

Center for Cooperative Media: Voting Block, 2019–2020

December, 2020

Background

The Center for Cooperative Media's second iteration of Voting Block took place from late 2019 through August 2020. The program connected community members in three New Jersey cities – Paterson, Newark, and Camden – with local journalists, government officials, and one another in an effort to spur civil dialogue. The initial design was to create these connections over intimate dinners across several months of time. The pandemic disrupted a great deal of these plans, forcing Newark and Camden to go partially or fully virtual.

According to pre/post survey results from community participants and one-on-one interviews from journalist participants, Voting Block effectively engaged and connected participants, while also increasing trust with local media and tangibly increasing community involvement. However, it must be noted that the participants were already largely civically engaged. Voting Block 2020 enhanced the civic mindedness of its community participants, but it didn't necessarily engage the indifferent.

Event Sites

Paterson

Voting Block in Paterson took place from December, 2019 to January, 2020. There were ten participants, although one person stopped participating partway through. The group included a mix of people who were plugged into local politics and media, as well as those who were less engaged and were new to this type of community-based experience. All three dinners for the Paterson group were in-person. Paterson was the first to launch because networking efforts paid off right away, which led to a diverse group of community members willing to participate in the dinners. Rosie Grant, a professional facilitator, served as moderator for the Paterson group.

Newark

The Newark Voting Block met for its first dinner in person in January, just before the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the U.S.. The project paused, then resumed virtually, with the last dinner being hosted in August. Most of the 11 Newark participants were local leaders, and some participants already knew each other; however, the participants weren't as connected to local

media. Participants were guarded at the first in-person meeting, more willing to boost Newark than call out issues of concern. The first virtual meeting often turned to local despair as a result of the pandemic, which led to raw and honest conversations about Newark. WBGO reporter Brit Harley facilitated the dinners. As a community organizer and journalist, she had crossed paths with some of the participants and was sensitive to their concerns about the media.

Camden

The Voting Block dinners in Camden in August and September 2020 were all held virtually and had nine participants. Because the dinners were virtual as a result of the pandemic, a local restaurant delivered food to participants in anticipation of the meeting. The first of the three dinners, each of which lasted two hours, was the most successful in terms of engagement and subject matter. The designated facilitator, journalist Phaedra Trethan, had a hard time engaging the participants, which led the Center's Manya Brachear Pashman to participate in facilitation more than initially planned.

Discussion

The Community Perspective

Prior to the Voting Block events, we surveyed participants to understand their current level of civic engagement and experience interacting with local journalists, and we followed up after the events to identify if and how Voting Block influenced changes in their thinking or behavior.

We found that despite the already high level of civic engagement and connection to information in New Jersey, participants indicated that Voting Block led them to be even *more* engaged and connected.

Among the 30 Voting Block community participants, 27 took the pre-survey (90% response rate). The respondents represent a broad socio-economic cross-section of community members. Eleven (40.7%) respondents have a household income below \$30,000, nine (33.3%) have a household income between \$30,000 and \$74,999, and the remaining seven (25.9%) have a household income \$75,000 or higher. The demographic characteristics of the respondents was less broad: 19 (70.3%) were women and the rest men; just over half of participants (14, 52%) identified as Black, five (18.5%) identified with two or more races, and three each (11.1%) identified as white and Hispanic/Latinx, respectively. In terms of age, 16 (59.3%) were between the ages of 25 and 44, with just one participant between 18 and 24 and the remaining 10 (37%) 45 years of age or older.

Politically, the respondents tended to describe themselves as liberal and engaged. Thirteen (48.1%) said that "liberal" or "very liberal" best characterizes their political views, while 10 (37%) said "moderate" does. The remaining either did not answer or said "apolitical" was the best description for them. No respondent identified "conservative" or "very conservative" as the best characterization of their political views. Regarding local political engagement, 11 said they were

"moderately engaged" (40.7%), eight (29.6%) said they are either "extremely" or "very" engaged, four said they were "slightly engaged," and only one person said they were "not at all engaged."

This self-identified level of engagement is evident in behavior. We asked about voting practices, and 23 (85.2%) said they either "always" or "usually" vote. Just one person said they "rarely" vote. We also asked participants if they've ever talked or written to a state government official, and 17 (63%) indicated that they had.

In terms of interpersonal engagement, 11 (40.7%) respondents said that they "occasionally" talk to people with whom they disagree with about politics either online or in-person, which was the most common response. Eight (29.6%) said that they "frequently" do, three (11.1%) said they "rarely" do. One respondent indicated that they "very frequently" talk with those with whom they disagree politically, and one respondent selected "very rarely." No respondent said that they "never" do.

When asked how informed they feel about New Jersey politics, most (55.6%) said that they feel "moderately" informed. Four (14.8%) respondents said they feel either "extremely" or "very" informed, while five (18.5%) said they feel either "slightly" or "not at all" informed. In terms of news habits, the predominant ways respondents access local news is through online newspapers and social media, as 40.7% of the respondents indicated they "very frequently" get information in these ways. Most (59.3%) also said they had previously talked to a journalist for a news story, almost half (44.4%) said they have been recorded for public broadcast, and a quarter have written a work published either online or in print about civic issues in New Jersey (25.9%).

After the conclusion of all Voting Block events in Paterson, Newark and Camden, we asked participants about how much the experience influenced them in terms of civic engagement and feeling informed about New Jersey politics. In all, 22 of the 30 participants (73% response rate) took the post-event survey: 10 from Newark, seven from Paterson, and five from Camden. Overall, participants identified positive change as a result of Voting Block.

The vast majority of respondents felt more informed about local politics, more engaged in community, and had more trust in local media after Voting Block. While not every participant identified these changes for themselves, no respondents selected "disagree" or "strongly disagree" when asked to assess the impact of the events.

	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL
After participating in NJ Voting Block, I feel more informed about my city's politics.	40.91% 9	31.82% 7	27.27% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	22
After participating in NJ Voting Block, I feel more engaged in my community.	40.91% 9	36.36% 8	22.73% 5	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	22
After participating in NJ Voting Block, I have more trust in local media to provide relevant information to me and my community.	40.91% 9	31.82% 7	27.27% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	22

Some of the specific issues participants felt more informed about include policing, pollution, the digital divide, prison reform, resources for change, and local activism. Understanding other community perspectives was another way participants expressed being more informed. One respondent said "I understand a lot more about Paterson," and another said, "I am more informed about the issues which are important to others."

Participants also provided specific examples about how Voting Block influenced their trust in local media and connection to their community. A participant from Camden said it "felt like all the journalists displayed compassion and concern about Camden City." Another said "The people were invested and that's a start. They took the time to listen and that's a major part that's missing." Continuing the theme of listening as fellow community members, another participant said "the journalists were merely participants in a group of like minded individuals." And in response to a question about identifying specific relationships formed as a result of Voting Block, one participant said "I think I will be more inclined to contact the media involved in this project, whereas before I was hesitant."

Regarding connections to communities, there are examples of participants taking concrete actions as a result of Voting Block. One respondent stated "I had the pleasure of being invited to community board meetings and organized community platforms." Another made contact with "leadership in Paterson," while others mentioned things such as joining local nonprofits, attending town meetings, and sharing new insights with others.

Respondents indicated a high degree of interpersonal connection as well. Seventeen (71.3%) participants said they formed a new relationship as a result of Voting Block, while three (13.6%) said they were "unsure" whether or not they did and two (9.1%) said they did not form a new relationship. The pre-event survey indicated that most respondents already engaged in conversation with those they disagree with politically, but the post-event survey shows that after Voting Block, participants are even more likely to do so. Sixteen (72.7%) of the respondents said that they were either "much more likely" or "more likely" to engage in this type of conversation, while the remaining six (27.3%) said they were "neither more nor less likely" to do so. None of the participants said they were "less likely" or "much less likely" to engage in these types of conversations.

The Journalists' Perspective

We spoke with the three journalists who participated in the discussions but who did not serve as meeting facilitators: Steve Lenox from TAPinto Paterson, Patrick Wall from Chalkbeat (based in Newark), and Steve Rodas from TAPinto Camden. Participating in this type of event was new for each journalist, and all three of them reported a positive experience with lasting impact.

One tangible way the events impacted the journalists was by providing new sources. All three journalists said they made new connections at the events that later served as inspiration for new local journalism or as a new connection. Similarly, all three journalists reported that they produced journalism as a result of the conversations at the events. For example, Steve Rodas from TAPinto Camden said that illegal dumping was a major theme from the conversations. One participant even took advantage of the virtual format and showed illegal dumping taking place outside of the participant's residence. This led to a story about illegal dumping and what the city of Camden is or is not doing about it.

Otherwise, Lenox, Wall, and Rodas all identified the open conversation and welcoming atmosphere as one of the best aspects of the events. They appreciated the fact that the conversations were not about one theme. Because the conversations were wide-ranging, the journalists were able to hear about multiple issues that concern community members. For instance, Patrick Wall is an education journalist, but the conversations were not focused on education. As a result, Wall said he came into contact with community members and community issues he probably wouldn't have while on his regular education beat.

While each journalist identified the open conversation as a positive, it also prevented them from going deep on an issue in the moment. One possible program change would be to reserve the first meeting for a broad discussion about many themes, and then to use the subsequent meetings to dig deeper into one or two specific issues. While the journalists did not offer many critiques of Voting Block, Rodas did indicate that he and at least one other participant felt that the final meeting in Camden with public officials felt lacking. The reason was because the issues and questions the group discussed in the first two meetings didn't come up enough.

Recommendations

Voting Block 2019-2020 achieved its primary goals, despite the disruptions to initial plans. Still, there are concrete ways Voting Block can fine tune future events.

- 1. Engage the unconnected.** While Paterson had a mix of community participants that were civically engaged and relatively unengaged, the participants from Newark and Camden were well connected and already had a share of voice in the community. Using the methods that worked in Paterson in other regions could lead to a greater overall mix.

- 2. Leverage discrete networks to find participants.** Many participants were referrals from other participants, which led to some insularity. Pulling from non-overlapping networks could lead to a more diverse mix of participants.
- 3. Use each meeting to determine the next meeting's agenda, and stick to it.** Let the meetings organically build upon one another and sharpen the focus as the meetings take place.
- 4. Follow up with participants.** Keep participants engaged and show them tangible results of their participation, including links to journalism that resulted from the conversation, or any other tangible actions taken by participants, such as volunteer work or organizing efforts toward local causes.