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From whispers to roars: The conversation movement

By Michael Perry and Kathleen Perry

The easy story to tell in politics today is that of a divided and disconnected public: red versus blue, urban versus rural, men versus women. It is easy to feel discouraged in an environment dominated by divisiveness. But that is not the whole picture.

Amidst the rhetoric of a divided public has emerged a movement of people driven by a need to connect, to understand and to be reassured that they are not alone. And the message to grantmakers is clear: People care about issues like gender and racial equity, and they think more needs to be done; the time is now for funders to tap into this movement.

THE BIRTH OF A “CONVERSATION MOVEMENT”

Our studies in the past year and a half have shown that people are increasingly driven by a desire to connect and engage with one another. They are talking – more than ever – about public issues with family, friends, strangers and anyone who will listen.

And they are connecting. We see this in surveys¹ with majorities – across age, gender and party affiliation – reporting discussions with friends or families in the past year about issues like women’s equality. We see this in focus groups,² with participants continuing conversations amongst themselves long after the groups are over.

As researchers, we have heard whispers of a movement for years, where focus group participants increasingly mention issues like “women’s rights”

and “racial inequality” as top concerns in their lives. Those whispers turned to roars after the 2016 election.

Since then, we are seeing people take action – big and small – in a way they were not doing before. More are informal political action, primarily involving conversations.

More people seem to be talking to each other, paying attention to news and speaking out in ways they would not have before. Some are joining Facebook groups with like-minded individuals, while others are surprising themselves by raising public issues in book club meetings, Bible studies, family reunions and other settings, where “politics” have traditionally been avoided.

Conversations that did not used to be political are becoming more nuanced and more informed. While many tell us they are taking traditional political actions like donating to causes and supporting candidates, many others seem to be bypassing the traditional institutions for democratic engagement. They seem to be taking action into their own hands and engaging directly with one another. This is organic action, often leaderless, usually without clear end goals, but driven by strong emotions and the desire to speak out and connect.

This “conversation movement” we see bubbling up in our focus groups and surveys may be creating a space for people to unite with others like them. We see this in the Women’s March and the March for Our Lives and the organic ways these evolved. But we also see this in the white supremacists’ rally in

Charlottesville and in more overt expressions of bigotry and intolerance.

Voices have been given a platform and a new medium for discourse, and people are listening more than they ever were.

TOP ISSUES: GENDER EQUALITY AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Two areas where we are seeing this informal engagement the most are in gender equality and sexual harassment. These are issues we have been digging into lately and they offer a window into this emerging activism.

Our polling suggests that there has been a shift on these issues since the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape and the election of Donald Trump. Here are some highlights from our surveys:³

- A solid majority of voters (69 percent) now thinks the country would be better off with more women in office – up 17 points since December 2016 (52 percent).

- Sexism is a “big” problem in our society, say 44 percent of voters – up 14 points from late 2016 (30 percent).
- Seven in 10 voters (73 percent) say the sexual harassment and assault stories have made them think more about sexism in our society. This is in addition to 40 percent of voters who said last year that the 2016 election made them think more about sexism in society.
- Many men are reflecting. Forty-three percent of male voters say the recent stories about harassment and assault have made them wonder about their own interactions with women in the past. About half of men (47 percent) do not think any of their actions in the past might have been interpreted as sexually inappropriate or harassment. The rest (53 percent) are unsure or think someone might have interpreted their actions as such.

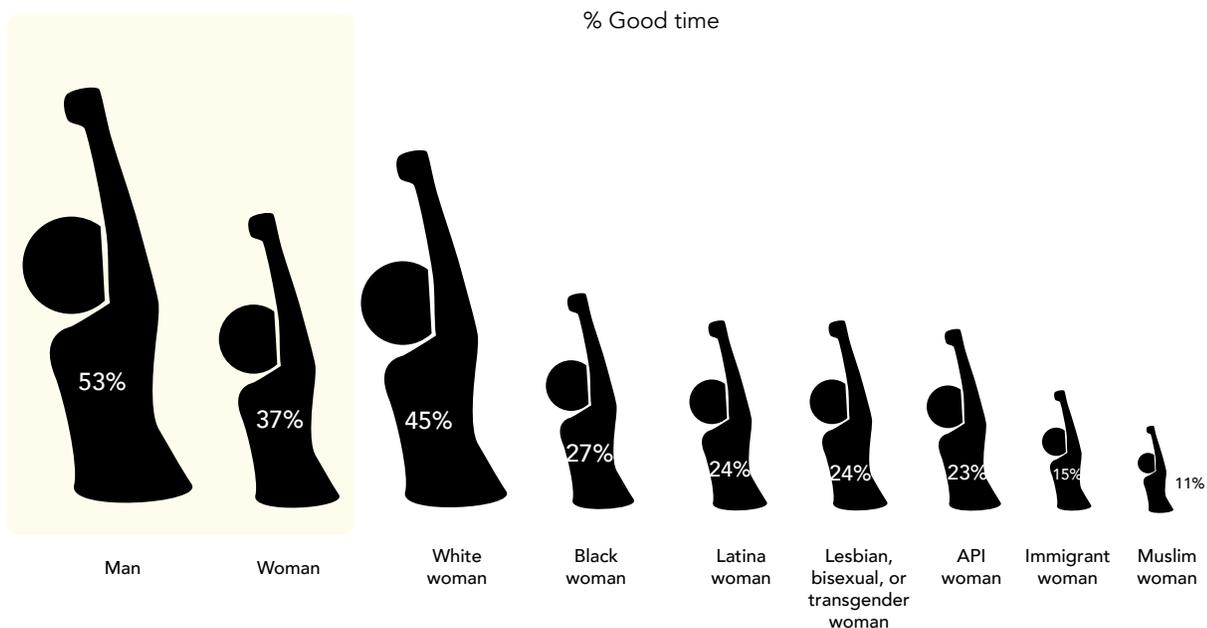
SILENCE NO MORE

Perhaps the most important shift is that people are talking more about these issues. Seventy-two percent of voters say they have spoken with a friend or family member about issues related to gender equality in the past year – a major increase from December 2016 (49 percent).

News stories and celebrities talking about sexual harassment are also causing new conversations and actions. About 79 percent of voters say they are following these stories, and two-thirds of men (66 percent) have talked to a woman about these stories (68 percent of women have talked to a man as a result of these news stories). This all adds up to a lot of new kinds of conversations on topics that are traditionally not part of public – or even private – conversations.

This is what we saw in recent focus groups on the #MeToo movement that appeared in a VOX article.⁴ In focus

IS IT A GOOD TIME OR BAD TIME TO BE A _____ IN AMERICA?



From “The State of the Union on Gender Equality, Sexism and Women’s Rights,” which highlights results from a national survey conducted by PerryUndem on January 17, 2017.

groups with women of different generations, we heard, “You didn’t used to talk about it. You just let it happen.” What is different now?

We think the kind of space created in the year and a half since the 2016 election provided a platform for people to come forward and have a voice. The need to connect, to ask “Am I crazy? Did this happen to you?” and have people respond, “You are not crazy; it happened to me, too” is central to this movement. There is a desire to push back against the way things always were and to no longer be silent.

SEEING THE CONNECTIONS

Another trend emerging in our studies is the “connecting of the dots,” which happens when people have the space to talk about issues. This seems to be a critical step towards seeing the larger picture and what is at stake. We are noticing that, as people engage around issues like women’s equality and racial

justice, they do not approach these issues in isolation but instead connect the dots between them all. A broader dialogue about freedom, equality and rights emerges.

In our survey on gender equality, sexism and women’s rights,⁵ eight in 10 say that more work needs to be done to achieve full equality for women in work, life and politics, and three in four say that sexism is a big or somewhat big problem in our society.

Majorities recognize the impact of access to health care, racism, violence against women and opportunities in the workplace on women’s rights and equality.

In our survey of Black adults on the intersections of politics, race and public policy,⁶ most see inequities at the core of systems in our society – two-thirds say they think systems in our society are set up to give white people more opportunities than Black people. Majorities also think racism affects

the Black community’s ability to have equal opportunities in the workplace, feel safe in their neighborhoods, have access to higher education and access quality, affordable health care.

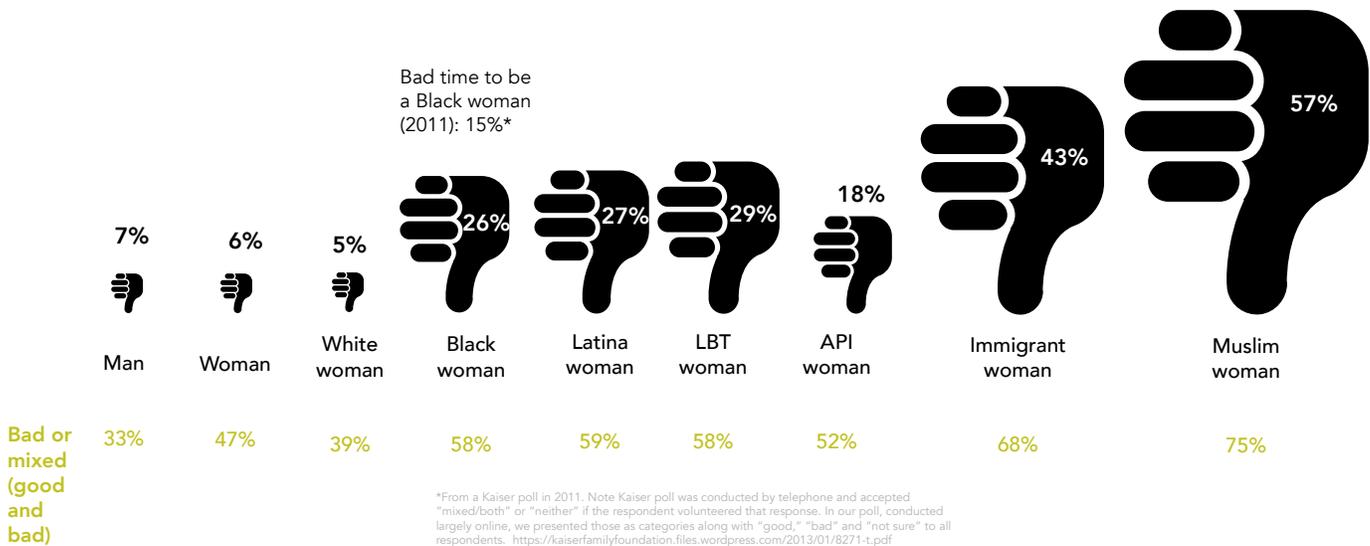
WHAT’S AHEAD

We do not see any fatigue in this conversation momentum. The participation in and sustained engagement around March for Our Lives shows that the desire to speak out, connect and push for change is still strong. This movement is continuing to manifest in less visible ways, too, as people continue to talk and take organic actions in their own lives.

So what are some key takeaways for funders that care about the same issues that people think are important, too?

1. Support ongoing efforts to continue to learn what is driving this new political landscape (other than the desire to connect) and how it will be *(continued on page 12)*

% Bad time to be a _____ in America



From “The State of the Union on Gender Equality, Sexism and Women’s Rights,” which highlights results from a national survey conducted by PerryUndem on January 17, 2017.

Early in the new administration, GCIR experimented with crafting a joint statement that expressed a clear position on immigrant and refugee-related concerns. By using their voice as a PSO, GCIR provided an umbrella for over 200 foundations to sign on to this public statement – two-thirds of which were not members of GCIR itself.

LEVERAGING PSOS AND FUNDER COLLABORATIVES FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

In responding to a rapidly changing political environment, the philanthropic sector has demonstrated flexibility, nimbleness and a willingness to collaborate that can serve as a model of creative adaptation for the field going forward. Critical to the responsiveness of the sector during this time has been the existence of a sometimes under-

appreciated and underfunded array of PSOs and funder collaboratives – backbone entities for philanthropy always at the ready to support funder learning, networking and grantmaking.

“There’s been a question among some funders about whether there are too many PSOs,” remarked Cambell. “But PSOs really help funders deepen their understanding and investment, which necessitates there being multiple organizations and focus areas.”

“People feel like something has to change if we can find ourselves where we are now,” concluded Chun. “Program officers and others at all levels are feeling the imperative that everyone needs to rally around a new way of doing things and are motivated to think collectively about what this might look like.”

PSOs and funder collaboratives are

the spaces in which this collective thinking has already begun to happen. ■

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Notes

1. Harder+Co Community Research and Edge Research, *Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy: A Field Scan of How Foundations Use and Access Knowledge*, Prepared for the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, February 2017, available at <https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hewlett-Field-Scan-Report.pdf>.

From whispers to roars

(continued from page 5)

- sustained, and to understand how information access and the constant bombardment from different news sources will affect these trends.
2. When sponsoring research, include methods that allow people to talk with each other and weigh different opinions. This is what is happening organically in people’s life and could be a better way to measure opinions than using quantitative methods (e.g., surveys) alone.
3. Tap into the momentum from the “conversation movement” by supporting targeted civic engagement as part of an overall strategy.
4. Foster projects that help people “connect the dots” so that they see the larger issues beneath the specific issue you care about. This allows for new solutions and ideas.

People are voicing their opinions, connecting with others and taking action. Grantmakers interested in making an impact in the communities they serve ought to seize the opportunity and do the same. ■

Michael Perry is co-founder, and Kathleen Perry is senior analyst at PerryUndem, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm.

Notes

1. Read PerryUndem’s “What a difference a year makes” (December 6, 2017) for results of their comprehensive study on voters’ attitudes toward sexism, gender equality and the 2016 presidential election on [https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-](https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-And-Equality-compressed)

- AndEquality-compressed.
2. Anna North, “You just accepted it: why older women kept silent about sexual harassment – and younger ones are speaking out,” *Vox*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/17116086/me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-workplace-millennials>.
3. PerryUndem, op cit.
4. Anna North, “Why women are worried about #MeToo,” *Vox*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/5/17157240/me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-aziz-ansari-accusation>.
5. See <https://www.scribd.com/document/336804316/PerryUndem-Gender-Equality-Report>.
6. See <https://www.scribd.com/document/367291049/PerryUndem-Research-Communication-Black-American-Survey-Report>.