



Peoria Project



A New Approach to Understanding and Communicating with American Voters

June, 2018

About the Project

To convince people to take civic action or shift their opinions, you first need to understand how they think, feel, and frame the world.

Over the past year, we undertook an ambitious research project to examine Americans' core beliefs across the full political spectrum. That work led to a new view of the public, clustered into nine segments around people's values rather than their demographics or voting behaviors.

To deepen our understanding of these audiences, we worked with creators from advocacy, marketing, and media to produce dozens of social media-optimized videos that represented a wide variety of progressive messages. We then distributed these videos with scientific rigor on social media and measured the impact of the messages across a wide variety of audiences using innovative digital testing tools.

The result is a new way to use 21st-century tools to understand, identify, and listen to audiences across our society. We don't believe in a single message or process — but we've tried to share our data and demonstrate a set of methods that, together, may illuminate the path forward.

Why the Peoria Project?

Here are three macro changes that we believe necessitate a rethinking of campaign communications, and *how we learn* about the electorate:

IN A POST-BROADCAST WORLD, we can't force people to watch anymore. No matter how many millions of dollars we have in our ad budgets, if our videos are not genuinely attention-grabbing and interesting to the audiences we're trying to reach, we simply will not be able to deliver our messages. Hitting this mark is impossible without deeper understanding of the audiences themselves.

IN A SPLINTERED WORLD, we can't understand everyone we're trying to reach. We all share a common humanity, but we're not all the same. Different audiences have different values, experiences, beliefs, biases, cultural references, ways of creating meaning. Different things convince us, move us, fascinate us, disgust us, shut us down, or draw us in.

IN A DATA-RICH WORLD, we can learn a huge amount from our audiences — before *and after* we tell them stories. Thanks to social platforms and digital surveying techniques, we can distribute messages in real-life contexts, observe how different audiences respond in real time, and adapt our approaches based on real feedback. By embracing curiosity, data, and iteration, we can better understand how different audiences may hear the very same messages differently — and use these insights to create dramatically better media, recognize the power of new messengers, and broaden our coalitions.

The “Peoria Nine”

A Values-Based Segmentation of the American Electorate

The Peoria Project began with a large scale, multi-mode survey focused on voters’ underlying values frames rather than demographics. The survey questions drew from research in social and behavioral science and focused on the beliefs that frame our identities and choices. We included questions about race, gender, moral foundations, social relationships, and perspectives on authority. And we combined the new survey data with more than 1.5 million historical poll records on issue and values questions collected by Catalist partners.

Using cluster analysis, we grouped voters into nine segments based on their shared values — all intended to provide a richer way to understand the different threads that make up the American tapestry than is normally used in approaching and producing advocacy communications.

Our understanding of these clusters was further enhanced through a series of in-person focus groups in battleground regions across the country, as well as online community discussion boards within specific clusters.¹ These qualitative research steps helped illuminate much of the “why” behind what holds these groups together and added tremendous geographic variation and linguistic richness to our new portrait of the electorate.

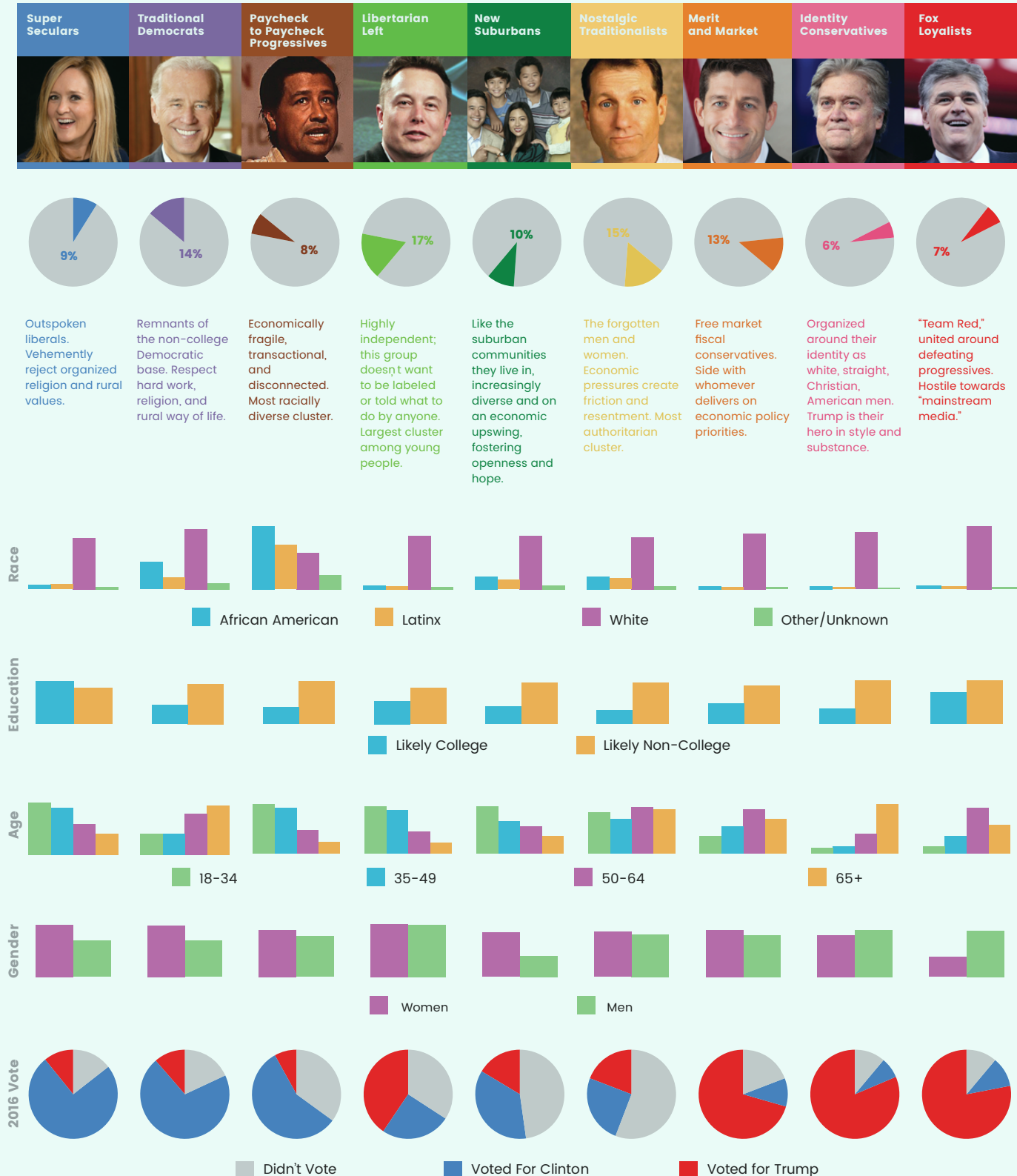
Combined, our multi-faceted quantitative and qualitative approach allowed us to add a new layer of audience understanding to more traditional analyses primarily based on demographics and voting behaviors.

We are grateful for the support of our research partners, who are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

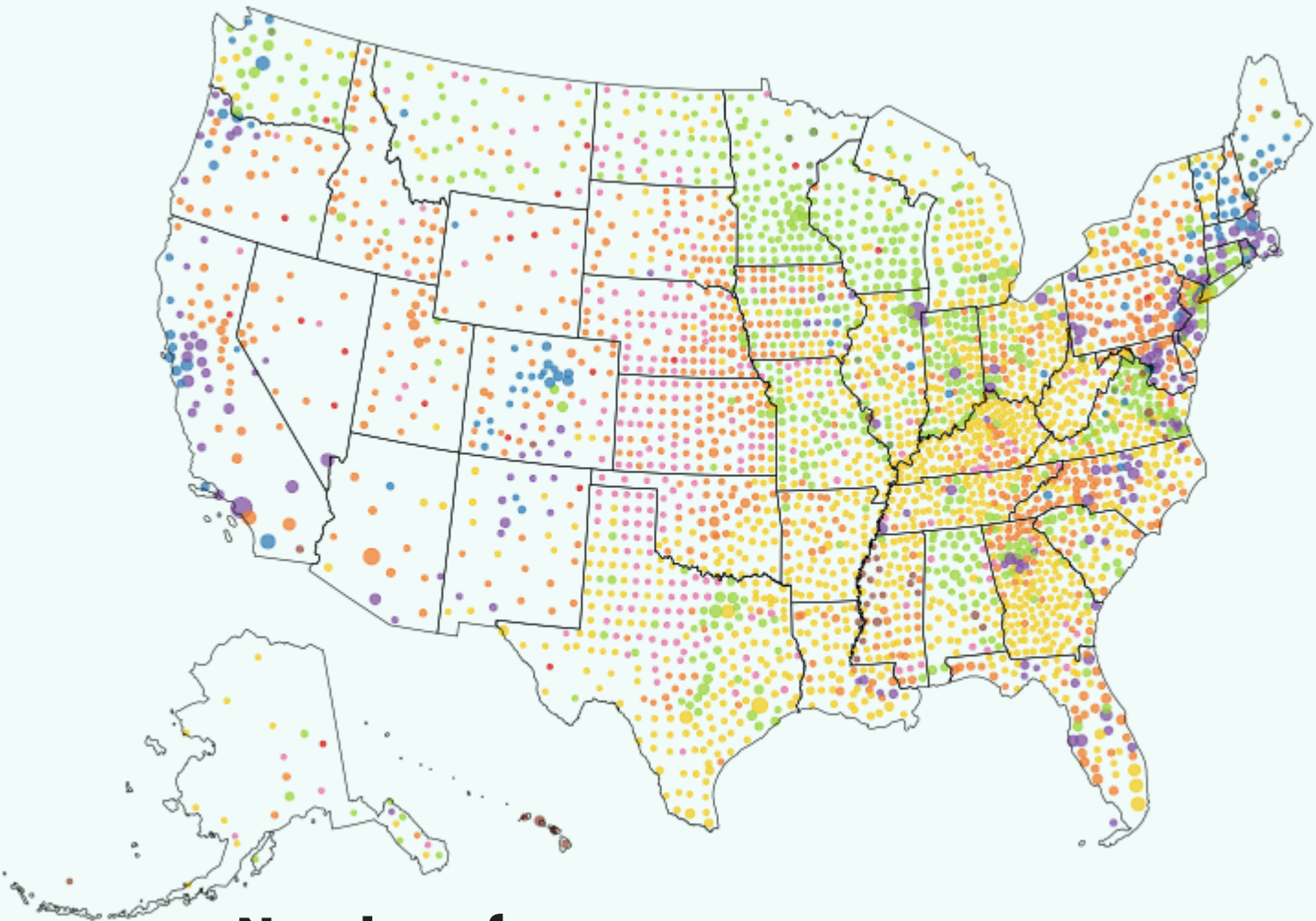
1. Data or other information from social media platforms were not used in cluster analyses, or in development of the audience segments, nor is social media data or information used to update, enhance or revise audience segmentations..

The "Peoria Nine"

At a Glance



Most Common Cluster By County



Number of Registered Voters

- 250K
- 500K
- 1 million
- 3 million
- 5 million

Peoria Cluster

- Super Seculars
- Traditional Democrats
- Paycheck to Paycheck
- Libertarian Left
- New Suburbans
- Nostalgic Traditionalists
- Merit and Market
- Identity Conservatives
- Fox Loyalists

Assessing the Clusters with Creative Content

We shared this new understanding of the American electorate with a broad community of content creators spanning the commercial media, nonprofit, and advocacy sectors. Our call for entries led to hundreds of submissions, which we augmented with targeted curation. Ultimately, we considered nearly 400 options and produced more than 70 videos in total.

We conducted two rounds of video content production, distribution, and testing. In the first round, we deliberately generated stories that varied across topic, tone, messenger, style, and source to share with *each* of the nine audience clusters. That decision — not to pre-select audiences or pre-target content — was highly unusual and deliberate. The second round of testing was informed by what we learned in the first round, allowing us to go deeper with the tones, messengers, topics, and styles that seemed to work best for a few particular audiences in the middle of the ideological spectrum: Libertarian Left, New Suburbans, and Nostalgic Traditionalists.

Our primary analysis focused on digital *engagement*: could we get relevant audiences to actually watch our content? Secondly, we measured the *persuasiveness* of the videos with different audiences. Our focus groups and online panels provided additional specific insights on how the audience reacted to the content.

The goal of this process was to observe how different audiences engage with the same content to deepen our understanding of the audiences themselves — rather than simply identifying video “winners.”

To view all the videos, visit thepeoriaproject.org

Some Illustrative Findings

The Peoria Project was very much a process-over-product endeavor. We aimed to demonstrate that continuous experimentation, observation, assessment, and improvement can lead to new ways of “listening” to the American people and useful insights about how to communicate with them.

We expect those findings to be highly contingent on audience, topic, organization, point-in-time, platform, and a dozen other factors. Their purpose is not to be written on stone tablets, but to deepen understanding of audience similarities and differences and inform continuing rounds of creative development and distribution.

In that spirit, here are some of the insights and hypotheses that surfaced during the Peoria Project, which are the sorts of *things* others could learn about audiences by using similar processes:

1. An approach that worked broadly: real people telling their own stories. There’s no single way to make a video for social media platforms. But we did find, in creating more than 70 videos about progressive ideas and rigorously testing them, one basic format tended to work better, on average, than others. What defined it?

- * *Generally a single person*
- * *Speaking in their own voice: talking direct to camera, being profiled, or captured in the act of doing something public like yelling at their congressperson at a town hall or telling a powerful story from a podium*
- * *Emotion, whether that’s anger, sadness, comedy, frustration, or surprise*
- * *Authenticity: without being super slick or over produced, and without feeling “ad-y”*

Across a variety of engagement metrics, all audiences responded to moving, first-person stories. Here, for example, are five of our top-performing videos:

“Father Enraged Over Trumpcare” is a man outraged with his Congressman for voting to gut the Affordable Care Act, threatening his wife’s cancer treatment.

“Fox News and Taxes” features footage of a Fox Business host attacking Trump’s hypocrisy on closing tax loopholes. While this video isn’t a first-person narrative, it had a searing emotional tone that “felt” personal.

“Kathy and Minimum Wage” is about a 72-year-old woman whose savings were depleted taking care of her husband who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

“Sensible Gun Control” is the story of a Marine who believes gun owners ought to be properly trained. Like he was.

“We Call B.S.” features Emma González, a survivor of the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, in one of her memorable public speeches. This video was also very timely during the period tests were in the field.

2. Engagement and persuasion measured different qualities. We found that the stories which best engaged people were not often the ones that persuaded people most. In fact: watching the content, liking the content, and being persuaded by the content were all very different phenomena. Liking and persuasion were negatively correlated, perhaps because if “everyone” likes something, there is no one left to be persuaded. That, though, is why measuring both social engagement *and* persuasion is vital: creating content that thrives in both ways is necessary, and inherently challenging.

“**Fox News and Taxes**” featured footage of a Fox Business host attacking Trump’s hypocrisy on closing tax loopholes. This video was submitted with the idea that presenting a Trump criticism from a seemingly right-wing media outlet could effectively engage people in the middle and on the right. The video was highly engaging and attracted a lot of attention, but it proved to be only marginally persuasive (and more so to the left and center than to the right). This was a clear example of multiple dynamics working in separate and different directions.

This phenomenon is made more difficult by the reality that the platforms are particularly responsive to decisions made in the first seconds of a video — while longer exposure is often needed to tell a compelling, persuasive story. With that said, we did find several 15-second cut-downs of videos that were *more* persuasive than the minute-long original versions.

3. We understand audiences less than we think: It is very, very hard to predict what content will work. In Round 2, even after the creative team had been steeped in audience data and working on this project for half a year, we still nearly killed two videos late in post-production that ended up being two of our top three performers in the round! The lesson isn’t that we’re terrible at our jobs (we hope), but that there’s no substitute for actually sharing content with real audience members and observing their reactions. Again, these processes can help us spot useful qualities in the content, but the most valuable, and lasting learning, is what responses teach us about the audiences themselves.

4. Particular values segments appeared to gravitate towards videos with particular tones. For example, just looking at three groups in the middle of the political spectrum, we saw:

- * *snarky/knowing videos perform best with the Libertarian Left, while*
- * *compassionate/heartstring-tugging videos fare better with New Suburbans, and*
- * *just-the-facts/fed-up videos connect with Nostalgic Traditionalists.*

For specific illustrations of these points, compare these videos from Round 2:

“**Angry Young Man**,” which performed well with the Libertarian Left, featured a young Trump voter voicing frustration at politicians’ broken promises and growing corporate power in our country.

By contrast, “**We The People // Gaby**,” from the [Midwest Culture Lab](#), featured a young organizer sharing her moving family history and resonated with New Suburbans.

These are early indications rather than hard findings — and they’re the sorts of things we expect will shift over time. But we found them creatively inspiring as we embarked on Round 2, and the videos we created to test these hypotheses *did* end up significantly overperforming benchmarks for the audiences we designed them for. We can use optimization results to learn even more about who is responding to what — not to slavishly add these qualities to every form of communications going forward, but to enrich our overall picture of the mindset of various audiences.

5. The messenger can be more important than the message.

The videos that appealed to specific segments aligned more on messenger and tone than on topic. In many cases, we saw audiences engage most with messengers from their own racial or ethnic group and age bracket. In the comments section, we also saw a greater suspicion regarding source (“who are you?”, “brought to you by nobody”, and “this is an actor”) when there wasn’t necessarily alignment between messenger and audience; seeing someone who looks familiar in terms of race and age may serve as a marker of authenticity for some viewers.

6. High production value — and even original production — was overrated.

In many cases, finding and licensing great existing videos that reflect the heart of what you’re trying to communicate is more cost-effective, more engaging, and more persuasive than the videos you’ll produce yourself. In the cases where precise messaging or other factors mean you have to create an original video, it’s more valuable to focus on finding a compelling messenger than on production boondoggles. This again may currently be a marker of authenticity. We were careful, however, to adapt curated content to adhere to platform-specific best practices.

7. Optimizing videos for specific platforms was crucial.

If your video doesn’t follow the always-changing best practices of the applicable social media platforms with religious zeal — attention-grabbing first few seconds, tight editing, on-screen text, for example — the social media platforms’ algorithms will make sure it quickly disappears from view. In fact, in our first round of testing, we saw that the least-engaging videos didn’t rank highly with any audience, while the top 5 most-engaging videos overall were also amongst the top 10 most engaging in every particular audience. Sufficient engagement unlocks a shot at persuading them.

Before adding nuance to break through with hard-to-reach audiences, you have to make sure your creative is compelling and in line with basic best practices to garner sufficient engagement up front. If you want your message to be seen, it’s wise to work with people whose job it is to keep on top of the ever-shifting social media landscape — like creators and publishers who produce video regularly and at high-volume for the most prominent social media platforms.

8. A neutral research platform that includes audiences across the electorate can offer a path to additional insights for a range of partners with different narrative hypotheses.

By setting up a standardized experimental protocol, we were able to incorporate content approaches and research hypotheses from a range of other third party insightful messaging and narrative projects. For example, in the second round of testing we utilized frames developed by [Demos' Race-Class narrative research](#) as well as the [Midwest Culture Lab](#).

9. Expect even more platform turbulence ahead.

Given the current concerns of prominent social media platforms, we can reasonably anticipate that rule changes are likely to continue. Future work building on this project will be necessary to understand the impact of those changes and adapt. The goal of this type of research is to use platforms — such as they are — to gain insight into how distinct audiences respond to similar content. And to bring this knowledge back into the creative process to deepen understanding of the electorate, rather than to simply pick video “winners.”

In Round 2, we included two variations of a video about rising income inequality, “**Craig 1**” and “**Craig 2**,” the sole difference being that “Craig 1” included mention of how “they” (corporate elites) were trying to “keep us apart” and blame people of color, before returning to the broader point. This recommendation for a “race-class” framing came directly from Demos’ Race-Class Narrative research. “Craig 1” was more persuasive than “Craig 2” across all audiences, including the Nostalgic Traditionalist cluster (not what we expected!). This finding illustrates how the many elements of a message, including the sometimes subtle or minor points (since race was not a focus of either ad), come together, and how listening for audience reaction to the content can inform the broader, longer-term conversation and spark further research.

Putting Peoria into Practice

A New Approach to Campaign Communications

1. Start with an age-old principle: Be curious about the people you're trying to reach. Read about them, study them, listen to them. Use some sort of process or framework to get beyond your own intuitions and put yourself in your audience's shoes. (Such as the Peoria Nine!)

2. Intentionally craft stories that feel like they'll connect with multiple different kinds of people. Messenger is often more important to basic engagement than topic. Create media that employs a variety of speakers, tones, style of arguments, and level of emotion. Consider the values of your audience to better hypothesize how they may "hear" your message.

While it's wise to try to match your messaging to the audience you're trying to reach, it's actually more important to make sure you're creating a wide variety of approaches that take into account the values lens through which the audience will filter your arguments.

3. Test your intuitions and hypotheses by communicating as widely as possible with everyone in your audience and analyzing the results. See sidebar for a number of useful testing recommendations.

You shouldn't assume that doing Step 1 and Step 2 will lead to predictable results in Step 3. Much more often than not, you'll be surprised by which stories connect with which audiences. But your goal should be to create media that changes hearts and minds, not to successfully predict which video will change whose heart and mind.

4. Test the persuasive power of any content that's reasonably socially engaging. To reiterate, since engagement and persuasion are not the same thing – it's important to look at both.

Because it's often excessively expensive (and sometimes impossible) to promote unengaging content on social platforms, you don't need to spend money to persuasion-test media that doesn't meet a decent threshold of engagement. And successful engagement over time may substantially increase opportunity for persuasion in the long run.

5. Look for the most engaging and impactful video, both generally and by audience, as a seed for future rounds of hypotheses. If you have a video that is connecting meaningfully, either overall or with a particular group of people, consider what sets that video apart from other tested creatives. Use that differentiation to generate additional hypotheses about your audience and inspire new creative. Repeat steps 1-3 to continuously expand your options and avoid being trapped by relentless efficiency testing. Because these insights can foster a richer understanding of audiences, we believe these "seeds" can also be useful fodder for communication via other channels.

Some Tips on Testing

In the course of running these experiments, we tried quite a few different experimental approaches. With the benefit of that knowledge, future tests would likely follow this sequence:

- 1.** Define initial metrics and parameters of the test — especially what is being held constant.
- 2.** Research, define, and select audiences to include, with a bias towards adding as many audiences as possible to allow for surprising discoveries.
- 3.** Define hypotheses to evaluate (e.g., messenger, tone, or format).
- 4.** Develop creative — either by curating or producing — within the parameters and style guide.
- 5.** Evaluate the assumptions of the test using cheap live "pre-tests" and update budget estimates.
- 6.** Run a round of live engagement testing.
- 7.** Evaluate on overall content engagement as well as overperformance in subsamples.
- 8.** Cull content that is worst performing for engagement.
- 9.** If needed, rerun the most-engaging content to get more sample.
- 10.** Place reasonably-engaging content in persuasion testing.
- 11.** Reevaluate results in full.
- 12.** Based on results, develop new hypotheses.
- 13.** Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Here are a few suggestions if you choose to apply this in your own work:

1. Approach audience research without preconceptions. In our quantitative and qualitative research, we tested several sometimes-competing, theories from the social and behavioral science community over the more “traditional” political polling questions. The resulting findings were a breath of fresh air compared to prior views of the electorate. Said another way: if you rely on the same standard research inputs, you will surely reproduce the same standard strategic outputs.

2. Run cheap pre-tests to validate cost estimates and statistical power. For example, at the beginning of our engagement testing (Round 1), we “pre-tested” several options for how to configure the platform’s algorithm, evaluated the “cost-per-cell” we needed to budget to get a statistical result, and looked at differences caused by video length. (We actually pre-tested a lot more than this.) We used those insights to improve our approach for the “real” test.

3. Start broad and then go deeper. If you want to test a lot of content to a lot of different audiences, it can get time-consuming and expensive quickly. Don’t be afraid to use smaller samples or more limited assessments of often-critical subgroups initially. You can usually get away with this because effective audience-specific targeting is not enough to overcome “bad” content.

4. Use these pro tips. Here are two tips that are relevant as of this writing. First, given a social media platform’s limitations, you may have to make some tradeoffs about what subgroups to prioritize. Second, to test a particular ad with respect to a particular audience, depending on the social media platform, the budget can be as low as \$100 to \$150. That should be enough to give you a baseline on engagement for a video. (For a graphic, you can do even less.) On some social media platforms, such as YouTube, you can relatively easily get insights into which *parts* of videos were the most engaging or caused the most drop off. Coupled with matching audience segments with YouTube’s values profiles, you can develop new hypotheses for what elements of a video work best with certain groups.

Next Steps

Without being too prescriptive about future applications, here are some of the most interesting lines of further inquiry, development, and investment that we hope will come out of the Peoria Project:

Throughout the movement, we think its important and possible for groups of all shapes and sizes to adopt a more iterative, curious, audience-focused approach to content development.

At Catalyst, we'll be providing partners with access to our audience research in 2018 and we will be creating methods guides for practitioners and partners to put what we've learned into practice. We have identified a small group of partners for beta tests of these processes in 2018, and we are seeking a few more partnerships to refine audience data collection and ensure it can be built on to create knowledge for the future. We aim to deploy our learnings from 2018 beta tests broadly across the community in early 2019.

Either via a new organization or an existing one with an a new mandate, we must capture some of the adjacent opportunities and tackle some of the more challenging problems, such as:

- * *Navigating the complexity of measuring both engagement and persuasion*
- * *Understanding and communicating with critical audiences, including some of the more challenging Peoria Nine, such as Nostalgic Traditionalists*
- * *Building media brands that speak to critical audiences, including groups like the Peoria Nine segments*
- * *Connecting social-savvy creators with progressive organizations in need of storytelling*
- * *Using content as a stethoscope on the heartbeat of American voters — helping the broader community understand audience mindsets and what is connecting at any given time — by continuously distributing material at a low volume to a variety of audiences*

To capitalize on the power of these ideas, **a new institution is likely needed to run a Peoria-inspired continuous campaign across progressive issues**: generating creative approaches, distributing them to a wide variety of audiences, looking for powerful moments of connection between particular stories and particular audiences, and scaling up opportunistically to drive real impact. By working those learnings into a constant loop of hypothesizing, experimentation, listening, and actual deployment, this organization would combine the rigor of research with the real-world impact of campaigning.

If interested in supporting or collaborating on future work of this kind, or incorporating the results of the Peoria Project in your own work, please reach out via peoriaproject@catalist.us

Acknowledgements

Peoria Project Partners

PEORIA PROJECT SUPPORTERS

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ABOUT CATALIST

For over a decade, Catalist has been the data utility powering the progressive community. Catalist compiles, enhances, stores, and dynamically updates data on over 240 million unique voting-age individuals across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Our diverse, experienced, and talented Analytics team, led by PhD data scientists and campaign strategists, has built dozens of the most widely recognized, requested, and used models in progressive campaigns across the country. Learn more at catalist.us

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