Subjects or Citizens, Part 2
Creating engaged conversations about government

By the Topos Partnership
For the *Reclaiming Government for America's Future* project of Indivisible and Public Works

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Executive Summary

Government actions play a critical role in determining the wellbeing 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 when 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

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[1] "Subjects or Citizens? Americans' Lived Experience of Democracy," produced for the *Reclaiming Government for America's Future* project of Public Works and Indivisible

"subjects" in an undemocratic society than like citizens with the ability, and responsibility, to shape government policy in their own interest.

This follow-up report offers a much more hopeful perspective. It focuses on specific communications approaches that help Americans appreciate the contributions of the public sector to our wellbeing, and promote a shift in thinking from "subjects" to "citizens."

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 effort[2] identified a positive way forward, that helps engage Americans – both by priming a meaningful and positive *dialog* about what we can achieve through government, and also by helping them *imagine* what a more engaged relationship feels like. There are two essential elements in this effective approach:

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[2] The research had a total N of over 2,500 from around the country, and included online Talkback testing, a Virtual Community Form, interviews with state-level leaders, ethnographic field testing in six states, and a dial-test survey.

"For the people" – Maintain a focus on how public institutions and policies are *collective achievements that 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.

"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. 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:
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> *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 …*
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> *We sometimes forget that governing isn't really about capitol buildings and politicians. It's 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 of referring to the issue for non-experts, 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 both to 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, more active and impactful role.

> Sample language
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> *Some groups are working on the idea of <u>Voting Plus One</u> or <u>Beyond Voting.</u>   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.*

<u>Second</u>, it is helpful to paint a vivid picture of how effective engagement works. This picture can include several different elements:

> "Success stories" – One of the most effective ways to change people's stance towards 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.
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> "Starter kits" – Since the majority of Americans have so little experience feeling and acting like pro-active citizens, they respond positively do the idea that there could be "starter kits" that offer simple steps beyond voting.
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> "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 make their views known.

All of these approaches are helpful because they offer what amounts to "second hand experience" of how meaningful democratic engagement works – and they 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.

And 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 towards 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.