SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?
Creating engaged conversations about government

Supplement Addressing African American and Hispanic Audiences

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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 the study period of 2014–2016 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.

From the beginning of the effort, people of color were seen as one of the most important populations to learn about and pay attention to, both as members of the "Rising American Electorate," and as groups with a special and often negative history of interactions with the public sector. If people of color do not feel part of the conversation about the role of government in this country, if they do not feel their perspectives are represented, if messages do not speak to them, then the conversation cannot be successful.

For this reason, people of color were oversampled in all phases of the work – including ethnographic conversations in all six partners states (AR, CO, MI, NC, NE, OR), as well as national surveys – and the final component of the effort focused specifically and exclusively on an exploration of the dynamics of conversation with these audiences.

INTRODUCTION

This latter research was undertaken in Michigan, in mid-2016, and included conversations with roughly 110 Michiganders of color, in the communities of Ypsilanti, Kalamazoo, Lansing, East Lansing, Flint and Greater Detroit (including downtown, Davison, Mexicantown, as well as Oak Park and Highland Park). Some of these communities – due to their histories as well as more recent events – are among the most hostile terrain imaginable for conversations about the role of government in promoting the common good. Researchers encountered other very hostile terrain, too – e.g. in the conservative rural heartland of the Mountain West (Colorado), rural, eastern Oregon, and high plains western Nebraska, where resistance and skepticism about aspects of government are particularly strong among Whites. But conversations in parts of Michigan, as well as in the Delta Region of Arkansas, parts of Philadelphia and greater Los Angeles, and both rural and urban North Carolina, allowed us to observe some of the most challenging and important dynamics in the perspectives that people of color bring to the conversation. Even if some of these patterns are already familiar to advocates working in the communities in question, it is helpful to lay them out explicitly and consider them in the context of the broader project and its findings.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

It is important to emphasize that, to a significant degree, the findings and recommendations from the project as a whole reflect the responses and perspectives of people of color. Given the oversampling of these populations throughout the effort, their views have contributed in a major way to the determination of which narrative elements are effective – i.e. clear and compelling, with the potential to help shape our shared discourse and "cultural common sense" about the role of government and our relationship to it.

In particular, responses from people of color confirm that the following core aspects of the findings and recommendations are germane to these populations.

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

> It doesn't seem like any of the parties are actually interested in working for people...and I think the poor citizen just gets lost in the shuffle. (conservative African American woman, 40, NC)

> From my experience they don't care much about the bottom, lower level people - mostly the upper level people are their main concern. There are a lot of us down here at the bottom. (liberal African American man, 39, CO)

> Government is whose interest is being served. Most laws are passed by an interested party to benefit that party, not necessarily to benefit we the people. (liberal African American man, 61, AR)

> In our city, we recently had three city council members recalled ... [for] doing things behind closed doors. And the perception, and it's a reality, is that sometimes they were doing things that were self-serving. (liberal Hispanic man, 65)

I think the people who benefit are that top 1% or 1/2 % or 1/4% - the people who benefit most are the people who have rigged the system for themselves…How is it that CEOs of these companies can make millions upon millions of dollars and yet we still have hungry people, we still have homeless people, we still have people who are living in poverty. (liberal African American man, 54, NC)

It doesn't matter what we do, they're going to do what they want to do to fill their pockets… That's all they're going to do. (moderate African American female, 24, OR)

People are interested in and motivated by the concept of going beyond voting.

I think [going beyond voting is] 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, NC)

Yeah, I think it gives you a little more hope or awareness that you can contribute more than just a single vote, that you might have the power to do more. (liberal African American woman, 35, OR)

M: It would be a step in the right direction for us to actively participate in our democracy in the US. I think it would give us a chance to be happy with the choices we make, knowing that we can go further and be able to really take part in that heavily.

F: I think it's good because it wouldn't leave us just stuck with that one vote and we'd have to go with it. (African American man and Native American woman, both 19, CO)

[What sticks with me is the idea of] being active in the community. Not only voting but getting out and getting other people to vote, talking to politicians, talking to people and getting people involved in the process. Because unless we're involved, then politicians are basically going to do what they want to do and not serve the people. (liberal African American man, 60, NC

I think when you say 'beyond,' that means that we're not just stopping here. There's not a stopping point. We can do more than what we're told, or than what we just instantly think that's our vote and that's it, but we can go further. (liberal African American woman, 34, AR)

I think it's great that you're encouraging people to take extra steps beyond just voting, because just voting isn't enough, because it's set up and we need to be stepping outside of what choices we're given and start creating other options. I think it's cool that there are other people who are realizing this. (liberal African American man, 22, OR)

People respond positively to "success stories" of regular people acting with public officials to create positive change.

This small group worked together and they really did make a difference in their town. I think it's kind of sad that the news doesn't show us the things that matter to us as a group of people, and maybe we should work together more and things would get done. (moderate African American woman, 22, CO)

If people could turn on their TVs and not see the Congress and the Senate trying to choke each other, or constantly bad mouthing each other, if there could be some small breakthrough that might give people hope, then they would feel more interested in getting involved in the process. (moderate Hispanic woman, 42, NC)

A: I think that's awesome...that people finally helped African Americans - that's good, and government. I don't hear much of that where I'm from. (liberal African American woman, 20, AR)

Hearing that example of those community members coming together and coming up with a solution to the problem, and getting it out there and having that big influence on getting that building built for them, that center built for them, it's almost like small inspiration that if you have enough people...you have an influence. (liberal African American woman, NE)

I think that's so true, and I think that's something we don't hear a lot about. I think if we did hear more about things like what you just read to me, we'd be more empowered to do more on our level...It starts with us - we have to make it happen. It's not necessarily going to happen from the lawmakers - we have to make our voices heard. (liberal Hispanic man, 34, CO)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Detroit, Michigan: We didn't take our video camera this afternoon, having been warned by several locals that we'd make ourselves targets in a couple of these neighborhoods. Plenty of people around. Some groups dispersed suspiciously when we approached – in other cases groups coalesced around us out of curiosity about what we were doing interviewing people there.

In most places, the 'beyond voting' idea is a good place to start the conversation. The Success Stories can follow as illustration and evidence for its reality and power. However, in the most disenfranchised places we've visited – including rural Black Arkansas, Detroit and Flint – the idea of government as a problem-solving device is such alien and unlikely idea to many people that you have to start with the Success Stories. They are the necessary first ingredient to even enter into a conversation about how greater engagement with government could have some point to it and relate to better communities somehow.

People respond positively to discussion of public systems and institutions that are critical foundations of thriving communities.

Q: Of the things we've talked about, what ideas strike you the most?

A: Just how much our government helps us out. There's a lot of conflict and stuff in it, and it's really confusing, but just that they're there and they've built the libraries and roads and everything, because without them it would be nothing - it would be dirt roads everywhere. (conservative Hispanic man, 19, CO)

I mean a lot of people don't realize what they use day to day that the government affects. Like you were saying, the library system and all that. So that's definitely a part people don't really think about when they think about the government. They always think about the debate first, and not all these public servants that they have to go through in their day to day life to get stuff done. (liberal Asian-American woman, 19, OR)

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. (liberal African American woman, 24, CO)

People like to focus on the bad things and put a lot more [media] attention on the bad things than focusing on...good things that are helping not only the community but the country, too. (Hispanic / African American woman, 17, OR)

There are a lot of other positive things that they might not be showing to you, and a lot of those positive things are [being done] for actual change, and those are the kind of things that you should try to strive to do. (Hispanic woman, 22, NC)

Yeah, like say people in Detroit wanted to make their city – more infrastructure, better roads, better schools. If there were enough people in that city to all stand up and say we want federal aid, we want this and that, there would be a certain point where the government can't just ignore them because there are so many people on that side. (moderate Hispanic man, 18, MI)

On the other hand, the perspectives and responses of people of color were, in various ways, distinct enough from those of White Americans to warrant separate discussion, and a consideration of the dynamics of conversation as they play out with these audiences. These dynamics are the focus of the remainder of the memo.[1]

[1.] For discussion of the "exploratory findings" regarding people of color – i.e. analysis of current, default patterns, as opposed to patterns observed during the testing of various communications strategies – see the earlier report from the project, "Subjects or Citizens? (Part 1)."

AFRICAN-AMERICANS

While the project sometimes treated "people of color" as a single category – e.g. when reporting survey results where non-whites overall responded in a statistically different way from whites – the diversity of this cross-section of Americans is obviously huge. For purposes of this memo, it is helpful to distinguish between patterns observed among the two groups for whom sample sizes were substantial enough to allow for specific observations: African-Americans on one hand and Hispanic Americans on the other.[2] We begin with discussion of dynamics observed with African American audiences.

Even if these Americans are more inclined than others to believe in the (hypothetical) role of government in promoting the wellbeing of the people (see the Exploratory report for this project), they are often deeply skeptical about the realities, particularly about government's intentions to do positive things for their communities.

Something has to happen - we have to have somebody from government to be able to talk to who would actually listen. Because they can...sound good on camera and... appease us - that's one of the things I'm most concerned about. They can say some good stuff, "We'll check that out. Yes that needs to be done," and they go back and it's swept under the rug. (liberal African American man, 54, NC)

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, MI)

[2.] Other people of color – including North and East Asians, Native Americans, and those who chose not to identify particular race or ethnicity – participated in the research and are included in the analysis of the national project as a whole, and all evidence suggests the core findings and recommendations apply well to them. But the project design did not allow for separate, specific observations about these groups.

You can't really trust the government. I know they're not really for the people, they're for each other...we're just people controlled by the government that does not care for us. . . I don't see too many people prospering off the government. People have to go through too much already. . . even having money, it doesn't matter. They can take whatever, do whatever. They could take your kids from you, they could do whatever they choose to do, however they choose to do it. (apolitical African American man, 30, MI)

In this section we discuss some of the dynamics in these communities in greater detail.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Jonesboro, Arkansas: An older gentleman (61) was working on a refrigerator with his wife (59) outside a second-hand store. As he spoke he emphasized his gestures with the wrench he was holding. The language of God and righteousness were woven throughout his talk. He described the fight of the people against the Government as analogous to the story of David and Goliath. Even though we often feel like we can't win, we must continue to fight, as we may, like David, make an unlikely victory against institutions that seem much bigger than us. We must fight against an unjust government, and we 'should never give up on democracy.' In his words, we must continue to strive to become again what he thinks we once were, a 'righteous nation' – one nation, under God, indivisible. And in doing so, we have a 'duty to rise up.'

"Supposed to have a say?"

The core recommendations from the project build on a broadly shared idea that regular people are meant to have a say in governance – that part of being an American is living in a country where government is supposed to be both by and for the people.

While African-Americans share the general sense that government should be driven by public priorities and needs, they are also more likely to see government as fundamentally ordered against them. In this view, government has not been hijacked by elites, but was built from the start as a system for empowering others – specifically, the wealthy, and often Whites. In short, African-Americans sometimes suspect that they were never meant to have a say (not hard to understand, given historical realities), and that the powers that be will see that they never do.

[How much of a say do you think black people have in how things are run around where you live?] Not a lot. They have a little, but again, like I said, they're only going to give you so much power. (liberal African American man, 55, MI)

Well, I'm pretty sure the founding fathers didn't include anybody of color, so, for the people, by the people was really for white men by white men, so I guess it is what they envisioned! (liberal African American man, OR)

I think that we [African-Americans] as a society and community are just ingrained in our ways, that we allow other people to make our decisions for us, and that's just the way it has been and it's going to stay. (liberal African American woman, MI)

If they were representing the population how would they be working against the population? I think the voter suppression laws as a prime example - why would you do something to prohibit someone from getting to the polls to vote? (liberal African American man, 54, NC)

What I see in the neighborhood that I grew up in, I see a lot of poverty, a lot of people starving, a lot of people needing help, and needing jobs. Government as far as that goes - I just look at Bush - what he did in Katrina. He actually showed his actions of what the government is capable of doing. And even before that, if you look at Civil Rights movements and things of that nature - this is what government had people thinking - that it wasn't okay to be Black. The government did that. J. Edgar Hoover actually – FBI...he was running things and the only black person who worked for him was his driver. He was an FBI agent, but he used him as a chauffeur. So this is what the government has done in my community. (African American man, 32, NC)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The basic recommendations at the core of the project emerged partly in response to this type of skepticism. In particular, "success stories" involving relatable communities are an important part of credible communications with African American audiences. Overall, it may take more effort to persuade these groups that power is within their reach, but the recommended narrative elements are helpful tools for doing so.

Ambivalence about voting

African-Americans are often very used to being urged to vote – "your vote counts" etc. On the other hand, perhaps even more than other Americans, they often seem to feel as though their votes *don't* count.

People don't vote...The people who got the biggest benefit, they don't vote and they get left out of the equation. And then they get mad about the government won't respond to them. The way you make the government respond is by voting. (moderate African American man, 64, MI)

Every vote does count, first of all. But the thing about voting is the candidates we have - are they going to be willing to keep their promises once they get into office? (moderate African American man, 54, NC)

I think overall, in the last couple decades, voting has kind of made people feel like their voice doesn't matter...I think that the country was founded on the idea that the people are supposed to be heard, and I think that we need to get back to that understanding. (moderate African American man, 35, OR)

I never voted - I don't even know where to go to vote. I don't even think about it, but now I think I need to. I need to experience it - I want to, but no one ever knows anything about it - I guess I ask the wrong people. (liberal African American woman, 20, AR)

Perhaps as a result of frequent voter drives in their communities, African-Americans are particularly likely to misinterpret the recommended messages as just *more* exhortations to vote.

While this idea sometimes strikes people as important, we know that it is not a *new* idea, and not likely to help shift attitudes.

For this reason it is important to convey very clearly that:

A. Voting is important

B. It is not enough

C. The lack of response to our votes is not a reason to give up, but a reason to step up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is very helpful to frame the "beyond voting" aspect of the narrative as follow-through.

In other words, it is specifically about things we do after voting, to insure that the system runs in the ways we voted to promote.

Research participants easily understood the follow-through idea (a term they often used themselves) in terms of holding representatives accountable, and making sure people are being listened to.

This additional concreteness helps reinforce the idea of taking a step or two beyond voting, and also helps give the message greater freshness.

Another advantage of this framing is that it helps focus the conversation on change that is connected with government – and helps inoculate against a default expectation on creating change by bypassing government (see next discussion).

I mean, we all know, if you don't vote, you won't get your opinion across. And even then, sometimes when you do vote for the person that you think is getting your opinion across, when he or she goes to Lansing, now their opinion has changed, because the influence that they have here. (liberal African American man, 50, MI)

Voting Plus One...Once you elect someone you should make sure, you should follow up. If you were interested enough to go vote, you should follow up and see what they're doing, and see where that campaign cash is coming from and what laws they're supporting. (liberal African American man, 61, AR)

The idea of just going beyond voting. That's the main thing. I feel like going beyond voting is one of the first steps. They say vote early. Vote. Okay, we vote. Something else needs to happen after that. We vote and we wait, so I feel like what are we doing in between the time that we're waiting? (liberal African American woman, 23, AR)

I like it. I think it's important...I think that too often people are too focused on [the election] and not what happens afterwards, so then they end up with a president who they supported, they're like, well, why aren't things I wanted getting done? Because I believe in following through, so if there's a candidate you really support and they get elected, follow through with them and follow through with groups who are trying to further what you voted for them about. (moderate African American woman, 19, CO)

What that kind of reminded me of, when you said voting isn't enough, they actually took a stand, it kind of reminds me of the scripture in the Bible that says faith without works is dead. So that's pretty much the same thing. Like if we're voting, that's our faith that something can get done, but if we're not pushing that vote and actually trying to make a change ourselves, going out and fighting for ourselves ... Nothing's going to happen if we don't actually go out and put that vote to work. (liberal African American man, 20s, AR)

Emphasis on community organizations

Even more than other ethnic groups, African Americans are prone to think about empowerment and collective action through non-govern-mental vehicles. Community organizations, neighborhood associations, churches and so on are top-of-mind images, when it comes to the question of how to create change, improve community circumstances, and so forth.

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, in place. And that's another thing too, we have to see these things as a responsibility, not just as something to do. (liberal African American woman, 49, AR)

It's more up to the community than the politicians. Just point blank, period. We're the only ones who can help us. Like I said, they say they understand, but they don't. But we do. (apolitical African American man, 20s, AR)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Charlotte, NC: Speaking with a Black couple in their 50s. They were very interested to hear about the communities that had organized to take on Duke Energy.

The man agreed, 'the people in the community do have the power to start changing their communities, but they need to get together.' Although he understood that these communities worked together through government, the crucial part to him was whether the community could bring itself together. The woman chimed in with strong agreement.

I asked them what was it going to take for that to happen? The man responded, 'Prayer, and a lot of people starting to look within themselves and looking around to see who actually has a need, and just start doing little things. If you know someone needs some food, take them some food. Blankets or shelter - it's everybody just extending their hands to each other as a community does.' For them this was about the church and its ministries.

A moment later he brought it back around to the government's responsibility to respond to and help the community. 'You go deeper inside Charlotte, there's homelessness, drug addiction, the elderly being neglected - there are so many areas that need to be addressed...The people who they're electing say they're going to do something about this situation. So a community does matter, and everyone's votes do count.'

On one hand this pattern is a positive effect of a long and successful tradition of community organizing in African American communities.

On the other, it can also pose a real challenge if we are trying to promote the idea of government as an instrument of collective action to benefit the common good.

Recommendations

In success stories, for instance, it is important to stress the intersection and interaction between community groups and government – and specifically the ways that community groups have successfully increased the attention, responsiveness and effectiveness of government.

Likewise, discussions of steps government can take to make it easier for us to have a say should include ways they might more effectively bridge with and link to community groups, as vehicles for people to get information and make views known.

Importantly, government should not be portrayed as a hostile resister of change (if we are trying to create more constructive perspectives towards government), but rather a potential partner that can be guided and spurred to action by effective community groups.

Note again that this recommendation is not meant to disparage the importance of community organizing and the role it plays in making neighborhoods better, but to help African-Americans more effectively leverage the specific potentials of government to improve their communities.

Anxieties about unity

Whereas Whites tend to interpret the recommended narrative – e.g. about going beyond voting – in individual terms ("What can I do to have a greater impact?"), African-Americans are more likely to believe that the community has to stand up in order to have more of a say.

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, MI)

Currently we have a lot of division…We need less chatter and more work. We need to come together and really work on the issues at hand instead of bickering. (liberal African American woman, 53, NC)

If we could all really put whatever it is to the side and stand together, unity, instead of dividing ourselves…If we came together, that would be the start, to show the world we're standing together and we all feel this way. I feel like that's the first one, but I feel like that's the first and main [thing we could do]. (liberal African American woman, 23, AR)

Like yeah, okay, we're not getting the support in the community, we're not getting the necessary funds or necessary resources or anything, but then at the same time, we're not uplifting each other, we're not helping each other out…It's just like a separated community within itself, and it hurts us. (liberal African American man, 23, MI)

The good news here is that African-Americans already understand the importance of organizing for numbers and impact. In other words, they often have an established belief in collective action – one of the important missing pieces in White American culture when it comes to perspectives on government.

> When humanity wakes up and realizes that one is not better than the other, we are all kind of being manipulated by those who have the power and authority, when we stand up and voice our opinions openly, collectively together, I think it may bring about some changes. (moderate African American man, 65, PA)

> We are a village. If we come together as a village, and expand, start small and work up bigger, we can accomplish a lot more. (liberal African American woman, 53, NC)

> This is our opportunity to band together and empower one another, empower our community to do something to make a difference. I'd summarize it as us empowering our community. (moderate African American man, 45, NC)

But the bad news is that widespread anxieties about disunity in their communities can inhibit action and empowerment. Whites tend to view individual assertiveness and discussion as the first step to having more say, but African-Americans typically view community unity as the precondition for having a say. Since unity is usually lacking, the result can be great pessimism.

> M2: Everybody have a voice. Until everybody come together in the community as a unity, we won't succeed. They're going to still keep overriding us like they've been doing.

> M1: They're going to divide and conquer. (African American men, 20s, AR)

> When there were different classes, a single class could work together. Different races, a single race could work together... But we've gotten to the point in society where we feel like we're our own little islands. We've become less openly dependent on each other the less we communicate with each other. And it doesn't go very far past the families and the few friends that we have. And for some, churches and workplaces, but very little other than that. (moderate African American man, 19, AR)

Whites and Hispanics are often quite willing to overlook most of the internal divisions among "the people" or "the Hispanic community" – and imagine that an open and constructive dialog can result in something like an adequate consensus. They sometimes complain about the real problems of partisanship, divisiveness and polarization, but essentially view these as constructed mostly by the media and the parties. African-Americans, on the other hand, are much more likely to see their communities as insurmountably divided within.

Recommendations

Success stories involving communities of color coming together are helpful for inoculating against these concerns. And one of the helpful aspects of these stories is that they focus on concrete goals the entire community can be expected to agree on (e.g. renovating a school, eliminating toxic dumping) – rather than more abstract and challenging ideas about unity.

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. Or keep bad changes from occurring. (conservative Hispanic man, 34, NC)

In addition, while testing this particular approach was beyond the scope of the research, it may be helpful to explicitly emphasize ways in which individual steps beyond voting are ways of having a greater impact, without waiting for the whole community to come together.

Ambivalence about "Help"

While Whites often have the luxury of remaining relatively blind to the role that public structures and systems play in their relative prosperity – i.e. they can maintain an illusion of rugged individualism – African-Americans are not in the same position. They are more likely to appreciate the services that government provides (as shown in patterns of survey response for instance), but also likely to be aware of the material and social problems brought on by an absence of government infrastructure such as quality education, economic opportunity, and protection of property and person.

We do have some new officers in Flint, but we need programs for our children to do, things to do so they can get out and play, get out and learn. We just need more programs. Get those summer programs, those winter programs. Get those programs going so that the children can learn year-round. (apolitical African American woman, 63, MI)

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. (conservative African American woman, 32, CO)

Q: How would you explain to a ten-year-old what government is and why we have it?

A: I would say a government plays a very important part in a person's life. It actually helps you to live a more better life than not having government. But don't depend on the government so much as yourself, because really you should be self-reliant or self-sufficient. (moderate African American woman, 31, NC)

We have so many people in such bad shape, and economically - I'm not saying throw a whole lot of money because then we devalue the dollar, but we need to start maybe raising up some practices or get some programs that can help people get back on their feet somehow. (moderate African American man, 54, NC)

Finally, they are also aware of a highly toxic public discourse that frets about government dependency among minorities. In short, government "help" is a salient and often a fraught topic.

It does have to be jobs...There's an old saying, if you give me the fish for me to eat, I'll eat today, but if you teach me how to fish, I'll eat forever. (conservative African American man, MI)

I'm a decently middle class person and my life isn't bad. I've dealt with a lot of lower income people in my work, so I see where it could be worse, but then I also feel like there's a personal responsibility that people have to take at times, and not just expect the government or someone else to help them out. (liberal African American woman, 29, MI)

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Los Angeles: I'm talking with a man who is leaning against his pickup truck in a hot parking lot. He gestures with a small clipboard of tattered paperwork. He's deeply ambivalent about government, toggling between frustration that the government doesn't do enough and frustration that Blacks don't do enough for themselves. 'I think that the government needs to try to, I believe, focus more on the people being able to grow. And that's just not the case...[But] I also don't believe that the answer is just, you know, pass out food stamps to everybody and put everybody on welfare. I don't believe that's the answer, because too many people get lazy that way. You know, you can look at my hands and tell I'm not lazy.' He held a callused, scarred hand up between us. 'I've been working all my life since I was seventeen.'

One unfortunate consequence is that it can heighten self-criticism as African-Americans blame themselves (i.e. their neighbors) for failing to strive and succeed. Although members of every ethnic group are willing to blame people in their community for apathy and a self-defeating lack of effort, African-Americans are particularly harsh judges.

[Immigrants] come here, they work hard, and they really achieve the American goal, American dream...we sit back and we wonder how did they get to where they are...Especially Blacks...we don't try to take advantage of the opportunities that are there for us, that back in the '60s when my forefathers fought for it. (liberal African American man, MI)

If all the slaves would have bum-rushed the slave master, it would have worked. It would have. They had too many of them and too little of them, but what stopped them was the older ones there, the ones that's been living in this life and that's been whipped and that's been abused, to where they're mentally broken...[Today] if you go to door to door, I think it would be like - oh, this is dangerous, I've got to protect my kids, I've got to protect my family. (apolitical African American man, 20, AR)

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.'

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research consistently finds it is helpful to emphasize the ways in which public systems and institutions are foundations of thriving communities. This focus helps with the ambivalence about government services because it steers thinking away from the "help" that particular people or communities need, and towards the broader (and less stigmatizing) idea that *all* communities require certain investments in order to do well. There is energy to tap into here, as people are brought to feel that they can have a say in how resources get distributed and policy priorities get set.

A second point is that while it is helpful with at least some Americans to discuss our collective *responsibility* to take steps beyond voting (the idea of responsibility implies that our actions matter, and give us moral credit), this focus may interact in complex and counterproductive ways with some African-Americans' already self-critical ideas about communities that have "let themselves down." In short, communicators who talk about our civic *responsibilities* should take care to empower without blaming.

Fear of speaking out

In some African American communities around the country, people are often worried, with good reason, that speaking up could lead to reprisals. Many are leery of political action that seems to confront the powers that be, and which might result in negative repercussions. Besides "punishment" of various kinds, gathering in numbers can mean riots and/or negative portrayals and perceptions.

> *If you're doing a protest, be safe, be smart about it. Don't get caught up in that, because you don't want to risk yourself and risk your education having a record on jail for protesting. (liberal man, 21, MI)*

> *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, AR)*

> *Some people do take a stand, but they get knocked right back down. Kind of like you just really have to have people who will take a stand and be strong, don't let nobody knock you down. (liberal African American woman, 23, AR)*

M1: It's more up to the community than the politicians. Just point blank, period. We're the only ones who can help us. Like I said, they say they understand, but they don't. But we do.

M2: They ain't going to let that happen, though. They ain't going to let that happen.

M3: It's really just common sense... 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.

M4: Or try to. (Group of African American men, early 20s, AR)

RECOMMENDATIONS

We make participation less daunting by framing it as building on and following through on our votes, rather than rejecting government. Many other forms of activism, such as demonstrating or agitating, evoke fear and doubt among vulnerable African-Americans because they seem against or outside of the law and government.

Limitations of People Power

Americans on the whole have tremendous faith in people power, and it is often an article of faith that if Americans stand up and assert themselves they can accomplish things.

But in some stressed and predominantly African American communities, the limits of people power are all too well understood. Michigan – and specifically in the context of Detroit, Flint and the hangover from de-industrialization – is one of the few places where a significant number of research participants expressed concern about the limitations of people power.

> *You know, people just don't have the belief in the system anymore. It's just not there. And I don't know what it would take to ... it would take more than talk, and nine times out of ten that's all you're going to get, is some talk. Promises that they don't have the power and the control to make it happen. So people are just tired. They're tired. (liberal African American woman, 70, MI)*

This pattern may reflect the fact that no amount of local organizing was able to stop the departure of the auto and other industries and the export of decent jobs and opportunities from the state and region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important, when addressing African American audiences, particularly in stressed communities, to be sensitive to issues of scale – and what people can actually accomplish with the resources that they have. Abstract avowals that "we can do anything when we put our minds to it" are not likely to ring true, and even some of the success stories from elsewhere may not be adequate to getting people on board in a constructive way.

To have the greatest chance of an impact in these communities, success stories should ideally be chosen with the following considerations in mind:

- It really happened (true stories).

- It happened in a place like this – including a place starved of resources and community cohesion.

- There was a concrete goal everyone can agree was important, yet difficult (otherwise achievements can be easy to dismiss).

- The results were (or can be expected to be) lasting – not something ephemeral than can be taken away tomorrow.

- It involved community members coming together and overcoming their divisions.

- It involved government in a positive, central and supportive role (rather than just responding to community pressure).

- The description focuses on the idea of going beyond voting.

- It focuses on the broad idea that good governance supports thriving communities.

The following text illustrates how some of these ideas might play out.

Sample Language

Some communities in our area, with help from city and county governments, have been organizing themselves so they can have more of a say in how things are run. Once a few people in a community get together and reach out, there are resources to help keep the ball rolling, and keep the neighborhood coming up. In neighborhood X they got land and grants to create a community garden that brought people together. In neighborhood Y it was working together with law enforcement to create safer streets. In neighborhood Z the city helped supply a meeting place not just for after school programs, but so people could get together talk out their concerns and send block representatives to council meetings to be heard. The way the city and its neighborhoods are going to come back and thrive is if the people and the city build on more of these sorts of successes to make them the new normal instead of the exception.

HISPANIC AMERICANS

In this section of the memo, we address dynamics among Hispanic-American audiences.

A first point to emphasize is the central fact that this group's perspectives and responses were taken into account throughout the process, and are reflected in other discussions of both findings and recommendations. A second point is that Hispanic Americans express a tremendous internal diversity in terms of their personal attitudes about governance and the role of individuals – for a number of reasons:

- Geography: They bring diverse experiences from countries with very different types of democracy – Cuba, Mexico, Dominica, Guatemala, Argentina, etc.

- Class: Even people from the same nation of origin may have entirely different experiences with government (e.g. middle class Mexicans versus rural villagers), and this background affects their thinking about democracy and whether they have, or should have, a say.

- Degree of assimilation: Many Hispanic Americans are fully assimilated and culturally indistinguishable from other Americans. Others, including recent immigrants, may express views that derive more from their culture-of-origin than from mainstream American culture per se.

In all, this is a much more diverse group than African-Americans, and as such it is difficult to generalize about them as an audience. (We assume that the diversity of self-identified Hispanic Americans is part of the explanation for their falling in between Whites and African-Americans in various survey measures, and being indistinguishable from the general population on many others.)

That said, we offer the following as patterns worth keeping in mind.

"Hispanic identity"

One perspective that self-identified Hispanics do frequently share – and particularly older people – is a sense that they represent a community apart from the mainstream (i.e. Whites), with interests and a voice that may or may not be heard and acted upon.

All of the core recommendations from the project, including ideas about stepping up and going beyond voting, are effective overall with Hispanic Americans. But rather than the simpler Us vs. Elites model that frequently shapes the thinking of Whites when it comes to political power, Hispanics often think in terms of We-Hispanics vs. (not necessarily in a confrontational sense) the non-Hispanic powers.

> *Look at back in the '70s when there was a Latino-Chicano movement going on here in Lansing. There was a big movement, actually. Huge history, rich history, down in downtown Lansing. And being a part of student government for my first half of my student career here at MSU, like I've seen big things happen between students, some great ideas being exchanged and just rallying together. I think the best thing was just rallying together and making bigger things happen. (liberal Hispanic woman, 23, MI)*

The stakes they focus on are often less to do with the state of the U.S. overall – or the good of "the people" as a whole – and more about the state of their (extended) community within the U.S.

> *We live in a democratic society, so it's kind of a majority rule thing, but I also think that the best test of any democratic society is how we handle the needs or the interests of minority groups, too, so I think we need to go with whatever the majority is in favor of, but at the same time, do it without completely steamrolling over minority groups. (moderate Hispanic man, 30, OH)*

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

Colorado: The woman (46) came to the US 12 years ago from Mexico. We are talking in her appliance store, where she sits at a desk, surrounded by papers and invoices. She's very much enamored of the American system and happy to be raising her daughters here. The ability to have a say and live in a peaceful, ordered society count for much. The one dissatisfaction that she voiced was that although small businesses have something of a voice – combining into an association – the Latino businesses remain sidelined within that. 'We don't do too much noise. Maybe that's the problem. Or because, I don't know, because we are minority, and I don't feel that we go together - I don't know why - with the other small businesses.' She shrugged and returned to her former cheerfulness, 'But in general, I like to live here.'

IMPLICATIONS

As with African-Americans, it is important to emphasize the sense of how public systems and institutions help create *thriving communities*, as opposed to helping particular populations. In part these kinds of for-the-people examples help create engagement about the benefits of acting together through the public sector, as they do with all audiences. But they also help create a more unifying narrative, that doesn't further divide Hispanics from others.

On the other hand, the "for the people / beyond voting" aspects of the narrative can emphasize what "our people" (i.e. Hispanics) want and need, and how to work towards these meaningful and motivating goals, via democratic engagement.

Emphasis on community

For less assimilated Hispanics, "having a say" means their *community* having more of a say. Getting active and involved – and having others get active and involved – is primarily about *giving their community* more say in how things are ordered, what government priorities should be and so on. In this way, the idea of unity and coming together plays a much more top-of-mind role in their thinking and talk than it does for most Whites. (Like African-Americans, Hispanics tend to be more focused on community, collective activity and so on than Whites.)

As with African-Americans, this community-centered perspective is in part an advantage, since it means a greater natural emphasis on collective stakes and collective action.

> *[F1] [I wish government would] listen to [Hispanic people's] ideas, because sometimes we tell them what we need and they end up ignoring us. Like we want to do something different, but they say no. Or maybe because there aren't many of us, so I think getting more people involved - not only voting, but...*
>
> *[F2] Trying harder to get yourself heard so your ideas get put out there. (Hispanic mother and daughter, 48 and 13, CO)*
>
> *[In] Barrio Logan children have like three times as much asthma from like the average child because of all the industry that's around Barrio Logan. And then they also just started polling [about a ballot measure]...I felt like that's really important because it's for our community, and for minorities. (liberal woman, 21, CA)*

On the other hand, it can also be a significant stumbling block for those who are concerned about achieving unity in their communities.

> *A lot of people have a lot of different ideas. You know what I'm saying? Just talking to my friends on...weapons. Some are pro military. Some are not. Like if the people have the power? Honestly, man, I don't want to say it, but I'm afraid it will be the same thing probably. (apolitical Hispanic man, 22, CA)*

IMPLICATIONS

It is certainly helpful to offer success stories that illustrate the power of communities coming together to achieve results in the public sector, such as new laws or investments that are of obvious benefit to regular people. Such stories help reinforce natural assumptions about strength in numbers, and can help steer thinking away from concerns about fractured communities.

Furthermore, it is helpful to reinforce the idea that individuals can act meaningful even in the absence of harmonious community ("If you believe in something, there are simple steps you personally can take ...")

Concern about authorities

Hispanics, and recent immigrants in particular, often express real wariness of authorities, related to obvious patterns of profiling, immigration-related concerns, and so forth.

> In most cases people keep their mouths shut, and in America you shouldn't have to. People witness a crime or something, and they just don't want to speak their mind - they're afraid - every time I've seen it, people end up worse when they speak up. (moderate Hispanic man, 48, CO)

> Why is it that minorities are ending up the jails more than everyone else? There's a bit of unfairness...Especially since my family's been ... oh my goodness, how long have they been here? Generations. But the treatment is still different. (conservative Hispanic woman, 30, OR)

Naturally, the desire to keep a low profile makes speaking up and democratic engagement beyond voting less natural.

IMPLICATION

As with African-Americans who may be fearful of reprisal, there are two elements of the recommendations that are particularly helpful:

Success stories of communities coming together to create positive change imply strength in numbers, a factor that was clearly important to many research participants, presumably in part because it offers a degree of comfort and confidence about the safety of acting.

Additionally, the recommendations regarding the discussion of steps beyond voting focus on modest, non-confrontational activities, as opposed to aggressive protest, for instance, which helps normalize democratic engagement and make it seem less exceptional or risky.

Lack of representation

Like other Americans, Hispanics feel that elected representatives don't come from the same pool as they do, partly for reasons having to do with wealth and class. This concern is especially sharp and obvious when it comes to the lack of Hispanic representation. When they picture people from their own community in office, it can significantly change Hispanics' view of the possibilities of government.

> We'd have someone on the inside instead of just keeping us out here and saying, 'We're going to do this,' but not really doing anything about it. So if there's someone from the neighborhood actually in there listening to stuff and having a say for everyone else, that would help a lot. (liberal Hispanic woman, 21, MI)

> Many meetings, they don't have people translating what the other people saying, so that's one of the reason Hispanic people, they don't go to the meetings. And I know a lot of people, their citizenship like me, but they don't go to the meetings because they say, oh, I don't know what they said because they speak only English. (liberal Hispanic man, 44, NE)

> 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. (liberal Hispanic man, 49, NE)

> Right now the whole political horizon is crazy, especially with the GOP - they're insane. It's all about their agenda - it's not about the people. (liberal Hispanic man, 34, CO)

This pattern reinforces the need for an emphasis on government "by the people" rather than merely "for the people." Other research, including investigations by Topos, suggests that Americans in general are very interested in the idea that "regular people" (i.e. people from their own communities and circumstances) could successfully run for office. Framed as a local goal, this may be an engaging example of something people can work towards by going beyond voting. (While this project in general is focused on policy, not politics, elections obviously can't be off the table entirely.)

Order as an important function of government

Recent immigrants in particular often have a relatively positive attitude about the structuring and order-bringing aspects of government. More than others, they express the belief that people need to listen to the government and do as they are told. (Native-born Americans recognize this role of government, but tend to be ambivalent or even resentful about it.)

I believe in the government. I don't understand that much about politics, but I believe in the law. We have to obey the law. (apolitical Hispanic woman, 41, OR)

Our government is there to help us out, because without it everyone would be lost and the world would be crazy, without someone in charge with rules and laws to follow. (conservative Hispanic man, 19, CO)

People say that Greeley is not a safe place to live. But believe me, when you come from other countries, you say, "Oh, no. This is wonderful!" [i.e. thanks to relatively effective law enforcement] (apolitical Hispanic woman, 42, CO)

Why we have government?...Because we need to follow the rules. Because somebody needs to do the law. We need to follow the rules. Like in the house, the father, the mother they put the rules. Is like us. We need to follow everything they say. (apolitical Hispanic woman, 38, CA)

Our government is supposed to be the protector of our country, and I think that's the most important. (liberal Hispanic man, 49, NE)

IMPLICATIONS

This law-and-order perspective is essentially a stumbling block, since it amounts to a lack of democratic instincts. (We all want law-abiding communities, but a democratic perspective would put less emphasis on authorities at the top keeping the rest of us in line.) The recommended narrative as a whole – i.e. ideas about how we achieve public goods through collective decisions and investments, and about how we can all have a greater say by taking steps beyond voting – can hopefully be part of what helps immigrants assimilate in a constructive way into American culture.

CONCLUSION

topos

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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Race and ethnicity are central factors in the American cultural and political story. They affect the ways people interact with government, the benefits they receive from it, the roles they play in shaping it, and the threats they experience from it. The overall goal of the Reclaiming Government for America's Future project is to identify ideas with the potential to shift perspectives in the direction of greater, more constructive engagement with government, so that more of us participate in public decision-making and more of us benefit from it. We hope that by keeping the perspectives in this memo in mind, communicators will have a greater chance of engaging African-Americans and Hispanic Americans into the critical public dialog about self-government and about our future together.