

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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Michigan 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 Michigan, including a series of ethnographic visits in late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a diverse mix of roughly 230 Michiganders, across the following locations: Grand Rapids, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Ypsilanti, Lansing, East Lansing, Flint, Battle Creek, Ann Arbor and Greater Detroit (downtown, Davison, Mexicantown, as well as Oak Park and Highland Park).

(Note that roughly half of these participated as part of an effort focused specifically on dynamics among people of color, which are the subject of a separate memo. Many of the particular observations about Michigan are included in that paper.)

The research also included interviews with a diverse set of eleven leaders in the state, recruited by the project’s Michigan advisor group.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to Michigan 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 Michiganders and leaders in the state.

Like other Americans, Michiganders tend to see government as separate from them and, frequently, uninterested in their points of view.

[Government] has become a machine that ignores or doesn't feel it needs our input...They could care less what the citizens of Michigan think or want. (liberal White man, 64, Allen Park)

We do see government as a negative. We don't trust it. Every time, again, every time we ran to government, government showed us a different face. (liberal African American man, 55, Detroit)

People are starting to tune out and give up and not try and participate. Even my own daughter who's 19, who can vote now, said to me, "God, Mom, I read all this stuff and I listen to all this stuff and at this point I feel like why should I even vote?" Well, I got pretty upset with her...I said, "You know, people have died for you to be able to vote and to have the freedom to vote and have that voice, so don't you ever say that to me again." That's what I told her. But, again, it's a feeling. It's a feeling of, you know, we don't make a difference anyway. (conservative White woman, 52, Jackson)

I think that we should do what our forefathers did and actually peacefully revolt, but be prepared to die. Because that is honestly what this country is turning around on. Just because we don't have a king does not mean that we're not ruled. (liberal African American woman, 31, Detroit)

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

And the core recommendations from the project, intended to work across great diversity – of political ideology, rural-urban-suburban divides, generational divides and so on – were greatly shaped by conversations with the people of Michigan. The state is a good representation of overall American diversity, and finding effective narrative elements related to government was partly a process of figuring out how to talk to the full breadth of Michiganders.

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

If you don't go beyond voting, you won't have a say, you won't have a seat, you won't have anything. So you have to go 'Plus One,' plus two, plus three, plus four, plus one hundred... You have to go beyond whatever it is that you think you're doing now. (liberal African American man, 56, Oak Park)

I like the idea of voting plus one. I just like the way it's phrased, and I'd never heard it...voting plus one would be to, as you suggested, participate in your civic responsibility of voting, but then perhaps going beyond...If people felt like their voice could be heard, and by sort of converging their voices in order to work on specific issues, I think that people might feel more empowered. (liberal White man, 35, Kalamazoo)

Voting plus one - meaning take the extra step?...Yeah, that's a good idea. Like writing a letter to your congressman or your representative or whoever. Yeah, it sounds good. (conservative White man, 56, Battle Creek)

When people take a step farther than just voting, they own something. It's like a little bit of pride, some ownership that can be as easily quieted or squashed. (moderate White woman, Kalamazoo)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Kalamazoo: Talking with a man who runs a fitness center (41, Black Puerto Rican heritage). He sits at his desk, in a black T-shirt and fingerless gloves, rotating back and forth on his chair as he speaks. He is very interested in this conversation about 'empowerment'. To him the gym is like the traditional barbershop where people come together to talk about issues. 'We get a lot of different members here – we got NAACP members, a lot of police, a commissioner, she comes here,' all kinds of people. His wish is that rather than just talking, this kind of gathering should actually result in changes. He likes the idea of going beyond voting. 'I think that's a great idea. That actually gives people - I won't say for sure power - but it gives us a little more leeway as opposed to just leaving it up to the politicians to decide. It actually makes our opinions count...It's like giving opinions, and going the extra step to make sure you're heard.'

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 Michigan 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.

Not giving up on good government

Michiganders, though often frustrated with their politicians and feeling that they don't have much say in the decisions being made – have not entirely given up on the idea of self-governance, and were responsive to the directions we tested.

In some states it is rare to hear anything positive about the state government, and it might even be odd or socially awkward to voice views along these lines. But in Michigan, people were often nuanced and hedged in their criticisms.

You got to vote. You got to stay with the system. It's built on our forefathers and if it worked for them, it could work for us if we all get together and focus, and vote on the right candidate that's going to take our word and our concerns to Lansing. (liberal African American man, 50, Allen Park)

If we do give up our government that we have right now, we can always rebuild another one. I think we need to. I think we need better government, stronger government that's actually for the people. For everybody, not the five percent that have millions of dollars. (conservative White man, 24, Allen Park)

I don't believe [democracy] is broken. Honestly, I think there's a lot of things that are showed, like on social media, that are bad, but they don't really look at good things as well...And even if it has maybe fallen a slight bit, it's not like it's not fixable. So, there's always hope. (Asian American woman, 19, Grand Rapids)

I think Michigan is in a really good spot, but you can look at some other states where they've like killed all their funding to their school system and they're going to just have a generation of idiots. And, you know, the people that... that is a mess that will have to be cleaned up at some point. (moderate White man, 48, Grand Rapids)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Look at the Social Security Act and the New Deal during the Great Depression. It's possible. It's possible to get this country back to its original state, or into a better state. I have faith in this country. I have faith in the new generation, the millennials. So yeah. (moderate Hispanic man, 21, East Lansing)

I can understand why people would be like, 'I just don't even want to learn about it, I don't want to think about it, because they're not doing what I voted them to do.'...but I still think it's something that we need to work past, both as people and politicians. I mean we built our country on democracy and it worked for a long period of time. Even though it's broken now, I think that if we, on both sides, acknowledge this and work past it, I think it could still be wonderful, still be good. (liberal White woman, 22, Grand Rapids)

Potential implication(s): This pattern should mean that, at least with many audiences, and despite high-profile problems and failures, communicators can build on the assumption that government is important to the wellbeing of the state as a whole, and that it is possible to get it right, particularly if the population stays engaged.

Race as an explicit factor

While many African-Americans around the country tend to avoid talking about race as a key factor in determining who has power and who benefits from government action, many others, including in Michigan, do not shy away from expressing views on the matter.

They had the Tuskegee experiment. This is the Detroit experiment...that's what it was. Look at what happened. It went straight down. Everybody's like, 'Hey, hey, hey! We got to put a black man back in office [as mayor of Detroit]! We got to put a black man!' I say nah, it ain't going to work. In order for this city to get back up, you're going to have to put the white guy in office, because then all his friends will come, and money's going to come. (liberal African American man, 55, Detroit)

Voting just shows that you care, [but] that's one thing with the black community is we don't have a sense of care. Because we automatically think, oh, the government's not for us, the government's against us. (liberal African American man, 23, Ypsilanti)

They're waiting for the comet to hit Detroit as it is and then rebuild it...I am an '80s baby. I grew up in the Detroit renaissance, where everybody had Malcolm X shirts and Rick James beads...I grew up in an awesome school and I learned not only about my civics and my history, but also my Black history. Like we were taught not to segregate by race but to still be proud of who and what you are, and contribute...Now, they're waiting for us to self-destruct. (liberal African American woman, 31, Detroit)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Particularly in Detroit – and distinct from perspectives encountered elsewhere in the state – African-Americans were likely to be very skeptical about the possibilities of government “for the people,” and to associate this skepticism with racial dynamics. It is no accident that predominantly black areas are hit especially hard by economic problems, and the consequences of political mismanagement.

Potential implication(s): If communicators have wells of faith to tap into regarding the possibilities for government, these are least likely to be encountered in Detroit, and particularly with African American audiences. For further discussion of these dynamics and ideas for addressing them, see the separate memo on African American and Hispanic audiences.

More complex view of politics

In many states, regular people’s political analysis tends to stay at an extremely simple level, and to revolve around ideas such as:

“It’s all about us (regular people)
vs. them (powerful elites).”

“Money automatically corrupts and separates
us from our legislatures.”

“The state legislature is all bad and working
against regular people.”

In Michigan, by contrast, presumably due to the various high-profile, complex events of recent years – such as the crises related to the Flint water supply and the Detroit public schools – people seem more aware of the complexities of politics. The details of these stories have been front and center in public discourse, and Michiganders have had little choice about whether to hear about them. While they may be deeply skeptical, they are also likely to acknowledge various complex dynamics. Put another way, discussions tend to feel more “real” and less like simplistic abstractions.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

I mean, we need a government. That's essential to good living, I feel like. But some of the things that the government's been able to do, I completely don't agree with. (liberal White man, 22, Detroit)

It's easy to sit here and make policy, arm wave and say we all need better roads. Okay, how do we get there? You need a way to implement it to get better roads, you need a way to engage the population in an understanding that there's a cost today to maintain the roads. (conservative White man, 55, Jackson)

I just think that there's so many road blocks put up to the general person to be able to have their voice heard, and money has become so intrinsic into hiring elected officials with PACs and campaign donations that the individual has really been lost along the way. I think the only way we can help to change that is to form our own groups and committees and say enough is enough. (conservative White man, 49, Jackson)

Why do we have all these mayors and these senators and these governors? Nobody's fixed the problem, and there's not been a single someone to put forth the effort to fix the problem. The problem is we need to generate income, revenue for the state, and it don't have to be playing on the poor trying to hit a lottery, or a guy at a liquor store. Now that's a real conversation, whether they want to address it or not. But they take jobs and go to Mexico and they give them a break. (moderate African American man, 43, Jackson)

I think [going beyond voting] makes good sense, but in order to go beyond something you have to first be able to get to it, then you go beyond it. So I think that would take some concerted efforts in issues like community policing, empowering neighborhoods with good services - to build the confidence again and the community where they feel that their vote

does count. (liberal African American woman, 62, Highland Park)

Importantly, though, this relative realism doesn't necessarily make Michiganders more optimistic and engaged. If anything it raises the bar for discussions, and means that simplistic stories about the possibilities of government are not likely to ring true. There is a strong sense that there has been a great deal of political talk (and activism) that has resulted in a disappointing amount of change.

I don't know how you change it and I don't know how you make it more attractive for people to participate, except actions speak louder than words. (conservative White woman, 52, Jackson)

Potential implication(s): Communicators in Michigan can probably assume a somewhat higher level of sophistication and realism about politics than communicators elsewhere, though the core themes should be the same. More particularly, it is probably more important here than elsewhere to acknowledge that engagement will not lead to immediate or guaranteed results, as many Michiganders have seen for themselves – but to find ways of avoiding fatalism nonetheless. “Real victories are possible, and have happened here and elsewhere.” “Going beyond voting isn't a guarantee, but it's the one tool that can work.” Etc.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Anxieties about unity

Concerns about unity and disunity in Michigan's African American communities is strong, and especially in Detroit. A common view is that unless communities come together solidly, which is hard to achieve, progress of any kind is difficult. All American communities have doubts about the possibility of achieving consensus and unity, but in places like Detroit, this is seen as a potentially insurmountable roadblock to progress, whereas in other places, Americans might be satisfied to imagine how *individual* steps beyond voting can help create a stronger and more effective democratic system.

People like the Koch brothers...got their own agenda. And they figure if we get the little man to just give up and not keep pushing, now we can push our agenda forward, whatever that might be. Because, you know, as a group, we're stronger. When we start to break us up into individuals, we're real weak then. (liberal African American man, 50, Allen Park)

I just moved here from Detroit eight months ago, and people are definitely not unified out there at all. I can't even tell you... there's a lot of judgment and BS, and that's one of the reasons I moved out here - people are more unified. (liberal African American woman, 22, Ypsilanti)

I think if we all got together and we were all in agreement, the laws would be changed as far as school, healthcare, the judicial system, how kids are dealt with when they get into criminal activities. If we all put the same effort into it to work towards getting it together rather than to tear it down, we could make a difference. (liberal African American woman, 37, Oak Park)

People just have to get together instead of going against each other - get together and stand up for what they believe in. If they want something to happen, everyone needs to come together. (liberal African American man, 45, Detroit)

If everyone is in unity, then whatever people put their minds to should be able to be achieved. However we have the divide and conquer thing that's always going on, so I feel like that's in place purposely to prevent people from unifying and achieving certain things. (liberal African American woman, 30, Detroit)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Flint, Michigan: Talking with a pair of young Black women: one sitting on a chipped white metal chair outside her little brick house. We were talking about whether the people of Flint could do anything about the water crisis. She was utterly pessimistic - first because the government doesn't care about them and second because the people of Flint won't stand up for themselves. 'They ain't going to do it. They ain't going to do it at all, because if that's the case it would be more people coming together about this water situation, but instead it's more killings than coming together to say, okay, come on everybody, let's get together. This is going on, our kids is getting messed up, we getting messed up, let's come together. No. They rather shoot and kill each other. They stupid.' She shook her head and squinted in disgust and sadness, 'They still doing what they do best, being dumb.'

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Potential implication(s): Community-focused perspectives are a head start towards understandings about government as a tool for achieving collective goals. For this reason, communicators should continue to encourage, not discourage, the positive idea that there can be real strength in numbers. On the other hand, there are two considerations to keep in mind related to the challenge of seeing divided community as a deal-breaker:

- Consider promoting the idea that individuals can take steps beyond voting and contribute to more active democracy, and these steps matter even if the community hasn't come together in overall unity. Just as every vote counts, every additional individual step counts, only more so.
- Consider emphasizing specific goals that communities can come together around, even if they are divided in other respects. "Success stories" about people acting to promote updated schools, neighborhood jobs programs, and new toxic dumping regulations, are all compelling in part because they focus on simple, "no-brainer" goals (and achievements), and steer clear of questions about whether these communities are united in a broader sense.

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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Michigan 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 Michiganders, 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.

For further discussion of racial dynamics in particular, please see the supplemental memo on African American and Hispanic audiences.