



## 2.1 The “call them bigots” approach

### Key building blocks

The Left often responds to dog whistle politics in one of two predictable ways, both of which have limitations. This video discusses the first:

- It seems obvious that we should directly **call out racism** in response to dog whistling.
- But this backfires, playing into dog whistling’s **punch-deny-counterpunch** theater.
- Even so—and this is important—this does not mean that progressives should stop challenging racism; instead, it means we should change **how** we challenge dog whistle racism.

#### Anti-racist protip

When calling out dog whistling, people of all races are more likely to grasp the concept of **strategic racism** than they are to understand **systemic racism** or **institutional racism**. “Strategy” directs attention to motives, something people understand easily. In contrast, “systems” are abstractions that are difficult to imagine. Plus, the focus on strategy directs people’s attention to powerful elites promoting division. Or, think about it in terms of the “us vs. them” that is basic to politics. The core opposition is between powerful elites and the rest of us. In contrast, systems and institutions tend to push people to think in terms of harms to communities of color but not to white people. It creates an implicit “us vs. them” that pits white people against people of color.

### Sample questions

### Potential answers

#### THE “CALL OUT RACISM” STRATEGY

1. Why does it seem obvious to many progressives that we should call out dog whistle politicians for being bigots?

This question asks people to reflect for a moment on the tendency to call dog whistle politicians “racists” or “bigots.” It may require some prompting, but it’s worth exploring the underlying assumptions.

- The fact that dog whistling is rooted in racism is obvious to us, and so we assume it must be obvious to everyone else as well. But is it? Recall video 1.4
- We hope that calling someone a bigot will get them to examine what they are doing—and will prompt their supporters to similarly question themselves. But does it have that effect on people convinced by dog whistle messages? This video answers that question.

### PUNCH-DENY-COUNTERPUNCH THEATER

1. Denouncing dog whistle politicians for being racist typically backfires because it walks into a trap, the “punch-deny-counterpunch” theater. Can you describe its elements?

- **Punch** racist stereotypes into the conversation through code, then wait to be called a racist.
- **Deny** any racist intent.
- **Counterpunch** that it’s racist to accuse someone and their supporters of being racist.

Notice how this flips the script on liberals. We think we’re calling dog whistling politicians racists, and then they turn around and say we’re the real racists. Even if their supporters are not convinced liberals are racists (and many DO feel victimized by supposed anti-white racism), at a minimum it establishes a rhetorical draw, with both sides pointing the finger at each other for being “racists!”

2. Why does “punch-deny-counterpunch” even work?

It works because dog whistling is designed to trigger intense fears rooted deeply in racist stereotypes, but without coming across as overtly racist. In fact, dog whistling often sounds like common sense to audiences, which is why it’s convincing to majorities of Democrats and people of color, too. Recall video 1.4.

When people are called bigots for beliefs that they view as common sense, they react badly. They rarely stop and ask themselves whether they are, in fact, participating in racism. Instead, they most often react defensively, insisting they are not racist, and then expressing outrage that anyone would suggest otherwise.

### DOES THIS MEAN WE SHOULD NOT CHALLENGE RACISM?

1. If the “call out racism” strategy often backfires, does this mean we should NOT call out racism?

This is where liberals often make a huge mistake—as we will see in video 2.3. Since as long ago as the 1970s, liberals have learned the wrong lesson from the punch-deny-counterpunch strategy. They’ve concluded that if calling dog whistle politicians backfires, liberals should not talk about racism at all.

This is wrong. We must challenge racism, but we have to change how we do so.

### STRATEGIC RACISM

1. So how should we challenge the racism of dog whistle politicians?

We should call them “strategic racists.” This framing resonated with 81% of Latinx people, 84% of Black people, and 79% of white people.

2. What is “strategic racism”?

The video describes it as when “politicians promote racial conflict as a strategy to divide and distract people so they can get and hold onto power.” Recall the conversation from video 1.4

3. What would strengthen the message of strategic racism?

Familiarity with a message adds to its credibility. The more progressives say it, the

more likely it is to become accepted as the new common sense.