



Public Works:

The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

Building Support for Government

Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector is dedicated to building a new appreciation among Americans for the foundational role of our public systems and structures. In 2004, Public Works began investigating public attitudes toward government and searching for new ways to engage Americans in support of its essential roles and purposes.

Our society and quality of life rest on the health and capacity of our public sector. A new century of opportunities and challenges demands that we reengage our fellow citizens in support of a government dedicated to the common good, empowered to plan for our future, with the capacity to succeed in its many and varied functions. Achieving these goals requires a public that comprehends the unique mission and purpose of government, understands the fundamental roles of its many systems and structures, and sees itself as an empowered and responsible citizenry.

Public Works is working to broaden and deepen support for the public sector by:

- Working with leaders across the country to build broad support for the role and mission of the public sector;
- Commissioning research that has resulted in specific recommendations to counteract the cynicism Americans have about government. This research has also formed the basis of concrete and proven strategies for helping people adopt a more aspirational attitude toward the public sector and a more constructive perspective on government activities and policies;
- Providing trainings, consultations, and ongoing educational series to nonprofit and public sector employees, elected officials, and community leaders to assist them in communicating more effectively about public issues and government's roles; and
- Building a constituency of supporters for the public sector—who in small ways and large—are working to revitalize Americans' perception of citizenship and of a public sector dedicated to addressing the fundamental opportunities and challenges of our nation.

Findings from our Talking about Government Research

Public Works began this far-reaching effort with groundbreaking analysis and thorough, multifaceted research that examined Americans' attitudes toward the public sector. This research, which was originally conducted in 2004–2005 by the FrameWorks Institute and re-tested in 2008–2009 by the Topos Partnership, was designed to uncover the dominant frames or stereotypes to which Americans default when they think about government and how those frames affect public choices. Ultimately, we wanted to know how to best reframe the concept of government in order to evoke a different way of thinking, one that advances collective understanding of – and support for – public sector solutions to society's challenges.

The research revealed both good news and significant challenges. Negative views of government are indeed dominant. While the roots of this cynicism run deep, the good news is that these views are not as entrenched as many believe. The public is open to—in fact hungry for—a more mission-driven, "common good" sense of the public sector and its role. The research reveals that focusing on enduring public values, talking about the systems and structures of government, and evoking “civic” thinking are productive and powerful ways to move Americans toward this more receptive and supportive view of government's role in society.

The Roots of Cynicism: How Americans Think about Government

Our research into how Americans think about government shows that Americans see government and their relationship to it in narrow and distorted ways. In particular, Americans see government as “just politics” or as a “blurry bureaucracy,” but fail to see the diversity of systems and structures that are the actual workings of government. Also missing from public understanding is a ready sense of the mission and purpose of government. And, finally, the research also illuminated two coherent, but opposing, mindsets about how Americans view themselves in relationship to government: as a consumer or as a citizen.

Two Dominant Images of Government: “Just Politics” or a Bumbling Bureaucracy

When thinking about government, the tendency for most Americans is to toggle back and forth between two different and distinct images of government. The first is an image of government as a partisan and political boxing match; the second is one of government as a bumbling bureaucracy.



When people are thinking of government as “just politics,” they apply their stereotypical way of thinking about elected leaders—as corrupt, partisan and prone to in-fighting—to the whole of government. These "top of mind" negative associations color their overall view of government. This view of government also leads people to act as passive spectators – not participants – in public life. They can't see government as “us” – as the means for achieving our common goals and aspirations.

The other dominant image in the American mind is of government as a large and undifferentiated bureaucracy; a hard to grasp monolith. From this viewpoint, Americans have a difficult time “seeing” what government does every day, all around them. They don't readily see it as an active network of agencies with employees carrying out the important daily functions of government, and they have a difficult time differentiating its inherently public tasks. In this mindset, they exaggerate waste, bloat and inefficiency and are confused over where tax money goes, and what it supports.

An Overarching Challenge: Consumer vs. Citizen View

Our research also revealed two coherent, but opposing, mindsets toward government:

- a **Consumerist** view that substitutes an individualist mindset in the place of collective responsibility; and
- a **Citizen** view which aligns with notions of the common good and recognizes the shared public purposes of government.



Members of the American public easily default to a consumer stance. When they adopt this stance toward government, they bring into civic thinking many of the habits of consumerist thinking, from its focus on getting the most for one's money to small picture thinking about available products and point-of-purchase decisions. They see government as a vending machine from which they get services. Promoting a long-term reappraisal of government's role requires an understanding of the citizen and

consumer perspectives as distinct and competing patterns of thinking that lead in markedly different directions. Strategies to change public views of the role of government in society will have to be cognizant of these powerful drivers of perception.

Missing Ingredients in Public Understanding

Missing from these dominant understandings of government are three key ideas that are necessary to rebuild a more robust understanding and appreciation of government.

1. **Mission and Purpose:** Our research revealed that public discourse about government is missing a clear articulation of the unique mission of government, of why it exists and what differentiates it.
2. **Systems and Structures of Government:** When people are caught in an image of government as a large and wasteful bureaucracy, it is difficult to grasp the many concrete and essential activities of government. The systems and structures that make up our government – from our court systems and the post office to the services that support families – are obscured.
3. **Civic Thinking:** The dominance of a “consumerist” mindset towards government has undermined the kind of “civic-thinking” that we need to underpin an appreciation of the role we all have in a democracy. It is civic thinking that promotes the important perception that government is “us.”



The dominant images of government as “just politics,” as a bloated bureaucracy, and as a vending machine bring with them strong stereotypes that cloud public understanding of government. With these images in mind, government seems corrupt, inefficient, ineffective and unable to do anything, and it seems as if we have no responsibility or role.

Overcoming the Cynicism: Reframing the Public Discourse about Government

Despite the stereotypes that dominate the American mind, our research revealed that there are reasons for optimism. We found in our research – and now in our field work – that when people are reminded of the public goals of government and given vivid and concrete images of the public structures necessary to achieve those goals, they can engage in questions about government in a more reasonable, pragmatic and problem-solving manner. This way of thinking about government is, however, so rarely evoked in Americans' daily lives that it remains vague or hopelessly idealistic for many.

Our research yields important lessons about the new stories that we need to tell to create more fertile terrain for our conversations about government. These clues give guidance on how to fill-in those missing ingredients described above:

1. **Mission and Purpose**
2. **Systems and Structures**
3. **Civic-Thinking**



Mission and Purpose. To overcome Americans' lack of understanding of the unique mission of government, we recommend talking about government's embodiment of broadly shared values that we all hold dear. In particular, we recommend:

- *Speaking directly about the unique mission of government* to protect and promote the common good.
- *Articulating the public values and purposes* of the particular public services, programs and systems that we support.
- *Highlighting the roles of government that the public can remember and does value such as planning for a prosperous and healthy future for all, stewardship of our resources, and the building and preservation of community.* Talking about these concepts allows you to remind people of the purposes of government and our common responsibility to leave to our children a country that can live up to those values. People want to improve our country "on their watch" and make sure it is there for the next generation.
- *Reinforcing the notion of interdependence and shared fate, in the form of the common good and our quality of life, which gives rise to government in the first place.* This concept allows you to promote citizen thinking, advance notions of mutual responsibility, and discuss why government is a necessary agent in the functioning of society and a tool for achieving better quality of life for all.
- *Emphasizing its mission as distinct from, but not antithetical to, business.* It is important to illustrate how we all benefit when business and government work together as partners, but that it is government's unique role to protect and preserve our common good and public interest.

Systems and Structures: Government is only dimly understood by most Americans. When thinking of government as distant bureaucracy, it's difficult for people to remember the extent and diversity of its day-to-day work. To bring into focus the actual activities of government, we recommend:

- *Emphasizing the systems and structures of government.* In particular, we recommend describing government as the "public structures" that are the foundation of our society and fundamental to our prosperity, stability, opportunity and a strong middle class. Using this descriptive construct triggers an appreciation of the role our public systems play and the ongoing need to create and maintain the public structures that are essential to our quality of life.
- *Offering a persona for government* more in keeping with democratic ideals: responsible manager, watchdog, long-term planner, the people's voice, etc. From clean water and

safe food, to financial regulations and public health programs, government acts everyday in ways that protect and empower us all. The idea is to emphasize the various roles of government that people do recognize and value.

“Civic-Thinking:” To elevate a citizen stance toward government and combat the pitfalls of consumerist expectations of government, we recommend:

- *Reinforcing notions of interdependence* and how our shared quality of life and prosperity depend on how we work together and support each other;
- *Using “ownership language”* to consciously refer to government using collective pronouns that emphasize collective ownership and responsibility of “our” government;
- *Avoiding portraying government as a laundry list of services* that individuals “buy” with their tax dollars; focusing instead on the shared community benefits from the public services, systems and structures we build and maintain; and
- *Emphasizing our shared responsibility* to maintain the public things we depend on for our quality of life.

We believe that consciously and deliberately utilizing these thematic elements can help to broaden and improve public discourse about government.

Conclusion

Each and every day our lives are enriched, supported and protected by the public structures that create and maintain our quality of life in America. These structures – from laws to highways to myriad public services – are the manifestation of a government of, by and for the people. However, talking about government in American society today is a difficult proposition. Public perceptions of government's role in our lives and in our society are, at best, indifferent and confused. At worst, they are downright hostile. Whether government is invisible or seen as a negative or incompetent force, these prevailing images make it difficult to suggest solutions to current societal challenges that require a governmental role.

The findings from our research and fieldwork offer concrete and compelling directions for rehabilitating public attitudes toward government and what it does. As mentioned above, the good news we have uncovered is that a more positive image of government is retrievable; the public is open to – in fact hungry for – a more mission-driven, “common good” sense of the public sector and its role. It is also encouraging that the public does indeed recognize and support many of the unique responsibilities and roles of government.

But, this awakening of more supportive attitudes will not happen on its own. The dominant negative stereotypes of government pervade our public discourse and are constantly reinforced by our culture and our media. To begin to change current discourse and current attitudes will take deliberate and persistent efforts to communicate about government and public programs differently.. Beyond finding ways to better communicate about government, our effort must identify and actively engage people from all sectors of society in reclaiming the balance between “public” and “private” purposes, between individual and collective responsibilities. Such a movement may also make possible a renaissance in the public sector, spurring new and innovative uses of public resources and rehabilitating government’s fundamental mission and the public good for which it stands.



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