

DECEMBER 2018

# A TEACHING MOMENT FROM KANSAS



A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE MEMO AND VIDEO

BY THE TOPOS PARTNERSHIP

# INTRODUCTION

For decades political and media discourse has relentlessly reinforced the cultural common sense that lower taxes are always better—more money for individuals to spend and for private businesses to create jobs. Indeed, the signature legislative achievement of the outgoing US Congress is a vast tax cut marketed to the middle class in those familiar terms. Yet in the 2018 congressional campaigns, Republicans did not brag about these tax cuts and in fact barely mentioned them. Even more dramatically, in Kansas, a deeply conservative state that had been at the forefront of radical tax-cutting, voters elected a Democratic governor and rejected Republican Kris Kobach who campaigned on a resumption of the Brownback experiment.

It is tempting to assume that what happened in Kansas is simply a case of “the pendulum swinging back” to a more realistic view of taxes. Our research reveals a cultural dynamic that is far more interesting, and that holds critical lessons for advocates.

Topos has been at the forefront of developing strategies to change public understandings of tax and budget issues. In 2018, on behalf of Kansas Action for Children, we mapped Kansas’ cultural terrain around taxation to understand the effects of the “Kansas Experiment” on the cultural common sense—the widely shared, unquestioned ideas that shape issue understanding and behavior. We found a culture truly in flux, creating a teachable moment that advocates and candidates used in the midterm elections to challenge and even replace familiar anti-tax feelings with more constructive understandings.

While there is still much work to be done in Kansas, the paradigm shift that is beginning to occur offers lessons for the rest of the nation.

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## AFTERMATH OF THE KANSAS EXPERIMENT

In 2012 Kansas lawmakers pledged to stimulate the economy and create widespread prosperity by eliminating taxes such as those on business profits, and by collapsing the highest income tax brackets. They asserted that economic growth would make up for the lost revenue from tax cuts and prove once and for all the validity of “trickle-down economics.” Instead, the result was an immediate budget shortfall requiring spending cuts that hit infrastructure, school budgets, pensions and Medicaid. By 2018, many of the tax cuts have been partially restored by the legislature, but the state is still struggling to get its financial house in order.

The question we asked in our research was, “What impact did this revenue roller coaster have on people’s attitudes?”

In a series of ethnographic interviews conducted in Kansas in 2018, we found a wide spectrum of sophistication about taxation in general, and the Kansas situation in particular. Yet, whether they know very little or very much, whether they are politically conservative or more moderate, whether they are avid media consumers or not, each is grappling with Governor Brownback’s experiment in radical tax-cutting and doing it in ways that are shifting thinking in constructive directions:

**“WHAT IMPACT DID THIS REVENUE ROLLER COASTER HAVE ON PEOPLE’S ATTITUDES?”**

- The conservative ideologue sees that cutting business taxes does not lead inevitably to job-creating investments.
- The college student who just hates to pay taxes comes to recognize that cuts mean the high school isn’t going to have a marching band anymore.
- The town booster wonders if a bankrupted government can make necessary investments to revive a community.
- The retired mechanic realizes that the tax cuts didn’t change his lot for the better.

Across the board, people are re-thinking their aversion to taxation in light of the damage done to their state and their communities and the prosperity that failed to materialize. Kansas provided a teachable moment in 2018 for candidates to make the case for effective government and sensible revenue policy.

Kansans have re-evaluated their former knee-jerk support for tax cuts. At the same time, many are not fully adopting progressive ideas about the benefits of public revenues and investment, much less coming to see how raising taxes, done wisely, would lead to more broadly shared prosperity. The experience of the Kansas Experiment has given Kansans a push in the right direction, but for this momentary flux to translate into lasting culture change outside of electoral politics, advocates have to continue to connect the dots for people.

In sum, the shifting cultural terrain in Kansas provides lessons for advocates around the nation in how to make the case for adequate, sustainable revenue.

## WE ALWAYS NEED TO TIE TOGETHER BOTH SIDES OF THE BUDGET EQUATION — SPENDING AND REVENUE

# NEW PARADIGM: REVENUE LEADS TO THRIVING COMMUNITIES

In comparison to other states where Topos has conducted research, Kansans are more prone to genuinely reflect on the challenges of managing a state and its budget. People may not like taxes, but Kansans are now more able to recognize that they are necessary. They now understand much better that “this is how we collectively pay for the things our communities need to thrive.”

Topos research in Kansas and nationwide points to the opportunity to nurture a cultural shift in Americans’ thinking about taxes and spending that is less reflexively negative and which instead stresses that broadly shared prosperity, quality of life, and a thriving nation rely on effective government, so we all have a stake in ensuring sufficient, sustainable revenues to support government and achieve our shared goals. In short, public investments lead to the thriving communities we all need and deserve.

Our research from across the country finds a number of strategies that consistently work to instill and reinforce this new common sense:

- Focus on the common good: Stress that public investments should benefit us all, rather than the few. “Thriving communities” is a common-sense phrase that triggers the essential idea.
- Always connect the dots to what taxes pay for: Frame taxes as the means to an end—which means emphasizing what the taxes provide. In practical terms this means starting the conversation with a description of what we mean by thriving communities.
- Stress foundational public systems: Remind people that the “foundations” of strong communities, of our prosperity and so forth, are schools, infrastructure, health systems, etc. Without investment in those foundations, communities falter.
- Emphasize that we make choices: For example, we can spend either on tax breaks or on things that promote the common good; we can lower the top tax bracket, or advance solutions that allow every community to reach its potential.
- Highlight achievements and goals: Offer a picture of what we aspire to and what we are achieving, including what needs to be done for communities that have been left behind, rather than focusing on problems and shortfalls that reinforce skepticism about the public sector’s ability to solve problems.
- Always present tax cuts as a tradeoff: The one-sided view that “lower taxes lead to more money in your pocket” has to be replaced with “lower taxes damage our communities’ ability to thrive.”

In a conservative state like Kansas with an electorate susceptible to the allure of tax cuts, this last point represents an important first step for many individuals. It encourages them to think about taxes and budgets in “practical problem-solving” mode, rather than as taxpayers whose only motivation is to keep their personal tax bill as low as possible.

Every state presents its own unique set of challenges and opportunities, but the core strategic direction is that we always need to tie together both sides of the budget equation—spending and revenue—into compelling common sense that confidently makes the case that more revenue leads to better quality of life and shared prosperity.

These and other ideas are laid out in more detail in Topos’ [THREE-PART TAXLANDIA REPORT](#).

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## CONCLUSION

Advocates everywhere need to be aggressively and creatively using this moment to make a permanent shift in the American cultural common sense around taxes. While the core story should be consistent, state culture may require additional elements to really connect to people's concerns.

Topos is working with advocates to implement these strategies and adapt them for different state situations and cultures. For example, in Maine we are working with advocates to tie the state's established culture of local civic responsibility to a bigger-picture understanding of how to revitalize the state through public investment. In Washington, state advocates are challenging citizens to reform the regressive "upside-down" tax system and ensure the wealthy contribute more so the state has revenue to accomplish Washingtonians' goals.



### ABOUT TOPOS

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 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. This exploratory project deployed multiple Topos methodologies, including cognitive elicitations, media analysis, and ethnography.