supposed to do about all of this?" And that sounds like this: **"Your vote is your ICE whistle,¹⁰ blow it."** **"Your vote is your gas bill, lower it."** **"Your vote is your neighbor, protect them."**



Endnotes

[1] The questions were answered partly in person on April 30, 2026, during a meeting on the sidelines of a conference in Berlin, and partly in writing on July 13 and 14, 2026. Unless otherwise noted, emphases in individual sentences were added by the TTRex.

[2] This refers to the Supreme Court of the United States, which has been chaired by John Roberts since 2005.

[3] Redistricting is supposed to take place every ten years following a census – the last one was in 2020, the next would be in 2030. Since the Roberts Court’s ruling on April 29, 2026, states such as Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Tennessee have already begun taking steps to redraw electoral districts ahead of schedule, i.e., before 2030.

[4] Roughly: the ideology of wanting to establish and maintain white, Christian dominance at all costs in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, pluralistic society.

[5] With these words, Trump announced his 2016 presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, at Trump Tower in New York City (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkysjbM>, 0:00–0:25 and 3:34–3:53).

[6] <https://movement-hub.org/race-class-narrative/>. The “Race Class Narrative” is, roughly described, an empirically tested formula for progressive political messaging that counters an “us-vs-them” logic with an “all of us” logic, with the goal of countering divisive narratives without reproducing them. A detailed description by its developers can be found here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lwbq9RH6c5tP2d0efR7u13w2vombEDIM/view>. One RCN application example for Germany is the “Wir Fahren Zusammen” (“We Ride Together”) campaign (2024) for better public transit working conditions and more climate protection. This clip captures its goals and style: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDx70vblPG0>.

[7] <https://www.wemakethefuture.us/history-of-the-race-class-narrative>.

[8] The speech in its original English in video (8:45–9:35) and text: <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2026/07/remarks-as-prepared--mayor-mamdani-delivers-address-marking-amer>. The highlighted passages in the indented quote from Mamdani were added by Anat Shenker-Orsorio.

[9] A term from American political science.

[10] Since roughly fall 2025, neighbors have been using (3D-printed) whistles to warn each other about ICE checks and arrests. Since then, whistles have also become a symbol of resistance against Trump and his supporters. For example, in a statement by Becca Good, the wife of Renée Good, who was shot and killed by ICE agents in Minnesota on January 7, 2026, it reads: „We had whistles. They had guns.” (<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2026/01/09/renee-goods-wife-releases-statement-about-ice-shooting>).

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