STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING WITH LOCAL OFFICIALS ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

CORNELL MUNICIPAL CLERKS INSTITUTE
TUESDAY JULY 12, 2016

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ROADMAP FOR TODAY:

Background on our *Informed Decision-Making Project*

Understanding our own ideological frameworks

Knowledge versus Beliefs

The difference between complex, controversial, and culturally polarized issues

How do these factors influence our approaches to working with local policymakers and community members?

Next steps
University-Community Intermediaries: Supporting Informed Decision-Making in a Polarized Context

New federally funded multistate project
Focus on relationships, paths of influence, between academic community and local policy makers
a. How are university-based information, research, outreach and community engagement efforts viewed, accessed, interpreted and used by decision-makers dealing with pressing, complex, and sometimes controversial issues?

b. How do the tensions and conflicts that often exist between data, research, politics, experience, ideology, values and opinion play out in the decision-making process of local government officials?
C. How can the land grant mission, as carried out by universities, best support informed decision-making effectively in local government contexts? What mix of approaches, tools and trainings are most effective, and in which kinds of contexts and with which kinds of issues?

- How can we adapt/change our engagement strategies most effectively?

d. By addressing these key questions, will these efforts increase the impact of research-based knowledge generated by land grant institutions?
UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

RATE THE STRENGTH OF YOUR PERSONAL & PUBLIC OPINIONS ON THE FOLLOWING ISSUES:

- A ban against natural gas hydrofracturing in NYS (“H-FRACK”)
- A requirement for public school children to be vaccinated (“VACCINE”)
- A ban against farmers using GMOs (“GMO”)
- The human impact on climate change (“HUMAN-CLIMATE IMPACT”)

INSTRUCTIONS: USE X STICKY FOR PERSONAL, Y STICKY FOR PUBLIC AND POST STICKIES ON WEAK-STRONG SPECTRUM AT FRONT OF ROOM
DISTANCE BETWEEN PERSONAL & PUBLIC OPINIONS

➢ ARE THERE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRENGTH OF YOUR OPINION ON THESE ISSUES
  ➢ Between what is personal and what is public?

➢ REFLECTING TO YOURSELF, WHAT ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
  ➢ Your actual opinion (how you feel) personally and the average public opinion?

➢ DOES THIS HAVE ANY IMPACT ON YOUR ABILITY TO BE A TRUSTED, NEUTRAL ACTOR IN YOUR COMMUNITY?
  ➢ Is any impact general, or totally issue specific?
COMPLEX......CONTROVERSIAL......CULTURALLY POLARIZING

Technically Complex Issues:

- Understanding them fully is difficult, even for experts - they typically involve many variables and subsystems that interact in ways that aren’t easy to conceptualize and may be hard to measure as well — specialized or technical knowledge is required, usually of multiple kinds.

Controversial Issues:

- People hold strong and frequently opposing opinions about these issues, especially on the question of policy or what ought to be done. They may engage strong emotions on the part of some. They often are complex too, but not necessarily so.

Culturally Polarizing Issues:

- These issues are a special, relatively rare kind of controversial issue. The key factor involved is that people’s personal and group identities are involved. The way people understand the issue itself, not just the policy choices they prefer, is influenced by what they believe others in the “in-group” they identify with will think. Empirically, the more people are educated about the issue, the more they disagree about it.
CULTURAL COGNITION THEORY:
KNOWLEDGE ≠ BELIEFS

SCIENCE COMPREHENSION THESIS

Kahan et al. The polarizing impact of science literacy and numeracy on perceived climate change risks
Nature Climate Change 2, 732–735 (2012) doi:10.1038/nclimate1547
## Public Issue Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex</th>
<th>Controversial</th>
<th>Culturally Polarized</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anaerobic digestion</td>
<td>Breast cancer screening</td>
<td>Climate Change (geoengineering?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invasive species eradication</td>
<td>GMOs</td>
<td>Death penalty (Policing?)</td>
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<td>Weather forecasting</td>
<td>Lowering drinking age</td>
<td>HPV vaccination</td>
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<td>Air traffic control</td>
<td>Legalizing marijuana</td>
<td>Hydraulic fracturing</td>
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<td>Downtown revitalization</td>
<td>School violence</td>
<td>Deer/goose management?</td>
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<td>Music education in schools</td>
<td>Diet advice</td>
<td>Health care reform</td>
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COMPLEX, CONTROVERSIAL, AND CULTURALLY POLARIZED ISSUES IN YOUR COMMUNITY...?

- How does issue “type” influence your approach?
- Do issues vary in importance &/or controversy across communities?
- If so, how does this influence your approach?
Creating a Program Work Team with NYS CCE around Informed Decision-Making

Work with Multi-state partners in our 5 Year Hatch funded project

Ultimately work to develop workshops around skill-building, communication strategies, and general approaches to working with policymakers around controversial issues.