

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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Arkansas Supplement



INTRODUCTION

This memo is a supplement to the national report, “Subjects or Citizens? Creating engaged conversations about government.” The national report outlines findings from a multi-state study of Americans’ attitudes towards government as of 2016 and recommends ways of creating engaged and constructive dialog about government and the role of the public sector in promoting our wellbeing and prosperity, as well as the important role played by citizens themselves.

A significant portion of the research for this national project was undertaken in Arkansas, including a series of ethnographic visits in late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a diverse mix of roughly 140 Arkansans, across the following locations: Benton, Pine Bluff, greater Little Rock, the Delta region including Jonesboro and Forrest City, as well as Russelville and Fort Smith. The research also included interviews with a diverse set of roughly a dozen leaders in the state, recruited by the project’s Arkansas advisor group.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to Arkansas is that, in common with other states, the national findings and recommendations took local dynamics into account – that is, the patterns reported on and recommendations outlined in the major reports for the project were based partly on experiences talking with both average Arkansans and leaders in the state.

Government (particularly at the federal level) is perceived as “rulers” disconnected from the people.

They put more weight on the people who donate the most money to their campaigns...It's money...Our government's been bought. (liberal White man, 53)

They don't want to listen to us, they want to do what they want to do, or whoever's lining their pockets. (conservative White woman, 49)

I hear a lot of that around South Little Rock - 'it doesn't matter, we're broke anyway, so it doesn't have anything to do with me, that's for the rich people'. (liberal African American woman, 33)

Government is not for the people now. Government seems to be for government. The people need to get more involved to get the government to come back to them. (liberal African American man, 68)

Unless you're involved in government, we're on the outside looking in. Those doors, they close and we don't know what's going on in there. We have no idea. And then we're disappointed in the end when we see something that comes about and we didn't put out any effort to even try to ascertain what they were going to do. (conservative White man, 66)

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

People are interested in and motivated by various aspects of reclaiming government “by the people” – including the concept of going beyond voting.

*When you say **beyond**, that means that we’re not just stopping here. There’s not a stopping point. We can do more...we just instantly think that our vote and that’s it, but we can go further. (liberal African American woman, 34)*

Like you say, voting isn’t enough. We’ve been voting for how long, and what has happened? Some things got better, most things got worse. I feel like you do have to take another step other than voting. (liberal African American woman, 23)

You actually have to maybe become a part of your government system instead of just marking a piece of paper and then going on. If you know you’re actually going to be involved and heard, more people are likely to do it. (moderate White woman, 43)

You would get the opportunity to not only vote but to make a bigger statement with what you had to say so that it carries more weight and potentially go further. (conservative White man, 27)

Our system is made by the people and for the people, and as soon as we realize that we have to be a part of it, then things can start running smoothly again...Because many of the good things that are about this country, and about this state and about cities and counties...were made by involved people, not people who just sat back and did nothing. (moderate African American man, 19)

Seeing more positive stories about people actually getting things done...needs to happen, because people lose hope when they don’t see it and all they hear is bickering. So they just lose interest and they don’t care anymore. (liberal White woman, 32)

The research also confirms other aspects of findings and recommendations in the national report, such as the idea that it is helpful to reinforce the ways in which various past public decisions and investments have ended up benefitting all of us.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Researchers noted a number of patterns and dynamics in Arkansas conversations in particular, that may be relevant to communicators as they work to create engaged and constructive conversation about the role of policy, the public sector, and citizens themselves.

State-level government accessible (for Whites)

Among many Whites, Arkansans state-level politics seem relatively within reach, as though people do (or can) have some say. This pattern may reflect recent history of some politicians being held accountable. While dominant national patterns still hold in Arkansas, dislike for state legislators comes across as somewhat more muted.

[Arkansas] comes together a little bit more...and of course, too, the people of Arkansas, I think if you don't do a real good job, they'll probably get you out of there pretty quick. (conservative White man, 58)

The state government is, if you get a good governor, it thrives...and if you have good representation from the different counties in the legislature...[And what kinds of things does a good governor do as opposed to a not so good governor?] He listens, for one thing...And I think that the governor we have now is doing that. (moderate White woman, 73)

Arkansas is small enough - you probably know someone you can reach out to. [Have you ever done that?] I have. I have a friend who's in office now, and I have another friend who used to be in office, and friends who are reps. (liberal White woman, 42)

Potential implication(s): Communicators can embed examples of state-level successes into discussion of the role of the public sector, and tap into appreciation (among Whites) of a relatively accessible level of government.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Race is clearly the major cleavage in the state.

While Arkansans are often very unwilling to talk about it – in fact, numerous people (Whites in general and Blacks when speaking to a White researcher) took some pains to deny that race is an important factor – Blacks and Whites seem to live in separate political worlds, which overlap, but are clearly different. In most states, research participants spoke about “the people” or “regular people” having a say – imagining a sort of politics that sets aside race, religion and other divisions. Arkansans do this much more infrequently – which may represent clear-sighted awareness of real divisions, but may also count as a significant obstacle towards the sense of collective stakes.

*It's not just blacks - it's everybody. It's going to take a whole village to make a community - just one person can't do it by himself, **or one color.** (liberal African American woman, 56)*

My grandchildren have talked about how they hate to go to school during black America week, because it causes friction. These little kids don't have a clue, and my generation didn't cause anything - we didn't have slaves, and I was raised to respect everybody - my point is we're dragging this out and we're making it an issue. It's no longer an issue - we can't help what happened in the past - drop it. Let's just all be one big happy family - let's be people together - it's ridiculous. I don't go around calling myself a Dutch-American. (liberal White woman, 56)

Maybe later, coming together as a whole, in spite of what race, nationality, you know. We're all God's children. We all should be one. Only thing that would make it better is coming together as one. (conservative African American man, 66)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Pine Bluff: I'd engaged a (White conservative, 56) supervisor and her younger colleague (African American apolitical, 26) in conversation about playing a role in government. When the older woman found out the other had never even registered to vote, she fixed her with a stern look and said to her embarrassed co-worker, 'I've voted in every election since I was old enough to register, and the reason I started was because I had an opinion on what's going on locally.' Later I took the White woman's advice on the best restaurant to eat at. The clientele was entirely White and seemed to be composed of movers and shakers of the town – local leaders, politicians, business people, real estate agents, all eating and visiting in a cozy, clubby atmosphere. It was easy to imagine this as a place where decisions are made. The only African Americans to be seen were on the wait staff.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

The most striking difference between experiences based on race is that in predominantly Black areas (e.g. the Delta region), Arkansans sometimes expressed explicitly that they would be actively prevented from having a say in governance, to the point of being physically harmed or harassed if they were to stand up and advocate for themselves. To these African Americans, Whites and Government are often conflated as powers that are hostile to any idea of Black self-assertion and power. Disenfranchisement of felons is often understood as a deliberate method of preventing engagement and power in Black communities.

[First man] You keep going with all these positive things, okay, you going to keep on building a little group, you're going to keep fellowshipping with different people, after while, somebody's going to get tired of hearing all that positive. Somebody going to shut you down. That's the truth.

[Second man] Or try to.

[First man] Right.

[Second man] We ain't going to let them. We ain't going to let them shut us down. (liberal African American men, 20s)

We've been voting for how long, and what has happened? Some things got better, most things got worse. I feel like you do have to take another step other than voting...whether it's taking a stand or standing firm, because some people do take a stand, but they get knocked right back down. (liberal African American woman, 23)

They're going to find some way to get you in the system, where they take all your rights. Once you become a felon or anything like that you lose your voting rights and stuff like that. They'll find out some kind of way to put a felony on you. (liberal African American man, 62)

Potential implication(s): It is obviously more challenging to persuade audiences who feel disenfranchised that government has acted in ways that “benefit all of us” or that we can all “have a say.” Nonetheless, African American audiences in Arkansas and elsewhere generally responded positively to the core message ideas presented in the national report and mentioned above. On the other hand, communicators should take several factors into account when addressing audiences of color, discussed below.

Community as the “basic political unit”

In contrast to other places where the political ideal is the activated, engaged *individual* who stands up for their ideas and their interests, Arkansans (and especially African-Americans) are likely so see the united, active, engaged *community* as the necessary actor of politics. While this is a helpful pattern in some respects – since government is ultimately about collective stakes and action – it also creates some anxieties and tensions, because it is easy for people to see the ways in which their communities are not united and not on the same page about things.

I feel like if we could just come together, every group, if we came together, that would be the start, (liberal African American woman, 23)

Once people get together and start working toward what they want, there's not really too much to stand in their way, and history has shown that over and over. So it's not that we don't care, it's that we don't care to come together. (moderate African American man, 19)

Changing the system...One person cannot do it. It's going to take really people to stick together to make sure things happen like it's supposed to happen. That's my belief. (liberal African American man, 62)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

At one point we all worked together, and then it became to where it became just the individual people working for what they wanted. And that's not right. That's not a good way to do it. (liberal White man, 63)

You need peoples combined in order to make something work. One person themselves [shakes head] The only somebody I knew that started that was ...well, it was quite a few who did it, but I'm talking about here with Dr. King. He started this on himself, but he had backers. (liberal African American man, 68)

It's black people, we are too divided. We're for ourself instead of for one another. (apolitical African American woman, 37)

Potential implication(s): This patterns makes “success stories” even more important in Arkansas than in other places. It is critical to offer real-life examples of communities successfully coming together to create change through government institutions. In fact, *among the most disenfranchised*, this was really the only approach that showed potential to get people to re-think their disengagement with government.

Action through non-governmental associations

African-Americans in Arkansas are much more likely than Whites to look for change through non-governmental action. Churches, for example, offer a plausible mechanism for community-level activism – while the idea that government could be in people’s control, or could be used as a tool of self-determination and problem-solving, is almost entirely alien in Black communities.

We all need to participate and take an active role, and it's our responsibility to make our community better, not the government's responsibility. (conservative White man, 65)

[What kinds of steps beyond voting can you imagine appeal most to you?] Personally, just becoming more involved in the schools, and of course it crosses, for me, over into the church. They may already have some activities, or responsibilities even...So, yeah, I could stand to become more involved. (liberal African American woman, 49)

if you can somehow instill that basic principle, the privilege of being involved and making your voice heard and everything, but you have to start at the very building tools of how that starts. I mean it could be your PTA, it could be your church board. It could be anything like that. Then you build up to that's why it's important to follow local things, and then state things, that sort of thing. (conservative White man, 55)

To me government is sometimes so far removed from what's actually happening in our community. At my church every Saturday...we feed people who can't afford a meal or who just show up. A lot of them are homeless or indigent people, and I've taken my daughter down there, and to me in a lot of ways that's more meaningful. (liberal White woman, 44)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Potential implication(s): This pattern underscores both the importance of “success stories” in general, and the importance of emphasizing that these include partnership with city councils or other units of government. The idea of a “toolkit” designed with these particular dynamics in mind can also play an important role. The right stories can help teach people about the intersection between churches, community activism and leveraging government as a problem-solving mechanism.

“ARKANSAS IS DIFFERENT.”

There was a sense among many research participants that Arkansas is different from the rest of the country – possibly less “advanced” in various ways, and less fertile ground for progress and activism.

Now, you would have asked me that anywhere else, I would have spoke so good on it because they're doing so many things. They're doing things to prevent people from going to prison, they're helping you get in school. Anything that keeps you from destroying your life. These places [in Arkansas] is about, hey, we want your life screwed up. (liberal African American man, 40)

[It's going to take] unity, and there is none. Even, not just race unity but I mean class is a big issue, I think. People...just can't mingle...It's really, really gnawing, especially for somebody [trying] to get things done, you know? And it's like, God, why can't you guys talk to each other? I don't know...I've never experienced that anywhere else. (liberal White woman, 55)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Benton: Talking with a local woman (White, 53) in a supermarket parking lot. She gestured around her as we talked about the benefits of government. She gave local leaders credit for bringing in these new, better stores. She gave most of the credit to 'outsiders' coming in – now that Benton was practically part of Little Rock. 'Most Arkansans don't expect much, so a little bit of improvement – even if it's not much – goes a long way here.' It just took a few people to come into Saline county with visions of something better. She saw the same pattern of low expectations and inertia playing out in Arkansas as a whole when compared to other states.

Potential implication(s): Success stories that take place elsewhere do not necessarily prove that “people would do it here.” On the other hand, stories of successful action in Arkansas proved compelling and motivating – e.g.:

Down in **Dermott (Chicot county), residents** badly needed jobs and economic development. It wasn't until local people worked with the City Council to organize themselves into a Community Development group that they could use tax dollars and get outside government grants to help with training and loans to open businesses – and to finally re-start the economy of their corner of Arkansas. To accomplish this, it took people really taking control of their government by going beyond just voting.

In the **Ozarks, Newton County residents** needed jobs and economic development. So they organized themselves through their local Resource Council – and directed tax dollars and grant money into helping support local tourism. Through smart use of their government resources, they've been able to attract money and tourists into the county, which supports local business owners, workers and entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION



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Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is *possible* to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

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Arkansas communicators have the opportunity to create more engaged and constructive dialog about the role of the public sector in promoting a thriving state, and the way that a healthy democratic process works – and also to address the racial divide that characterizes the experience of Arkansans, creating a more unified sense that “the people” can act together. Doing so will not only help shift the “cultural common sense” about particular policies, but about collective efforts and stakes more broadly.