

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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North Carolina 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 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 North Carolina, including a series of ethnographic visits in early and late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a diverse mix of over 200 North Carolinians, across the following locations: Raleigh, Hillsborough, Haw River, Pittsboro, Siler City; **Greater Charlotte area:** Gastonia, Charlotte, Concord, Davidson, Shelby, Lincolnton; **Triad area:** Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point, Asheboro, China Grove, ; **Mountains:** Asheville, Hendersonville, Saluda, Brevard, Waynesville, Black Mountain, Hickory.

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

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to North Carolina is that, as 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 North Carolinians and leaders in the state.

In fact, North Carolina was both the first state and last state visited for the project, and therefore played a special role in helping the researchers identify challenges and opportunities, and refine recommendations.

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

I feel like regardless of what people vote on or have to say about what the government decides, they are the people, the head honchos, the people that's in charge. Our decisions, at the end of the day, really don't count, if you ask me. (apolitical African American man, 24, Charlotte)

We have no say anymore, it seems like, and we need that. I mean, look around. We need it. (conservative White woman, 47, China Grove)

I just saw the most marvelous clip from Jimmy Carter, who said, "We are truly living an oligarchy here in this country," and that's kind of where it all trips me up, because if that's true it really doesn't matter what we do. (conservative White woman, 60, Waynesville)

I'll go and I'll vote and I'll try to do my part, make my impression, but ultimately, people in DC have more power than some guy who works at a bank in Winston-Salem. So I think what's going to happen is going to happen. I can try to do my part, but I'm also not going to bend over backwards and lose sleep over it. (conservative White man, 21, Winston-Salem)

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The core recommendations from the project – which need to be effective across a wide cross-section of Americans if they are to have a chance of shaping “cultural common sense” – were greatly shaped by conversations with North Carolinians. North Carolina is a microcosm of overall American diversity, and finding effective narrative elements related to government was partly about figuring out how to talk to such a wide range of North Carolinians.

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.

I think it's a very good idea. People need to be more hands-on and more demanding about what they really want instead of having to sit by and listen to what people in upper government tell them to do. (liberal Hispanic woman, 20, Asheville)

I think it's good. People should get involved. When you leave all the power to the people in the White House, it doesn't become about the people. It becomes more about the higher power - more of a dictatorship type thing than democracy. (liberal White man, 20, Hendersonville)

That would be great, we having a say even after we vote, to talk to some people that could take some stuff even further than what we could. That would be good. (moderate African American woman, 54, High Point)

I think we should work harder to make it what it's supposed to be. The government is about the people - it's what the people make it, so if it's not right then it can be fixed. (liberal African American man, 45, Charlotte)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

In the shadow of Bank of America's towering skyscraper, Charlotteans from all walks of life are getting lunch. A 53-year old businessman without a jacket sits in his car to stay warm as we chat. He identifies himself as a 'Constitutional conservative.' He voices typical complaints about taxes 'killing the middle class,' and corporations on the take. He responds well when I introduce the basic idea that together we all should have more control over how things run, and agreed that in fact regular people 'should have all the say.' He stressed that 'Government needs to be able to listen...so it's a two-way channel. But it starts with people being active and raising their voice, trying to be heard.'

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

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.

That's what government's about, people working together to accomplish things, to meet needs...It's the type of environment that I'd like to live in, where the government is addressing all the people's needs instead of just some people. (moderate White man, 68, Brevard)

Personally, I'm a libertarian, but I do just like to see sometimes as a reminder how our government is working for us, you know, I mean our dollars do pay for it so it's nice to be reminded, hey, it actually did this and this and this. (conservative White woman, 25, Hillsborough)

That's very well put. When you talk to people about government, I like to point out, do you like to drive on nice streets? Do you like traffic lights that stop and let others go by? Do you like public schools, universities? That's all government. It's become popular - we all know there's a big movement in this country to do away with government altogether it seems, or as they like to put it reduce it down so it shrinks down the sink, but that's unrealistic and we don't want that. We would all miss our government if it wasn't there. (liberal White man, 62, Waynesville)

NORTH CAROLINA “SUCCESS STORIES”

The following examples of people coming together with government to create positive change were used in North Carolina conversations, and resonated well across broad audiences.

For many of us, the word “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because that’s most of what we hear about on the news. We hear less about the fact that the power of people working together is the power of our democracy. For example, in Polk and Henderson counties, Duke Energy was planning to run power lines through historic downtowns like in Saluda, as well as through people’s front yards. Concerned local people organized with a non-profit and their local government - and managed to get the whole community involved. Using local websites and social media they informed people with plain language explanations of zoning issues and about when and where meetings were happening. Other towns got involved as well and in the end Duke Energy routed its power lines outside their communities. To make this happen, it took people really making the most of their government by going beyond just voting.

In Raleigh, bad relations between police and many communities have been a problem for years. Recently residents organized themselves, held meetings to come up with solutions and are working with the City Council to change policies and open up new lines of communication and accountability for officers and residents. To make this happen, it took people really making the most of their government by going beyond just voting.

The Raleigh thing was interesting I think. I'd be more interested in finding out more about how they did that and what was really, truly accomplished in the end.

(conservative White man, 53, Charlotte)

A group of people that had an interest in getting something accomplished or getting something done, and they came together, and because they came together they were able to get it done, right? They were able to kind of swing that. [So what's your reaction to that statement?] It's good! I like it. I think that we all should have the power to make changes like that. (conservative Hispanic man, 34, Lincolnton)

It sounds like people want to be a part of the process, and that they're doing just that. (moderate White man, 24, Asheville)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Researchers noted a number of patterns and dynamics in North Carolina 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.

Concern about corporate influence

Americans everywhere have a more or less vague sense that powerful interests – including private corporations and business interests – have hijacked government to their own ends. But in North Carolina people are much more likely to have specific concerns about this. Contributing factors to these perspectives ranged from the Governor’s ties with Duke energy to the role of the tech and other industries in bringing outsiders into the state (and changing its political culture), to corporations pressuring the state legislature about the so-called Bathroom Bill.

In short, North Carolinians tend to be even more aware than other Americans that to some extent their political will is in direct competition with specific corporate interests, and they are very concerned that the public’s interests should play a larger role in decisions being made.

The voters would have the final say-so instead of lobbyists and money. So the more people that are involved, absolutely the better our government would be. They would listen to us. (conservative White woman, 51, Lincolnton)

Whoever is wooing them to get their vote with their purse strings. They’re not listening to people like us - they’re listening to whoever can write the fattest check, so that plays a role in the distrust. (conservative White woman, 45, Saluda)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Corporations have people that are lobbying for things so probably there needs to be lobbying for the people, not just like for tax breaks for corporations and businesses trying to come...because we definitely need that in North Carolina to help, you know, get money into education...We should have people saying, hey,...maybe we should just buy new school buses for the school. (moderate African American man, 26, Winston-Salem)

Potential implication(s): North Carolina communicators should have somewhat freer rein than in other locations to point out that if people don't have a say, other interests will dominate decision-making in communities, the state and the country. In much of the U.S. this perspective must be expressed delicately – or it risks sounding “liberal” and/or “anti-business. While North Carolina communicators seeking to connect with broad audiences should still be very careful about these traps, people’s concerns about specific instances of corporate influence should create opportunities to make this point in concrete and practical ways.

Low awareness of Moral Mondays

The researchers were very surprised to find that North Carolinians either are generally unaware of Moral Mondays, or at least do not connect it with the topic of public influence on government decisions. The topic was only brought up twice (once in a positive light and once negatively) in 159 conversations specifically focused on people coming together to have more say in public affairs. Researchers brought up the topic several additional times, and heard (predictably?) mixed views.

Moral Monday is more of a... well... a Black thing. It's more of a Black thing...They go and sit out at like places they're feuding with, NAACP, you know, people they're feuding with or whatever, they'll go sit out on Monday, and...a lot of them get arrested just to get on TV, but it's about some kind of cause. (conservative White man, 58, Winston-Salem)

Potential implication(s): The low salience of Moral Mondays among regular North Carolinians is a sharp reminder that communicators should always assume very low levels of awareness about particular events or issues in the state, no matter how high-profile they might seem to insiders. (We have found the same pattern on issues in other states – e.g. regarding the Taxpayer Bill of Rights in Colorado, and controversies about collective bargaining in Wisconsin.)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Concern with levels of participation

Although people around the country are open to idea that greater public participation could be an answer to their dissatisfactions about governance, in North Carolina more people were likely to voice the idea even before hearing the messaging being tested. That is, North Carolinians were more likely to volunteer the idea that a central problem with our democracy is that people are disengaged and need to play an active role.

[The statement] pretty much says your vote counts, and then if you want a say in how government's run and not just complain about it like I just did, do something after the fact. Show up at the open forums, and if you really wanted to, run yourself. [What's your reaction to hearing a statement like that?] I mean, it sounds good, it's just a matter of actually making it work. That's going to be the hard part. (liberal White woman, 49, Asheboro)

We do have power, but we don't use it. (conservative White woman, 42, Hendersonville)

Be more involved. People should speak up. I mean, one person can't change the world. I mean, they can spark the idea and get the fire going. (moderate African American man, 26, Winston-Salem)

This pattern is an advantage in the sense that many people easily grasp a key idea at the heart of the narrative – and to be clear, even these individuals responded positively and with interest to the “beyond voting” idea, and other recommended narrative elements. But there is also a challenge here in the sense that people are ready to ask hard questions about what is practical to do and what comes next.

Potential implication(s): Many North Carolinians are very interested in hearing specifics about the tips included in “starter kits” and about how success stories played out and might be replicated in the state. Communicators may need to be more ready than in other states to follow up with a realistic discussion of such details.

Scaling up beyond the local level

As in other states, local success stories were a very important part of effective conversations in North Carolina, helping to persuade people that the public really can have a say, and offering second-hand experience of what engaged, effective democracy can look like.

I think that's a perfect example – I'd share that. They didn't just vote for it, they had to actually do it...I think it's a good thing, because it is clearly a problem. Not just there, but a lot of places are having issues with the police and citizens, so that's a good thing, and if they do it maybe other people will jump on the bandwagon. (conservative White woman, 28, Brevard)

But while stories of local successes resonated and were inspiring (e.g. see examples above), many research participants questioned how exactly to get unresponsive and unaccountable state and federal leaders to respond to the desires of the population – especially when so many people are disengaged from the process.

Yeah, that's really awesome . . . I hear that as a success, it's a victory, but then you look at things like Flint, Michigan and the coal ash, and people are outraged and people are making a stand, and people are vocal about it. Then we have like our governor here in North Carolina that's not responding. (liberal White woman, 30, Hickory)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

It's an example of people going beyond voting to make the government more responsive and make it work for them using Raleigh as an example, and that it's a demonstration of the fact that our government is made up of us, the people...I think it sounds awesome...What strikes me about this...is the necessity of starting locally and working on the local level, and that perhaps for many of us, that's where we can make the most difference or where we can actually make a difference at all. It's just so daunting and so depressing sometimes to think about trying to tackle the system on a national or even a state level given what's been happening in state legislatures across the country. So it seems to me that this idea, this approach, at the very least has a potential to make a difference on the local level. (liberal White woman, 46, High Point)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

A young couple, leaving farmers market in Hickory, NC with a plastic grocery bag filled with local produce. Both are in graduate school and the young man starts out more negatively: 'Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't have a cause that motivates me enough to get out and actively engage or, protest or get out on the street and.' After hearing a success story [about Duke Energy] for North Carolina, he began to shift, talking about the positive impact of collective action at a local level and recalling historic examples of impacts at the federal level, like the Clean Air Act. By the end, he was talking about advocating for environmental issues as part of his professional path, noting how easy it is to get involved: '[City Council meetings are] open to the public for a reason, so go to them. Sit in on it, if you're interested in the topic. That's a small step, but it's I think an important one.'

Potential implication(s): Communicators need to share nuts and bolts information regarding how citizen action can intersect with the face-to-face politics of local governance, but should also bridge to the question of how to have more of an impact on state and federal representatives. (For examples of success stories at these levels, see the national report.)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Racial dynamics

It will come as no surprise to communicators in the state that race comes up as a clearly divisive factor in some conversations in North Carolina – e.g. when an African American Winston-Salem man states matter-of-factly that the city is interested in investing in affluent areas, but not in “Black neighborhoods.”

We have a lot of old-school southern mentality here, which has very concrete, very set ideas about the roles and responsibilities for women, and segregation of the races, and prayer and church. And then we have a lot of younger people, a lot of people that are transients like myself...I'm from Connecticut. . . Now, we have a whole different perspective. (moderate Hispanic woman, 42, NC)

The racial dynamics in North Carolina significantly informed the analysis for this project devoted to addressing African American and Hispanic-American audiences. Please see the substantive memo on this topic for further detail [Supplement Addressing African American and Hispanic Audiences] – on subjects such as concerns about reprisal, a focus on community organizations and an emphasis on community unity.

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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North Carolina 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 North Carolinians, 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.