



Responding to Impeachment Skeptics

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Making the argument for impeachment is easy on MSNBC, CNN, or among progressive crowds and affirming friends. It is not easy on Fox, at a town hall in purple or red America, or at Thanksgiving with Trump-supporting or indifferent relatives. How the impeachment investigation lands in America depends on how those Trump-supporting or indifferent people in purple or red places see it.

Below is guidance on how to discuss and frame the impeachment investigation in neutral or hostile ground. Our goal is not to preach to the converted but to reach the convertible and sow doubts among Trump loyalists. These talking points were developed with the help and guidance of those who have spent a career speaking to people in the ideological middle and center right.

Format

It is most important to provide tight, effective rebuttals during live, time-sensitive media appearances on Trump-friendly outlets. This is also when it can be most challenging. We recommend this basic format:

Set the right goal for yourself: It's not to win the argument but to sow doubt among listeners about what they are being fed by Trump and his echo chamber.

Lead with a simple unassailable fact (many voters don't know the basics): The President demanded that a foreign leader dig up dirt on Joe Biden, his main rival, and held back U.S. military aid to coerce this foreign interference in our elections.

Quickly counter the substance of an attack: Consult our list of suggested rebuttals to Republican talking points.

Give a little to get back to your affirmative case: Democrats and Republicans agree that it was wrong when President Trump demanded that the Ukraine president dig up dirt on Biden. Where we disagree is on how wrong.

Don't forget to assert fundamental values: Seeking truth no matter where it leads us. Demanding accountability because no one is above the law. Fulfilling our duty because our Constitution puts the country ahead of any one person.

Topline Guidance

Who is delivering the message—and how—matters almost as much as the message. Give your audience space, and permission, to change their minds. Be grave, not partisan; even-tempered, not emotional. The facts are damning enough. They do not need embellishment.

Most undecided Americans do not know the underlying facts. You can tell them:

The basic facts are not in dispute by anyone: In a phone call, through aides, and via unusual backchannels, President Trump twisted the arm of the Ukraine President to manufacture a public dirt-digging investigation to harm Joe Biden.

After trying to hide their actions, the President and his allies admitted what they'd done: blocked military aid that Ukraine needed to oppose Russian aggression its border unless it manufactured a public investigation to harm Trump's most feared political rival.

President Trump's own transcript of the call with the Ukraine president has him asking about Biden three times. His personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and his Chief of Staff admitted to the arrangement on TV. Scores of public servants witnessed the coercion and registered alarm almost immediately, including the President's hand-picked National Security Advisor, his Ambassador to Ukraine, and senior officials in the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House.

The actions taken by President Trump and his aides show they knew he was in the wrong.

- Instead of using regular diplomatic channels, the President created alternate backchannels and had his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, do what no professional diplomat or national security professional would ever do—try to get another country to manufacture a political scandal targeting his most feared rival.
- Instead of releasing a transcript of the Ukraine call to the people who needed to see it at the time, a panicked White House put it in a classified computer meant for real national security secrets, not ugly coverups.
- Instead of releasing urgent military aid to Ukraine in its fight against Russia as scheduled, the President and his aides withheld the funds as they pushed for a manufactured investigation, putting his personal agenda ahead of America's national interest.
- Instead of cooperating with Congress, they have ignored subpoenas, refused to turn over documents, and attempted to prevent witnesses from testifying.

Most Americans also do not understand the impeachment process—and given the incontrovertible facts, this is where Republicans mounting their defense. People should know that:

- Nearly all Democrats and Republicans in Congress agree that what the President did was wrong.
- Where they disagree is on whether Trump's actions—asking a foreign leader to investigate his main rival as a “favor,” holding up military aid to coerce a foreign leader into manufacturing a political scandal, and inviting a foreign government to get directly involved in an American presidential election—are so wrong that they warrant impeachment.

- The Constitution calls for impeachment in cases of “treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors.”
- The Constitution also establishes a process to ensure that this President, like all presidents, is held accountable. It gives Congress control of that process.
- The Constitution gives the House of Representatives the duty to seek the truth and the power to charge the President with impeachable offenses. It gives the Senate the power to try the President on those charges and, if necessary, remove him from office.
- The Constitution is very clear that it prohibits Presidents from seeking anything of personal value from a foreign government. What could be more valuable than manipulating a presidential election to stay in power?
- The President and his allies are complaining about the House process. We all know that when you can’t argue the facts, you argue process, so this process absolutely needs to be open and fair to the satisfaction of reasonable people—not partisans on either side. And in fact, the House investigation is consistent with longstanding congressional practice and grand jury proceedings, which are designed to protect the privacy of the process and the accused in the initial phases. Republicans on the designated committees—nearly a quarter of their caucus, including Vice President Pence’s own brother, Greg (R-IN)—have been fully participating in the closed-door hearings, questioning the witnesses, and enjoying full access to the transcripts.
- The House has now voted on impeachment inquiry procedures that provide for open hearings and the release of hearing transcripts. President Trump will be given at least as much due process, if not more, as Presidents Nixon and Clinton received. Republicans will be able to interview witnesses in public, and the President will have an opportunity to respond.
- All the Republicans who claimed to want more open proceedings voted against the measure that opened them.
- After the House reports and votes on any impeachable offenses, the President will have an opportunity to mount his defense during a removal trial in Mitch McConnell’s Senate, under rules set by the Republicans.

Many of the President’s claims are designed to distract from his conduct.

Keep your message clear and focused on his actions. For example:

1. The President had at least a half a dozen legitimate avenues he could have pursued if he was truly concerned with corruption Ukraine. What he was really concerned about was exactly one person he saw as a threat, and the real corruption was his efforts to use America’s money to boost his personal political fortune.
2. This is not about some bizarre conspiracy theory about the 2016 election. This is about the President’s actions while in office. No American president ever said to a foreign leader: We will let you die at the hands of your Russian aggressors unless you manufacture dirt on the person who could defeat me next November.

3. The real problem Republicans have with the process is that it has revealed facts that leave them no ground to deny the truth: Trump took U.S. funds that were supposed to make us safer and used them to bribe a foreign power for his own personal gain. It forces them to choose whether to be complicit in his cover-up.
4. This is not business as usual, and it is an insult to the men and women who have served this government—from elected leaders, to unsung civil servants, to combat veterans—to suggest that it is normal to do what Trump did: use our national coffers like his own personal piggy bank, indebt himself to foreign powers, and put his interest above our nation's.

Narrative Frame

In America, we rebelled against the king because we believed that a nation is bigger than its leader. Our Founding Fathers aspired to a democracy that is of the people, for the people. To safeguard this system, they wrote a Constitution that bars the President from using the powers of government for his personal benefit. Its prohibitions are clear: He cannot ask foreign governments for a thing of value. He cannot bribe. He cannot commit treason.

Throughout American history, Presidents have honored that oath. Until now. In using the powers and resources of the U.S. government to coerce a foreign government to help him in his re-election bid, President Trump abused his power and violated his oath to the Constitution. He should be held accountable for his actions.

What President Trump did is not in dispute: he withheld desperately-needed military aid to pressure the government of Ukraine to manufacture a baseless investigation in hopes of harming his most feared-rival and interfering in our elections. The President has admitted to it. His lawyer has admitted to it. His Chief of Staff has admitted to it. Throughout the government, public servants and military officers—many hand-picked by the President—were witness to his actions and registered their alarm. The only question is whether we will stand by and let him get away with it.

The Constitution provides a process for seeking the truth and holding the President accountable for his actions. Indeed, it demands it. That process has begun. The people's representatives have a duty to find the facts and determine the consequences. They must decide whether it is acceptable for one man to use his position to coerce a foreign country to provide him with a personal benefit. They must decide whether it is acceptable for our public servants to put self over country. They must decide whether the plain words of the Constitution still have meaning, and whether our Founders' vision for America endures.