

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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Nebraska 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 Nebraska, including a series of ethnographic visits in late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a mix of roughly 110 Nebraskans, across the following locations: Omaha, Columbus, Fremont, Schuyler, Kearney, North Platte, and Scottsbluff. The research also included interviews with a diverse set of 12 leaders in the state, recruited by the project’s Nebraska advisor group.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to Nebraska 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 Nebraskans and leaders in the state.

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

I don't believe we have any say, to be honest with you...They all look after themselves, that's all it is. (conservative man, 59, Fremont)

I don't vote because I feel that we don't have a say. Years ago I voted, but I just don't anymore. I think the local governments, county and stuff, you have a say because they're visible, but when you get to Washington, they're invisible to the common people. (conservative woman, 49, Kearney)

I guess there's times I wish I could voice more. [But] they don't come to the average Joe...and come out to a small community, come to a small place and say okay, what is it you guys are looking for? What's the common man – what's the middle class situation really like? (liberal man, 53, Fremont)

Fraudulent, corrupt. Basically I think both political parties just don't care about the people - all they care about is their own pockets and the corporations. (liberal man, 64, Kearney)

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.

The biggest idea is just bringing it back to the people, putting us back in charge - the common folk. (conservative man, 24, Kearney)

You have to do something else besides vote, because people feel like their vote doesn't count, but maybe that one other thing you did does count for something. (liberal woman, 39, North Platte)

The “Plus One” idea would probably resonate...I can do one more thing, invite one more person, speak one more place. (liberal woman, 67, Scottsbluff)

It's not just I'm going to walk in here, check this, check this, throw it in the ballot box. Now you actually have a voice to be able to communicate with everybody that you want to hear your complaints, comments, anything like that, and it just gets you a little bit more involved. So you're not really just voting, you are beyond voting. (moderate man, 23, Fremont)

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 Nebraska 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.

Relatively accessible and effective state/local government

In Nebraska, possibly due to its *relatively* small and homogeneous population, state and local governments are perceived as relatively more accessible than they are elsewhere in the country.

It's easier for me to have something happen here in Omaha...than it is to even go down to the state legislature, even though I know several people in the legislature. I know the governor, but it's still hard to get it done. (conservative man, 66, Omaha)

City government's about as good a place as any to start...and work your way up to state and I think federal's a lost cause. (conservative man, 56, Columbus)

I think they do pretty good with us. Because as you can see we are immigrants, and then some other towns, they don't like us over there. Here they love us. They treat us good, and whatever we need, we go there, we go to the city hall, ask for it, and they glad to help. I've got a pretty good relationship with the mayor, and he is pretty good guy. He is pretty good mayor. (liberal man, 49, Schuyler)

I think the states, especially in Nebraska - we're doing a pretty fair job with what we've got - I think our governor is doing a super job with what he's getting done. (conservative man, 74, North Platte)

This pattern was noticed particularly among older Nebraskans, perhaps because they have been the most likely over the years to try communicating with government.

Potential implication(s): Communicators should keep in mind the opportunity to build in hopeful images of effective collaboration between citizens and officials at the local and state levels.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Strong emphasis on self-reliance

Self-reliance is seen as an aspect of Nebraska's basically conservative, Republican identity – particularly by those who identify with this category, and who view the state as sharing a conservative consensus. An underlying vision of this consensus is something like the following: “If we speak up for our shared values, we can do away with some of the nonsense of over-regulation.”

Being Nebraska-raised, I'm straight Republican – that's the way I grew up, the way my family grew up. We're all hands-on, do it yourself, get your own education, and hard work pays. That's the way I see government. You do the work, it should pay off. (conservative man, 24, Kearney)

Nebraska is pretty good because they've got a good work ethic and people are used to not living high off the hog, most of us. You get a job, you work, you pay your bills, and if there's any left over then you might be able to go out and eat or go on vacation, but otherwise you take care of your family and kids first, and your own responsibilities. Some states aren't like that. A lot of the kids nowadays, they're spoiled, they believe they're entitled...and they expect the government to do everything for them now and that isn't the way it's supposed to work. (conservative man, 67, Columbus)

I think a lot of people look to government for so many things that government wasn't designed to do, and we should be doing it as a people. Actually, we should be doing it as a church, too ... The church, or just general citizens should see needs and meet the needs, and not have to ask government to do it. (conservative woman, 66, Omaha)

There should be an infrastructure in place that allows people to take advantage of it to take care of themselves...If you take it too far then it just creates more bureaucracy and slows everything down, slows progress down. (moderate man, 30, Omaha)

This country is great, and I think if you try hard you can making good living. I mean I like the way it is...you work hard, you get something. If you don't do anything, you get nothing. I think, so far so good, for me, for myself. (liberal man, 49, Schuyler)

Potential implication(s): There is a risk in Nebraska that getting engaged beyond voting is expected to lead to “less government.” To avoid triggering this assumption, communicators should stress the “for the people” aspects of the narrative (the collective accomplishments that promote broad wellbeing) in addition to “by the people” stories of engagement and empowerment.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Disengaged West

Not surprisingly, the western part of the state is where researchers heard the strongest expressions of distrust and disconnection from Government. Western Nebraskans were also the most likely to express the idea that average people shouldn't *have to* go beyond voting - the rest is the job of representatives. That is, there was a particularly strong overall resistance to engagement and politics even on ones own behalf.

I hate government. We were just brought up that way. My parents weren't into the Republican party like some of our neighbors. You just went, you voted, and you were done. (conservative woman, 48, North Platte)

[What comes to mind when you think of government?] Thieves...crooks, liars, cheats. [How much of a say do you think regular people have in how things are run?] None. (moderate man, 73, North Platte)

I think you're lucky to get people to vote in the first place, so then if you're asking for more than that from some people, I think you have to start with just the voting. (liberal woman, 39, Kearney)

I don't know quite what's possible. I don't want to waste my time on things that aren't going to come to fruition, but I really think the election process needs to be changed tremendously...I told my husband I wasn't going to vote this year, just because the two choices are so horrible. (liberal woman, 56, Scottsbluff)

The people get the right to vote - we do elect people to sit down in Lincoln for us...and they kind of make the final decisions for us, but we elected them because we thought they knew what they were doing. (conservative man, 22, Kearney)

Potential implication(s): Communicators working in the western part of the state should probably take care to convey modest, "do-able" expectations about engagement beyond voting.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Tradition of engagement, dialog

Researchers noticed a desire among Nebraskans for open dialogue and finding common ground – i.e. across lines of political or other sorts of division. Millennials frequently shared this emphasis, as did people focused on the practicalities of promoting a good business atmosphere, thriving downtowns and so forth. Researchers who have noticed similar patterns in Midwestern states such as Wisconsin believe this may reflect traditions of civic engagement. Rather than a “radical” idea about how to change the status quo, engagement can be understood as a nostalgic (but productive) idea about how to restore basic principles like civility and self-governance.

If it's going to become really confrontational and polarizing, I'm not excited about the idea. If it's keeping people involved in the community, I think that's fantastic. (liberal man, 55, Omaha)

[F1] It just sounds hopeful. Maybe if people get more involved maybe things will move forward a little bit, so we'll see.

[F2] I think people used to be a lot more involved.

[F1] Yeah, they did. (liberal women, 50s, Omaha)

There has to be reciprocity. One side is not going to fix the problem. (liberal man, 46, Omaha)

Everybody needs to work together - I don't think it's Republican, liberal, whatever - people need to work together as a team. (moderate woman, 41, Columbus)

Potential implication(s): Communicators may be able to take advantage of a tradition of practicality and civility as they promote ideas about engagement on behalf of common interests

Admiration for the Unicameral

A number of research participants spoke very positively about the Nebraska Unicameral – which often seemed to stand for nonpartisan and practical approaches to government and problem-solving. Many Nebraskans feel that having only a single legislative body helps make it simpler and quicker to get things done.

Because we've got the Unicameral we do better than DC - we seem to go a little bit faster. I think it's because with the Unicameral we have less politicians. (conservative man, 73, Columbus)

Potential implication(s): Communicators can point to achievements of the Unicameral legislature to illustrate that government is a mechanism for coming together to achieve practical purposes on behalf of the state as a whole.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Skepticism about Electoral College

Liberal Nebraskans were more likely than research participants elsewhere to bring up the “anti-democratic” nature of the Electoral College – seemingly because many perceived the recent change to the rules in the state as an effort to disenfranchise Democrats.

Get rid of the electoral votes and let the actual people deal with who we have going in there. Because that's how it's done. I think that's why so many people don't vote, because it doesn't matter, or they feel it doesn't matter. (liberal woman, 56, Scottsbluff)

We don't have a one person one vote system here. When you have the political parties the way they are and you have these electoral colleges that decide...[and] these super-delegates and things like that. (liberal man, 64, Kearney)

Potential implication(s): By emphasizing the “for the people” and “by the people” aspects of the recommended approach – and painting a picture of an engaged population coming together to achieve things for the common good – communicators should be able to take the emphasis off of electoral politics in general.

Getting better informed as the top of mind ‘first step’.

For many Nebraskans, going beyond voting is first and foremost about increasing one’s knowledge and awareness of the issues and topics of the day. A common criticism of citizen apathy focused on the idea that people fail to get themselves informed.

Educate the voters so they know who they're voting for and not just the ad that's on TV. (conservative woman, 55, Omaha)

Do you have to be active in everything? No, you just have to know what's going on around you and pay attention. (conservative man, 63, Columbus)

The “Plus One” would be for people to then take some additional action or steps to educate themselves about issues and people who are up for election, and maybe even to support organizations that advocate for things some of us might feel are important. (moderate man, 74, North Platte)

M: [There] certainly needs to be more involvement starting at the local level with everybody. It needs to change in the school system I guess, and the education process, early... hopefully you have a better educated electorate...you'll hopefully end up putting better people that are supposed to be representing you as the end result.

F: Educate the voters so they know who they're voting for and not just the ad that's on TV. (conservative couple, man 60, woman 55, Omaha)

Potential implication(s): Communicators should be aware of “traps” inherent in this perspective: For some, the story of going beyond voting may lead to a critical (and counterproductive) stance towards others who fail to stay informed. Others may conclude that their own efforts to go beyond voting should merely include efforts to keep up with information. To minimize these risks, communicators should focus on the concrete achievements that are possible when people stay actively engaged.

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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Nebraska 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.