



SUBJECTS OR CITIZENS, PART II

Creating engaged conversations about government

By the Topos Partnership | for the “*Reclaiming Government for America’s Future*” Project of Indivisible

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Government actions play a critical role in determining the well-being of a community, state or nation. Policies in domains from health to the economy to security and the environment can make the difference between a community that flourishes and one where conditions make it difficult for people to achieve their goals and their potential.

But if citizens themselves are disconnected from government, with little faith in its power to do good—and if they step back from their own power to shape it—positive outcomes are far less likely.

In an earlier “exploratory” report,¹ Topos examined the current American context and found a bleak state of affairs, in which Americans feel more like political “subjects” in an undemocratic society than citizens with the ability, and responsibility, to shape government policy in their own interest.

This follow-up report offers a much more hopeful picture. It focuses on specific communications approaches that help Americans appreciate the contributions of the public sector to our well-being—and promote a shift in perspective from “subjects” to “citizens.”

¹ “Subjects or Citizens? Americans’ Lived Experience of Democracy,” produced for the *Reclaiming Government for America’s Future* project of Public Works and Indivisible

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SITUATION ANALYSIS: LEARNED PASSIVITY

The core problem at the heart of the project is Americans' lived experience of being disengaged from government. Despite (some) intellectual knowledge about how the institutions of democracy are supposed to work, Americans have come to believe, at a gut level, that government is not in *our* hands, in any sense. Due to a combination of factors—including, among others, the real and growing influence of wealthy elites, but also a public discourse that consistently treats government as the playground of self-interested power-seekers—the public has internalized a picture of government that is of, by and for "*them*" (elites, politicians themselves), not "*us*." This experience leads to frustration with no apparent constructive outlet, and to the disappearance of government from the public's radar when it comes to vehicles for positive change. For example, people are still happy to participate in charity drives and park cleanups, but see little connection between community-focused action and the institutions of government.

This negative and alienated view of the public sector also contributes to a kind of cognitive blindness, in which it is hard to recognize the tremendous benefits that public institutions can and do confer—or at least, hard to remember that these are associated with "government." In short, to make a meaningful difference, communications must not only address intellectual *thinking* about government. They must also try to change the *experience* of our relationship with government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research for this effort² identified a positive way forward—one that helps engage Americans, both by priming a meaningful and positive dialogue about *what we can achieve through government*, and by helping them imagine what a *more engaged relationship* feels like. There are two essential parts of this effective approach:

"For the people" – Maintain a focus on public institutions and policies, as *collective achievements that (should) benefit us all*, in order to inoculate against a focus on "government as politicians."

"By the people" – Offer a vivid sense of how active democratic engagement can work and how it can help (essentially, an *experiential* rather than theoretical model of democracy), while also acknowledging that most of us currently don't feel we have a say.

²The research had a total N of nearly 3,000 from around the country, and included online Talkback testing, a Virtual Community Forum, interviews with state-level leaders, ethnographic field testing in six states, and a dial-test survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“FOR THE PEOPLE”:

The research consistently finds that it is helpful to remind people of how the laws and investments we make through government end up benefitting us all (at least in principle).³ There are many ways to express these ideas, including the samples below, and it is easy to embed them in discussions of other topics, such as democratic engagement.

Sample Language

The real story of government of, by and for the people is a story about working together in ways that benefit all of us—from railways and highways to the Internet; from world-class colleges to libraries in every community ...

We sometimes forget that governing isn’t really about capitol buildings and politicians. It’s supposed to be about the laws and investments we make to benefit all of us and to create thriving communities. When we’re using government well, we create prosperity by building modern transportation and communications grids, good colleges and court systems, and we make laws about clean air, food, and safe workplaces.

“BY THE PEOPLE”:

For conversations about government to feel meaningful and real, they must address Americans’ central concern—that they no longer “have a say” (this phrase is the most natural way that non-experts refer to the issue, and is a helpful anchor to keep conversations grounded in a focus that is meaningful and important to people). Many communicators feel, and the research reinforces, that it is critical to both acknowledge people’s current frustration and to remind them that part of the definition of the American way is supposed to include the people being in charge.

Just as importantly, communications should help audiences begin to experience what active democratic engagement actually feels like.

First, it is helpful to convey a new idea about the topic: that really having a say requires *taking a step beyond voting*. This idea proves clarifying, engaging and very “sticky”—people remember and discuss it as a new understanding about how democracy really works, and about how they themselves can take on a new and more active and impactful role.

Sample Language

Some groups are working on the idea of Voting Plus One or Beyond Voting. This is the idea that everyone should vote, but everyone also has to take a step or two beyond that. Going beyond voting is the only way we are going to get a say in how things are run in our communities and our state.

³The goal is not to paint an idealistic picture of government, that ignores such real problems as unequal access to services, but to establish the broad principle that public systems and institutions are *supposed*to yield benefits to the population as a whole.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Second, it is helpful to paint a vivid picture of what effective engagement looks like. This picture can include several different elements:

“Success stories” – One of the most effective ways to change people’s stance toward government is through real and specific stories of others who have worked with government to achieve positive change. The report offers examples and a set of guidelines for selecting the kinds of stories most likely to engage people positively.

“Starter Kits” – Since the majority of Americans have so little experience feeling and acting like proactive citizens, they respond positively to the idea that there could be “Starter Kits” with tips about simple steps beyond voting.

“Process improvements” – Similar to the idea of “Starter Kits,” people appreciate hearing about simple, concrete steps governments could take—from establishing more regular community meetings to making information about upcoming decisions easier to access online—to make it easier for people to stay informed and express their views.

All of these approaches are helpful because they offer what amounts to “secondhand experience” of how meaningful democratic engagement works—and therefore help people understand and believe that government can be a tool that serves their own interests, and benefits all of us.

At the same time, they offer examples, however modest, of blueprints for change.

Even for groups that have no intention of beginning new engagement efforts, simply telling the *stories* of how we can have a say is a way of creating positive attention and energy, and a different stance toward government.

In addition to further detail about how to operationalize the recommendations above, other topics addressed in the body of the report include communications approaches that miss the mark, and considerations to keep in mind when addressing particular audiences, especially communities of color.

Despite a current context that can seem daunting, if not hopeless, the research suggests that if communicators are careful with their framing, they can find willing and even eager partners in the American people.

INTRODUCTION



The presidential election of 2016 is important for many reasons, but one of them is that government itself is a core, contested issue. Americans are, to a historically significant degree, skeptical of and distanced from their elected leadership, and when they are asked how things might get better, a common, half-jocular take is that it will require a “revolution.” Donald Trump’s promises to upset the applecart and some of Bernie Sanders’ rhetoric about a political revolution have struck chords at this level. For many Americans, the entire system is broken—and nothing short of radical change will help.

But while the problems at the root of public frustration may be real and important, so is the role that the public sector plays in ensuring our well-being, and so is the potential for government and public policy to create meaningful, positive change. The aim of the *Reclaiming Government for America’s Future* project is to find ways of helping to restore these fundamental ideas to the public lexicon, so that we can have a constructive dialogue about how to do the most we can with government, rather than dismiss it and waste the power of time-tested public institutions designed to promote our common welfare.

The prior report that emerged from this research effort, *Subjects or Citizens? Americans’ Lived Experience of Democracy*, focused largely on the challenges inherent in this ambitious effort—that Americans see themselves not as citizens with the responsibility to help manage our government, but rather as “subjects” who have little ability to influence how it works. This report also documented a set of patterns in the current “cultural common sense” that end up blinding us to the possibilities in our system of government while bringing areas of failure and dysfunction to the forefront.

The current report lays out the results of the next phase and offers a hopeful path forward. If we frame the conversation in the right ways, we find Americans are ready to recognize the contributions of the public sector to our prosperity and quality of life, and are willing to engage as eager partners in a constructive dialogue about bringing the system in line with our priorities.

RESEARCH APPROACH



The goal of a Topos project is to create simple but profound shifts in perspective that help advocates engage better with their audiences, and to create better, more constructive understandings that present a clearer call to action.

We do this by rethinking an issue from the ground up—uncovering the hidden patterns of understanding that undermine citizen engagement while identifying new possibilities and refining a course of action.

Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

Importantly, the research is not intended to drill down into the specifics of how Americans regard *particular* events, policies, proposals, or individuals. Instead, it aims to assess the most fundamental aspects of the current cultural and cognitive landscape across our nation.

The exploratory research for this project consisted of ethnography, media analysis, focus groups, and a quantitative survey. The insights that emerged from this exploratory phase led directly to more systematic strategy testing in the form of Virtual Community Forums and TalkBack, in-depth interviews with leaders, as well as ethnographic field-testing of promising approaches. Some methods were deployed in the six focus states (AR, CO, MI, NC, NE, and OR), while others were deployed throughout the U.S. as a whole. These methods included:



RESEARCH APPROACH

ONLINE TALKBACK TESTING

In the TalkBack method, developed by Topos principals, subjects are presented with brief texts (roughly 100–150 words) and then asked several open-ended questions, focusing in part on subjects' *abilities to repeat the core of the message, or pass it along to others*. TalkBack texts generally convey a few key concepts, such as a particular aspect of a complex issue like revenue and taxation. New terms are often introduced as well (usually identified as terms that "experts" use), in order to test their clarity and memorability.

Importantly, one of the purposes of TalkBack—and the Topos approach in general—is to explore *what is taken away from a message as opposed to what is intended*. Listeners often hear something quite different from what the speaker meant to convey (one of the shortcomings of testing approaches that focus on "agreement" or enthusiasm is that they can inadvertently measure responses to *a point that was heard but not intended*).

Parameters of success include subjects' abilities to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory ideas and key terms. The testing is designed to assess whether a given idea has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating in a new way about the issue, as well as its overall effects on reasoning and engagement.

In 2015 and 2016, over 30 TalkBack paragraphs were tested among a diverse set of 550 subjects from around the country. This effort enabled us to sort through numerous ideas and approaches, and identify the most promising (for examples of TalkBack texts that were used in testing, see the appendix).

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY FORUM (VCF)

A VCF is an online interaction over several days among a diverse set of roughly two dozen individuals who respond to questions, to materials, and to each other, on their own schedule. The VCF process allows us to observe how thinking evolves over time, as well as how dynamics play out in an interactive group setting. It enables us to introduce ideas and framing contexts over the course of several days and determine what aspects seem to stick with people and which fall away. The approach allows both individual reactions and group interaction, top-of-mind thoughts as well as considered responses, as people think about issues over several days.

In February of 2016, a Virtual Community Forum brought together a diverse group of 27 adults from around the country who participated over a period of five days in online discussions. Participants responded to a variety of different questions and materials, including video and marked-up documents, in detail (see Appendix for a sample excerpt of a VCF protocol).

The VCFs enabled us to test numerous promising message directions in a controlled yet flexible manner, and to explore the nuances of people's understandings and reactions to various ideas and frames.

RESEARCH APPROACH

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD-TESTING (EFT)

More focused than exploratory ethnography, ethnographic field-testing (EFT) is a way to test specific communication approaches rather than having open-ended conversations designed to uncover default dynamics. In EFT, anthropologists take messages out and engage people in impromptu conversations in the places where they live, work and play. One of the key goals of these semi-structured conversations is to introduce particular, targeted ideas and frames, and then encourage subjects to think aloud about the topic, to see if their thinking can be shifted toward more constructive understandings and orientations. The conversations are often one-on-one, but also include interactions with small groups.

Between September of 2015 and March of 2016, a team of ethnographers conducted over 750 of these encounters in the six focus states, including 150 conversations with people under 30, and 200 with people of color. Most were taped for later analysis (see Appendix for a sample protocol). The research was designed for great cultural and geographic breadth as ethnographers conducted conversations in areas as culturally diverse as Portland, Oregon; western Nebraska; Detroit; the central Rocky Mountains; and the delta region of eastern Arkansas.

Ethnographic field-testing presents the highest bar in communications testing. Only the most successful messages and ideas can thrive consistently in these kinds of impromptu conversations among strangers.

ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE

On these sunny winter days, supermarket parking lots turned out to be the best place to have one-on-one conversations. Racially and demographically diverse, with people in not too great a hurry or even waiting in their vehicles for a shopper to finish errands. In south Little Rock for example, folks included a 90-year-old white, conservative woman with an enormous pickup truck; a young African-American welder with a felony conviction wanting “opportunity” rather than downtown boondoggles; a white woman in a fire department vest, politically cynical and angry; and a young, brightly dressed African-American woman, ostensibly apolitical, but with a clear grasp on class and racial dynamics in Little Rock politics. She described how political stances are so sensitive to wealth and envy, even within her own extensive family.

RESEARCH APPROACH

LEADER INTERVIEWS

In these semi-structured interviews, we shared potential strategies with leaders and allies who have experience in the topic area, and elicited their feedback. This enabled us to gauge whether communicators and strategists would feel comfortable using various approaches, as well as allowing us to refine and improve the approaches themselves.

One of the key goals of these interviews was to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they had stated or heard before.

Over 60 of these interviews were conducted over the phone by Indivisible in consultation with Topos, across the six focus states. The conversations took about 30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

SURVEY

To complement these “ground-level” analyses and methods, Topos also conducted a national survey to gain insights into the dynamics at work in the population at large. This helped us confirm and quantify patterns that we were seeing based on other methods.

A survey of 1,200 American adults was conducted online, April 29–May 10, 2016. The survey incorporated a number of experiments designed to explore the impacts of various communications strategies. Respondents were divided into five groups, which included a control group ($n=400$) and four experimental groups that determined which message respondents heard first ($n=200$ in each group).

After hearing the first message, respondents answered an open-ended recall question about the message, as well as a number of indicator questions that were also asked of a control group.

After the indicator questions, respondents reviewed the three remaining messages so that all four messages have a base response of $n=800$.

SITUATION ANALYSIS



We begin with discussions of two core problems in Americans' current thinking about government that must be addressed in order to create more engaged, constructive outlooks:

- People see themselves as powerless – as subjects, with little power to influence what government does, rather than as citizens with a say in what happens in our government.
- People have a very limited view of what government is and does.

While Americans can sometimes take positive views of government and its actions, these default views more often tend to drive thinking in negative or dismissive directions instead.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

SUBJECTS-NOT-CITIZENS

Specific complaints and attitudes about government vary widely across demographic and political lines, but one strategically critical pattern is now part of the “cultural common sense,” shaping assumptions about what government is and does, and about our (the public’s) relationship to government. At both a conscious and implicit level, people experience government as something other than the type of democratic and representative institution the founders intended. Instead, government is *other*, an authority that is fundamentally disconnected from us. From this perspective, we Americans are not *citizens* of a democratic society, but *subjects* in a different kind of society altogether. This cultural pattern (see our earlier exploratory report for this project), and the language that accompanies it, is surprisingly consistent across the political spectrum and across demographic and geographic groups.

For many conservatives, this idea converges with a model of “tyranny”—a powerful, overbearing force that does not take into account the wishes and needs of the people.

Liberals are more likely than conservatives to believe government sometimes bequeaths good things on the people—depending on many factors, such as the honesty of particular politicians. But even from this somewhat more-positive perspective, the people are relatively passive as government acts upon us. In this view the people are typically “consumers” of government services, and government is certainly not “by the people.”

And in fact, government is usually not even seen as “for the people.” Instead it acts on its own agenda—often for the benefit of politicians themselves. Other work by the Topos Partnership confirms that the problem of money in politics contributes greatly to a sense of alienation from the people who are supposed to represent us.

ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE

Michigan. In a quiet café in Allen Park, a young Hispanic woman (22) is working and chatting with a male friend (24) at the counter. Both think there is no doubt that democracy is broken. The young woman admits to not being registered to vote, since her vote just doesn’t matter. The young man actually spent four years overseas in the Marines and he is adamant that politics is broken—moreover, that it is rigged in favor of wealthy elites. She labels herself as a Democrat and he Republican.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

There's a lot of cynicism and a lot of lack of participation, and I think that's not helpful but I can understand it, from a person who understands that if you wake up every single day and don't feel like your opinion or your vote matters, then it's very easy to slip into that kind of cynicism. (44-year-old white, liberal man, MI)

BS. So many layers of it. The waters are so muddied that it's really hard for regular people to know really truly what the truth is. (66-year-old liberal, white woman, CO)

I feel like we ain't got no control, and they just do what they want to do. (apolitical, African-American man, 20s, AR)

I just think about money, just people or ideas I can't relate to as an everyday person. Almost as if I don't have much say in it. (25-year-old apolitical, white man, NC)

I don't know very many people my age who are voting. I don't know very many who are interested in government. (29-year-old conservative, Hispanic woman, CO)

We have kind of a practice of apathy, is what I've been noticing, as far as regular people go. There's so much going on in the world that you can't really do anything about . . . so you just do nothing about anything, and if regular people started participating in things, at least locally, that's definitely a great step. (24-year-old liberal, Hispanic man, OR)

A lot of people have given up. I hate to say that, but given up some hope. I think we all want a change, but sometimes we turn our backs on things. (41-year-old liberal, white man, NC)

I don't feel like they have our best interests at hand. I feel like it all ties back to money. I feel like it's a money racket; I do. (40-year-old apolitical, African-American man, NC)

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Many citizens do not view government as operating in their behalf but on the behalf of special interest groups, usually composed of those individuals who have greater ties with the individual legislators and policy makers. (NC)

I think behind [people's skepticism] is the perception that government officials are inherently corrupt and always on the take and benefiting and, you know, live by a different standard and make a bunch of money off the people. (AR)

There is a lot of skepticism about government and their role and that government is supposed to be for and by the people, but it does not appear to be so. (MI)

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Overall, the way ordinary people experience government is profoundly disempowering, in ways identified by social science research on how people lose their sense of agency in the face of a system of authority.⁴

There is also a set of more specific implications that shape the context advocates find themselves in:

Good fit with anti-government conservative perspectives: Even people who self-identify as liberal agree with many negative views that are more associated with particular brands of conservatism. It is not easy for them to call to mind a positive picture, and it can seem that anti-government conservatism is simply more direct about acknowledging the problems.

Bypassing government: Action by and for regular people is alive and well in America, but is rarely associated with the functions of government. Research participants eagerly spoke about church activities, food drives, neighborhood watch groups, neighbors looking out for neighbors, volunteer organizations, and the like. However, these initiatives are thought of as unrelated to what government is about. In fact, people sometimes draw an explicit contrast between government, and what we the people do with, and for, each other.⁵

Cynicism: The experience of being a Subject, not a Citizen, leads to an internalized attitude that resists most communications tools, as people can hear messages of hope and change as mere “happy talk,” or even attempts to manipulate them.

Unconstructive anger: People’s resentment about government is often expressed in half-joking fantasies of revolution and does not seem to motivate constructive action, such as working on government reform, increased participation in the process, etc

Messages backfiring?: Importantly, reinforcing the idea that the government provides beneficial services (a common advocacy focus) may backfire, by reinforcing the Subjects-Not-Citizens perspective— specifically by reinforcing a passive consumer stance relative to government. (Even political strongmen regularly do things “for the people.” The fact that a government makes the trains run on time tells us nothing about whether that government is by the people.)

More generally, the Subjects-Not-Citizens experience of government leads not only to explicit opinions or understandings about government, but to a set of habits of feeling and thinking. As with any deeply ingrained habit, attitudes toward government have a very strong emotional and unconscious dimension. This means that helpful communications must do more than change intellectual *thinking* about government. They must also try to change the *experience* of our relationship with government.

⁴ Early studies, like Milgram's famous obedience experiments (Milgram, Stanley, 1963, Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67: 371-378; Haney et al., 1973. A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review* 30: 4-17), looked at extreme examples of this behavioral response, but more recent work (e.g., Aubrun & Grady) has shown how the dynamic also shows up in ordinary settings, such as the factory floor.

⁵ In one sense, this pattern in American life goes far back in our history, having been identified by de Tocqueville as the peculiarly American enthusiasm for civic associations. What seems newer is government's near disappearance from people's radar as they consider collective action and decision-making.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

OBSCURED VIEW OF WHAT GOVERNMENT IS AND DOES

Partly as an effect of the Subjects-Not-Citizens model, and partly because much of what government accomplishes is under the radar (think infrastructure in its broadest sense), Americans tend towards a “cognitive blindness” regarding what government is and does. Their view of government tends strongly to focus on emotionally charged images related to power and zero-sum advantage (who is running things, and in whose interest?), and these patterns block out awareness of the many beneficial and uncontroversial dimensions of the public sector, from libraries and schools to court systems and physical infrastructure.

There are also other reasons these critical systems and institutions tend not to come to mind in a conversation about government. For example when we do think about them, they tend to have their own vivid identity (e.g. a particular school, library, court case, road) that we don’t associate with the higher-level abstraction of the public sector. In addition, anti-government, conservative communications have served to feed assumptions that government consists of little more than inefficient bureaucrats or overbearing power-seekers.

But regardless of causes, the lack of awareness regarding government’s functions is a significant problem, as it contributes to devaluation of a sector that is already regarded with mistrust and skepticism.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Q: What comes to mind when you think of government?

A1: Control, I just think of control.

A2: Power.

A1: Yeah. Kind of something you have to abide by. Whatever laws are set, just whatever they say is what goes, pretty much.

A2: Pretty much. (20-year-old female college students, NC)

RECOMMENDATION - *BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE*



The challenge of creating engaged, hopeful and constructive conversations about government is significant, but the research identified a set of approaches that can consistently help communicators do exactly that.

We begin with a discussion of what communications must achieve. The research established that creating a helpful dialogue depends on making a particular set of points. The details of *how* to effectively make these points are then discussed in the later parts of the section.

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

To create engaging, hopeful and constructive conversations about government, communicators must:

- Establish that government often operates “for the people” by making the benefits of collective solutions to collective problems (e.g., infrastructure in all of its forms) easier to see.
- Create a vivid sense of government “by the people,” by addressing the public’s “habit of disempowerment,” and offering a vision of active, engaged and democratic self-governance.

Unless both of these dimensions are addressed, people remain cynical or, at best, unengaged by the conversation. We consider each in turn.

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

FOR THE PEOPLE: RAISING AWARENESS OF COLLECTIVE ACHIEVEMENTS THAT BENEFIT ALL OF US

Americans' default definition of government focuses on the politicians in office—the class of “rulers” who, for better or worse, run our communities, states and country, and whose actions affect us—their metaphorical subjects—as a kind of external force. **So it is critical, throughout any communication, to change the focus to the various ways that the tools of government can be, have been and should be used to create benefits for all of us.**

There are any number of kinds of examples that can help with this (parks, highways, clean air laws, etc. – see further examples below), and the key is to consistently tie discussion of government to these beneficial systems, structures and programs, while also framing them as collective achievements on the part of all of us, rather than “gifts” from a benevolent group of leaders (this latter point follows from the tendency, discussed in the situation analysis, for even collective systems to reinforce an essentially passive consumer perspective, to be understood as benefits bestowed upon the people by government rather than as things we do for ourselves).

BY THE PEOPLE: PROMOTING A SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT

As the research demonstrates, painting a picture of government's positive actions is not sufficient. The other challenge is even more daunting, and we devote more space to it here and elsewhere in the report.

The research makes clear that one of the core dynamics that drives conversations about government in either a constructive or unconstructive direction has to do with a sense of empowerment. Do we feel like passive subjects in our own country, ruled by an elite class, or can we be active citizens who guide things according to our needs and priorities? Do “we the people” have a say in how our government runs? If not, it is too easy to ignore it or regard it with anger and frustration.

Addressing this challenge is not a matter of simply “making a case” in intellectual terms. As with changing any habits, explaining why it would be a good idea to change the habit can only be one dimension of the communication. In particular, **advocates must address people's lived experience of government—helping them move from an experience of powerlessness to an experience (or at least a secondhand experience) of control, of actually “having a say.”**

When thinking about the effective tools identified by the research, it is important to keep in mind that in different ways they add up to something like an “experiential model” of democratic engagement, as opposed to a theoretical one.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

[Male] The part about putting the power of lawmaking to us, the citizens—that made me want to listen, because we don't have that much power in the lawmaking process.

[Female] Just empowering the citizens, making them want to be active in the community is pretty nice. (African-American couple, both 17 years old, AR)

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

HOW TO DO IT: CREATING A SENSE OF GOVERNMENT BY AND FOR THE PEOPLE

There are a number of narrative elements that promote a very different stance toward government, including specific ideas and language that can help communicators make the crucial points discussed above.

The remainder of this section discusses both sides of the core story (*by the people and for the people*), and the elements that are helpful to keep in mind. In a nutshell, these include the following:

1. Consistent reminders of the positive things we accomplish together through government;
2. Acknowledgement that we don't seem to "have a say" but are supposed to;
3. A new *idea* about how democracy works when it is successful—it requires going at least one step beyond voting; and
4. A variety of narrative tools that help people picture the experience of having a say in how government operates.

1 REMIND PEOPLE OF THE POSITIVE THINGS WE ACCOMPLISH TOGETHER THROUGH GOVERNMENT ("FOR THE PEOPLE")

It is critical to emphasize the beneficial things that we can accomplish and have accomplished through government, and in particular the achievements that (in principle, at least) create benefits for all of us, rather than a few. Reminders of these achievements can be embedded in discussions on a variety of different points, but should be made the focus of what we really mean when we talk about governing and government (as opposed to the focus being on politicians, for instance).

Sample Language

*We sometimes forget that governing isn't really about capitol buildings and politicians. It's supposed to be about the laws and investments we make to benefit all of us and to create thriving communities. When we're using government well, we create prosperity by building modern transportation and communications grids, good colleges and court systems, and we make laws about clean air, food and safe workplaces. But in order for government to benefit all of us, **we the people** need to have control of its actions. It's up to each of us to step up and do our part to make sure government is in our hands and accomplishing what it is supposed to.*

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Yeah, we should talk more about things that are actually going on around us instead of the debates on TV. 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 and leave out some of the fighting and what they call interesting. (25-year-old liberal, African-American woman, CO)

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

I just love this [concept] because you get a chance to talk about this is what the country is built on. It feels inclusive ... (AR)

These are examples of when we took steps forward and made progress and made life better for everybody. We have done some things before in moving forward and we can do it again. (NC)

I think there's so many things that we take for granted in this country ... the list is innumerable. (NE)

In both the current effort and other research on a range of related topics (see Appendix for discussion), we have consistently found that it is helpful to:

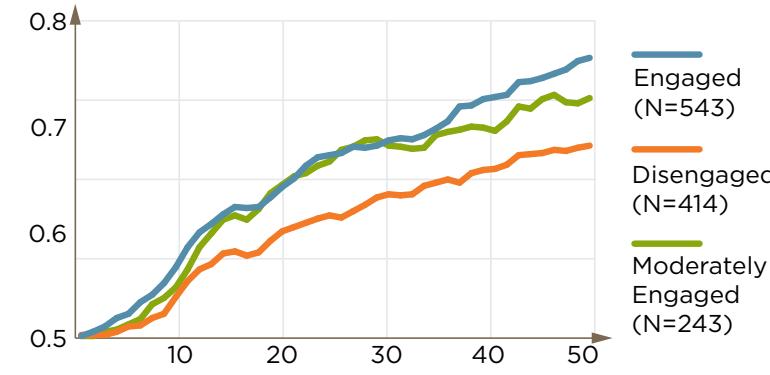
- Remind people of the systems and structures that are foundations of our prosperity and quality of life—particularly those that are found in every community and relevant to all of us (from libraries to parks to courts, etc.).
- Emphasize collective benefit, discussing how developments and innovations benefit us all (safe food, clean water, labor laws, etc.).
- Emphasize collective responsibility for creating these systems, in order to promote awareness of the active role that citizens can play.
- Discuss how investments create “thriving communities”—both as a way of clarifying the stakes and to promote awareness of the role that government plays in creating the infrastructure of civilization at every level.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The sample text on the previous page reached a high of 73 (out of 100) on dial testing, an average rating of 70 on how convincing the statement is, and 64 on how motivating it is.

After hearing this statement, people were less likely to hold some negative views of government: they were statistically less likely to view government as “THE government” (as opposed to “OUR government”) and less likely to agree that government action usually benefits the wrong people. Responses to open-ended questions show that ideas like *people having more control* and *the people vs. elites* prove sticky, with 30% and 24%, respectively, volunteering those ideas after being exposed to the statement. This approach is particularly compelling for Democrats, both highly and moderately engaged Americans, older men, and senior citizens.

“For the People” Dial Test Results
Average Rating (0-100) by second



RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

An alternative text (below) that blames the media for not covering the “real story of people working together in ways that benefit us all” also performs well—presumably because of two elements: the reminders of collective achievements that benefit us all (railways, highways, etc.), and the contrast between a negative view offered by media and a view that recognizes some positives. (While people’s default views of government are negative, it can be helpful to single out negative “hater” views, in order to make positive views seem more reasonable and appealing.)

The following text reached a high of 71 (out of 100) on dial testing, and an average rating of 68 on how convincing the statement is, and 63 on how motivating it is.

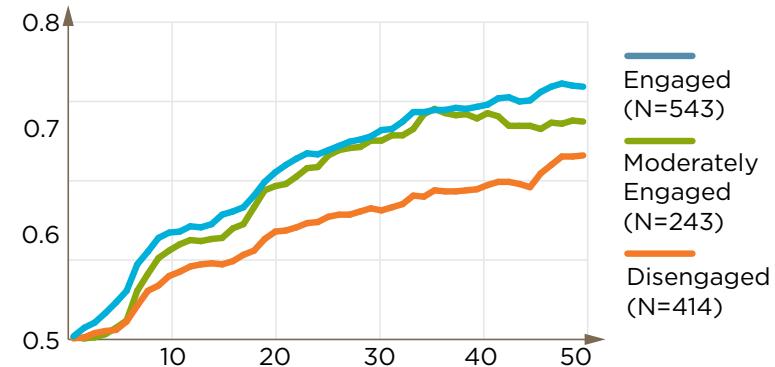
Sample Language

For many of us, the word “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because the media loves to entertain us with the fight of the day. But that’s not the REAL story of who we are. The real story of government of, by and for the people, is a story about working together in ways that benefit all of us—from railways and highways to the Internet, from world-class colleges to libraries in every community; it’s about dedicated public servants who quietly get things done, and people coming together to build communities and solve problems. This real story is about how working together has made us more successful and prosperous than many other countries.

Instead of only dwelling on negative stories, we should look around for the positive things that are happening in our governments and our communities, and get involved to help.

SURVEY FINDINGS

“The Real Story” Dial Test Results
Average Rating (0-100) by second



After hearing this statement, people were less likely to hold some negative views of government. They were statistically less likely to view government as “THE government” and less likely to agree that government action usually benefits the wrong people. When asked to recall the statement, people voice the ideas that government is about collective action (21%), that it does good things (15%), and that media focuses on the negative (9%). This approach is particularly compelling for Democrats, engaged Americans, African-Americans, older women, and senior citizens.

Finally, while the sample text focuses explicitly on how actions of government benefit us all, this point can be woven into discussions that focus on a range of other points—as will be illustrated by subsequent texts throughout this section.

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

2 ACKNOWLEDGE THAT “WE DON’T HAVE A SAY”

Communicators need to acknowledge at the outset that most Americans feel we currently *don’t* have a say, but also remind people that we are *supposed* to have a say.

The common and common-sense lament that we don’t have a say needs to be acknowledged, and acknowledged early, in order for a conversation to be credible. Otherwise, Americans easily reject any subsequent ideas as naïve “happy talk” (unrealistically optimistic and meaningless) or irrelevant to the current dysfunctional system. People are frustrated and negative about the situation and readily blame problems like the shrinking middle class, wage stagnation and national malaise on the fact that government is no longer run with our interests in mind.

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

I think what's important is that there needs to be recognition that government has disappointed people; the current way that government is being carried out is leaving out the people that it's supposed to be advocating for. (MI)

Don't start lecturing people about not having a right to be skeptical. I mean that stops the conversation before it can get started. (AR)

I think that it would resonate with people [of color], being truthful with people that we understand and we acknowledge that government is not working the way it should work, but this is the way that it should work and ... this is what it should look like. (MI)

Once reminded, people agree that a fundamental aspect of being American is *supposed* to include having a say in government and how our society is ordered. It is not something we can just give up on. By default, it is as though this notion has been largely forgotten—but once it is introduced, Americans readily focus on the idea that government is *supposed* to be guided by our views and interests, and that things would be much better if it were.

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

I think [the idea that we're supposed to have a say] is principally, exactly and comparatively to other nations, exactly who we are and what the role of government is supposed to be in our free market society. (AR)

One of the best things and most challenging things about living in a democracy like we do is that we get to make the decisions and “we” being every individual that lives in this country, and that means you have to be an active participant because you help shape the society you live in. (CO)

What strikes me in a really positive way is the notion that government is defined to be an organizing and protective force of, by and for the people. And so, we're protected by each other first. (AR)

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

You can't be completely anti-government, because you have to have your say out there, still. If you're just going to shut up and say nothing about it . . . then you're not going to have a say in anything. (38-year-old white, conservative woman, OH)

The sample texts in this section all achieve these goals in one way or another (e.g., “... in order for government to benefit all of us, we the people need to have control of its actions”).

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

3 ESTABLISH THE CORE IDEA THAT CREATING REAL CHANGE MEANS TAKING STEPS BEYOND VOTING

Research experience in a number of issue areas suggests that it is often helpful to offer a new idea, a conceptual “hook” that sticks with people when they hear it and helps them look at a topic in a new way. The testing in this effort identified an idea like this, and that we recommend as one of the core focuses for communications. The idea can be expressed in various ways, but boils down to the following:

For the people to really have a say in how government operates requires that we take at least one step beyond voting.

Sample Language

*In our democracy, the people are supposed to have final say about how things are run—but most of us feel like we don’t have much say, and just voting isn’t enough. So some groups are working on the idea of **Voting Plus One** or **Beyond Voting**. This is the idea that everyone should vote, but everyone also has to take a step or two beyond that. Going beyond voting is the only way we are going to get a say in how things are run in our communities and our state.*

This idea resonates both with those who have given up on voting, and with those who vote but know that their vote could count for more with more follow-through. It crystallizes the idea that the best response is not to step back, give up and disengage from a non-responsive system—but rather to step forward, do more and demand more.

In other words, this focus offers a clear and simple alternative to people’s default response when they are frustrated about the apparent impotence of their vote: rather than stop voting, take additional steps beyond voting.

The phrases “Voting Plus One” and “a step beyond voting” are examples of how this idea can be summed up in sticky ways that capture the key concept, making it seem simple, concrete and straightforward. In fact, in our survey fully 50% recalled and repeated the term “Voting Plus One” after hearing it in a text read aloud—demonstrating its memorability—and 42% repeated the core idea of doing more than voting, demonstrating the message’s clarity.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Voting, we understand. “Voting Plus One,” that makes sense. It’s the next step further to be able to have some extra input on that actual thing that we’re voting on. (29-year-old conservative, white man, NE)

It’s not enough just to vote anymore—you have to do a little bit more. So you have to be involved in civic organizations, you have to be a community member, and a lot of times, you have to actually take the reins yourself. Like if you see something that’s not going right, you have to be more of an activist, than just sitting still and waiting. (42-year-old liberal, African-American man, CO)

The idea of going beyond voting taps into intuitions that people already have about power:

There is strength in numbers—so getting more people involved and organizing them is powerful.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

If you want change, these people need to come together as a force and voice our opinions, and eventually somebody’s going to listen. I think absolutely if a community comes together they’re strong, and people eventually will listen. (29-year-old conservative, Hispanic woman, CO)

My roommate . . . is involved in moral Mondays . . . They’re just trying to hold the government accountable to be for the people . . . [Do you think that has an impact?] I think it’s good to show how many people support the movement like that, and use the power of the numbers to open up eyes. (23-year-old liberal, white woman, NC)

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

The only way our interests are going to be represented is if we stand up and insist on it.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Even though national elections are important, I think that too often people are too focused on that, 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 ... (19-year-old African-American, moderate woman, CO)

The simple idea that making a real difference means going even a single step beyond voting is readily understood and accepted, and creates an “aha!” moment of clarity and empowerment.

It also prompts a “practical problem-solver” mode, where people begin to think about ways one could go beyond voting.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

One of the things they could do is after they vote for the candidate who campaigns on a platform, the people who voted for him en masse should follow up and make sure he's keeping his word . . . once you elect someone you should make sure—you should follow up. (61-year-old liberal, African-American man, AR)

I really liked your paragraph about Voting Plus One. That's what I'm going to take away from that. And if I have something that I'm really passionate about, just following through with anything I can do on my end for that cause. (19-year-old moderate, African-American woman, CO)

4 PROVIDE A VARIETY OF NARRATIVE TOOLS THAT HELP PEOPLE EXPERIENCE HOW HAVING A SAY IN GOVERNMENT OPERATES

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

If you're reading the newspaper and they give a review on a restaurant, they'll say, oh, here's the number, here's the website, here's what they serve, and if you're interested to make a reservation, call, or here's the address. But for civic engagement stuff, they'll write an article about politics and then that's it. No town hall meeting or no anything. You have to go digging for the information if you're interested; it's not just right there. (23-year-old liberal, Asian-American woman, CO)

Besides offering the helpful *idea* that having a say means taking a step or two beyond voting, communicators need to combat Americans’ experiences of being subjects-not-citizens by painting a vivid picture of what the experience of going beyond voting would actually be like—essentially, allowing them to experience active engagement secondhand.

There are several approaches that can help do this, and the research suggests they should all play a role in communications.

“Success stories”: How collective action is making a real difference in real places.

One of the most powerful ways to engage people in action is to model the behavior. When people hear accounts of the concrete and meaningful difference real people are making in their communities, working through government, they see that they really can have a say in things.

LEADER PERSPECTIVE

The help I would need is some lines of evidence or anecdotes or storytelling or metaphors that help people to actually see that's true—connect them to a lived experience where there was a change based on the voice of the public. (OR)

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Research participants responded well to such stories, including these which were tailored to different states, such as North Carolina:

Sample Language

For example in Raleigh, bad relations between police and many communities have been a problem for years. Recently, residents organized themselves, held meetings to come up with solutions and are working with the City Council to change policies and open up new lines of communication and accountability for officers and residents.

To make this happen, it took people really making the most of their government by going beyond just voting.

and Oregon:

Sample Language

Over a decade ago, Oregon state geologists realized how vulnerable the coastal communities are to a massive tsunami. So they spent years organizing local, state and federal resources through a TsunamiReady program. Community leaders, first responders—even teachers and neighbors—all have a role to play in helping to understand and educate people about how to prepare for a tsunami.

To make this kind of thing happen, it takes people really making the most of their government by using it to solve real problems.

and Arkansas:

Sample Language

Down in Dermott (Chicot County), residents badly needed jobs and economic development. It wasn't until local people worked with the City Council to organize themselves into a Community Development group that they could use tax dollars and get outside government grants to help with training and loans to open businesses—and to finally restart the economy of their corner of Arkansas.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

People don't believe in anything until they actually see some action. Those people saw the action—now they see it. They say, "wow, we can do this." (62-year-old conservative, white man, CO)

That whole Chicago situation, how they actually got together and made a change. That's great. That's real great. That's what you have to do to make sure that the politicians do their job. Like just voting, all that does is get them in there, but who's going to make sure they actually do what they say? (29-year-old African-American man, AR)

It took the group, though. I mean, you have to have the group of people that are going to all be behind it, because if you're just like one voice or like a couple voices, if you don't have the rest of the voices, then that might not have happened. (23-year-old conservative white man, NE)

I don't just generically hate politicians, [but] I think there's a more efficient way to get things done . . . But I think that's interesting. That's cool that they got in there and got their hands dirty trying to fix things, and got change to happen. Sure, it's possible . . . That's a good story. (20-year-old Tea Party conservative white woman, AR)

When the public actually gets informed on what's going on, they will voice their opinion. When the public voices their opinion, the big government agencies are actually going to listen. [And how do you feel about that?] . . . I liked it—how the public responded and the government acted on it. (22-year-old liberal, white man, NE)

RECOMMENDATION - BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

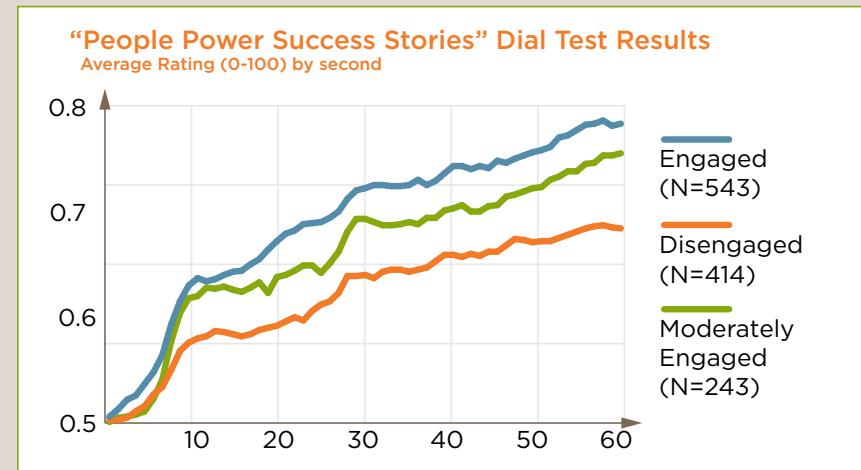
SURVEY FINDINGS

In terms of being compelling, the following text was the top-testing message in our survey, reaching a high of 74 (out of 100) on dial testing, and an average rating of 71 on how convincing the statement is and 66 on how motivating it is. People's reactions improve dramatically as they begin to hear real stories of change. While engaged citizens are the most enthusiastic, even those who are disengaged respond.

Sample Language

Sometimes we need to be reminded that the power of people working together is the power of our democracy. There are examples all around the nation. For instance, last year, residents of Chicago's southeast side took on a powerful, multinational corporation and won. They educated neighbors, held protests and worked alongside elected officials to pass a law banning the storage of toxic chemicals that were polluting their neighborhood. In another example, citizens in an Alabama community were frustrated with inaction on outdated schools, so they urged local officials to get additional funding for new school buildings. And in one Arkansas county, local people worked with the City Council to get grants for new businesses and job-training programs. Working together, citizens are taking the initiative and getting things done. We the people can definitely have a say in how our communities and our country are run. It's time to take a stand.

After hearing the statement and responding to some questions, survey respondents were asked what they could recall from the statement. In this instance, responses revolved around the idea of collective action: people can make a difference (40%), people should work together (22%), we need to do more (20%), and 27% mention one of the specific examples. Furthermore, people were statistically more likely to agree with the statement "people like me can help make our government more effective." While it is a top message across demographic groups, it is particularly compelling for Democrats, both highly engaged and moderately engaged Americans, African-Americans, and older women.



RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

There are a number of considerations to keep in mind when choosing success stories to embed in communications:

- It is not critical to show cases of major policy change. Stories of any real-world impact can help clarify the idea and promote an optimistic stance.
- It is not critical to pick stories from nearby. If stories are from a distant state, for instance, they may still illustrate the idea that “if they can do it there, we can do it here.”
- It is critical to make it explicit that these stories involve—rather than bypass—government as a way of creating positive change. Otherwise, people will often focus on non-governmental actions.
- The stories should implicitly or explicitly tie to real and realistic action items that citizens can imagine themselves and their neighbors taking up.
- Audiences can be alienated by stories that seem especially fraught with controversy or peril, or which make the actors especially heroic (e.g., stories involving confrontations that turned violent). People who are lacking political confidence and experience can discount the relevance of such stories (“people wouldn’t do that here”).
- Stories can illustrate very specific dynamics and lessons, such as how people can actually be gathered in greater numbers for greater impact, or how enlisting elected officials can be an effective path forward.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

The people in Wayne [Nebraska], they came together and they made a positive outcome for their community. Not only did they come together, but they all voiced their opinions and came upon an agreement to better their community. When we better our community, we better ourselves, because we all live in the community. (20-year-old African-American man, NE)

In short, while they are not the same as real-world experience with effective popular action, success stories offer people the next best thing—the opportunity to vividly picture and learn from such experiences, essentially experiencing them secondhand and inspiring them to get involved.

“Starter Kits”

Most Americans feel very little confidence about how to take the first steps toward creating positive change related to government. The problem seems vast and daunting—the kind of challenge people usually don’t even think about taking on (instead hoping for a “hero” such as a billionaire strongman to take it on for them). So anything that makes the challenge feel more manageable can be helpful and empowering.

As a specific example, the idea of “Starter Kits” with tips and instructions for how to have more of an impact proved very helpful in the research. This idea was appealing and sticky when mentioned in conversation with participants.

In the ethnographic fieldwork, people often expressed a strong desire for these sorts of specific and manageable tips, suggestions and sources of information. People who were already active and engaged also appreciated the benefits of making it easier for more people to get involved.

The idea often served as a complement to the idea of going beyond voting as people began to seriously consider what they and the people in their community or state might do.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

It's a reality check. I've thought this for a while, that I should dive more into things like that. I think sometimes I just think by avoiding it and just living my life and not thinking about it that something will change, and it's not going to change unless you and everyone gets involved. (24-year-old moderate, white woman, CO)

It seems like maybe the ballot box is such an enclosed, solitary place that most of the dialogue that takes place outside of that is just rhetoric that you hear on TV . . . and I think it would be nice to bring it back to the community and possibly organize around that . . . It could be as simple as inviting people to coffee shops and sitting down and talking through issues, and hearing different opinions. (28-year-old liberal, white man, CO)

Sitting here on the corner and handing out fliers to encourage people to sign something that I could then submit for change in law or a change in policy, or simply to just build knowledge of the fact that there maybe is a need . . . getting large voices together, whether it be directly at a council or with people and signatures, and getting involved in that manner, just building awareness so that policies can be changed, things like that. (27-year-old independent, white man, CO)

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

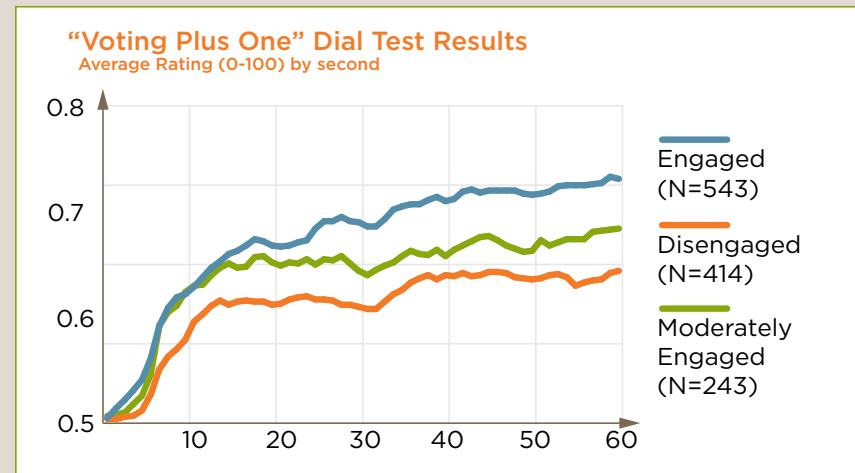
SURVEY FINDINGS

The following text reached a high of 69 (out of 100) on dial testing, and an average rating of 66 on how convincing the statement is and 61 on how motivating it is. While the idea of having to do more is initially met with negativity, particularly among the disengaged, as soon as action is connected to impacts, people respond more positively. Telling them “how” to engage (Starter Kits) is met with even more enthusiasm.

Sample Language

In our democracy, we the people are supposed to have the final say about things—but more and more Americans feel like we don’t have the final say, and just voting isn’t enough to make a difference. So some groups around the country are working on the idea of Voting Plus One, meaning that every American has the responsibility to vote, but also to take a step or two beyond that. Voting Plus One will mean something different for every person. But when regular people take steps beyond just voting, we get government by the people. Groups are even giving out Voting Plus One Starter Kits, with tips on having a greater impact at every level of government. Tips include how to convince your city paper to cover public meetings, how to provide ways for more people to weigh in, advice about which government representatives or agencies should get more input from regular people, which citizen groups are active on issues that concern you, and much more.

This approach is particularly compelling for Democrats, highly engaged Americans, Republican men, and older voters.



RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

An important aspect of this concept is that the tips are *non-partisan* and *not issue-specific*. In this way, the idea is very different from the kinds of appeals (to get behind a particular cause) people are used to hearing. The concept is also flexible enough so that people can focus on the kinds of steps they feel most comfortable with.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

If the stuff was able to be streamed online, I might actually take more of an initiative and actually watch it, because right now I don't know when anything's going on around town. If stuff was online ... because we're always on our phones nowadays, so we could actually pay attention to what's going on. (22-year-old liberal, white man, NE)

Steps government can take

A complement to the “Starter Kit” idea is to offer explicit, realistic examples of how government and its representatives could meet people halfway in the effort to promote active democratic governance. In brief, what kinds of process changes could make it easier for people to stay informed and have a say?

Suggestions and lists like the one below generated significant interest among people in the research:

Sample Language

Many Americans are concerned these days that the people have less control over things, because our representatives too often don't act on what we want and need. Basically, government isn't FOR the people unless it's also BY the people. Towns and states around the country are working on creative ways to make sure we all can have a say, such as:

- Clear, everyday-language reports from representatives on what they are up to*
- Greater accessibility for regular people to speak with representatives*
- Regular community meetings where firm decisions are made—including meetings you could Skype into to submit comments and votes*
- Web pages that list upcoming issues and allow people to weigh in directly*
- Social media feeds that send survey results right to our representatives*

Steps like these will revive the original American idea of a government system where the people play an important part in decision-making.

Note that the examples on this list are *only* examples, and that communicators should feel free to choose examples that fit their own context—as long as these are simple, realistic, concrete and easy to understand.

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Furthermore, in some cases these mechanisms already exist. There is a great deal of information available about current debates at levels from city councils to Congress. But in practice, people feel they have little idea of what exactly is going on, and the whole domain is perceived as secretive, complex and hard to grasp. For this reason, Americans are often very interested to hear about the simple, practical steps government can take to be more open to hearing from constituents and community members.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

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 . . . A lot of people don’t even know how to look them up . . . [It] would be nice to 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. That’s just not the Latino community, but all different types of communities. (30-year-old independent, Hispanic woman, OR)

Being able to Skype in and you’d be able to see results, and you know that if you’re going to ask a question it’s going to go straight to who needs to answer it—that makes a huge difference because if you really think about it, right now, I wouldn’t know how to really get in touch with our senators or anything like that. (23-year-old independent, African-American man, NE)

In many ways these overlap with the ideas in the Starter Kits, but they can also represent actual reforms to government’s way of doing business (which puts them outside the scope of this research report). In any case, regular people see them all as important examples of what having a say and going beyond voting would look like in the real world.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

I feel like, before, I really didn’t pay attention to politics or voting or anything, even when I turned 18—but now I feel like it gives me an opportunity to really participate and get a chance to get in there and know what I’m doing . . . Being able to actually stream the rallies, like you were saying, and being able to have input. If it’s open to social media, so everybody could have their voices heard, maybe Twitter or things like that, we could tune in, watch them, comment, have questions answered—I think it should be more open. (19-year-old moderate, African-American man, CO)

If there’s, say, a town or government meeting about what’s going on in your community, you should definitely be there to have your say. If you’re not there to have your say then you can’t complain . . . The government is about the people—it’s what the people make it, so if it’s not right then it can be fixed. [Of the things we’ve talked about, what will stick with you from this conversation?] That I, as one of the people, need to get involved and stay involved! (45-year-old African-American man, NC)

It would be a lot easier if there was a very open system where people could see it and make their judgment and voice their opinion if they could. I feel like more people would voice their opinion if they knew what was going on with anything. (22-year-old white, liberal man, MI)

When President Obama opened a Twitter account, that was one of the best things that anybody in any elected official position could have done, because the people that matter right now . . . if the children are the future, then you have to target them. You have to make them aware. So you can’t be a fuddy-duddy and discount YouTube and Twitter and Snapchat, Periscope . . . because that’s where all the action is right now. (43-year-old independent, African-American man, NC)

We have very good technology now to communicate, so we need to use every technology to pass everything we need to say. Like we can use Skype, Facebook and try to use all of those technologies to involve everybody in the meetings. Because we live in a country that we are very busy. We have not much time sometimes, because work and activities, so sometimes we don’t have a lot of time to go to a meeting, but we can do Skype or Facebook. (44-year-old liberal, Hispanic man, NE)

RECOMMENDATION – BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

[What's going to stick with you most from the conversation?] I think not being politically lazy. I want to make sure that I'm not, so I can make a difference, and I want to have more personal government and know what's going on. (78-year-old Hispanic woman, MI)

I probably should go look in the mirror and say, "You're talking that people should participate more, but yet you're not." So I think I'd probably think about this Voting Plus One. I vote, we both vote, but do we go to the City Council meetings, do we go do all of that stuff? No, we don't . . . You know, your questions do make you think. (40-year-old conservative, white woman, NE)

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

There is definitely a subset of people who care about something but don't know how or don't feel like there's enough ways to get in touch with their elected officials ... (MI)

I definitely think that idea would resonate with people who are trying to change the system and people who are trying to make sure the system continues as is. (AR)

Gives me hope. (MI)

Now the citizen is becoming an active participant and you're demonstrating to them ... that you have a voice and here's an opportunity for you to share that voice ... how they can participate with government and to be engaged with it. (AR)

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS



In the previous section, we laid out the basic recommendations for how to create a more constructive and engaged dialogue about government, along with the rationale for why the approach is effective.

In this section we address some particular points that communicators should keep in mind as they consider and work with the recommended approach.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN AUDIENCES

The approaches presented above are recommended in part because they are effective across geographic, class and ethnic-racial boundaries. The core elements of the narrative are helpful with a very broad cross-section of Americans.

For instance, African-Americans are receptive to the general idea that for people to have a say, and to help make government a more positive force, they must become more active.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

When we “wake up,” we’re out and about in the community doing good, doing positive, and we’re involved with the police department and the mayor’s office and all of that, and we’re attending the meetings and everything that they have, the community meetings, and we’re fighting for our community, pretty much. ... But when we’re “asleep,” ... that just means we’re not involved in anything and we don’t know what’s going on. And we can complain all day about things being wrong and not good for us, but it’d be wrong and not good for us until we wake up. (Liberal African-American man, 20s, AR)

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Nevertheless, when it comes to engagement with government, the experience and perspectives of people of color, and particularly African-Americans, are distinct from the majority in ways that communicators should keep in mind.⁶

On one hand, people of color are often more aware of the role that government plays in their daily lives, including the benefits that government systems and programs offer. On the other hand, they can also feel even more profoundly disenfranchised than other Americans.

Although African-American communities are by no means identical from Arkansas to Michigan to Colorado, certain patterns commonly emerge:

Pessimism. Like much of the generational working class, regardless of race, African-Americans may be inclined to believe that government by or for the people has always been a sham—regardless of any public statements to the contrary—and that there is little reason to expect change now or ever.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

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

People in Pine Bluff don't speak up like they should. Whatever you throw at us, that's what we take, and that's for real. That's what's going on. (59-year-old African-American woman, AR)

Because of this pattern of pessimism, providing real-world success stories is a critical part of the communications, particularly in communities of color. To be persuasive, it is important to offer examples of people that audiences can identify with, who are having a real impact through democratic action.

⁶ Note that at the time of writing, Topos is engaged in a specific investigation of how to most effectively adapt the recommendations for audiences of color. A separate memo will address this topic more fully. Note also that while both African-Americans and Hispanics were oversampled throughout the research, most noticeable differences based on race were particularly associated with African-Americans.

LEADER PERSPECTIVES

I mainly work with communities of color; a lot of folks feel that going to cast that vote just doesn't matter. They feel that the government is going to do what they want to do. (NC)

When you're talking to an African-American person and we say, "trust us," I mean, well, "goodbye." (OR)

The traditional racial minority have had a history of disappointment and let down, and it is more difficult to spark them back up again ... (NC)

The bus routes didn't run [in minority neighborhoods]. Just to get to the grocery store they had to go five or six miles, walk a mile just to get to the bus stop, things like that. People of color are used to it, and it's really a way of ... not all, but some neighborhoods ... and it's a way of life. (NC)

Coming from my culture ... communities of color ... we go to school. But we don't have books. We go to school, but you speak out, you're suspended. ... There's a lot of advantages that I never received, a lot of benefits that I didn't get because of the color of my skin. (NC)

Racism. In addition to the idea that government is run by elites for their own benefit (shared by a broad cross-section of all Americans), there is a common perspective among African-Americans that the government is specifically run by whites for their own benefit.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

I'm pretty sure the Founding Fathers didn't include, like, 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! (20-year-old socialist, African-American, OR)

This is both another reason to offer real-world success stories of people (of color) making a difference, and a caution not to go too far in suggesting that we have all benefitted equally from the “successes” of government. This is an ideal, not a current reality.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Unity. African-Americans, more often than others, focus on the importance of people coming together in order to have an impact.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

*Communication and getting along makes a community thrive.
(27-year-old moderate, African-American woman, AR)*

It's very, very rare that one person makes a difference, but the collective, what do you call, collective opinion of people? Once people get together and start working toward what they want, there's not really too much to stand in their way, and history has shown that over and over. So it's not that we don't care—it's that we don't care to come together. And that's the thing. (19-year-old moderate, African-American man, AR)

[Man 1] 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.

[Man 2] They're going to divide and conquer. (African-American men, 20s, AR)

This pattern suggests that communicators should place a special emphasis on group action—e.g., as opposed to the idea of individuals attending meetings or staying informed through social media—when addressing audiences of color. Real-life success stories of communities coming together, and working with government to create positive change are especially powerful in this context.

Fear. For very understandable reasons, some people of color are leery of taking any kind of political action that seems to challenge the powers that be—and which might result in repercussions.

ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE

Delta region, Arkansas. Sitting in the dimly lit, cozy living room of a small house set in a short row just off a small road near the appliance store, I spoke with a 61-year-old man who describes himself as “not a racial person,” who tries to “stay quiet” and focus on his own life. For him, government is about voting. Asked about other forms of civic participation, he demurred. He said, “I try to stay to myself and not bother anybody, or get in their business. I pay my bills. My life is my life.” His nephew, who had popped briefly into the room, spoke up and said, “We try to stay quiet around here. If you speak up, they’ll find a way to get you. They’ll try to kill you.” His uncle agreed, “Yes, that’s right. They’ll find a way. Somehow. They’ll kick in the door and get you.” They were not willing to say much else, but the fear, and the silence it engendered, was palpable.

This pattern both reinforces that strength in numbers is an important theme for African-American audiences, and that communicators should be careful not to set the bar too high in terms of public or confrontational engagement in communities where there is real fear of retribution.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Self-blame. Although members of every ethnic group (including whites) are sometimes willing to blame people in their own community for apathy and self-defeating inaction, African-Americans can be particularly harsh judges.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

People are lazy. This generation, everybody's like, "oh well, it'll get done for me." Someone else will do it. Nothing's going to get done on a large scale because nobody's going to try. (18-year-old moderate, African-American woman, CO)

They just say as long as it's not affecting me I'm not going to worry about it. But it's affecting all of us because when you don't have jobs, that means no matter what I put in my house, somebody's going to break in and steal it . . . [What would it take to get people to take part, to decide not to tune it out?] It's going to take them to stand up and have common sense, because they're going to have to want to fight for something—they have to want something in life. (59-year-old African-American woman, AR)

This pattern suggests that communicators working with audiences of color are likely to trigger complex and possibly counterproductive responses if they put too strong an emphasis on regular people's "responsibility" to do more than vote, for instance.

"GOVERNMENT" VS. DEMOCRACY

In one sense, the project set out to find ways to help Americans see more positives in what government is and does. Despite its failings, the public sector remains essential to shaping our society and improving conditions for everyone. And if people can't see that point, they can't participate constructively in the dialogue about how best to use public powers and institutions.

Yet over the course of hundreds of interactions with everyday Americans, the research made it clear that it usually isn't possible to create a constructive conversation focusing on the positives of "government" per se. The term itself now tends strongly to stand for a set of people, institutions and processes that Americans do not trust or identify with.

Instead, it proves much more constructive to focus on a set of outcomes we appreciate or hope for (i.e., ways in which government does or could benefit us all), and especially, the *processes of democratic participation* that help us achieve those—with government itself as a backgrounded concept whose meaning is (hopefully) determined by the surrounding context, related to democracy and widely shared benefits.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

“ELEPHANT” PROBLEM?

Often it is a bad idea for communicators to refer directly to problemat-ic perspectives, and is instead more effective to find ways of bypassing or inoculating against them. In the present case, communicators might wonder if it is really a good idea to suggest or imply that government is often unresponsive—doesn’t this just trigger a negative mindset?

LEADER PERSPECTIVE

[The concept] did catch me a bit like you went positive, a little bit negative and then positive again, just with that comment of saying while you are not always efficient. Maybe there's a reason for that—if not, I don't know why you would mention it. (OR)

Our own worst enemies are our own people who for political purposes jump on the bandwagon to accuse government of being inefficient and incompetent so it's a vicious circle but obviously there's a lot of distrust. (NE)

I think too many times advocacy groups push for their policies by saying what's wrong instead of go for hope, and being hopeful and optimistic. (CO)

We live in a climate that is such that, like, when we're critical everybody jumps on the bandwagon like government's bad, they're screwing up, they're not doing it right. (OR)

But the research experience strongly suggests that it is necessary to explicitly address people's deep alienation from government. Pointing out the public sector's positive achievements simply isn't enough to “inoculate” against skeptical attitudes—seemingly because these attitudes are so deep and pervasive.

Instead, it is critical to directly acknowledge the idea that most Americans don't feel they have a say—in order to get to a realistic and engaged discussion that feels relevant to people's priorities and concerns.

TOO MUCH DEMOCRACY?

Some advocates are concerned that a focus on the people having a say can lead to problematic outcomes such as the Initiative system, which has proven challenging in states such as California and Colorado, or to expectations about citizens “always getting their way.”

LEADER PERSPECTIVE

It implies a little bit to a novice person that you get to see what happens and that means you get your way. I think one of our fundamental problems right now is we are in this culture of instant gratification. (CO)

While these may be genuine challenges, the research suggests that revitalizing the idea of democratic self-government is so critical that communicators must take the risk of the pendulum “swinging too far.” The far greater danger is total public disengagement from the institutions of government.

To mitigate this risk, communicators may choose to include reminders that our system is and ought to be a representative one. These reminders can be as simple as the following: “Our representatives do the day-to-day work, but ultimately government reflects the people's wishes.” or “While it's not realistic for each of us to spend the time studying the issues that our representatives do ...” (i.e., representatives can be expected to study issues in ways that regular people cannot).

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS THE PROTOTYPE

When it comes to taking an active role in government, it is easiest to imagine having a say at the local level. This isn't to say that people don't understand that they can have a say at the state and federal levels, but rather that these are further from the prototype, and therefore somewhat less natural to contemplate. Communicators will probably need to take advantage of this dynamic by using local examples (from their own community or elsewhere) and then bridging to issues of wider scope (state, national).

Sample Language

In states where drilling for natural gas involves fracking, citizens got worried about chemicals that drillers were injecting into the ground. Companies wanted to stay unregulated, but Americans around the country wanted a say about this—and they went beyond just voting to do it. Some communities banned unregulated fracking—they joined together with others to have more of a say in state government. When the federal Environmental Protection Agency asked for citizen input, 1.5 million comments flooded in. Because millions of people were willing to go beyond just voting, most states now require companies to monitor and make public the chemicals they use in their wells.

UNITY

In one sense, democratic action by definition involves ideas of unity, common purpose or a collective voice. But while these are ideas that research participants often brought into the conversation on their own, it proved problematic to frame unity as the starting place for democratic change to happen. Many people quickly become skeptical, noting that we are not unified, we are divided, people have different opinions, etc.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

I mean if we work together, yeah, it would be great. But not everybody wants to get along, because they're going to find some discrepancy to bicker over. If they would just look past certain things and realize that if we work together we could actually get things done, maybe it would be a better place for everyone. But I don't see that happening anytime soon, to be honest. (18-year-old liberal, African-American man, AR)

We conclude that rather than direct appeals to come together, communicators are better off indirectly implying that unity plays an important role—e.g., by referring to “the people” (a phrase Americans are very comfortable with, particularly as a contrast with elites); by references to the common-sense idea of strength in numbers; and by describing scenarios (success stories) that are implicitly about unity, since neighbors did in fact come together around a cause, for instance.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

[If you were to sum up what I read to you about these success stories, what would you say?] About us working together as one. We're all people, we all love each other . . . Come together, and let's go. That makes us stronger, because one stick is powerful [or] many tied together, but separated, no chance at all. (48-year-old liberal, African-American man, CO)

When we come together and we all have the same opinion, that means we have more power. Because everyone's agreeing upon the same thing. People aren't arguing, saying that this is right, this is wrong. People are agreeing that this is right, and this is what we should do. (20-year-old African-American man, NE)

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

MILLENNIAL AUDIENCES

As an important (and oversampled) part of the participant pool for the testing, Millennials had a great influence on the overall outcomes. The recommended elements of the approach were arrived at, in no small part, due to positive responses from Americans 30 and under, as many of the quotes above illustrate.

One obvious nuance regarding this audience is that they are particularly open to and interested in solutions that seem to take advantage of technology that is so much a part of their day-to-day lives.

LEADER PERSPECTIVE

I could see that resonating with our younger crowd, and maybe with our organizational crowd, because they have the capacity to Skype and things like that. (MI)

The following comment (repeated from earlier in the report) is a typical reflection of Millennials' perspectives:

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

If the stuff was able to be streamed online, I might actually take more of an initiative and actually watch it, because right now I don't know when anything's going on around town. If stuff was online ... because we're always on our phones nowadays so we could actually pay attention to what's going on. (22-year-old liberal, white man, NE)

More broadly, bearing in mind patterns reported in the exploratory phase of the effort—in particular, government's overall lower salience for younger people—it is particularly important with younger audiences to embed frequent references to government, public solutions, city councils and so forth in communications. Given the tendency of Millennials (even more than their elders) to bypass government as they think about making positive change, these reminders are critical for building awareness that democratic action *through government* is a positive path forward.

MISSING THE MARK



Over the course of the project's second phase, many different communications angles were tried and tested (see Appendix for more detail about these materials). In this section, we briefly discuss several directions that did not prove to be successful. Understanding why they were not successful helps shed light on why other approaches are more successful.

Importantly, these approaches didn't necessarily prove to be counterproductive, and some could even be considered secondary recommendations. But they did not prove helpful as core starting points or organizing themes for communications—because they failed to address people's central concerns, were hard to convey clearly, or for other reasons.

MISSING THE MARK

PATRIOTISM

Some messages linked appreciation of government with patriotism, e.g., through an emphasis on how our form of government was created by the founders and defended by Americans over the course of history.

Sample Language

What is more patriotic, attacking the institutions that define our country, such as the government defined by our Constitution, or working to make sure they are as healthy and productive as possible? For years, certain Americans have talked as though we should get rid of government—the same government that Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and other founders designed, and that our military has fought and died to protect. But true patriotism isn't about tearing down our core public institutions—it's about working together to continually improve them.

This direction proved appealing to some, and seemed to help Conservatives in particular take a more positive stance. It may be a useful support point.

On the other hand, as a central focus, this idea did not help create engaged conversations about real-world topics that concern people. Like a number of other points, it was one many people agreed with, but that seemed irrelevant to the critical dynamics that create distrust and alienation.

PROCESS

One potential way to help people shift away from a counterproductive focus on particular aspects of government, such as “politicians,” is to frame government as the process of decision-making—and in the case of democratic self-government, collective decision-making by or on behalf of the people.

In principle, an emphasis on government as process might help inoculate against the contrast between “big” and “small” government, for instance.

Sample Language

Most people just think of government as politicians, or capitol buildings, or bureaucrats—do you think it would change anything if we could get back to the idea that “government” isn't a thing out there, but is the process of making the decisions that concern all of us, like where to build highways, how much tax money to raise, how to run our court system, and so on?

While this approach struck a few as new and interesting—that is, they were intrigued by thinking of government in a very different way—overall it struck people as abstract and did not engage attention.

A second problem is that it was too easy for participants to focus on the idea that the wrong people are in charge of this process.

MISSING THE MARK

HOW GOVERNMENT WORKS

On many topics it is helpful and empowering to offer people a clearer picture of a topic they tend to have vague understandings of. Several communications angles in this project took this general explanatory tack.

Sample Language

Experts talk about what they call the “two tools of government,” which are basically making laws and investing money in things ...

It is always worth considering how key concepts, such as the functions of government, can be made clearer and more concrete for audiences. Unfortunately, this approach, in the current context, did not help address or inoculate against the fundamentally problematic and emotional dynamics in Americans’ thinking about government.

Communicators can use explanatory ideas like the one above, but should not count on them, as core organizing themes, to overcome problematic dynamics.

GOVERNMENT IS “US”

In principle, it would be helpful to go back to the most fundamental definition of democratic self-government: we the people making decisions for ourselves. During the course of the testing, many materials took the approach of equating government with “we.”

Sample Language

When Americans have a problem, we have a tradition of working together to solve it for ourselves. If our town doesn’t have enough affordable parking, we can decide to build a public lot. If it doesn’t have any reasonable Internet service, we can decide to create a public network. If a company is dumping waste near a school, we can pass a law that stops them. This is “government” at its best—the people who live in a place agreeing something needs to be done, and making it happen for ourselves.

Unfortunately, the idea that “we” are synonymous with government is simply too far at odds with the realities Americans have experienced to be credible, or even comprehensible—and simply asserting it did not prove to be an effective communications strategy. In short, we were not able to successfully remind people of collective action as *the essence of government*. While we can create helpful conversations about shaping and directing government, it is difficult to persuade Americans that we, collectively, are government.

CONCLUSION

It would be easy to give up on the effort to “rehabilitate” government in the eyes of Americans. Communicators might be tempted to focus on promoting particular policies, while sidestepping the fact that these are “government” decisions—or even to solicit support and agreement by joining into the general, popular chorus of government-bashing.

But this project proceeds on the assumption that that course would be a mistake—and finds strong evidence that it is not necessary.

The reasons that advocates should not abandon vigorous defense of the idea of government are many—from the fact that this would be tantamount to abandoning the founding vision of the country, to the fact that public institutions are often the only ones with the scope and resources to take on important projects or challenges.

To take one issue area closely connected to many Americans’ current frustrations and feelings of disenfranchisement, widespread economic insecurity isn’t likely to subside without a significant policy agenda to address it; private efforts or “market forces” may ultimately play important roles, but by themselves they will not push change in the right direction.

CONCLUSION



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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More generally, it is extremely difficult to advance any of the particular policies that advocates believe in, as long as government is seen as irrelevant or inimical to addressing our collective needs.

But the research presented here suggests a viable alternative: reclaim government, and revitalize the sense that it has been and can be an instrument of the popular will, meeting public needs. By shining a spotlight on the (collective) achievements of government that create widespread benefits, and by offering a clarifying and compelling vision of how engaged democracy works (a lesson in the experience of democracy), communicators have a real opportunity to shift the cultural common sense on these critical topics.

The effort will require time and many voices, but as a Chinese proverb says, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.”

APPENDIX – RESEARCH ON RELATED TOPICS

In this Appendix we briefly summarize findings from other, related research by Topos that has informed the current effort.

REVENUE

There are several factors that help create a constructive conversation about revenue—all of which are relevant to the present context.

On the spending side (what are taxes for?), it is important to emphasize the investments that we all benefit from, as they create the foundations for thriving communities and a prosperous state or nation: infrastructure, education, good health and emergency services, and so forth.

On the revenue side (where do we get the money we need?), it is helpful to emphasize that we can *either* make the kinds of investments just described or continue to give away tax money through out-of-control tax breaks promoted by powerful special interests and those at the top. Essentially, the discussion of tax breaks taps into the desire for reform on the part of most Americans—it acknowledges that there is a problem in how taxes are handled, but in a way that doesn't lead to condemnation of government as a whole, nor of taxes overall.

The effectiveness of this two-part story shows that it is helpful to point out the (often invisible) ways in which public investments create benefits for all of us. And it also shows that it is helpful, if not essential, to acknowledge widespread frustration with government (in this case, related to the tax code), and channel it in constructive directions.

I'd rather be involved so I know what my taxes are going to, or what's going on in the house or the property behind me. I think, yeah, I'd rather know. I'd rather be involved in a meeting, or getting stuff in the mail, or someone calling me all the time, so that I know. (50-year-old conservative, white woman, NH)

PRIVATIZATION

An effective communications approach for challenging the wisdom of privatization efforts is to point out that privatization amounts to “handing over control” of public assets and institutions to private interests that can run things as they see fit, without regard to what benefits us, the people.

Impressively, this way of framing the issue has the effect of successfully aligning the public with government, rather than with private businesses which is the more common default—illustrating again that it is helpful to focus on the public systems and structures that people easily recognize are important for our well-being.

Another relevant aspect of the privatization findings has to do with Americans' central concern as they weigh the issue: they often point out, unprompted, that once a given structure or asset has been privatized, we (the public) no longer “have a say” in how it is run. This focus obviously echoes themes that are central to the present study. People feel it is important to have a say in public matters, and, under the right circumstances, can even feel that they do have one.

MONEY IN POLITICS

Concerns with empowerment are central to thinking about our electoral system. Who actually has a chance to become a leader? Only well-heeled elites? And like frustrations with democracy in general, it can be very helpful to take these concerns head-on, in order to have a dialogue that feels grounded in realities, as opposed to ideals and hypotheticals about how our democracy supposedly functions.

While many communications approaches can end up reinforcing fatalism about the stranglehold of money on our political system, an emphasis on *improving representation by removing barriers to “regular people” running for office* leads to engaged, constructive and hopeful conversation.

APPENDIX – RESEARCH ON RELATED TOPICS

This is another, particular case where it is very helpful, even critical, to offer a concrete, realistic vision of how positive change could work.

In the current research, texts like the following were presented in ethnographic field-testing, and again elicited positive responses.

If the people are going to really have a say in how things are run, then we need to elect more representatives that come out of our neighborhoods, and who have experience in how regular people live. At the moment, it is nearly impossible for a regular person without wealth or connections to wealth to get elected these days. This affects the kind of representation we get and this was not what the founders envisioned when they set up a government by the people, for the people. For this reason, Americans are pushing for a level playing field when it comes to elections and getting into government. So that regular people can compete. Things that are already being done to level the playing field for candidates who aren't wealthy or have wealthy connections include...

I like that because on the lower side of the economy there are people who know how to change it but like you say, they don't have representation so they don't get represented enough. So I do like the idea of actually trying to find people who live in those economic situations. [How would you sum up the main points of that statement?] That the U.S. is now looking for people who have lived in these type of situations and they want to hear their voices now to see what their solutions would be. (19-year-old liberal, African-American man, NC)

PROGRESSIVISM

For communicators trying to convey the appeal of progressivism, it is helpful to point out several elements—specifically, that progressivism has been characterized by a search for innovative, large-scale solutions (including Social Security and Medicare, mass transportation systems, universal labor laws, etc.), and that these developments are about creating benefits for all Americans.

While the current project is non-partisan, these themes have relevance, particularly with respect to reminding people of the beneficial actions of government: large-scale systems, programs and structures that benefit all of us.

APPENDIX – PROTOCOL FOR LEADER INTERVIEWS

[Treat everything but the TEXTS as flexible, conversational.]

Thanks for being part of this research. I really appreciate that you've taken the time to talk with me today.

This particular research isn't directly about how we change or improve our government and our policies at this point—though we know how important those efforts are.

This part of the work is about identifying ways to bring more people into a constructive conversation about government—what we can do with government and how we can improve it.

If Americans are reflexively distrustful and dismissive of government, it's difficult to get people on board for the kinds of good things we can do together through government to make our communities and our nation stronger.

This is about finding ways to *talk about* government that are credible, and that help people see the real possibilities for what policies can achieve, and help them recognize that government must, and inevitably does, play a role in big questions we're addressing, from economic to social justice to environmental.

The conversation should take about 20–30 minutes. I have some very open-ended questions, but I also have three separate brief texts that I'd like to share with you and get your feedback on.

Can I start by having you say just two or three sentences about your position and your work?

Have you heard about or worked with Public Works or Indivisible in your work?

In your experience, is skepticism about government an important challenge you face—for example, when talking about various policies that are needed and so forth? If so, can you talk a bit about that challenge?

Can you think of any particular issues where skepticism or ignorance about government gets in the way of constructive public debate?

Do you know of promising ways of addressing such challenges? From your experience, do you have any thoughts about effective ways of getting people into a constructive or engaged frame of mind?

I'd like to read you several ideas that have been showing promise around the country as ways of getting average Americans into a more constructive conversation and frame of mind about government. Then, I'd like to get some reactions from you.

Here's the first one. To be clear, it's not a text anyone would use verbatim, just one way of expressing some ideas average people from both sides of the political spectrum have found compelling.

And these ideas wouldn't have to be the very first thing a communicator would talk about—for instance, they might initiate a conversation by talking about some current issue in the community, but then segue to these bigger ideas about what government ought to be.

APPENDIX – PROTOCOL FOR LEADER INTERVIEWS

A

Part of what's always been special about the U.S. is that the people get a say in how things are done. For instance, we don't let anyone just pollute or discriminate as much as they want—we decide what's allowable and what isn't. And the reason certain important institutions are **public**—like schools, roads, libraries and prisons—is so the people can have control over how they're run, rather than having individuals or businesses run things in their own interests, no matter how well-intentioned. There's a lot that needs fixing about how our system of government works, but we can't forget the core idea that in America the people get a say. It's a big part of why things work better in democratic than non-democratic countries.

What do you think about that, as an important theme for a conversation about why government matters, that kind of thing?

If you had to sum up or paraphrase what I just read to you—say, to a colleague or constituent, how would you put it? If you were going to summarize the main points of what you heard here?

Now I'd like to read another, if you don't mind.

B

Many Americans are concerned these days that the people have less control over things, because our representatives too often don't act on what we want and need. Basically, government isn't *FOR* the people unless it's also *BY* the people. Towns and states around the country are working on creative ways to make sure we all can have a say, such as:

- Regular community meetings where firm decisions are made—including meetings you could Skype into to submit comments and votes
- Web pages that list upcoming issues and allow people to weigh in directly
- Social media feeds that send survey results right to our representatives
- Clear, everyday-language reports from representatives on what they are up to
- Greater accessibility for regular people to speak with representatives

Steps like these will revive the founders' ideas of a government system where the people play an important part in decision-making.

Would you see these ideas resonating with people? Would it resonate with certain types of people more than others?

Again, if you had to convey the main points of what I just read to you—how would you put it? (We're trying to get a sense of what parts of this are clear.)

How does it compare to the first paragraph I read? (in terms of effectiveness or reaching out to people—and focusing on the ideas rather than specific language or composition)

Is this idea resonating with different kinds of people from the first one I read, or the same?

Let me read you one more, please.

APPENDIX – PROTOCOL FOR LEADER INTERVIEWS

C

Government is at its best when we use it to make things better for everyone, not just a few. Some of the widespread benefits we have achieved through government include:

- *Public schools and colleges that give everyone educational opportunity*
- *Railways, roads and bridges that let everyone get around*
- *The infrastructure investments that led to the Internet we all use*
- *A fair work life—including the eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek, and workers' compensation for injuries on the job*
- *The right to vote, and protections against discrimination for women and minorities*
- *Safe food, water, air and medicine regulations*
- *Protected natural areas, waterways and national parks*
- *And Social Security and Medicare, which mean a bit more security for all of us*

Our system of government is far from perfect—it has some real shortcomings at the moment—but these are the kinds of ways we can use government to make things better for all of us. When we are frustrated by how our system of government is functioning, it is important to remember the ways we have put its power to good use before.

What do you see as interesting about that one?

In this project, we're specifically interested in being sure we can relate to a few particular audiences. One is nonprofit advocates, who need to feel comfortable with some new ways of talking and thinking about things. Another is the various communities of Americans of color, who

need to be brought into this conversation in new and more hopeful ways. A third is young people, who will hopefully be engaged in leading and offering guidance to our government in the future. Reflecting on these three audiences—advocates, people of color and young people—what strikes you about the kind of conversation we've had so far, including the texts I've read you?

[Follow up and probe]

Can I ask what has stood out to you most from our conversation?

How about from among the texts I read you? Are there any points you'll be thinking about afterward?

And, now I have an optional question. For demographic purposes, our research team would like to know your race and ethnicity, and your political affiliation. As I said, this is optional, so it's up to you if you wish to answer.

Thanks very much for your time and your very thoughtful input.

Any final thoughts?

Do you mind if we follow up at a later date (by phone or email) if additional questions occur to us?

Thanks so much for your help with this interview. This research project includes several other research methods. If you're interested in learning more about the findings, I encourage you to reach back out to ______. We will be sharing the final findings with them and they are going to be a primary contact in your state.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS

These texts were tested in several waves between April 2015 and March 2016.

01 A Tool in the Right Hands

The actions of government have a great influence on our lives and our society. The question is, and always has been, who directs the actions of government? Government should be us—we the people. When we are engaged and attentive, then government works for the good of all the people—that's how we got things we all value like Social Security, the interstate highway system, child labor protections and so on. But when we aren't engaged, we hand the tool of government over to narrow, selfish interests that will use government for their own ends—that's how we ended up with the economic crash and rising inequality. Our job as citizens is to stand up for and protect the good of the country by making sure government is in our hands.

02 Patriotism

What is more patriotic, attacking the institutions that define our country, such as the government defined by our Constitution, or working to make sure they are as healthy and productive as possible? For years, certain Americans have talked as though we should get rid of government—the same government that Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and other founders designed, and that our military has fought and died to protect. But true patriotism isn't about tearing down our core public institutions—it's about working together to continually improve them.

03 Real Story

For many of us, “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because the media loves to entertain us with the fight of the day. But the REAL story of government is about all the ways we have worked together to create things that are essential to our well-being—from court systems and library systems to school systems, canals, railways, and the Internet. It's about public servants who quietly get things done, and people coming together to build things, set priorities and solve problems. To keep making things better, we need to focus less on the story of politicians and more on the story of the important things we want to accomplish through government.

04 Vacuum

Many problems in American society are the result of a vacuum—a lack of people participating in big decisions about what government should do. Too many of us have stopped participating in discussions about the biggest things that affect us. When we don't pay attention to debates about policies on the economy, or the environment, or health care, we shouldn't be surprised that the vacuum is filled in ways that don't promote the common good. Maybe leaders don't fully understand what we need; maybe some industries push for laws that will benefit them; maybe a small but loud part of the public gets its way. If we want things to get better, more of us need to fill the vacuum by participating more actively in public discussion of what we want and need.

05 Pendulum

The U.S. has always swung back and forth between businesses calling the shots in their interest and the people calling the shots in their interest. In the 1800s, cattle barons wanted the West unfenced and ungoverned so they could maximize their herds and profits, but then “we the people” came in and created towns, roads, libraries and laws. In the 1920s, industrialists dominated the country thanks to the wealth they accumulated from steel, railroad and oil empires, but then we asserted ourselves again by making laws addressing their excesses, from exploiting workers to polluting our water and land. With the rise of powerful international corporations, we are again at one of those times when we need to assert ourselves, through our laws and institutions, to protect the public good.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS

06 For Ourselves

When Americans have a problem, we have a tradition of working together to solve it for ourselves. If our town doesn't have enough affordable parking, we can decide to build a public lot. If it doesn't have any reasonable Internet service, we can decide to create a public network. If a company is dumping waste near a school, we can pass a law that stops them. This is "government" at its best—the people who live in a place agreeing something needs to be done, and making it happen for ourselves.

07 Too Little Government

If Americans are upset about various aspects of life these days, they should consider that this is because of too little government, not too much. For example, the economic crash we are still trying to recover from resulted from too little government oversight of bank and Wall Street actions. And the recovery is slow for most of us because of too little insistence on a wage and benefits floor that would put money in people's pockets and let them spend enough to keep the economy going. Our roads and bridges are crumbling because we haven't invested enough in repairs. Too often, our foods or imported toys for our kids are unsafe because we have too few inspectors working. We need more from government, not less.

08 Why People Come

One of the reasons people come to the U.S. from other parts of the world is our system of democratic government. And this isn't just about freedom—it's about a functioning society. These immigrants appreciate the American public systems and institutions that actually work, more or less, as they are supposed to—public schools, libraries, courts and highways aren't perfect, but they basically support the overall good of Americans, our economy, our communities, etc. And this is largely because we have a democratic system where elected representatives can't totally ignore what average people want and need—as opposed to many countries where leaders don't care what the people think, so education is worse, pollution is worse, etc.

09 Cooperation

One of the reasons we have trouble making things better in this country is we forget the basic importance of cooperation to get things done. We all know that to get things done, people often need to work out the best way forward and cooperate, even if they don't totally agree on everything. In fact, one of the main things our Constitution is about is the details of how to cooperate—for instance, how to settle disagreements—so that the country can get things done and move forward. But if people give up on the idea of cooperation, we can't achieve things we have in the past, like investing in improved infrastructure or agreeing to set up the Social Security system.

10 All of Us

Why should we ever take actions through government—as opposed to through our business, our church, our civic club, etc.? The main reason is that government is about ALL OF US. We all get a vote—the laws apply to all of us, it's money we've all put in and is supposed to benefit all of us. When a church or service organization decides to help out with a problem, this is a small segment of the population stepping up. When we take action through government, this is all of us stepping up. When the stakes or benefits concern all of us, or when the resources needed require all of us, we act through government. We don't all belong to any one business or club, but government stands for all of us getting behind something.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS

11 Policy Table

When people think of democracy, they think of elections. But the real centerpiece of democracy is what experts call the “Policy Table”—the place where all the diverse opinions and interests come together and hammer out compromises and consensus, plans and public policies that help build the kinds of places we’d like to live in. The “Policy Table” isn’t physical, of course, but includes all the occasions where different people weigh in on things, from town halls to county commissions, committees in the state houses, and so on. If we want to make sure that government is working the way it should—hammering out policies and decisions for the common good—we need to focus on who’s at the table and how decisions are being made.

12 Democratic Mechanisms

If we want a government FOR the people, we need to have a government BY the people—and that means creating easy ways for people to participate and weigh in, besides just voting in elections. Some of us want easier ways to get information so we can weigh in—like town meetings we can Skype into, or everyday-language reports from our representatives on why they choose one policy over another. Some of us want to be part of active groups that advocate for our interests in the places where decisions are made—like unions and popular interest groups used to. Whatever they are, these “by the people” processes are important to our future.

13 Functioning Democracy

The more democratic a society is, the better it functions for everybody. That’s because *elected representatives*—unlike leaders in much of the world—can’t totally ignore what average people want and need. That’s why the U.S. has had public systems and institutions that basically function well—public schools, libraries, courts and highways here aren’t perfect, but they support the overall good of Americans, our economy, our communities, etc., unlike in undemocratic countries, where education is worse, pollution is worse and so on.

14 Opponents’ Agenda

Some of the people who bash government the loudest do it because they have an agenda we may not like. Specifically, many people who try to convince us that government is just a problem and can’t do anything right are trying to reduce the public’s say in how things are run in our country. If they don’t want the public to demand cleaner air and water, or more funding for education, or more controls on assault weapons, they pursue this agenda by turning people against government. If we’re fooled into forgetting that government is how we exert popular control, they win.

15 Process

We shouldn’t think of government as politicians, or capitol buildings, or bureaucrats. The real meaning of the word government is the process of making decisions on questions that concern all of us—just like “development” means the process of developing something. The Constitution set up a process for Americans to make the key decisions that affect all of us—from where to build highways, to how much tax money we need to raise, to how to run our court system, etc. When you think of government as our process for making collective decisions, ideas like “big government” vs. “small government,” etc., don’t even make sense. The real question is how to make sure the process of governing ourselves is going well.

16 Restoring Representation

In some places in the U.S., there are laws being passed to make it easier for regular people to successfully run for elected office, even without personal wealth or support from wealthy and powerful people. If these laws are successful at restoring true representative government, we will once again have government “by the people” and can start using government to create the kind of society we want—cleaner, fairer, safer and so forth.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS

17 Final Say

The core idea the founders of the U.S. had in mind is that we the people have the final say about things. Our representatives do the day-to-day work, but we the people need to have the final say about things like whether we should build schools and roads, whether we should outlaw pollution or make paid sick days mandatory, etc. This is what democracy and “government by the people” mean. If we don’t have the final say, then the results won’t benefit us. So places around the country are working on ways we can exercise our power more effectively—from making it easier for regular people who aren’t rich to compete in elections to using social media as a way of being informed and insisting on what we want.

18 Democracy Starter Kit

Americans want to have more of a say in their government, but other than voting, many people these days don’t feel well-equipped to get involved and have an impact. Some non-partisan groups have been setting people up with “Democracy Starter Kits,” with information, advice and tips about how to have a greater impact at every level of government. Tips range from how to ask your local government to set up a Facebook page for info and feedback to how to get your local or city paper to be more thorough about covering meetings. One of the most effective suggestions has been the simplest: think about something you’d like changed in your community and begin talking with other people about it. It turns out that once people get going, they realize having a say isn’t as daunting as they thought.

19 Tool

Government is a tool that we citizens have always used to accomplish important things. Using the tool of government, we’ve built transportation and communications grids, colleges and court systems. We have child labor laws, clean water and the FDA because we’ve used our power to create rules and regulations that promote the common good.

The key to government that benefits all of us the way it’s supposed to is that we the people have to have control over how the tool of government is used—not special interests, corporations or a billionaire class. Lately, many Americans have felt like the tools of government are not in our hands anymore, so they have been developing all sorts of innovative strategies to take more control and use government to solve some problems that we face as a country.

20 Two Tools

Experts talk about what they call the two tools of government, which are basically making laws and investing money in things. Over our history, the country has used the tools of government in some great ways that benefit all of us—from investing in highway systems and Social Security to making laws to prevent child labor and clean up the air. What’s special about the U.S., in theory, is that we the people are supposed to have the final say about how these two tools are used—things like whether we should invest in building schools and roads, and whether we should outlaw certain kinds of pollution, or make paid sick leave mandatory.

21 Self-Government

The basic idea of American democracy is supposed to be “self-government.” Decisions aren’t supposed to be handed down by rulers—all of us need to have a say in what we want our town, our state and our country to be like. Self-government means “we the people” choose how much we want to protect our environment, or not. We choose what kinds of job standards businesses need to meet if they want to operate here. We decide what trade deals do and don’t get signed. Self-government is supposed to be the essence of being an American, but in recent decades it seems like the people are less and less in charge. We need to find ways to get back to self-government, so that we choose what our country is like.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE TALKBACK TEXTS

22 Modeling Responsibility

As Americans we have rights, and we have responsibilities. We have a responsibility to be informed, to vote, to pay taxes, and watch out for our fellow Americans. We have a responsibility to weigh in on important topics and decisions, because in America, the people are supposed to be in control. And Americans all over this country are showing how it's done. Last year, residents of Chicago's southeast side took on a wealthy, multi-national corporation and won. They held protests, educated neighbors, and worked with elected officials to pass laws to ban the storage of toxic chemicals in their neighborhood. And citizens in one Alabama community were frustrated with inaction on outdated schools, so they petitioned for a ballot measure to increase property taxes for new schools. Working together, citizens are taking responsibility and getting things done.

23 Responsibility / Starter Kit

As Americans we have rights, and we have responsibilities. We have a responsibility to be informed, to vote, to pay taxes, and watch out for our fellow Americans. We have a responsibility to weigh in on important topics and decisions, because in America, the people are supposed to be in control. What does this look like? Some non-partisan groups have been setting people up with "Democracy Starter Kits," with information, advice and tips about how to have a greater impact at every level of government. Tips range from how to ask your local government to set up a Facebook page for info and feedback to how to get your local or city paper to be more thorough about covering meetings. Taking responsibility can begin with something as easy as talking with other people about something you'd like changed in your community.

24 Gaps

Experts say one of the keys to fixing American democracy is restoring the greater equality we used to have, economically and in other ways. Our democracy is not working like it should—we the people don't have enough say in what happens, and the policies that get made too often are not in our interest. Experts say the main reason is that the gaps between us have gotten so big that we are too divided to work together and assert what "we the people" want. Gaps in income, education and health have grown worse over recent decades, and policies to reduce those gaps will make it easier for people to unite and speak with a strong voice about what we want.

25 Race Gaps

Experts say one of the keys to fixing American democracy is reducing racial inequality. Our democracy is not working like it should—we the people don't have enough say in what happens, and too often policies are not in our interest. Experts say one of the main reasons is that the gaps between us have gotten so big that we are too divided to work together and assert what "we the people" want. In particular, race-based gaps in income, education and health have grown worse over recent decades, and policies to reduce those gaps will make it easier for people to unite and speak with a strong voice about what we want.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR VCF

[This excerpt represents the fourth day of a five-day VCF conducted among a sample of 27 people drawn from states all around the U.S.]

Section 7 – live, Friday, 6 a.m.

Welcome back. You have all been so very thoughtful in this discussion! I genuinely appreciate the time and energy you are putting into this.

7-1. (webcam) Let's get creative and have a little fun. I'd like you to come up with a metaphor or analogy for government, basically a comparison showing similarities between two different things. So an example would be something like "a doctor diagnoses disease like a detective investigates crime." What would it be for government? "Government is like ..." Collect your thoughts and then explain your idea on the webcam.

7-2. (multiple choice) I'd like you to take a moment and think about government at its best. Close your eyes and spend a minute or two thinking about images of our government accomplishing important things.

Now think about which of the following is the most important aspect of government when it is working well? Please explain how your choice relates to your images about government at its best.

- We, the people, decide
- We elect representatives who work for the common good
- We pool resources for things we can only accomplish together
- It is the only way to have the modern society we have
- It is how we protect the public interest against private gain
- It is the way we can make sure everyone is treated equally

- It is the pragmatic way to get big things done
- Something else (explain)

7-3. (open-ended text response) On the first day, several of you said that an essential part of being an American is that "we have a say." What does that mean to you exactly? In what way do we have a say (or not)?

7-4. (multiple choice) I want to give you two scenarios to consider. Choose which one you would be most likely to participate in. Please explain your preference for one over the other.

- A group of citizens is working to get approval for a new park in your community with trails, a playground, sports fields and a community center
- A group of citizens is working to combat the drug problem by getting more awareness, funding for treatment and more police officers in the area

7-5. (multiple choice) I want to give you two scenarios to consider. Please choose which one you would be most likely to participate in. Please explain your preference for one over the other.

- Your local political party is having an event for people to hear information about ballot measures that will be on the ballot this fall
- A local civic organization is having an event for people to hear about new community development plans that are being considered

7-6. (webcam) Earlier, you talked about metaphors or analogies for government. Now I'd like you to think about an analogy that I'll suggest to you. What do you think of the idea that government is like a tool for citizens to use? How would you expand on that? Feel free to have some fun with the idea.

APPENDIX - SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR VCF

7-7. (open-ended text response) The presidential primaries are in full swing and some analysts have argued that the best way to understand the choice today is between candidates who think politics-as-usual needs to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch, and candidates who believe that our best way forward is to work with and reform the system that we have.

What's your reaction to that way of thinking about the election?

7-8. If our system were going to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch, what do you think would be the key core idea or foundation to rebuild on?

7-9. Flint, MI, has been all over the news recently. Here's a bit of background on the situation:

Flint has been struggling financially, and the Republican governor of Michigan appointed an emergency manager to oversee the city. To save money, the city water supply was switched to the Flint River, rather than buying it from Detroit as they had for 50 years. Evidence mounted that the switch was creating a potential health hazard and the City Council voted to switch back. But the unelected emergency manager refused, citing EPA reports that downplayed the dangers. It now turns out that over the course of the next year, something like 10,000 children were exposed to enough lead poisoning to create numerous, serious health impacts.

What is your reaction to this situation? How does this relate to the discussions we've been having about government and the role of citizens?

Thank you. This ends section 7. Please check back after noon today to respond to the next section.

Section 8 – live, Friday, noon

Objective: More message comparisons.

We're nearing the end of our time together, and you have all been fantastic! In this section, I want to reflect back to you some of what you've said.

I'd like you to review some additional things people have said about these topics and get your reactions to them.

8-1. (concept test) For the next several questions, you'll be asked to review different points of view. For each, please give an overall rating, and then provide very specific reactions by marking up the text. Please approach each statement with fresh eyes. (GO TO MARK-UP.)

8-2. (FOR EACH STATEMENT) What are you thinking about when you read this; what's top of mind?

After you have given your first impression, please rate how convincing you personally find the statement:

Very convincing

Somewhat convincing

Not convincing

APPENDIX – SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR VCF

8-3. (FOR EACH STATEMENT) Now please go through the statement again and provide more specific reactions by highlighting parts of the statement that stand out to you. Use the green highlighter to mark what you think is important; the red highlighter to mark things you disagree with; the yellow highlighter if you have something to suggest; the purple highlighter if you have a question about something; and the blue highlighter to mark the main idea. You do not have to use all the highlighters, but use as many as you'd like.

Main idea

Important

Disagree

Question

Suggest

ROTATE TEST STATEMENTS IN THIS SECTION

STARTER KIT

There is increasing interest among Americans to reclaim their role as democratic citizens, but other than voting, many people these days don't feel well-equipped to get involved in more active ways other than just voting. Some non-partisan groups have been getting people set up with what they call Democratic Starter Kits, which contain information, advice and tips about how to have a greater impact at every level of government. Voting is important, but tips range from how to ask your local government to set up a Facebook page for info and feedback to how to get your local paper to be more thorough about covering meetings. One of the most effective suggestions has been the simplest: to think about something you'd like changed in your community and just begin talking with other people about it. It turns out that once people get going, they realize political engagement isn't as daunting as they thought.

BENEFIT / RESPONSIBILITY

As Americans, we enjoy freedoms and quality of life that many others in the world don't enjoy. And with those benefits come responsibility—responsibility to make our nation be the best it can be. We are most strong as a nation when "we the people" control our laws and policies, and we are weakened when we let a few take control and make decisions for us. Of course, voting is a fundamental responsibility of being an American, but so is speaking up, reaching out to elected officials, joining with others, defending the actions of government against those who would tear it down AND holding elected officials accountable when they take a direction we disagree with. We each have a responsibility to use the tools of government to benefit the common good.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE PROTOCOL FOR VCF

BROAD-BASED ECONOMY

The decisions we make through our government have a direct impact on the kind of economy we end up with. This has become more obvious in recent years as the power to direct government has fallen more and more into the hands of wealthy elites. As they—rather than we—take control of trade policy, the tax code, business regulations, and spending, we have transitioned to an economy that benefits Wall Street rather than Main Street. Like it or not, government and the economy go hand in hand, and the way to return to a broad-based prosperity is to return to a broad-based democracy.

CONTROL

Government is not about politicians and capitol buildings. Government is the way “we the people” control how important things are done. Together, we enact laws and regulations, we grant freedoms, and we build public structures like court systems, highways and the Internet. Democratic government is the way we collectively run things and take some control over what our community or society is like.

(AFTER ALL STATEMENTS)

- 8-4. (open-ended text response) Of everything you just read, what did you find the most striking or interesting?
- 8-5. (open-ended text response) If you were going to sum up some of the most significant points from the paragraphs you read, how would you put it?
- 8-6. (open-ended text response) What do you think is the appropriate role for citizens to play?
- 8-7. (open-ended text response) How much control do you think regular people should have in how things run in their communities?

Thank you. This ends section 8. Please check back after 6 a.m. tomorrow, Saturday, to respond to the next section.

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

Reclaiming Government
Topos Partnership
n =1200

April 29-May 10, 2016

SPLIT SAMPLE A = 200

SPLIT SAMPLE B = 200

SPLIT SAMPLE C = 200

SPLIT SAMPLE D = 200

SPLIT SAMPLE E = 400

The survey you are about to complete concerns issues facing the country. Your personal views are very important. Thank you very much for taking the time to provide your thoughtful responses on these topics.

First, please answer a few questions to make sure we have a representative group of participants.

1. ARE YOU REGISTERED TO VOTE AT YOUR CURRENT ADDRESS?

Yes	86
No	12
Don't know	2

2. IN WHICH STATE DO YOU LIVE?

Northeast	19
Midwest	23
South	40
West	17

3. PLEASE MARK YOUR GENDER:

Male	47
Female	53

4. WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF SCHOOLING THAT YOU HAVE COMPLETED?

High school graduate or less	33
Some college	18
Technical certificate	4
Associate's degree (2-year degree)	11
Bachelor's degree (4-year degree)	23
Post-graduate (Master's, PhD)	11

5. IN WHAT YEAR WERE YOU BORN?

18-24 years old	6
25-34 years old	23
35-44 years old	15
45-54 years old	20
55-64 years old	17
65+ years old	19

6. ARE YOU OF HISPANIC, LATINO OR SPANISH ORIGIN?

Yes	15
No	85

7. WHAT IS YOUR RACE? (multiple responses for race allowed)

White	81
Black/African American	14
Native American/Native Alaskan	1
Asian	2
Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian	*
Arab	*
Other race (please specify)	3

COMBINED Q6 AND Q7

White, non-Hispanic	69
African-American	13
Hispanic	15
Other/multiple responses	3

8. DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A:

Strong Democrat	21
Democrat, but not strong	21
Independent	28
Republican, but not strong	14
Strong Republican	11
Other	6

APPENDIX – NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

	Yes, in last year	Yes, longer than 1 year ago	No, never	Refused
Expressed your opinion by contacting an elected official	21	21	21	21
Spoken in public (such as a community meeting, church, school or work event) for an organization or cause you cared about	11	11	11	11
Expressed your opinion about a cause you care about on social media, like Facebook or Twitter	33	33	33	33

ENGAGEMENT INDEX:

“Engaged” = “Yes, in last year” to at least 1 activity	44
“Moderately Engaged” = “Yes” (not in last year) to at least 1 activity	34
“Disengaged” = “Never” to all three activities	22

10. COMPARED TO THE MANY THINGS YOU DO IN A GIVEN DAY, HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR YOU TO FOLLOW THE NEWS?

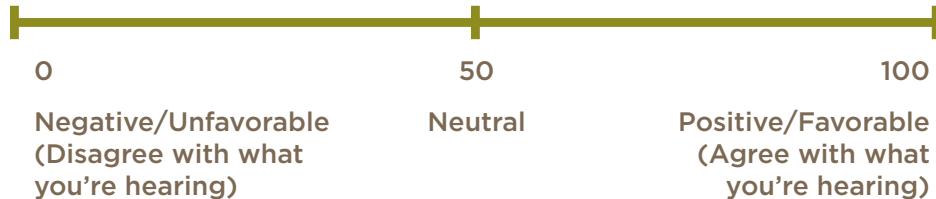
Very important	46
Somewhat important	37
Neither important nor unimportant	11
Somewhat unimportant	4
Very unimportant	2

APPENDIX – NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

DIAL:

INTRODUCTION:

Now you are going to hear a statement about some issues facing our country. As you listen to the audio, use the slider to show how you feel about what you're hearing, where 0 is very negative, unfavorable feelings and you strongly disagree with what you are hearing and 100 is very positive, favorable feelings and you strongly agree with what you are hearing, and 50 is neutral. Your slider starts at 50. Again, we want you to **constantly** slide back and forth to show how negative or positive you're feeling toward the statement you're hearing. **Please listen carefully, because you'll be asked several questions about this statement.**



[MESSAGE AUDIO]

SPLIT SAMPLE A

11A. In our democracy, we the people are supposed to have the final say about things—but more and more Americans feel like we don't have the final say, and just voting isn't enough to make a difference. So some groups around the country are working on the idea of Voting Plus One, meaning that every American has the responsibility to vote, but also to take a step or two beyond that. Voting Plus One will mean something different for every person. But when regular people take steps beyond just voting, we get government by the people. Groups are even giving out Voting Plus One Starter Kits, with tips on having a greater impact at every level of government. Tips include how to convince your city paper to cover public meetings, how to provide ways for more people to weigh in, advice about which government representatives or agencies should get more input from regular people, which citizen groups are active on issues that concern you, and much more.

SPLIT SAMPLE B

11B. We sometimes forget that governing isn't really about capitol buildings and politicians. It's supposed to be about the laws and investments we make to benefit all of us and to create thriving communities. When we're using government well, we create prosperity by building modern transportation and communications grids, and good colleges and court systems, and we make important laws about clean air, food and safe workplaces. But government only benefits all of us when we the people have control of its actions—not special interests, corporations or billionaires. This is too important to ignore. It's up to each of us to step up and do our part to make sure government is in our hands and accomplishing what it is supposed to.

APPENDIX – NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

SPLIT SAMPLE C

11C. For many of us, the word “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because the media loves to entertain us with the fight of the day. But that’s not the REAL story of who we are. The real story of government—of, by and for the people—is a story about working together in ways that benefit all of us, from railways and highways to the Internet, from world-class colleges to libraries in every community; it’s about dedicated public servants who quietly get things done, and people coming together to build communities and solve problems. This real story is about how working together has made us more successful and prosperous than many other countries. Instead of only dwelling on negative stories, we should look around for the positive things that are happening in our governments and our communities, and get involved to help.

SPLIT SAMPLE D

11D. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the power of people working together is the power of our democracy. There are examples all around the nation. For instance, last year, residents of Chicago’s southeast side took on a powerful, multinational corporation and won. They educated neighbors, held protests and worked alongside elected officials to pass a law banning the storage of toxic chemicals that were polluting their neighborhood. In another example, citizens in an Alabama community were frustrated with inaction on outdated schools, so they urged local officials to get additional funding for new school buildings. And in one Arkansas county, local people worked with the City Council to get grants for new businesses and job-training programs. Working together, citizens are taking the initiative and getting things done. We the people can definitely have a say in how our communities and our country are run. It’s time to take a stand.

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

11E. SPLIT SAMPLE E - SKIP DIAL, SKIP 12, 13, 14

12. BASED ON EVERYTHING YOU HEARD, PLEASE GIVE THIS STATEMENT A RATING FROM 0 TO 100 IN THE ENTRY BOX BELOW, WHERE 100 MEANS THE STATEMENT YOU JUST HEARD IS VERY CONVINCING TO YOU PERSONALLY AND 0 MEANS IT IS NOT CONVINCING AT ALL, AND YOU CAN BE ANYWHERE IN BETWEEN.

	A	B	C	D
Mean, first ask only	67.3	74.5	68.1	70.4
Mean, total ask	65.5	69.9	67.5	70.8

13. BASED ON EVERYTHING YOU HEARD, PLEASE GIVE THIS STATEMENT A RATING FROM 0 TO 100 IN THE ENTRY BOX BELOW, WHERE 100 MEANS THE STATEMENT YOU JUST HEARD IS VERY MOTIVATING AND MAKES YOU WANT TO TAKE ACTION AND 0 MEANS IT IS NOT MOTIVATING YOU TO TAKE ACTION AT ALL, AND YOU CAN BE ANYWHERE IN BETWEEN.

	A	B	C	D
Mean, first ask only	67.3	74.5	68.1	70.4
Mean, total ask	65.5	69.9	67.5	70.8

14. THINKING ABOUT THE STATEMENT YOU JUST HEARD, PLEASE TRY TO REPEAT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN REMEMBER OF WHAT IT HAD TO SAY—AS THOUGH YOU WERE PASSING IT ALONG TO A FRIEND. IF YOU CAN REMEMBER EXACT WORDS OR PHRASES, GREAT—BUT PLEASE COVER THE MAIN POINTS AS WELL AS YOU CAN. [OPEN-ENDED TEXT]

15. THINKING ABOUT PROBLEMS FACING THE COUNTRY, HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER WITH THEIR GOVERNMENT CAN MAKE IN SOLVING THE PROBLEMS YOU SEE?

A great deal of difference	26
A lot of difference	28
Some difference	30
A little difference	11
No difference at all	5

	A	B	C	D	E
Mean	3.4	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.7

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

16. WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT GOVERNMENT, DO YOU TEND TO THINK OF IT MORE AS "THE GOVERNMENT," "OUR GOVERNMENT" OR "WE ARE GOVERNMENT."

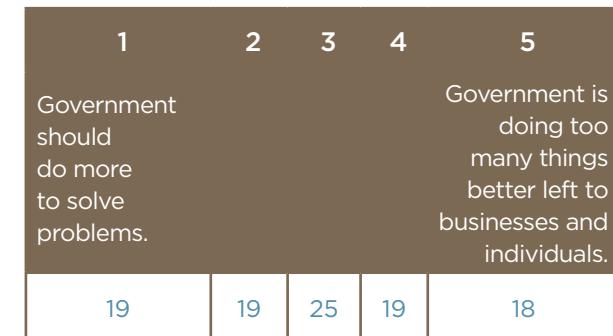
THE government	58
OUR government	27
WE are government	10
Don't know/Refused	5

	A	B	C	D	E
THE	62	52	53	58	62
OUR	24	28	31	27	25
WE	10	14	10	11	9
DK	3	6	7	5	4

17. OVERALL, WHAT KIND OF IMPACT DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT HAS ON MOST PEOPLE'S LIVES?

Very positive	10
Somewhat positive	26
No impact either way	15
Somewhat negative	33
Very negative	16

18. WHICH COMES CLOSER TO YOUR OWN VIEWS—EVEN IF NEITHER IS EXACTLY RIGHT:



	A	B	C	D	E
Positive	34	38	35	36	36
No Impact	13	17	21	18	12
Negative	52	45	44	45	52
Mean	2.8	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.7

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

19. ON A SCALE FROM 0-10, WHERE 0 MEANS YOU STRONGLY DISAGREE, AND 10 MEANS YOU STRONGLY AGREE, OR ANYWHERE IN BETWEEN, HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

RANDOMIZE

- a. We need to use our government to make things better in our communities.
- b. Our country is better off when our government is more active and effective.
- c. Government can't do much to move our country in a positive direction.
- d. Government action usually benefits the wrong people.
- e. People like me can help make our government more effective.
- f. We all have a responsibility to take part in governing our communities.

	A	B	C	D	E
a	54	57	46	53	51
b	52	47	42	42	50
c	20	16	23	21	19
d	55	40	43	41	47
e	39	43	33	44	41
f	62	59	55	60	59

20. AND WHICH STATEMENTS DO YOU AGREE WITH THE MOST?
(SELECT UP TO THREE.)

- a. We need to use our government to make things better in our communities.
- b. Our country is better off when our government is more active and effective.
- c. Government can't do much to move our country in a positive direction.
- d. Government action usually benefits the wrong people.
- e. People like me can help make our government more effective.
- f. We all have a responsibility to take part in governing our communities.

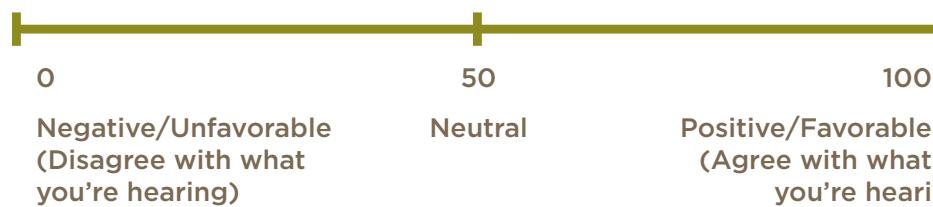
%	A	B	C	D	E
a	32	37	38	41	36
b	33	33	25	29	36
c	12	11	11	10	11
d	41	28	32	35	43
e	22	23	21	31	23
f	47	53	48	45	47

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

SPLIT SAMPLE E - SKIP FORWARD TO START AGAIN AT Q22

DIAL: SEE Q12 AND Q13 TABLES FOR TOTAL RESPONSE
TO THESE STATEMENTS

Now you are going to hear a total of three additional statements. As you listen to the audio, use the slider to show how you feel about what you're hearing, where 0 is very negative, unfavorable feelings and you strongly disagree with what you are hearing and 100 is very positive, favorable feelings and you strongly agree with what you are hearing, and 50 is neutral. Your slider starts at 50. Again, we want you to **constantly** slide back and forth to show how negative or positive you're feeling toward the statement you're hearing. **Please listen carefully, because you'll be asked several questions about this statement.**



[MESSAGE AUDIO]

RANDOMIZE ORDER OF MESSAGES

SKIP THE MESSAGE TESTED IN Q11, ASK ALL OTHERS

21A1. In our democracy, we the people are supposed to have the final say about things—but more and more Americans feel like we don't have the final say, and just voting isn't enough to make a difference. So some groups around the country are working on the idea of Voting Plus One, meaning that every American has the responsibility to vote, but also to take a step or two beyond that. Voting Plus One will mean something different for every person. But when regular people take steps beyond just voting, we get government by the people. Groups are even giving out Voting Plus One Starter Kits, with tips on having a greater impact at every level of government. Tips include how to convince your city paper to cover public meetings, how to provide ways for more people to weigh in, advice about which government representatives or agencies should get more input from regular people, which citizen groups are active on issues that concern you, and much more.

APPENDIX – NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

21A2. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very CONVINCING and 0 means it is not convincing at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21A3. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very MOTIVATING and makes you want to take action and 0 means it is not motivating you to take action at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21B1. We sometimes forget that governing isn't really about capitol buildings and politicians. It's supposed to be about the laws and investments we make to benefit all of us and to create thriving communities. When we're using government well, we create prosperity by building modern transportation and communications grids, and good colleges and court systems, and we make important laws about clean air, food and safe workplaces. But government only benefits all of us when we the people have control of its actions—not special interests, corporations or billionaires. This is too important to ignore. It's up to each of us to step up and do our part to make sure government is in our hands and accomplishing what it is supposed to.

21B2. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very CONVINCING and 0 means it is not convincing at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21B3. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very MOTIVATING and makes you want to take action and 0 means it is not motivating you to take action at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21C1. For many of us, the word “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because the media loves to entertain us with the fight of the day. But that's not the REAL story of who we are. The real story of government—of, by and for the people—is a story about working together in ways that benefit all of us, from railways and highways to the Internet, from world-class colleges to libraries in every community; it's about dedicated public servants who quietly get things done, and people coming together to build communities and solve problems. This real story is about how working together has made us more successful and prosperous than many other countries. Instead of only dwelling on negative stories, we should look around for the positive things that are happening in our governments and our communities, and get involved to help.

21C2. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very CONVINCING and 0 means it is not convincing at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21C3. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very MOTIVATING and makes you want to take action and 0 means it is not motivating you to take action at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

APPENDIX – NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

21D1. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the power of people working together is the power of our democracy. There are examples all around the nation. For instance, last year, residents of Chicago's southeast side took on a powerful, multinational corporation and won. They educated neighbors, held protests, and worked alongside elected officials to pass a law banning the storage of toxic chemicals that were polluting their neighborhood. In another example, citizens in an Alabama community were frustrated with inaction on outdated schools, so they urged local officials to get additional funding for new school buildings. And in one Arkansas county, local people worked with the City Council to get grants for new businesses and job-training programs. Working together, citizens are taking the initiative and getting things done. We the people can definitely have a say in how our communities and our country are run. It's time to take a stand.

[FOR EACH STATEMENT]

21. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very CONVINCING and 0 means it is not convincing at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

21. Based on everything you heard, please give this statement a rating from 0 to 100 in the entry box below, where 100 means the statement you just heard is very MOTIVATING and makes you want to take action and 0 means it is not motivating you to take action at all, and you can be anywhere in between.

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

[ALL RESPONDENTS,
ONCE DIAL TEST IS COMPLETE]

22. SUPPOSE YOU WERE HAVING A DISCUSSION WITH A FRIEND OR RELATIVE, WHO SAID, "GOVERNMENT IS THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION." HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND? PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST A COUPLE OF SENTENCES ABOUT WHAT YOU WOULD SAY IN RESPONSE. [OPEN-ENDED TEXT]

And now, just a few more quick questions for statistical purposes. This information will only be used for analysis of this study, and will be kept completely confidential.

23. ARE YOU:

Married	53
Single, never married	26
Separated/divorced	11
Widowed	4
Living with someone	6

24. (IF MARRIED) DOES YOUR SPOUSE WORK, PART-TIME OR MORE?

Yes, full-time	56
Yes, part-time	14
No	31

25. DO YOU HAVE ANY CHILDREN?

Yes	61
No	38
Prefer not to answer	1

26. [IF YES] IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AGE GROUPS DO THEY (YOUR CHILD OR CHILDREN) BELONG?

Select all that apply.

Under 2 years old	6
2-5 years old	14
6-11 years old	30
12-17 years old	25
18+ years old	54

27. WHAT IS YOUR EMPLOYMENT STATUS?

Employed full-time	36
Employed part-time	10
Self-employed	5
Not employed, but looking	7
Homemaker	10
Student	3
Retired	24
Other, not working	5

28. DO YOU GENERALLY CONSIDER YOURSELF:

Liberal	25
Moderate	49
Conservative	26

29. FOR CLASSIFICATION PURPOSES ONLY, PLEASE INDICATE WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR TOTAL ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BEFORE TAXES.

Under \$15,000	10
\$15,000-\$24,999	8
\$25,000-\$34,999	15
\$35,000-\$49,999	13
\$50,000-\$74,999	19
\$75,000-\$99,999	14
\$100,000-\$124,999	7
\$125,000-\$149,999	4
\$150,000-\$174,999	2
\$175,000-\$199,999	1
\$200,000 or More	2
Rather not answer	5

APPENDIX - NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT, INCLUDING DIAL TEST

30. WERE YOU BORN IN
THE UNITED STATES?

Yes	92 (SKIP TO Q32)
No	8
Rather not answer	* (SKIP TO Q 32)

(IF Q 30 = NO, n = 91)

31. ARE YOU A CITIZEN
OF THE UNITED STATES?

Yes	75
No	22
Rather not answer	3

32. WERE YOUR PARENTS BORN IN
THE UNITED STATES?

Yes, both	82
One was born in the U.S.,	7
one was born elsewhere	
No, neither parent was born in the U.S.	11
Rather not answer	1

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX – SAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD-TESTING

[This protocol was fielded among residents of North Carolina in April 2016.]

First is a really general, open-ended question.

What comes to mind when you think of government?
What's the first thing that pops into your head?

[if too brief] Anything else?

How much of a say do you think regular people have in how things are run?

[Beyond Voting]

I'd like to read you a brief paragraph and get your feedback on it:

In our democracy, we the people are supposed to have the final say about things—but more and more Americans feel like we don't have the final say, and just voting isn't enough.

So some groups around the country are working on the idea of Voting Plus One or Beyond Voting. This is the idea that every American has the responsibility to vote, but also to take a step or two beyond that. Voting Plus One will mean something different for every person, depending on who they are and what they can do.

When regular people take those steps beyond just voting, we get back to the idea of government by the people.

What's your reaction to hearing a statement like that?

If you were going to explain this idea to a friend who's never heard of this, what would you say?

[If it's going well, they're positive and engaged]: What positive things might we do through government if people did get more involved?

[Starter Kit supplemental, if needed]

Some groups are even giving out Voting Plus One Starter Kits, with tips on different ways we can have a greater impact at every level of government—local, state and federal.

Tips range from how to contact your city paper to get them to be more thorough in covering public meetings, or getting those meetings online so more people can weigh in. Or, what government representatives or agencies could use more input from regular people. And what citizen groups are active on issues that concern you.

APPENDIX – SAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD-TESTING

[Success Stories, CHOOSE ONE]

For many of us, the word “government” brings to mind bickering politicians, because that’s most of what we hear about on the news. We hear less about the fact that the power of people working together is the power of our democracy.

[U.S. version]

For example, in states where drilling for natural gas involves fracking, citizens worried about chemicals that drillers were injecting into the ground. Companies wanted to stay unregulated, but Americans around the country wanted a say about this—and they went beyond just voting to do it.

Communities formed citizen organizations that networked with other groups to have more of a say in state government and to make sure their representatives took their concerns into account. By the time the Environmental Protection Agency asked for citizen input, 1.5 million comments flooded in.

Because millions of people were willing to go beyond just voting, most states now require companies to monitor and make public the chemicals they use in their wells.

[North Carolina version]

For example, in Raleigh, bad relations between police and many communities have been a problem for years. Recently, residents organized themselves, held meetings to come up with solutions and are working with the City Council to change policies and open up new lines of communication and accountability for officers and residents.

To make this happen, it took people really making the most of their government by going beyond just voting.

If you were going to pass some of this information on to a friend—what parts do you remember of it? We’d like to know if it’s clear.

What’s your reaction to hearing the statement that I read?

Supplemental questions

[If too much focus on *voting*]:

Voting is good, but what would you say to someone who said that it wasn’t enough—that each of us has to take a step or two beyond voting if we want to have a say in things?

[If too much focus on *non-government action*]:

If enough people took these steps beyond voting, do you think that could change the kind of government we have?

APPENDIX – SAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD-TESTING

[If too negative]:

Do you think we should just give up on ever having democracy / having a say?

Closing:

If things started to move in the right direction, how would this change what we can accomplish with the tools of government? How could this affect the sorts of communities we live in?

What is it going to take?

Of all the things that we talked about—or that I brought up in these paragraphs—which of the ideas strike you the most? Which might you be thinking about later?

age / originally from? / years in NC / political leaning / ethnic background

APPENDIX – EXCERPTS FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD NOTES

We stopped a 42 year-old Caucasian male in Scottsbluff, NE, who initially appeared reluctant to participate. Before he declined our request, I asked him what came to mind when he thought of “government”. His response was typical. Like so many before him, he chuckled at first. He leaned his head back to accentuate his laughter, emphasizing the preposterousness of the question, if not the illegitimacy of an alternative reply. He snapped back to attention and quipped, “Crooked! It’s crooked.” Repeating himself, he shook his head, again as if to underscore the impossibility of coming to any other conclusion. He himself concluded with a final set of free associations about “government”: “Filthy! Bad! Wrong! Everything about it.”

However, moments later, after listening to a text which acknowledged that the only way we are going to have a say is through greater citizen involvement, in going “beyond voting”—the tone and character of his responses changed dramatically.

“I would agree! I would agree totally, that people should have more control over what our government does”

And when I followed up by saying, “Some folks say voting’s good, but you need to do more than that.”

He said enthusiastically, “I agree. You need to take a stand and be more, not necessarily just educated as far as government goes, but actually going out to support and make a voice to be heard.”

Notes by C.L.

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

Notes by K.M.

APPENDIX – EXCERPTS FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD NOTES

[In Saline County, Arkansas] When she understood the gist of why I was there in the shop, the young woman laughed and handed me over to the woman at the table in the back, because “she has the opinions.” A 40ish moderate woman (which counts as a “flaming liberal” in this conservative town). She was working on some silk-screening design for a sports team. We talked about the state of Arkansan democracy. A customer who came in about some birthday decorations for her boss joined us—she was less accustomed to holding forth on her political opinions, though she had them (more conservative). All three white women, the opinionated moderate, the law-and-order conservative, and the young apolitical enjoyed the novelty of such a conversation on civics and democracy, with its complicated mix of patriotism and pessimism. But they hinted that acrimony was also lurking beneath the surface.

“It’s like the whole Saline County being wet or not the last time around. My sister and I didn’t speak for months because we stood on opposite sides of it. I said if you’re going to drink, you’re going to drink, whether you have to drive five minutes to buy or you have to drive 50 minutes to buy, it doesn’t matter. You’d be better off keeping that revenue and that tax base in our county. She wouldn’t hear that. She actually deleted my comment off of Facebook.”

For an African-American young man on the other side of town, the ideas I was introducing prompted him to think hard about how we struggle to come together when our communities are so fractured.

“Once people get together and start working toward what they want, there’s not really too much to stand in their way, and history has shown that over and over. So it’s not just that we don’t care, it’s that we don’t care to come together . . . 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. And

also, we don’t believe we should fight. We don’t believe as strongly that we should fight. [Fight?] By fight, I mean go and actually work toward the cause that we want. And the hardest thing to do is convince other people to do it, because we, like I said, we’re all in our own little islands and nobody wants to leave their comfort zone. So as much as we see and as much as we talk to each other . . . well, that’s the thing. It’s the dependency on one another. When people are dependent on one another to live and survive, then if at any time anything needs to get done, everybody’s in.”

Notes by A.B.

In Jackson, Michigan: 33-year-old white, unemployed woman with her 45-year-old landlord. I caught the two coming from the courthouse, where the landlord had somehow come to the defense of one of his tenants—a woman who was broke and down on her luck. Indeed, she admitted that she was beholden to him—if “not for his kindness she would have been out on the street.” For his part, the landlord expressed himself in an unmistakably libertarian-Christian discourse. He could not have been more emphatic about his loathing for taxation. He asked pleadingly, “where does all that money go,” and, chuckled a bit once he recognized the public works and construction projects that were going on around us. At one point, the young lady was going to describe the deplorable state of public housing, but before she could finish her point, the landlord stipulated that such assistance needed to be onerous in order to dissuade people from desiring it. At this point, the young lady changed her point to agree with his.

Notes by C.L.