

The Topos Approach

The Methodology and Science underlying Topos' Taxlandia

March 2016

RESEARCH METHODS

The goal of a Topos project is to create simple but profound shifts in perspective that help advocates engage better with their audiences, and to create better, more constructive understandings that present a clearer call to action.

We do this by re-thinking an issue from the ground up, uncovering the hidden patterns of understanding that undermine citizen action, identifying new possibilities and refining a course of action.

Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

The exploratory research for this project consisted of ethnography, cognitive elicitations, media analysis, focus groups, and a quantitative survey. The insights that emerged from this exploratory phase led directly to more systematic strategy testing in the form of Virtual Community Forums and TalkBack, in addition to ethnographic field testing of promising approaches.

Some methods were deployed in the four focus states (CO, KY, WA and WI), while others were deployed throughout the U.S. as a whole.

Importantly, the research is not intended to drill down into the specifics of how Americans regard *particular* events, policies, proposals, or individuals. Instead, it aims to assess the most fundamental aspects of the current cultural and cognitive landscape.

Ethnography

The strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people's *experience* of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography—the observation and description of people in their natural environments, and the effort to engage with people on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. To be considered useful, interactions take at least five (but no more than 40) minutes, depending on how much time and willingness a given subject had to delve into the topics. The conversations were sometimes one-on-one, but also three- or four-

way exchanges. [See the appendix for sample questions, and the Taxlandia website for video excerpts.]

In 2014, ethnography was undertaken in two states: Washington and Wisconsin. Over 180 significant conversations were recorded, most of which were videotaped for later close analysis.

In order to explore the political, ethnic and geographic diversity of the state of Wisconsin, ethnography was conducted in and around Milwaukee, up the shoreline through Sheboygan to Green Bay, in the Fox Valley, and across the rural central regions to Eau Claire.

In Washington state, ethnographers spoke with people in rural Whatcom county in the north as well as Kennewick and Yakima in the south. Researchers visited the east side of the Puget sound from Woodinville through Seattle down to Auburn and Tacoma and conducted numerous interviews in the Gray's Harbor area on the southwest coast.

All of these open-ended conversations and observations helped lay the groundwork not just for an analysis of the two specific states, but for all the research that would follow in the other focus states and the country as a whole.

Cognitive Elicitations

The goal of these semi-structured interviews is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. One of the key goals of elicitations is to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or heard before. [See appendix for a sample interview protocol, and the Taxlandia website for sample video excerpts with Coloradans.]

Over 90 elicitations, some in-person and some by phone, were conducted with a diverse group of Americans in the four focus states. Most of these conversations focused on discussions at the state level, while roughly 20 focused on national/federal issues. The conversations ranged from 40 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

These conversations enabled us to delve more deeply into the cultural and cognitive models that had emerged in the ethnographic research, while also giving us an opportunity to begin trying out alternative ways of talking or reasoning about the topic to see how flexible people's thinking is.

Media analysis

The research included a qualitative examination of a broad sampling of media to determine how topics are treated by the media and the likely implications for readers' thinking. The researchers looked at such factors as the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, and

so forth. The analysis was designed to identify the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials.

This analysis is based on a review of over 500 relevant pieces in the news media from 2014, including state and regional newspapers, news magazines, blogs, and transcripts from television news. Particular stories were identified by scanning media sources for articles and reporting that touched upon the relevant themes of government revenue and budgeting.

Media analysis offered important context for understanding the public discourse about revenue and taxation. We could compare the cultural and cognitive models that we found in our conversations with regular people to get a sense of how the news media influences, reproduces or ignores the “cultural common sense” that people bring to the topic. For example, the media is much more active in articulating and promoting familiar anti-tax ideas, than it is in articulating people’s common sense ideas about why taxes are an important responsibility.

Focus Groups

In contrast to cognitive elicitations, which are meant to give insights into how *individuals think*, focus groups give insights into how people use these cultural and cognitive models and frames to talk, discuss and argue about the topic. Focus groups provide an understanding of the dynamics of the “public” conversation people have regarding these topics. What happens under pressure, as people express their point of view, disagree with each other, and attempt to digest complicated ideas?

Topos conducted four groups in Seattle, WA in June 2014. The groups were comprised of: (1) individuals who lean liberal; (2) moderates; (3) the rising American electorate (under 35 years old, people of color, and white single women); and (4) the white working class.

By exposing people to a variety of common frames and studying the ensuing conversation, we were able to start uncovering the models people use to understand these topics, and also how they deploy them in persuasive conversation. This was crucially important as the project moved from an “exploratory” phase to a “message testing” phase, which involved inserting new or alternate frames and models that can change people’s perspectives and attitudes. For a new frame to enter the cultural common sense we have to know how to articulate it in ways that not only resonate, but in ways that can be picked up and used in regular conversation.

Survey

To complement these “ground level” analyses and methods, Topos also conducted a national survey to gain insights into the dynamics at work in the population at large. This helped us confirm and quantify patterns that we were seeing based on other methods.

A national survey, 12 minutes in length, was fielded online using the GfK KnowledgePanel, the only large-scale online panel based on a representative random

sample of the US population. 1,219 members of the public, ages 18 and older, were interviewed in August 2015. The survey was fielded in both English and Spanish. Topos designed the survey with the assistance of GfK, which provided a segmentation analysis using the Latent Class approach.

The national survey identified a number of distinctive segments (discussed in the accompanying reports), which were defined based on attitudes toward revenue, budgets, and government.

TalkBack Testing

In the TalkBack method, developed by Topos principals, subjects are presented with brief texts (roughly 100-150 words) and then asked several open-ended questions, focusing in part on subjects' ability to *repeat the core of the message, or pass it along to others*.

TalkBack texts generally convey a few key concepts, such as a particular aspect of a complex issue like revenue and taxation. New terms are often introduced as well (usually identified as terms that “experts” use), in order to test their clarity and memorability.

Importantly, one of the purposes of TalkBack—and the Topos approach in general—is to explore *what is taken away from a message, as opposed to what is intended*. It is often the case that listeners hear something quite different from what the speaker meant to convey. (One of the shortcomings of testing approaches that focus on “agreement” or enthusiasm is that they can inadvertently measure responses to *a point that was heard but not intended*.)

Parameters of success include subjects' ability to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory ideas and key terms. The testing is designed to assess whether a given idea has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating in a new way about the issue—as well as its overall effects on reasoning and engagement.

In 2015, 52 TalkBack paragraphs were tested among a diverse set of 1200 subjects (800 in the target states and 400 drawn from elsewhere around the U.S.). This effort enabled us to sort through numerous ideas and approaches and identify the most promising. [For examples of TalkBack texts that were used in testing, see the appendix.]

Virtual Community Forum (VCF)

A VCF is an online interaction over several days among a diverse set of roughly two dozen individuals who respond to questions, to materials, and to each other, on their own schedule. The VCF process allows us to observe how thinking evolves over time, as well as how dynamics play out in a group, interactive setting. It enables us to introduce ideas and frames over the course of several days and determine what aspects seem to stick with people and which fall away. The approach allows both individual

reactions and group interaction, top-of-mind thoughts, as well as considered reactions, as people think about issues over several days.

In summer and fall of 2015, six Virtual Community Forums (one per focus state, two national) brought together a diverse group of 150 adults from around the country who participated over five days in online discussions. Participants responded to a variety of different questions and materials, including video and marked-up documents, in detail. [See appendix for a sample excerpt of a VCF protocol.]

The VCFs enabled us to test numerous promising message directions in a controlled, yet flexible manner, and to explore the nuances of people's understandings and reactions to various ideas and frames.

Ethnographic field-testing

More focused than the exploratory ethnography, in field testing anthropologists take messages out and engage people in impromptu conversations in the places where they live, work and play. One of the key goals of these semi-structured conversations is to introduce particular, targeted ideas and frames and then encourage subjects to think aloud about the topic, to see if their thinking can be shifted toward more constructive understandings and orientations. The conversations are often one on one, but also include three or four way exchanges.

In the fall of 2015 through the winter of 2016, ethnographers conducted over 150 of these encounters in Nebraska, California, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Colorado and Nevada. Most were audio-taped for later analysis. [See appendix for a sample protocol, and the Taxlandia website for a compilation of selected video excerpts.]

Ethnographic field testing presents the highest bar in communications testing. Only the most successful messages and ideas can thrive consistently in these kinds of impromptu conversations among strangers.

TOPOS AND THE SCIENCE OF FRAMING

When it comes to the term "framing," it is important to distinguish between the popular usage (which overlaps with "spin" and other standard PR strategies) and the more technical practice that builds on a particular body of research in the cognitive and social sciences. The Topos partners have developed a number of innovative approaches to researching public perception of important issues, and to testing the impacts of messaging on people's thinking. Topos' methods build on work in fields such as anthropology, linguistics, and psychology, that study how people think and communicate. The brief discussion included here will point readers who are new to these fields of study towards some of the key insights and representative research that is foundational to the Topos approach, and to the broader field of framing. (For a summary of what framing means as applied to public interest communications, see "Topos On Framing".)

Thinking is organized by “schemas” etc.

The main unit of study, from the Topos perspective, isn't words, phrases or statements. Rather than language, our focus is on the key “organizing ideas” that shape thought and determine how we understand the world. Many cognitive scientists have pointed to the critical role of these *cognitive models* (or *scripts*, *schemas*, *frames*, etc.) in human cognition and communication. For instance, our mental schema or script for the *restaurant* experience tells us what to do and say and allows us to immediately understand what is happening when we enter an eating establishment. To take another example, when we perceive by its shape, sound or other cues that an animal is a *dog*, other knowledge immediately comes to mind about how the animal is likely to behave, how we might interact with it, and so forth.

As these examples illustrate, the power of these familiar cognitive models is that they allow us to make sense of our environment *immediately*, without going through a deliberate process of investigation to understand every new situation. In short, nearly all thinking is immediately, automatically and unconsciously shaped by our repertoire of cognitive models.

We even see evidence of this aspect of thinking in popular optical illusions like the “young girl and old woman” image. The experience of seeing first one figure and then the other is based on our brain switching from one organizing idea to another. Cognitive scientists call this phenomenon “top-down” perception, because organizing ideas in our minds are telling the (lower-level) visual mechanisms how to see and interpret the lines, shading, etc.

Thinking about public-interest topics works in exactly the same way. We tend to immediately understand an issue as being “about” help for suffering individuals, about politicians taking away our money (taxes), etc. Guiding audiences towards the most accurate and constructive organizing idea is key to effective communication.

References:

- Fillmore, C. (1985). Frames and the semantics of understanding. *Quaderni di Semantica*, 6.
- Kahneman, D. (2012) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*
- Schank, R. C., & Abelson, R. P. (1977). *Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures*.

Culture is defined by shared schemas (“cultural models”).

The mental schemas for *restaurant* and *dog* mentioned earlier not only allow individuals to understand the world around them, they are part of what makes up a *culture*, in anthropological terms. Americans, for instance, have certain understandings of how the restaurant experience works, or how to interact with dogs, and so forth, and these differ in important ways from the shared understandings that exist in other cultures.

They are critically important because they constitute that culture's "common sense" about how the world works.

When it comes to public interest topics, the cultural models that are relevant might include our shared mental picture of ideas like *job, responsibility, farm, home, family*, etc. On issues like the minimum wage, health care, sustainable agriculture, and so forth, the deep and even unconscious shape of the relevant cultural models determines how people act and react.

References:

- D'Andrade, R. and C. Strauss. 1992. *Human Motives and Cultural Models*.
Shore, B. (1996) *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture and the Problem of Meaning*.
Strauss, C, and N. Quinn. (1997). *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*.

Thinking is usually dominated by understandings of basic, everyday experience.

Cultural models range from very concrete to very abstract (e.g. *dog vs. democracy*). But many of the most powerful ones—the ones that shape our thinking by default most of the time—are related to our everyday physical or social experience. For instance, Americans' default understandings of basic social interactions and relationships inform their thinking about topics from the economy to international security. We may tend to see unemployment as a result of "lazy" workers or "greedy" bosses who have no loyalty to their employees, rather than broader systemic factors. Or, we may default to thinking about the U.S. international stance in terms of individual personality qualities like bullying or helpfulness, and lose track of more abstract concepts like international law.

References:

- Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind*.
Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things*.

Studying cognitive and cultural models requires indirect approaches.

While traditional opinion research can probe people's explicit attitudes and opinions, it does not reveal the underlying cultural and cognitive models that shape thought and that may get in the way of progress and engagement. People typically can't articulate the nature of these default patterns of understanding. Cultural models, in other words, are typically invisible to the user. As a result, researchers must use methods that indirectly get at the nature of the models. For instance, psychological anthropologists use in-depth interviews that ask subjects to think aloud at length about a topic, so that the nature of the relevant cultural models can be inferred. Another indirect method is the "transmission chain"—as participants attempt to pass along an idea, story or text from one person to another, the ways in which they mishear and alter the story often reflect the default understandings and assumptions of their culture.

References:

- Bangerter, A. (2000). Transformation between scientific and social representations of conception: The method of serial reproduction. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39 (pp. 521–535).
- D'Andrade, R. (1995). *The development of cognitive anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kempton, W., J. Boster, and J. Hartley. (1995) *Environmental Values in American Culture*. Cambridge
- Mesoudi, A., Whiten, A., & Dunbar, R. (2006). A bias for social information in human cultural transmission. *British Journal of Psychology*, 97, (pp. 405–423)

Analogies and metaphors can play a key role in getting ideas across.

Because our most basic cognitive capacities have to do with managing concrete, everyday experience, it is often helpful to talk about complex or abstract topics (the economy, international security, social justice, etc.) in terms of analogies to topics that are easier to think about. The use of analogies has a time-honored and indispensable role in both scientific teaching and research. It is a critical tool for developing and teaching new concepts.

References:

- Biela, A. (1991). *Analogy In Science*
- Lakoff, G., and M. Johnson. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*.
- Thagard, P (1997), Medical Analogies: Why and How, *Proceedings of the 19th Annual Conf. of the Cog. Sci. Soc.*

Social/political issues play out based on how they are framed.

Like all other complex topics, social and political issues are often thought about in analogical or metaphorical terms. International relations are, by default, thought of in interpersonal terms, the economy is thought of as weather, or as a being that is “sick” or “healthy” and so forth. These figurative ways of thinking are not just “decorative” language; they determine how people think about the issue, what they see and don’t see, and so forth. Cognitive scientists (Thibodeau and Boroditsky) have even found that the change of a single metaphorical term in two otherwise identical texts can lead to different interpretations about a topic like crime, and different preferences about how to address it. More generally, the framing of a complex issue, whether metaphorical or not, shapes how people think about it and act on it. The Topos approach helps communicators understand this cognitive landscape and apply these insights to their messaging.

References:

- Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't Think Of An Elephant*

Schon, D.A. and M. Rein. (1994) *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*.

Thibodeau PH, Boroditsky L (2011) Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning. PLoS ONE 6(2): e16782.
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0016782

Appendix

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR ETHNOGRAPHY:

[These sample questions are from ethnography that took place in Wisconsin in May 2014. These represent suggested questions, designed to facilitate a free-flowing, informal conversation.]

- (Icebreaker question) Do you think the economy is going up, going down, staying about the same?
- What should Madison be doing about it?
- How do priorities get set in the state?
 - about who pays what in taxes?
 - about what tax revenues get spent on?
- (describe the process as you imagine it)
- What's the fairest way to make sure everyone contributes?
- How is Wisconsin different from other, neighboring states?
- Could we just get rid of taxes altogether?
- If you had to explain to a 10-year old why we have taxes – what would you say?
- If you were in the state house what would your priorities be?
- No one loves paying taxes, but do you think in the past people saw more of a point to it than they do today? what's changed?
- Do you think that there are things that the government can invest in today that would create prosperity down the road?
 - Does this pay off in terms of more tax revenue as well?)
 - Do you think there are things the government can do to pave the way for businesses to prosper?

- Some people are pretty anti-tax while others are in favor of taxes.
 - Could you summarize the two points of view?
 - How do the two parties differ?
 - Do you think people around here are more pro-tax or more anti-tax than other places?
- Is there ever a time when it makes sense for a state to spend more than it takes in?
- If you had to make the case to people that we should have a strong tax base, what would you say?

SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR ELICITATIONS:

[This protocol was fielded with 16 Washingtonians in July 2015.]

Guidance for interviewers. Washington is dominated by a liberal Puget Sound (Seattle to Tacoma), but otherwise is mixed and the rural and western parts of the state are quite conservative. Although the state is generally liberal, it's tax system relies on a sales tax and no income tax, making it one of the most regressive in the country. The capital is Olympia. Attitudes toward legislators and what they do in Olympia seem to be a significant topic when it comes to taxation, so when it comes up please explore.

If they ask, you can let them know that you are not from Washington, and that this is part of a national study, but we are interested in how things are at the state level.

I'm working on a research project getting public opinion about taxation, government revenues, budgets, and so on. It should take about 45 minutes.

I'll be recording the conversation for research purposes, but your name is not associated with the research in any way. (is that OK?)

The first question is a really broad kind of background question about the nature of government.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say `government'? (What picture do you see in your mind?)

What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say `taxes'? (What picture do you see in your mind?)

How do priorities get set in Washington state?

about what tax revenues get spent on?

about what gets funded and what gets cut?

(describe the process as you imagine it – how do decisions get made)

[We don't expect you to be an expert at this, just your best guess of how things work . . .]

what about who pays what in taxes? how does that get decided?

What's the fairest way to make sure everyone contributes?

How is Washington different from other states when it comes to these things?

Could we just get rid of taxes altogether?

If you had to explain to a 10-year old why we have taxes – what would you say?

How do tax dollars affect your quality of life? other people's?

Some states choose to have high taxes in order to have good services, while other states choose to have low taxes and less government. Where do you think your state comes down on that?

If you were in the state house what would your priorities be? If you could say we should spend tax dollars on this, but not on this. [have them list several pro and several con]

Could you summarize the difference between the two parties when it comes to taxes and budgets?

What do you wish others understood about this topic? Something that people don't seem to get about it.

No one loves paying taxes, but do you think in the past people saw more of a point to it than they do today? (what's changed?)

Do you think that there are things that the government can invest in today that would create prosperity down the road?

Does this pay off in terms of more tax revenue as well?

Do you think there are things the government can do to pave the way for businesses to prosper?

Some individuals are pretty anti-tax while others are in favor of taxes.

Could you summarize the two points of view?

Do you think people around where you live are more pro-tax or more anti-tax than other places?

The US has been a very prosperous country. Why do you think that is?

Does the form of government we developed here play a role in that, do you think?

If you had to make the case to people that we should have a strong tax base, what would you say? [that is, making sure that the government has enough money to do the things it is supposed to do.]

If you think about a problem like homelessness among the mentally ill what are the pros and cons of leaving the issue up to:

charities

private enterprise

families of the affected people

government

How about schools? (are the pros and cons the same or different for leaving schooling up to these different groups?)

Some people complain that the big companies like Boeing don't pay their share in taxes. What do you think of that?

[get them to elaborate about why they think things are the way they are.]

In your opinion, what is the *minimum* that we need to do as a society for people? (for example, young people getting started in life)

What is *your ideal* for what we should do for people?

Do you think rich people pay their fair share of taxes? (if not, what can be done?)

What about poor people? are they paying their share?

Are there other ways for the state or country to raise more revenues without increasing taxes on regular people? [prompt for several]

If you could sum up your own attitude toward taxes to someone who thought differently (or was from the other side), what would they say?

Do you feel that there is anyone out there among public figures or organizations making the case as you see it?

SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS:

[These texts were among those tested with Kentuckians in the autumn of 2015.]

Upside Down

Experts say that most American states, including Kentucky, have an “upside down” tax system, that can actually hold the state back. Low and moderate income households pay a far higher share of their income in total taxes (income, sales, etc.) compared to the richest households. In fact, the percentage they pay is almost twice as high as those at the top of the income scale. It isn't sustainable to fund the quality of life we want to have in this state by asking the most from those with the least. We need to address the upside down tax system and figure out a more sensible tax approach so that our state can afford the things we need, like better schools, more affordable higher education, and improved health for all Kentuckians.

Quality of life / family

Our quality of life here in Kentucky depends a lot on things, including the things we support together, like the roads that let us get around, the inspectors who keep our food safe, the parks that we value, the schools that educate all our children, the first responders who help in time of need – the list goes on. If we want the best quality of life for Kentucky, we need to collect enough tax revenue to pay for it.

Commonwealth

The founders purposely established Kentucky as a “commonwealth” – a word that comes from the idea that the ties that connect us promote our common wellbeing. We are all better off because we make some collective decisions, including investing together in things like schools, parks, first responders, food inspectors, libraries, and so forth. Our commonwealth does best when everyone – people and businesses – chips in to support the things that benefit all of us.

Closing Loopholes

Economists say one of the best steps our state could take is to close the loopholes that allow some individuals and some companies to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. This would include eliminating tax breaks that only benefit some folks. Closing the loopholes is not only completely fair, but it's also the most painless approach to solving our budget problems.

Money on the Table

Kentuckians need to remember that if it seems our state is “broke” this is because we have “left money on the table” – we have chosen not to collect lots of money we could have. If we instruct our representatives to make different decisions, we'll have plenty to pay for our schools, infrastructure, and other important things we all need. For example, we leave money on the table when we provide tax breaks to wealthy corporations; when we don't tax profits from high-end financial transactions; and when we don't tax services the same way we tax goods. These kinds of choices in Kentucky mean we have less money for all the things our communities need, from libraries to emergency services to health care.

Something for Nothing

You can't get something for nothing. We can't be against taxes while also complaining about potholes and overcrowded classrooms and other things we “can't afford” to do anything about. If we want great communities with quality schools, parks, police, and reliable communications grids, judicial systems, and so on, we have to be willing to pay for them. That's what taxes are for. If we want the things that serve as foundations for a

strong economy – from modern infrastructure and transportation to great education – we have to invest our tax dollars in those things. We can't get them for nothing.

Last time we built middle class

America knows how to build the greatest middle class in the world – we've done it before, in the 1950s. And this experience can teach us something here in Kentucky. One of the key differences between then and now is that the country had much more tax revenue to work with back then. Tax rates were much higher on the wealthy and corporations, which allowed us to invest more in science, education, and infrastructure. This is why the economy and middle class boomed in the 50s and 60s. High income tax brackets for the super-rich didn't hurt the economy – instead they allowed it to boom for everyone.

All better off

It's easy to think that taxes just disappear from our paychecks. But the reality is that this money is being spent in ways that build and stimulate our state, making us all better off. When our state government and local governments have more money, they can spend it on salaries for teachers, police and firefighters, for infrastructure like roads and bridges, and for services like health care. All of that money circulates throughout our communities, helping communities thrive, and making us all better off.

Loopholes vs. Investment

It's time to stop corporate tax dodging and invest in our state again. If we close tax loopholes for corporations, we'll have millions more to invest in Kentucky. We can make our classrooms less crowded, improve roads and bridges, improve health care and build our state in other ways.

SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR VCF:

[This excerpt represents the 3rd day of a 5-day VCF conducted among a sample of 25 people drawn from states all around the US.]

Section 5

Thanks for all your great participation so far. The conversation has been incredibly interesting. Keep up the good work!

In this section I'd like to focus on how we make decisions on these issues in the US.

- 5-1. (open end, text response) Imagine that you're still on that citizen's committee and you are supposed to help your representatives settle on budget priorities,

including closing a major shortfall in the budget for schools. Some of the members say that we need to cut dollars from other programs in order to have money to close the shortfall. Other members say we need to raise some revenue, and schools shouldn't have to wait until we've cut other programs. Which position would you agree with? What are the pros and cons of each position?

- 5-2. (open end, text response) Think about another problem (besides education) that you would love to see addressed, but which doesn't get the money it would take to deal with it from our government. What is the problem that you have in mind and how might we get the revenue together to address it? You don't have to have all the answers, but do some brainstorming on possible approaches.
- 5-3. (concept test) For the next several questions, you'll switch to a different activity where you will be asked to review different points of view. For each, please give an overall rating, and then provide very specific reactions by marking up the text. Please approach each statement with fresh eyes. (GO TO MARK-UP.)
- 5-4. (FOR EACH STATEMENT) What are you thinking about when you read this; what's top of mind?

After you have given your first impression, please rate how convincing you personally find the statement:

Very convincing

Somewhat convincing

Not convincing

- 5-5. (FOR EACH STATEMENT) Now please go through the statement again and provide more specific reactions by highlighting parts of the statement that stand out to you. Use the green highlighter to mark what you think is important, the red highlighter to mark things you disagree with, the yellow highlighter if you have something to suggest, the purple highlighter if you have a question about something, and the blue highlighter to mark the main idea. You do not have to use all the highlighters, but use as many as you'd like.

Main idea

Important

Disagree

Question

Suggest

Something for Nothing Biz

Just like the rest of us, businesses shouldn't get something for nothing. They can't be against taxes while they rely on our transportation networks and electric grids. Of course, it might help their

bottom line if someone else were picking up the tab for the quality public universities that train their workforce and customers, the police, courts and military that ensure a secure business climate, and all the other things that tax dollars contribute toward. But if they want the things that serve as foundations of a solid business environment, profitable businesses have to chip in their share. Just like the rest of us, they can't get them for nothing.

Can afford it

The US is one of the more prosperous countries in the world, and yet people talk about how our nation can't afford things like more teachers or health care. The reality is that we have plenty of wealth in the country and are "broke" only when we make poor choices about how much revenue to collect and from whom, not because the money isn't available. We need to focus on bringing in revenue in a way that makes sense, rather than live with the idea that we can't afford the things we need.

Public Benefit

Everyone loves a tax cut, but they always come with a whole set of less obvious costs, which we don't notice until later. There should be only one guiding principle for an exception to paying taxes – whether the public will benefit. Giving up millions in revenue to cuts, loopholes and "tax breaks" makes no sense at all, unless it leads to a far greater public good and not simply political popularity or private profits.

- 5-6. (open end, text response) Of everything you just read, what stands out most in your mind?
- 5-7. (open end, text response) As a kind of thought experiment, try to imagine a scenario where you would vote in favor of a tax increase for yourself. Please describe that scenario.

Thank you. This ends section 5. Please check back after noon EST today to respond to the next section.

Section 6

The conversation has been incredibly interesting. Keep up the good work! We've been talking in general ways about the role of government and budget priorities. In this section, I'd like us to talk a bit more about how we make decisions.

- 6-1. (open end, text response) We all hear anecdotes about government waste – a \$700 hammer or a study about the mating habits of some tiny fish – and everyone has seen the highway workers leaning on their shovels. It's become

- “common knowledge” that government is tremendously wasteful. But there are also analysts who’ve crunched the numbers and claim that government waste is actually quite small, and even shrinking, and that some politicians have been exaggerating it to make people more anti-government. The question is, how do we know one way or another? How confident are you about the scale of government waste, based on the sources of information you have?
- 6-2. (open end, text response) If we try to balance a budget by cutting back on waste, how do we know when we have cut enough? or cut too far?
- 6-3. (multiple choice) When I see problems in government services, such as roads and bridges that haven’t been maintained or schools that are doing a poor job educating our kids, it makes me feel like... (Please explain your reasoning.)
- My tax dollars are wasted
 - We aren’t spending enough money on these services
- 6-4. (open end, text response) In the earlier discussion we talked about the following idea that: “Government is often the most cost-efficient way to get important things done, because it’s about sharing costs rather than everyone having to pay for themselves. When we pool our resources together, we can afford a lot for a little.” Do you think this applies equally at the local level, state level and federal level. Please explain any differences among these in terms of this potential advantage of government.
- 6-5. (open end, text response) One commenter said that the government can take advantage of “economies of scale” (sort of like us buying bulk from a big box store). Does that make sense, and do you think that is a way that government can be useful?
- 6-6. (open end, text response) Can you think of any other ways where it makes sense to take advantage of government’s ability to have everyone chip in a little in order to create something big? What comes to mind?
- 6-7. (open end, text response) As a government we have the right to collect taxes from individuals and from profit-making businesses and invest those toward the public good. Some people have pointed out that whenever we give someone a tax break or a create a loophole, it’s because we’ve decided that it is more important to essentially write that person or business a check instead of spending tax dollars on the public. What’s your response to that claim?

Thank you. This ends section 6. Please check back after 6am EST tomorrow, Friday, to respond to the next section.

SAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD TESTING:

[This protocol was fielded among residents of Colorado in March 2016.]

Hi, I'm working on a research project, a kind of public opinion survey asking people a few questions about the US. It takes about 3-4 minutes if you have a moment.

1. *What comes to mind when you think about taxes?*

I'd like to read you a brief statement and get your feedback on it:

We should be spending money on things we all need, not on tax breaks for a few. When our communities prioritize fundamentals like quality education and modern infrastructure, we are investing in ourselves and in thriving communities. But instead of investing in our communities, we've been spending on tax breaks for people at the top who have forced these breaks into the budget. So we end up spending on tax breaks for a few, rather than for roads, and firefighters and college. We need to shift our priorities from spending on tax breaks that benefit a few to investing in the things that benefit all of us.

2. *What's your reaction to hearing that?*
3. *If you were going to summarize the main points of that statement that I read – as though passing it on to a friend – what would you say? (I'd like to get a sense of whether it was clear or not?)*

Possible follow-ups based on how it's going:

If it's going great:

4. *What about the fact that getting rid of tax breaks means that regular people like you and me might lose some?*
5. *What would you say to someone who said, "Taxes are the problem, not a solution for anything"?*

If it's going fine but not necessarily great:

6. *What would be the biggest benefits of getting rid of tax breaks?*
7. *Why do we have all these tax breaks?*

If they're harping on corruption, or misuse of tax dollars

8. *Would cleaning up the tax code and getting rid of tax breaks be helpful?*

For everyone:

9. *Of all the things we've talked about in this conversation – and all of the ideas that I've brought up in these statements you've heard – which of them are going to stick with you most?*