

SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS?

Creating engaged conversations about government



By the Topos Partnership | For Indivisible

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Oregon Supplement



INTRODUCTION

This memo is a supplement to the national report, “Subjects or Citizens? Creating engaged conversations about government,” which outlines findings and recommendations from a multi-state study of Americans’ attitudes towards government as of 2016, and ways of creating engaged and constructive dialog about government and the role of the public sector in promoting our wellbeing and prosperity, as well as the important role played by citizens themselves.

A significant portion of the research for this national project was undertaken in Oregon, including a series of ethnographic visits in late 2015 and early 2016, during which researchers spoke with a diverse mix of roughly 110 Oregonians, across the following locations: Portland, Prineville, Bend, Redmond, Albany, Salem. The research also included interviews with a diverse set of nine leaders in the state, recruited by the project’s Oregon advisor group.

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

The first point to emphasize with regard to Oregon, like other states, is that national findings and recommendations took local dynamics into account – that is, the patterns reported on and recommendations outlined in the major reports for the project were based partly on experiences talking with both average Oregonians and leaders in the state.

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

*It’s pretty obvious they’re protecting their own well-being, not really ours.
(liberal White male, 34, Salem)*

*You kind of have to tackle all of the issues kind of at once, to be able to get people to even want to vote because they know their voice doesn’t matter.
(moderate White male, 31, Bend)*

We can have an opinion and we can vote, but it doesn’t seem like it has a lot of effect. (liberal white female, 49, Bend)

*Politicians, you vote them in and then they kind of do their own thing.
(liberal White male, 42, Portland)*

*In the end, the government’s always going to get what they want.
(apolitical white female, 28, Bend)*

*Government kind of does what they want to do.
(conservative White female, 45, Salem)*

*You know, it’s almost like, “Well this is what we’re going to do, and yeah, we’ll take some public input, but this is what we’re going to do.”
(liberal African American female, 34, Portland)*

*It doesn’t matter what we do, they’re going to do what they want to do to fill their pockets to do what they need to do. That’s all they’re going to do.
(moderate African American female, 24, Prineville)*

CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL FINDINGS

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

Oregon’s coming up from the recession and everything else. I mean, they’re encouraging more small businesses and things of that sort, more programs for the schools. (moderate White female, 32, Prineville)

I’m not a big fan of the government. But I am thankful for like financial aid and the scholarships they give me, because without those I wouldn’t be able to be here and go to college. (conservative White female, 19, Bend)

[First woman] People tend to get really skeptical about spending money on aesthetic things, but I think when we actually invest in how the town looks –

[Second woman] It makes a huge difference.

[First woman] I think there’s a lot of pride and a lot more personal pride, and a lot more people willing to get involved.

[Second woman] Right . . . They built the Rotary Arts Park a couple years ago; They totally revamped Sam Johnson Park. (liberal women, 20s, Redmond)

People are interested in and motivated by various aspects of reclaiming government “by the people” – including the concept of going beyond voting, and ways to make learning and acting easier.

Give us more avenues to submit information. Instead of just voting, give us like, “hey, call this number, email us at this place.” Just have more of that out there so that we can have a voice. ...Not [only] in the Latino community, but all different types of communities would be nice, if we could find that information and just some go-to places. (moderate Hispanic female, 30, Bend)

By only voting and not doing anything else, it’s sort of like you’re accepting the way it is. (liberal white female, 49, Bend)

The more you involve yourself, the more you’re going to be heard. If we just vote, then that’s as far as your arm will reach. (conservative White male, 19, Bend)

If they opened it to everybody and gave us all a word, or at least [let us give] an opinion, I think it would make a big difference. A lot of people feel like they’re not worth being listened to, or know what’s going on, and they’re just – you know, we’re just little people. (apolitical White female, 39, Redmond)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Researchers noted a number of patterns and dynamics in Oregon 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.

A politically active state

People on both ends of the political spectrum feel like that Oregon is more politically active and engaged than other places, (even if voter turnout is in fact low).

I think Oregon is one of those states that really focuses on community, and you can hear that with different community groups getting together and talking about issues, and even going into Salem, talking about it there...There's other places that wouldn't even care, it would just be like, "oh, well, write a petition," and then it stops there. (moderate Hispanic female, 19, Bend)

I feel like people are a lot more politically active and the state is run really well because of that. (liberal White male, 26, Portland)

When I first arrived here [Portland] some ten years ago now, I guess, or nine years ago, there were more canvassers on the street corners than I had ever experienced in my entire life. And every canvasser wanted to put an election thing on the ballot. And then I started seeing that everything was on the ballot. There were so many elections that I got confused to when there was really an election. (moderate mixed race male, 60, Portland)

[I]n Portland thousands of people camped out [during the Occupy movement], they showed up, [but] they didn't accomplish [anything specific]. ...they themselves didn't push for legislation. There were maybe a few people who would talk to the leaders about what they want, but nothing happened. ...[I]n a sense showing up is action - it's assembly, it's powerful, it's what worked in the '60s and stuff ... When I really think about it, I think there are positive attributes to showing up, to being there, being a body. (liberal White male, 28, Bend)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Potential implication(s): The sense of Oregon as a politically active state, for the many who are happy and proud about it, can provide a helpful reference point – i.e. to a tradition of taking an active and responsible stance. On the other hand, for audiences that include those who have gotten engaged but failed in specific efforts (an inherent risk of political action anywhere), communicators may need to build in reminders that the process of going beyond voting is critical even if it is no silver bullet.

Good stewardship of the environment

To many research participants, the state seems to be doing well in terms of protecting the natural beauty of the state – which they value highly – and the health of its natural systems.

I think environmentally we're doing really quite well. (moderate White male, 58, Portland)

We all love Oregon [i.e. the physical space itself], everyone here. We think it's great. (liberal White female, 19, Bend)

What does Oregon do well? Well, I guess their environmental activities are good...(conservative White male, 77, Portland)

Potential implication(s): It is clear that environmental stewardship can be pointed to as an example of what can be accomplished when the people have a collective priority.

Portland vs. everywhere else

Portland is perceived as a very exceptional location within the state, and discussions in and outside the city confirm that attitudes and dynamics are in fact different. People in Portland were more likely to focus on the positive contributions of the public sector – e.g. the provision of essential social services. Outside of Portland, there was more concern with keeping federal and even state government from interfering with local issues (like infrastructure).

Rural interviewees sometimes talked about the Cascades as a significant divide, with issues on the Portland side naturally receiving greater attention, as the state's center of gravity. Even if natural, though, this relative “neglect” is obviously a source of dissatisfaction.

ABOUT PORTLAND:

I think that we're like really on top of it, in comparison to other states. I don't know, I feel like we're doing a lot more for helping people out that like need help, I guess, like with the new thing with PCC and stuff- Portland Community College. In 2016, I know that we are the second state to pass the free community college law. So I mean I think that's a really cool step, so it helps, like, people like get on their feet more and stuff. (Mexican and African American female, 17, Bend)

I have met more than my share of individuals just along the streets say, hey, how ya doing? And that is that kind of nice upbeatness that kind of drew me here in the first place. It's the reinforcement that not everyone is in it for themselves. (moderate White Hispanic male, 27, Bend)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

The old buildings and stuff, they're tearing down a lot of buildings... Yeah, and also the place near the Greyhound, the Bud Clark Commons, that was a good project too. I think that was one of the best ones they've done, I think. It helped out the homeless and stuff. (liberal White male, 42, Portland)

I really like Portland right now, because it's like, it's very... things are actually happening there, which is exciting when you're young, you know? Like, that's cool. It has a good art scene and like... and I don't know, I think people are pushing for positive change here a lot, in general. (liberal White female, 19, Bend)

ABOUT OTHER AREAS:

We still have some form of free speech that they keep saying we do, and we don't. Take the... Bundy situation a few weeks [Malheur?] Yeah. Now, granted, they approached it probably in the wrong way with carrying weapons. That's not the way to get it done, in this case. And it wasn't handled by the people that should have been there. The forestry and the BLM didn't get involved in that at all... they didn't respond to what those folks wanted to see happen. You know, they got the county involved in it, they got the city involved in it, they got the poor sheriff involved in that, who I think really did a great job as far as representing, but the government didn't step up to deal with it. It was all local government, which should be handling it to begin with, but they can't, because the federals have got control of it. Nobody showed for the meetings, nobody came to see if they would talk... Why is it necessary for the private sector to get in and shake the government up, and say hey, we don't like what you're doing? Nobody likes what they're doing. Why do you think Trump is so popular? (liberal White male, 73, Bend)

If you look at Prineville, it's basically an example of what's going on in the rest of the world, because we have, what, one of the highest unemployment rates in the country and stuff like that. ...In major cities it gets a little more diversified because it's bigger. It can go through different areas. But a small town? It's just, right here it is stuck. (moderate African American female, 24, Prineville)

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

I live like out where the woods are, and I have a big community of people who are living in tents, who are homeless, and alcoholics, drug users, and several times cops have been called and they've done nothing about it. The government just did an article on them saying how tough it is to be them when they can't get any jobs, but it's their own fault. (conservative White female, 19, Bend)

A related note is that a high percentage of individuals encountered by researchers had moved to Oregon from other states. People who had chosen to move to Oregon naturally tended to see various positives, and were most often encountered in prosperous areas such as Portland.

The reason I decided to come here [to Portland] personally was because of the progressive evolutionary, you know... it seems that people care more about other people here. (moderate White male, 21, Portland)

Native Oregonians on the other hand, were more likely to be in other areas, including inland and across the Cascades.

[Do you feel like you have a say in how things are run, whether it's in Salem or in Washington, or even the city here?] I think it gets incrementally less the further out it goes. It's kind of like a screaming voice can only be heard for so long. I would say here locally, yes, definitely heard. Salem, maybe not as much. Honestly, and I think you'll find that's true for anybody from central or eastern Oregon, most people, that our voices are not heard nearly as well as perhaps somebody from the [metro] areas or in the valley. (liberal White male, 58, Redmond)

To an extent this situation seemed to set up a complex dynamic even stronger than the usual metro-rural divide seen in all parts of the country, where some people feel that “real Oregonians” get the short end of the stick.

Potential implication(s): In one sense, communications in Portland and elsewhere could naturally take somewhat different starting points, with those in Portland and environs assuming a level of engagement and interest in the collective (public) systems and institutions that promote the common good – while those outside Portland need to do much more to establish these ideas, and even to acknowledge the frustrations of areas that feel they have, to date, gotten less attention and benefit from the public sector.

On the other hand, there may also be strong advantages to establishing a statewide sense of identity, and promoting the idea that Oregonians as a whole have shared interests that can drive policy if people are engaged and go beyond voting.

STATE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Dissatisfaction in Bend

Researchers heard a lot of specific complaint about government in Bend – much of it related to roads and transportation and a seeming inability to manage this important area.

Bend, Oregon has one of the most ridiculous governments. It is one of the most poorly run large cities in Oregon. They don't utilize the money we give them for what it's supposed to be for. The climate here in Bend with the constant freezing and thawing is really hard on streets, and the people do not want any more taxes, so they got together and put this tax on the ballot, and it was soundly defeated. It cost them \$77,000 to put this tax on the ballot, and the people just have no confidence in the city of Bend's ability to manage the money we give them. There were several times they wanted to pass a transportation fund and it was roundly defeated every time they put it on the ballot. Instead of doing that, they went ahead and did it, and they put this thing together and it failed twice as a measure, they went out and bought buses from Salt Lake City. The buses were total losses when they bought them. They paid millions of dollars for these buses that had no value ... It's just one misstep after another as far as the local government goes. (moderate White male, 59)

Yeah, there was going to try to be a gas tax to fix the roads, which are terrible, but that didn't go through... I've heard that there is the money to fix it, it's just not being fixed, and then they come up with this tax thing because they say there isn't the money, so is there or is there not, you know? I don't know. (White female, 28)

Give us more avenues to submit information. Instead of just voting, give us like, "Hey, call this number, email us at this place." Just have more of that out there so that we can have a voice. Call your local representative. We don't know who our local representative is [in Bend]. A lot of people don't even know how to look them up. Oregon representative, for what? We just don't know who we're supposed to talk to, so that would be nice to know, have a system where, okay, I have an issue with this, who do I talk to? Just an easy setup where we can send an email, something that makes us feel like we're being heard. (moderate Hispanic female, 30)

There are a lot of neighborhoods [in Bend] where grow houses are happening right next door to people's homes. [Q: Are people mobilizing against that or speaking out?] A: They're trying, and they've had meetings, and they've been talking to the commissioners to see what zoning they can change. (liberal White female, 43)

Potential implication(s): If the need to acknowledge that government is not ideal is important everywhere (as it is, in various ways), it should be especially so for audiences in a place like Bend, where perceptions tend to be particularly negative, and idealistic talk can sound irrelevant or insincere. On the other hand, this same dynamic makes it even more important for communicators to convey a strong sense of ways in which government has been and can be “for the people” – and to offer reminders that governing is not about particular administrations but about the processes that should lead to laws and investments that benefit all.

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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Oregon 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.