

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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Colorado Supplement



INTRODUCTION

This memo is a supplement to the national report, “Subjects or Citizens? Creating engaged conversations about government,” which outlines findings and recommendations from a multi-state study of Americans’ attitudes towards government as of 2016, and 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 Colorado, including a series of ethnographic visits in late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a diverse mix of roughly 150 Coloradans, across the following locations: Arvada, Colorado Springs, Denver, Eagle, Fort Collins, Glenwood Springs, Grand Junction, Greeley, Longmont, Loveland, Pueblo, Rifle, and Vail. The research also included interviews with a diverse set of 14 leaders in the state, recruited by the project’s Colorado advisor group.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to Colorado, like other states, is that 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 Coloradans and leaders in the state.

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

Q: You don't have a lot of faith in democracy at this point?

*A: Not the way we run it. I mean I absolutely think that when it was started, they had the right idea. Something went wrong somewhere down the line and I'm not sure how to fix it.
(35yr White female, moderate)*

Until the Supreme Court starts enforcing the 10th Amendment, I've given up all my rights. Until the Supreme Court decides that state and local government have more power than they have today, the federal government has stolen that away. (69yr White male, conservative)

In our city, we recently had three city council members recalled... [for] not being transparent and doing things behind closed doors. And the perception, and it's a reality, is that sometimes they were doing things that were self-serving. (65yr Hispanic male, liberal)

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

It is helpful to focus on ways in which public sector benefits state/community as a whole (“for the people”).

*Can we talk about the good things that happen? My kids are little - they love going to the library. What if they closed down every library that’s around us? We don’t ever talk about them being open. Yeah, I’d rather talk about the good stuff...I would want to talk about what we’re going to do for our schools.
(25yr African American female, liberal)*

[I value] basic services - roads, the things we share, utilities, management of those shared resources. (58yr White male, liberal)

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

*It’s good for people to take a role in their government. And in my mind the best thing we could do to affect that would be education, educating people about how to get involved.
(45yr White female, centrist)*

My “Voting Plus One” would definitely have to go for homelessness. I’m so hurt that there are so many homeless people now, so I would vote for them to have better shelters, more shelters at least. (32 yr African American female conservative)

*If we’re going to have a representative democracy, it has to go from the bottom up which means that the average person needs to participate at a local level so that the local level representatives can then trickle... I call it the trickle up process.
(40yr White male, conservative)*

The “Vote Plus One” idea [is] definitely a better idea than just voting. Going above and beyond voting - public service, community service, things like that. (51yr White female, libertarian)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Researchers noted a number of patterns and dynamics in Colorado 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.

Relative satisfaction at the state level

Among average Coloradans there is a sense that the state is in relatively good shape when it comes to functionality and governance.

I think we do fine. We're usually kind of pioneering, like we usually get things right before the rest of the country does - equal rights, laws, things like that. (35yr White female, moderate)

Oh, I would say they're probably just right on pace with everybody else. It takes them a while to get stuff done just like everybody else. (64yr White male, conservative)

[Colorado is] probably in the top third. Large states that have been around longer with larger bases of people and have dealt with the problems longer know how to respond quicker. (40yr White male, conservative)

I think we try to get things done without getting into politics better than a lot of places do. (45yr White female, moderate)

Note that these comments are not about “government” – and that conversations focused on that term tend to be more negative – but that the comments do reflect a sense that at the state level, there is a good deal to be satisfied about.

Potential implication(s): Communicators can tap into a general sense of satisfaction with a smooth running state by embedding discussion of government and policy in a positive and aspirational discussion of the state's strong points and successes.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Appreciation of local government

Across the political spectrum, Coloradans tend to feel their voices are heard on the local level, particularly in communities smaller than Denver. Local government feels connected to the community.

You can go there and rant all you want in front of the City Council [in Fort Collins]. Like when we had the fracking here, there was a huge turnout. You feel like your voice is heard. (60s White female, liberal)

They definitely take into opinion the average person's feedback, especially here in Colorado Springs. It's kind of a smaller community...they live here, they know what the everyday person needs and wants, and I think that translates into how they formulate the policies. (32yr White male, liberal)

I was born and raised in Greeley so I have no idea of any other places, so I know just considering...this little section, I think things get handled pretty quickly. (53yr Hispanic female, liberal)

You can get engaged in anything here. It's not about who you know or how many years you've lived here - it's about being interested in making this a better place. People are very open and always willing to let new people jump in ... (45yr White female, moderate)

Greeley has a sub-government entity downtown called DDA, Downtown Development Authority, and I can just walk in there anytime...I had plants torn out of the pot in front of my front door, and they came over and fixed the problem (69yr White male, conservative)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Talking with a woman (White, 40, conservative) who works in the mayor's office. Clearly she's more aware of the ubiquity of public structures than the average person. 'It's everywhere,' she said gesturing around the city street upon which we were talking. She pushed back against the idea that people don't have a say - at least at the local and state level. 'Many people have chosen apathy, but there is still enough activity that public policy does reflect the public's desires and its needs.'

Potential implication(s): Communicators can take advantage of positive images and examples of local involvement as they paint a picture of people working with and through government to create the kinds of places they want to live in.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Ambivalence about influx of people

Particularly in Denver, researchers heard a fair amount of concern about a rapidly growing population.

One of the main things is the influx of people moving here. A lot of Coloradans who have lived here their whole lives are not happy about it because we can't afford rent anymore - there's nowhere for us to live, but there aren't any regulations from CO to limit the amount of people who move here at any given time to help control rental rates. (23yr White female, liberal)

I think our city [Denver] is definitely growing, so it's bringing a lot of people here, but also the people who have been here in the outside communities, like the homeless, they get put on the back burner, and the people who have lived here and have been working hard are getting pushed out because our rent is going sky high. So I feel like they're making it good in some areas, but they're making it better for people outside of Denver to come here. (32yr African American female, conservative)

One of the big [issues I'd love to have an influence on] is the influx of population here. (23yr White female, liberal)

Potential implication(s): Regardless of their stances on growth-related issues, communicators can address the topic and point out the role of policy in managing change, and encourage audiences to engage in order to have a say about outcomes.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Concerns about immigration

Immigration is a passion-inspiring issue across the political spectrum, with both liberals and conservatives concerned about competition with “American workers” and other potential negative impacts on Coloradans – including general concern about cultural change.

I don't think the US will be unified as it always was. I mean, it happened to Rome, it happened to the British Empire, it happened to the Mongols. What make the US so special? Because they have the internet? If anything, that seems counterproductive to uniformity. (29yr Pacific Islander male, moderate)

Utah is a sanctuary state [for “illegal immigrants”] because they want the cheap labor. That's why this country, one reason why this country is falling apart, because it's too fragmented. There's no cohesion anymore, you know what I mean? As far as I'm concerned, they have too many ethnicities, too. And if you look at other countries that are prospering and their governments are stable, they're homogeneous...(68yr White male, conservative)

We've bent over backwards for all these immigrants coming over anymore. They didn't do that 100 years ago, but now we've allowed their languages into our school districts and stuff, so, it's all changing. (64yr White male, conservative)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Colorado Springs: Sitting at a small sidewalk café with an older man (69, White conservative). He's a chaplain, engaged with his community. He says, 'Public policy is fine, as long as it has in mind the heart of the American people, the safety of the American people, and the best interests of the American people. So, in that way, public policy is good.' Except when it comes under 'radical, hardcore government control,' I encourage him to elaborate and he angrily goes on about immigration policy. 'They take jobs away from the American people...He takes the job away from me, and that's one of my real, real pet peeves, and I'm very strong on anti-immigration, I really am. I know there's one minority that says, 'We own the United States, we've taken over the United States.' I'm not at liberty to mention the minority because that's racist, and I can't do that here.'

Potential implication(s): One impact of the kind of conversation emerging from the research – regarding having a say, policies that benefit us all, going beyond voting, etc. – is that it reinforces the idea of a population (“the people”) that shares a set of interests. While people obviously can't be expected to forget about ways in which we may be divided, communicators may be able to promote unifying perspectives through an emphasis on how “we the people” can and should benefit from public decisions, and can and should have a say in them.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Appreciation of public lands

The research confirmed that Coloradans appreciate the natural beauty of the state, and the role of laws and public policy in protecting it.

One way this priority expressed itself was through objections to fracking.

I think there are probably a lot of issues that need to be aggressively attacked by our state senate, such as fracking is getting entirely out of control in our state, and I think there needs to be some serious regulations because it's using our water, which is then poisoned and can't be disposed of properly, and water is precious in Colorado. (44yr White female, liberal)

Environmental issues, absolutely. Protecting our public lands is a priority for me, protecting quality of the water, opposing fracking and things that damage the environment. (32yr White female, liberal)

Potential implication(s): Communicators should continue to use public lands as a touchstone in discussions of how collective decisions can positively impact quality of life, and how critical it is for average people to engage in the process that leads to those decisions.

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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Colorado 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. Doing so will not only help shift the “cultural common sense” about particular policies, but about collective efforts and stakes more broadly.