



# Without a Mission:

An Analysis of Qualitative Research  
Exploring Perceptions of Government

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Dēmos

A NETWORK FOR IDEAS & ACTION

## About

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This report presents the findings from a series of focus groups conducted for the *How to Talk about Government* project. This project is a collaboration of Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector and the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG). Together, Dēmos and CEG have partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to research Americans' perceptions of government and to help identify effective strategies for communicating the important role of the public sector in American society. The project's mission is to help renew a shared sense of government as a vital instrument for achieving common goals.

*How to Talk about Government* uses a new approach to understanding public opinion—strategic frame analysis—a research process developed by the FrameWorks Institute that analyzes existing issue "frames" (or deeply held worldviews and assumptions) and recommends effective "reframes" to challenge and supplant damaging stereotypes ([www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)). Our goal is to use this analytical process to develop useful communication tools to share with organizations that believe American society suffers when public perceptions of government are excessively suspicious and constrained.

The title of this report, *Without a Mission*, reflects a central finding from the focus groups: people have largely forgotten the mission and values inherent in good government. We need to bring into public discourse the reasons why government exists and what it stands for, otherwise, the public believes that government is without a mission. The focus groups demonstrated that once people are reminded that government exists to act in the best interest of the common good, improve quality of life, preserve public health, and so on, people become more supportive of government and are more willing to be engaged in making government work well for everyone.”

For more about Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector and its current activities and research products see [www.demos.org](http://www.demos.org).

## **Dēmos: a Network for Ideas and Action**

Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action is a national, public policy research and advocacy organization based in New York City. Founded in 1999, Dēmos is committed to a long-term effort to create an American democracy that is robust and inclusive, with high levels of electoral participation and civic engagement, and an economy where prosperity and opportunity are broadly shared and disparity is reduced. Through research, advocacy, and innovative communications strategies, we develop and give voice to new thinking and analysis about American society. Our three main programs – Democracy, Economic Opportunity, and State Governance for the Future – work to catalyze and strengthen organizations, advocacy networks, policymakers, and opinion leaders by developing thought-provoking research, analysis, and policy ideas, and promoting these ideas in the public debate. We have developed a highly collaborative approach to our work and made a commitment to building a network of grassroots organizing and advocacy efforts, providing materials and research to network members, actively engaging with state-specific campaigns, and facilitating opportunities for members to share experiences, learn best practices, and highlight and support each other’s work. Dēmos combines research with advocacy—melding the commitment to ideas of a think tank with the organizing strategies of an advocacy group.

## **Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector**

*Public Works* is a program of Dēmos. The mission of this program is to revitalize our country’s tradition of pursuing public goods and to rehabilitate the role of government in achieving public purposes. In establishing this program Dēmos sought to counter the corrosive effects of organized efforts to discredit, dismantle, and shrink the role and capacity of government. Public Works is undertaking a deliberate campaign, grounded in the states, to build a vision of governance for the contemporary context that can restore respect for public service, trust in government’s protective capacities, and belief in the efficacy of government intervention on behalf of the public good. Achieving this vision will be a long-term process, the success of which will require sustained engagement with national and state leaders in advocacy, policy, academics, research, philanthropy, politics, labor and business. Beyond finding ways to better communicate about the critical roles of government, this effort must identify and actively engage people from all sectors of our society in reclaiming the moral high ground of public versus private purposes. We hope to resurrect the “corporate citizen,” reengage those whose religious beliefs include a yearning for social justice, and reawaken the faith of idealists of all kinds in the ability of the public sector to provide a necessary balance to the pursuit of private gain. A movement of this kind can reclaim our heritage of using common resources to pursue noble and essential public goals, whether conquering space, vanquishing a fascist foe, overcoming the hardships of economic depression or protecting the health and safety of our people.

## **Council for Excellence in Government**

The Council for Excellence in Government is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve the performance of government at all levels and increase citizen trust and participation in government and democracy. To meet these objectives, the Council has four strategic priorities: (1) attract and develop talented people for public service (2) encourage innovation and result-oriented performance in government (3) promote electronic government and technology as a means for improving performance and connecting people to government, and (4) increase citizen participation and trust in government and the democracy.

## **FrameWorks**

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank known for its development of “strategic frame analysis,” which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. The Institute is involved in empirical studies of American’s attitudes to the environment and global warming (with funding from the Turner Foundation), to foreign policy (Rockefeller Brothers Fund), to rural America (W.K. Kellogg Foundation), to healthcare reform in a number of states (The California Endowment and Endowment for Health/NH) and to early childhood development (David and Lucile Packard and A.L. Mailman Foundations). In addition to its innovative methods and research, FrameWorks is known for its distinctive application materials, from toolkits to narrated CD-ROMs and online workshops.

## **About the Author**

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**Meg Bostrom**, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her rich and varied experiences as communicator, public opinion analyst, advertising agency executive, and political consultant.

Meg started her career as a political pollster: Senior Analyst at Greenberg Lake, Vice President at Mellman Lazarus Lake. In both of these capacities, Bostrom consulted for a variety of nonprofit groups, political candidates, and foundations. Desiring a better understanding of how communications is developed and implemented, Bostrom joined Trahan, Burden and Charles, an advertising and communications agency headquartered in Maryland. As Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning, she was responsible for determining communications strategy for a variety of national and international corporations.

Bostrom launched Public Knowledge in 1998 to bring her personal passion for social issues to bear on specific communications challenges. Public Knowledge works closely with the FrameWorks Institute, which has as its mission advancing the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for addressing social problems.

## Strategic Overview

For most Americans, the word "government" conjures images of wasteful bureaucracy, burdensome taxes and regulations, corruption and special interest politics. Top-of-mind negative impressions are widespread, though Americans differ in the intensity with which they share these impressions.

For decades, advocates have recognized that these obstacles exist, and have sought to mitigate negative associations by communicating various actions by government, such as: reminding people of the broad scope of services that benefit the public, trying to promote examples of government effectiveness and efficiency, advancing reforms to address corruption and special interest influence, and so on. Strategic Frame Analysis, based on the cognitive and social sciences, instructs that these approaches are likely to be ineffective, because factual information alone cannot disabuse a person of his or her existing perceptions. For example, a person will not come to believe that government is honest simply because they hear that anti-corruption legislation is in place.

To change public perceptions of government, it is necessary to change the lens, or frame, through which people see government. The FrameWorks Institute defines framing as referring to "the way a story is told -- its selective use of particular symbols, metaphors, and messengers, for example – and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world" (Bales and Gilliam, 2002). Research on how people think demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world, and that new information provides cues to help people determine how to connect the new information to what they already know. This lens on the issue then quickly defines issue understanding, priority, consequences, solutions and responsibility for fixing the problem. This is framing.<sup>1</sup>

An effective reframing of government requires elevating the visibility of the *mission and values* of government, rather than the *actions* of government. The mission and values inherent in good government are missing from civic discourse, but it is these frame elements that can reshape public opinion and reengage citizens with government. This research suggests a set of complementary values and objectives to reframe government. The values that will build support for government are community, future, stewardship and practical management. The mission or objectives for government that people find compelling include working on behalf of the common good, improving quality of life, and preserving public health. People are not confident the government currently operates with these objectives or values in mind, but they agree on their importance.

Additional obstacles need to be addressed to effectively reframe government. Individual responsibility is a fundamental American ethic, but for people to engage with government, a sense of collective responsibility needs to be invigorated. Communicating

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<sup>1</sup> Frames incorporate a number of communications elements including values, messengers, metaphors, visuals, numbers, context, and so on. For more information on framing and reframing, see the FrameWorks Institute web site at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

collective responsibility is a task that needs careful construction. A misstep will trigger an image of “nanny government” or individuals who are unwilling to take responsibility. Collective responsibility is communicated through images of citizens, government, and business working together to improve quality of life.

Furthermore, the public's assumption that government and business are in opposition needs to be confronted. First, advocates should avoid pitting government against business and, instead, center attention on government’s role in addressing rogue businesses that have broken the rules. In addition, communicators should work to include business people as spokespersons on behalf of government action, which causes people to reconsider their assumption that government is anti-business. Ideally, the public should begin to view government as a supporter of a healthy economy, which includes restricting the poisonous actions of rogue businesses.

Language is a critically important component of effective framing. As noted, the word "government" triggers a complete way of thinking that disconnects people from government. It is not practical to eliminate "government" from civic discourse. Nor would inserting a new label create new public understanding if existing public discourse remains unchanged. However, carefully chosen words can help to illuminate the mission and values associated with government. Substituting "public sector" or "community" for "government" early in communications will allow people to maintain an open mind to consider the mission and values of the public sector rather than immediately reject new information as "government" causes them to do. In addition, “common good” conveys “helping people” and “for the benefit of all,” but it has not become politicized in the way that “public interest” has. Finally, instead of referring to Americans as "the public," "consumers," or "voters," communicators should choose words that connect people with a broader collective, such as "citizens," "community," or "townspeople."

Finally, language alone cannot reconnect people to government. To truly create the sense that "government is us," people need direct experiences that, over time, are able to reinforce collective responsibility. Determining the range of experiences that will engage people is a task for further research.

## Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to explore a series of hypothetical reframes intended to engage the public with government. Specifically, the research was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- How can we strengthen citizenship<sup>2</sup>?
- How can we re-connect people to government?

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this document the words “citizen” and “citizenship” are used to suggest an active, engaged relationship with government. It is not intended to limit this relationship to those who are legally U.S. citizens.

- What persona can government adopt (watchdog, manager, consensus builder, voice of the people, etc.)?
- What are the barriers to people's support for an active role for government?
- What frames advance support and engagement?
- How do we get from where we are to where we need to be?

To explore answers to these questions, 12 focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens across the country (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) Focus groups were divided by party identification, but mixed on all other demographic criteria (gender, age, education, and race). The groups were conducted in the following order:

- Philadelphia, PA (July 21, 2004)
  - Democrats
  - Independents
- Tampa, FL (July 22, 2004)
  - Republicans
  - Independents
- San Francisco, CA (October 19, 2004)
  - Independents
- Los Angeles, CA (October 20, 2004)
  - Independents
- Manchester, NH (December 1, 2004)
  - Democrats
  - Republicans
- Milwaukee, WI (February 9, 2005)
  - Democrats
  - Republicans
- Portland, OR (February 23, 2005)
  - Democrats
  - Republicans

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location, party identification and gender.

## **Section I: Obstacles and Opportunities in Public Perception**

Since the main objective of this phase of research was to understand how different communications approaches influence public perceptions of government, focus group participants were exposed to a series of fictional news articles, each incorporating different framing approaches. In reviewing the test articles, several consistent themes about government emerged in the focus group discussions that allow us to better understand why certain communications approaches are more effective than others. This section reviews these themes and offers recommendations for future communications.

The second section of this report provides a step-by-step discussion of the articles tested at each stage of the focus group research.

### **Consistent Themes**

#### **Government is necessary and it is how we think about operating communities.**

Focus group participants recognized that government is a necessary part of organized society. When asked for the kinds of decisions they would make if they were founding a new colony, focus group participants immediately recommended instituting a governmental structure with elected officials, laws, and a constitution. They were convinced of the necessity for government, but were highly critical of its performance.

#### **Government is “the Other” – a distant entity that has little to do with one’s own life.**

Schoolchildren learn that the United States Government is “of, by, and for the people,” but, as adults, Americans feel little relationship to government. Focus group participants tended to view government as a bureaucracy that has little to do with one’s own life or even saw it as an impediment to an individual’s progress. “It’s not ‘we are the government.’ It is the government and us,” remarked an Independent woman from Florida. “I see it as intruding, invading our way of life...for the most part government is looking, in my opinion, to take from me,” stated a Republican man from New Hampshire.

#### **The public’s top-of-mind associations with the word “government” are immediately negative. Problematically, once these negative perceptions are activated, it is extremely difficult for the public to incorporate new perceptions of government.**

Public opinion research consistently finds that Americans express strongly negative views of the government as being wasteful, bureaucratic, corrupt, etc. When asked for the first words that come to mind when they hear “government,” focus group participants responded primarily with negative remarks: “Big Brother,” “cheaters,” “legislative,” “protection,” “bureaucracy,” “too controlled,” “necessary structure,” “big,” and “powerful.” Focus group participants responded to federal, state, and local government with similarly negative perceptions, though they were particularly vehement about the federal government: “big,” “inefficient,” “bureaucracy,” “corrupt,” “controlling,” “taxes,” “confused,” “FBI,” “security,” “crooked,” and “Washington DC.”

Respondents also mentioned associations with electoral politics as they considered government: “politics,” “Democrat,” and “Republican.” Once attention was brought to elected leadership, the conversation quickly shifted to partisanship, special interests, and dissatisfaction with elected leaders. “It’s not the people. It’s the money. Absolute money corrupts absolutely,” an Independent man from Florida complained. With this political image of government in mind, many focus group participants asserted that they have little ability to influence government, because the public’s voice matters only during an election. Once a vote is cast, the public has no influence until the next election, they noted. Furthermore, since so many Americans choose not to vote, the will of the majority is even further diluted. Participants were so cynical about elected leadership and the political process, that they found it hard to believe that any reform would make a difference. The quality of elected leadership is based upon the individuals elected, they

asserted. The solution to better government, then, is electing better individuals to public office.

In addition to these negative stereotypes of government, this research suggests another troubling perception of government – that it is a reliable and widely-shared joke. In every focus group, when asked for the first words that come to mind when they think of government, focus group participants laughed and groaned. Moreover, they did so with impunity. No one worried that anyone would differ in their opinion, let alone be offended. Once this shared perception of government as laughing-stock is activated, it is far more difficult to incite the group to think about new perceptions of government.

Several other words and phrases tested in the focus groups did not trigger these harshly negative stereotypes. However, most of the substitute words and phrases that were tested did not convey the range of roles and responsibilities that government entails. Most of the substitute phrases were limited in scope:

- "Public institution" brought to mind images of buildings that serve the public even if they are not operated by government, such as schools, libraries, banks, hospitals, etc.
- "Public works" reminded focus group participants of government public works departments that maintain communities, such as trash disposal operations, electric or water utilities, or road maintenance.
- "Civil servants" triggered an image of specific government employees, such as police officers or postal workers, while "Civil Service" caused people to think about a civil service test or city government.
- "Public service" is a reference that is undoubtedly influenced by the context in which it appears, because when it stands alone, it conveys different meaning to different people. Focus group respondents' initial impressions with this phrase included "public service announcement," "volunteering," "elected official," "police and fire," "social worker," "politician," "military," "obligation," "nurse," and so on.
- "United States of America" triggered a range of patriotic references such as "a good place to be," "freedom," "land of the free," "democracy," "president," "country," and "flag."
- Finally, "Public Sector" is the one reference that demonstrated some ability to displace negative associations with government and allow people to consider new information. This insight is explored in more detail below.

Communicators can include these references where appropriate to avoid triggering negative perceptions of government. For example, communicators could begin to substitute "civil servants" for "government employees." Beginning the conversation with words other than "government" allows people to hear new information. Otherwise, associations with "government" are so powerful that many people simply stop processing information once they hear the word. As noted in *Mind and Monolith: Findings from Cognitive Interviews about Government* by Cultural Logic (July 2004), "government" triggers two cognitive models, both of which hinder public support and engagement.

Importantly, this researcher is not suggesting eliminating the word "government" from communications. First, that recommendation would be impractical. Second, if the other damaging elements of the frame remain unchanged, the public's negative associations with government would simply transfer to these new phrases. This researcher is simply suggesting that communications beginning with the word "government" triggers a complete way of thinking that does not lead to public engagement and support. The conversation needs to start in a different place.

**The mission and values of the public sector need to be elevated, but these concepts are currently displaced by perceptions of "government."** Discussing the mission and values of government is a more effective way to connect people to government than trying to convince people that they are part of government, or that government effectively acts on behalf of the people. People react more positively toward their role in government when they are reminded that the mission of the public sector, its overarching objectives and fundamental values, includes working on behalf of the public good, advancing common interests, protecting public safety, and creating a vision for the future. This value-laden conversation reminds people that there is a higher purpose to governing that they may miss in the political squabbles they see on the nightly news. However, the public's negative associations with the word "government" obscure its unique mission and values.

Focus group participants had less clearly defined associations with "the public sector," but the associations they held were much more positive than their associations with "government." In each focus group session, a few participants could comfortably engage in a thorough conversation about the distinctions between the public and private sectors. The remaining focus group participants seemed to struggle with these concepts. On the one hand, "public sector" suggested "government" and "civil servant." However, associations with "public sector" also included the values that the public associates with the public sector such as "common good," "community," "family and future," and "protect." Unlike "government," which was viewed as a distant entity, the public sector was "me," and "all of us." The mission of the public sector, they noted, is to "hold the society together," "establish the minimum norm," and establish "the rules of what is acceptable and not." There was some confusion as well, with some focus group participants holding no image of the public sector and other focus group participants thinking of activities such as charitable work and volunteerism.

Importantly, when focus group participants were considering the activities of the public sector, they were open to new knowledge, because perceptions of the public sector were largely unformed, but generally positive. They were able to discuss the unique values and motivation of the public sector without being distracted by their deeply-held negative perceptions of government.

Accountability is a central distinction between the public and private sectors, according to focus group participants. The private sector is accountable to finances; private sector institutions need to meet budgets and make a profit, which means that businesses have to

be as efficient as possible. “The private sector has one and only one goal, money,” noted a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. “The private sector, their primary motive is the profit motive, the bottom line. That’s why they’re in business, not that they have to be all bad, but that’s their essential reason for being,” a Democratic man from Pennsylvania described.

Using these same standards for government, some said the public sector is not accountable at all, because it is not financially accountable to budgetary expectations. However, most focus group participants said the public sector is accountable in a very different way. The public sector is accountable to voters and to the broader community. “Public sector accountability is at the ballot box. Private sector accountability is at the cash register,” remarked an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

These interpretations of accountability in turn influenced focus group participants’ assumptions about what is working and what is broken in government. Those with positive views of business noted that government would be better if it were “run like a business,” because government would adopt business’ standards of accountability and be more efficient and careful with tax dollars. “That’s what’s wrong with government is they don’t run it like a business. They’re wasteful,” stated a Republican woman from Florida.

Others, however, were suspicious of the profit motive and pointed to corporate secrecy as a negative. They stated that they view government’s charge as being open for inspection, accessible to the public, and far more accountable for actions than the secret workings of the corporate world. “The public sector is supposed to be accountable for everything they do and open to inspection. The private sector is not accountable,” noted a Republican man from Florida. “You can’t control what a lot of businesses are doing here and we have no say,” an Independent woman from Florida complained.

When asked to think in the abstract about the principles that should guide the actions of a fictitious governing council, focus group participants repeatedly emphasized the need to act in the public interest: “everybody is going to benefit from it,” “the common good,” “for the good of the people,” “as long as you’re working for the body and not an individual.” In addition, several suggested that public consensus is an important principle to respect: “when enough people say they want it,” “the pressures of the society are going to dictate what the real needs are.”

However, when thinking about the real world, many focus group participants did not believe that government is guided by these principles. The public and private sector conspire against the common good, according to some. “It’s almost like the private sector and the public sector are kind of merging together because...how can the public sector be our regulator when they’re in bed with the private sector and taking huge donations?” asked an Independent man from California. “For example, it’s probably not the accurate number, but they bought a toilet for \$13,000. Wow, who deserves to sit on that toilet? Mine costs \$100. Whose butt is to be going on that? Why does he get that?” wondered an Independent woman from California.

**At the same time, people expect government and business to be in opposition.**

People expect government and business to be on opposing sides. Once this narrative is cued, people fill in the rest from their ideological perspective. While most participants have a balanced view of business and government, on the extremes, Democrats see business as greedy and immoral and want government to be a watchdog. “Whenever I see ‘business will be involved,’ I immediately think, ‘what are they going to gain?’” asked a Democratic man from Oregon. Republicans see government as inefficient and overprotective and want government to be as limited as possible. “I’m a little leery of anything that’s owned by the government,” stated a Republican man from Wisconsin. Once this line of thinking is triggered, people revert to ideology and become more resistant to new information.

When ideology has not been cued, most have mixed feelings. “It’s a philosophy of does government do it, or do you let the market drive it?” asked a Republican man from Wisconsin. “I think we need a strong business climate in any thriving community. That is Portland’s problem now, is that we don’t have a strong business climate,” noted a Democratic woman from Oregon. “It’s just scary to look at it either way. If you have the government involved, it’s got its own tendency to build its own infrastructure, layers of bureaucracy, all the rest of it. And if it’s private, you worry about them spending the money in the right areas and have no control over it,” worried a Republican man from Wisconsin.

Most do not see privatization as a threat to democracy. It is about efficiency and cost savings, not ideology. If a service can be provided less expensively, then it should be privatized, they asserted. However, focus group participants also cautioned that government needs to maintain control over privatized services. They want government to oversee quality and to ensure that services are not cut back or eliminated to meet profits. This is one reason why they were uncomfortable with privatizing military services. They stated it would be difficult for the US government to maintain quality control overseas.

Interestingly, a significant number of focus group participants suggested that privatizing a service means that private dollars fund the service. For example, some thought that privatizing a school meant that a corporation would then sponsor the school, charge tuition, and take donations. “I think if a private company took over a particular school,” a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania explained, “I think the kids would get a better education because the company can furnish supplies and books.” For those who hold this misperception, “tax savings” takes on new meaning -- corporations save tax dollars, not through efficiencies, but because corporations pick up part of the cost.

**People want long-term planning, but see a short-term focus.** One broadly-shared critique of the private sector is that it focuses on short-term profits, not long-term planning. “Everybody looks at the bottom line for now – not the bottom line for 20 years from now,” stated a Republican man from Wisconsin. “No one really looks long term so we have a domino effect... A lot of major companies and a lot of major investors don’t look at the long term effects of things and they go too short term and then they don’t see how it affects the future,” remarked a Republican woman from Oregon.

While people do not currently believe that government plans for the long-term either, there is an opportunity to build this characteristic of government and make it a central differentiation from the public sector. Currently, the planning that does occur in economic development, urban planning, etc., is invisible to the public. When asked how struggling communities turn around, very few focus group participants mentioned any effort by local or state government. Instead, they pointed to changes in consumer behavior or the impact of a business decision. A Democratic woman from Wisconsin described how a Milwaukee neighborhood was revitalized through changes in consumer behavior: “Higher housing costs in the east forced people to look elsewhere and they looked at this kind of declining neighborhood and saw there were good bargains.”

It is important to achieve some visibility for the long-term planning that does currently occur in the public sector. Otherwise, people are likely to think about electoral politics and reject that government thinks long-term. “There are things the government can do to support the future, but politically that is not acceptable. In other words, politicians are looking at the next election. They're not looking at the next generation,” remarked a Republican man from Florida.

**There is tension between individual and collective responsibility.** While most focus group participants shifted back and forth between ascribing responsibility to the individual or to a collective, Republicans gravitated toward individual consumer responsibility while Democrats tended to think of actions that citizens can do collectively. For example, Republicans and Democrats had different assumptions of the role of the individual in how change happens. While both sides talked about the role of consumer pressure and citizen pressure in creating change, ideological Republicans emphasized consumer power to enact change, while ideological Democrats emphasized citizen power to enact change.

This is problematic for re-engaging people with government, because an emphasis on consumer responsibility undermines collective thinking by leaving each person to his or her own devices. Therefore, it also undermines the perception of government as the path through which citizens work together to enact change.

**“Protector” is a beneficial persona for government, but there is a fine line between being a “protector” and being a “nanny.”** Universally, focus group participants agreed that protecting public health is a necessary and valuable role for government. This is consistent with findings from *By, or For, the People? A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion of Government*, by Public Knowledge (January, 2005). Focus group participants asserted that businesses cannot be trusted to regulate themselves, and individuals do not have the knowledge nor the power to protect themselves as fully as government could. However, many focus group participants noted that government is increasingly becoming a “nanny,” meaning that, by trying to protect people from inconsequential or unlikely ills, government eliminates personal responsibility.

A consistent theme across the focus groups was the notion that government does things “for” people rather than allowing people to take care of their own problems. This perception is troubling for a number of reasons. First, it suggests that government does too much and is overreaching its responsibility. To describe his image of government, a Democratic man from New Hampshire discussed a picture of a child being helped over a fence by adults: “Whether you agree with it or not, it's going to force you into what it thinks is best for you...the kid may have been climbing on the fence because it was fun and somebody's is like, ‘Oh my God, the kid is on the fence,’ so they all gather around and they were pulling the kid off the fence. Even though they're having fun, it's against the rules to climb on a fence.” “They will outlaw them and say you can't have any more because children will climb on them,” added a Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

In addition, an image of government doing things “for” people feeds the notion that people who participate in government programs are lazy and irresponsible. “It's frustrating when you've got this beautiful townhouse and it's basically for Section 8 and I bust my ass. And I know a lot of people and they're in my family that suck off the system. They get a house like this when I've got two jobs. So I mean all that money that they're building these nice houses and these people are going in there and they're not even paying rent. They're getting it from the government. It's frustrating,” a Republican man from New Hampshire complained.

**Government’s only solution is more taxes.** Many focus group participants indicated that they assume government wants more and more money, which increases the tax burden on families. While they recognized that revenue is important to fund programs, focus group participants said they do not understand why increasing taxes always seems to be the answer to every problem. “It's like we don't have a choice. We have to pay taxes and we're tied to whatever the politicians decide that we're going to support through our taxes,” noted a Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

They have learned that tax cuts “help” the economy, but they also noted that decreased revenue hurts government programs and, by extension, quality of life. “The state of Texas has been under Republican [rule] for at least 12 to 14 years now and Houston is the most polluted city in the country; 25% of seniors live in poverty...20% of children live in poverty...and these numbers were way down before and they are up now because people say, ‘taxes have to be low.’ That's the credo of the Republican Party,” explained a Democratic man from Oregon.

**Democrats, Independents and Republicans are more alike than different in their perceptions of government.** While the national political conversation would indicate that the leadership of the two major political parties holds very different ideological perspectives of the role of government, this research finds that rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans are far more alike than different in their perceptions of government.

Historically, Republicans at the national level have advocated for smaller government. In the focus groups, however, Republicans frequently voiced support for an activist role for government. In discussing government regulations, a Republican woman from Florida

argued, “If the government didn't enforce this, who would? And when they continue getting away with it, who is going to follow them? Who is going to set them straight? I am?”

Similarly, Democrats have been viewed as the party that supports an expanded role for government, yet in the focus groups Democrats were frequently skeptical of giving government more responsibility. In discussing public sector ownership of a utility, a Democratic woman from Wisconsin stated, “I think sometimes when government does run things without any competition, there isn't a whole lot of incentive to keep costs low.” At the same time, given the right rhetorical triggers, each side can easily shift into a conversation that reflects its own political party's ideology.

### **Changing the Conversation**

**By the end of the two-hour-long focus group conversations, there were several indications that focus group participants were beginning to adopt ways of viewing government that would lead to more public support and engagement. These changes were not dramatic, nor universal. However, the results indicate that several participants became more likely to state the ways that government influences their lives, voice personal responsibility for the direction of government, and feel less partisan division.**

Some suggested that government is not a distant entity, rather it influences daily life. “It influences every aspect of my life. Whether it's the restaurants I eat at, the public health emblem on the door, what financial institution I go to, what bank I use, what rates I pay for interest, which affects the type of car I can buy or what I can afford. I think it's in every aspect of my life,” suggested an Independent man from Florida.

Furthermore, several walked away with a new sense of personal responsibility for the direction of government. “It all starts with me and us. We're responsible. You can't just pass the buck and say, ‘take care of me Daddy,’” remarked an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

Finally, due to the reasonable tone set in the course of the conversation, some came to believe that most Americans share values concerning the direction of the nation. “I'm thinking nine people here with different backgrounds and I see a unity and thought and a feeling of civic pride, civic concern. I think that's extraordinarily great,” stated an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

**To determine which of the introduced frames have the most ability to influence focus group participants' consideration of government, informants were asked to provide reasons for and against specific policies. This exercise reveals that focus group participants came to rely upon certain frames that had been introduced during the groups.**

**Active public involvement is important to good government.** Early in the focus group conversation, participants tended to reject the idea that the public has much say in government decision-making, due in part to their negative associations with electoral politics. By the end of the focus group conversation, people referred repeatedly to the importance of public involvement in government decision-making. For example, in considering requiring a period for public comment before major state legislation is enacted, focus group participants noted that this would provide an opportunity for the public to be heard. "People have good ideas about how government could run, if they would just listen," stated a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. Similarly, the best reason to support public financing for political advertising is to level the playing field for any citizen who wants to run for office, and the strongest reason to support voter approval of all tax increases is to allow for public input.

**At the same time, most did not want to be overwhelmed with too much information and they were concerned about the tyranny of the majority.** The strongest reason to oppose public funding for political advertising, according to focus group participants, is that it could result in too many people running for office and too much information. "There might be too many opinions then," stated an Independent woman from Florida. "It would just be too much information," noted an Independent woman from Florida. In addition, they noted that the majority is not always right. The biggest criticism that focus group persons had of mandating voter approval of all tax increases is that the majority would never support a tax increase, and they recognized that there are times when a tax increase is necessary.

**Several came to recognize the importance of government revenue and the need for increased taxes to maintain quality of life.** While they supported lower taxes, they also recognized that there are times when taxes are needed, such as when an unexpected expense emerges. "Just like when the hurricane came through and wiped everything out, they have to have money to rebuild. That's unexpected," stated a Republican woman from Florida. Capping taxes, according to a Democratic man from Pennsylvania, "seems to be very shortsighted." In addition, focus group participants discussed the impact of reduced government revenues on quality of life. "Important programs would have to go away if they had no way to fund them," suggested a Republican woman from Florida. Another Republican woman from Florida added that "quality of life could go down."

**They demonstrated a desire to instill citizenship in all Americans.** In suggesting reasons to support a civil service requirement for young adults, focus group participants emphasized the ability to instill civic responsibility in young people. "I think it would make our citizens better prepared to be better citizens," stated an Independent man from Pennsylvania. An Independent woman from Florida remarked that it would "give the kids a sense to know and learn about their country and learn how to care for other people."

**Focus group participants became able to have a sophisticated conversation about the common good.** In considering the advantages and disadvantages of privatizing public transportation, focus group participants noted that the advantage would be cost

savings, since they assumed businesses would run transportation more efficiently. The disadvantage, however, was that a business would not provide the same scope of services that the government provides. They noted that forms of transportation that are not profitable would be eliminated. "Public transportation would not serve areas with small numbers of people like the Postal Service. If you're doing it for a profit, you're not going to go to streets with hardly any houses on it, but the Postal Service will deliver to anybody," stated a Democratic man from Pennsylvania.

### **Recommendations**

Effective communications will allow people to overcome the obstacles in public perception reviewed in the first section and, instead, begin to have the kind of conversation that emerged toward the end of the focus groups. This research suggests some specific frame elements that can create a more beneficial climate for public engagement with government.

**Communications needs to keep a reasonable, not rhetorical, tone.** Since there are more similarities than differences between the rank-and-file members of the political parties, a rhetorical conversation emphasizing progressive or conservative ideology will not address the public's negative perceptions of government. Rather, rhetoric will simply remind the public that government is about partisan politics and special interests, not the *common* good.

**Emphasize the values and the mission of the public sector, rather than the services or scope of government.** One of the greatest obstacles in building public support for government is the deeply held negative associations that immediately come to mind when people hear the word "government." The mission and values that are inherent in good government are displaced by these negative associations.

These findings suggest that it is necessary to communicate government's mission, its values, its motivation, its accountability to the public, as well as its relationship with the private sector. Effective communications should begin with the values and the mission, not the actor (government). While the word "government" cannot, and should not, be eliminated from the vocabulary, using "public sector" early on in the conversation will allow people to hear the values and mission that are being communicated, rather than revert to deeply-held stereotypes of government.

The range of activities for which government is responsible necessitates developing more than one mission or value for government. This research suggests a set of complementary values and objectives that can reengage the public with government. The values that will build support for government are community, future, stewardship and practical management. The mission or objective for government that people find compelling includes working on behalf of the common good, improving quality of life, and preserving public health. Finally, to avoid triggering an image of a "nanny

government” that does things *for* people, communications should include a broad definition of public actors taking responsibility – community, citizens, public, we, etc.

**Communicate collective, not individual, responsibility.** Individual responsibility is a dominant ethic in this country. Therefore, without a concerted effort to communicate collective responsibility, members of the public will automatically think of their role as individuals or consumers, rather than as citizens. Over time, individual responsibility reinforces the belief that each person should be left to his or her own devices, thereby undermining any sense of collective responsibility. Instead, advocates need to use words that remind people of collective responsibility, such as “citizens,” “community,” “we,” “us,” etc.

**Convey compelling personas for government such as “protector,” but avoid the “nanny” image.** One task for this research was to determine which persona government could adopt that would be compelling and credible.

The meta-analysis found that the public sees “government as protector” to be a compelling and credible image. While the qualitative research also found “protector” to be an important image for government, this research suggests that there is a fine line between being a “protector” and being a “nanny.” It takes careful construction to activate positive perceptions of “protector” without simultaneously triggering “nanny.”

When protection is the relevant role (in public health, for example), communications needs to state why a particular action is best served by government and is one that individuals cannot do alone. For example, “we need government to ensure that our meat processing system is as safe as possible, because the most cautious food handling in the home won’t help if the food left the meat processing plant diseased.” This helps the public place responsibility with the collective, rather than with the individual.

In addition, to avoid triggering the “nanny” image, citizens need to be actors, not passive participants. Government is one actor, working side-by-side with citizens and business, not a large, isolated bureaucracy doing things *for* people. This gives people an active role in creating change in their communities.

**Begin to develop an image of government as a long-term planner and consensus builder.** The public wants long-term planning, but they see businesses emphasizing short-term profits and politicians focusing on the crisis of the day. There is an opportunity for government to distinguish its role as planning for the future, working with citizens to build consensus and bringing in the private sector at the appropriate time.

To develop this image, communications should begin to publicize government’s role in long-term planning and community development. The work the government does in this regard is largely invisible. Illuminating government’s efforts to plan for the long term and to assist community redevelopment efforts will help the public to see government as a visionary and begin to mitigate against the public’s view that government is not

effective. The emphasis should be on building consensus, or government, citizens and business working together, not government acting *for* citizens and business.

**Avoid pitting government against business. Instead, differentiate between responsible businesses and rogue businesses.** The public expects government and business to be in opposition, so frequently they automatically assume that government regulations or actions are anti-business. To overcome this assumption, it helps to include business messengers on the side of government policy or asking for government intervention. This causes people to re-think their assumptions and view the policy with an open mind.

Furthermore, communicators often inadvertently suggest that all businesses act in bad faith. People believe that the country needs profitable businesses and reject the idea that all businesses behave badly. Importantly, even though Republicans tend to be the strongest defenders of business, they want government to take a strong stand against those businesses that have proven they cannot be trusted. So, instead of positioning government as a watchdog against business generally, advocates should specify that it is up to government to act against rogue businesses (repeat offenders, those outside the mainstream, etc.) and to set minimum standards that help responsible businesses from being undermined by the low standards and unfair practices of rogue businesses. Including a business spokesperson on the side of government action reinforces that there are responsible businesses and there are rogue businesses.

**Communicate the relationship between government revenue and quality of life.** The communications recommendations can lay the foundation and create the relationship people need to support government funding. Over the long term, however, people need more familiarity with government budgets and the impact of drops in revenue. The impact that they care about is quality of life, so the consequences of funding cuts should be connected with the effects on community quality of life. Concepts like “ripple effect” and “spiraling decline” help them understand the impact of significant program cuts that can push a community into decline.

**Long-term change will require opportunities for engagement beyond voting.** As noted earlier in this analysis, focus group participants tended to view government as disconnected from their lives – “the Other.” During the course of the focus group conversations, the researchers were frequently able to get focus group participants into “villager mode,” during which they would set aside ideology and become practical problem solvers interested in the common good of “the village.” This is the mindset that causes people to act as citizens, to engage in collective action, and to eventually come to believe that “government is us.”

“Villager mode” is cued by “doing” government, by practical problem solving, and by becoming focused on the common good for the community. Ideally, over the long term, advocates would find ways to replicate the focus group experience by allowing people to have more opportunities to participate in the process of governing. This does not have to mean more opportunities for the public to sit on commissions; it could simply mean more

ongoing familiarity with decision making at the state and local levels. “Here we have town meetings. All of our boards are on television. We know exactly how much money is being spent, where it is going. We have a say in how it is spent,” explained a Republican woman from New Hampshire. “Even if you're not involved you can just be at home watching and feel involved,” added a Republican man from New Hampshire.

Language choices can assist in creating “villager mode” and connecting people to government. In addition to “public sector,” three references show promise in assisting this new dialogue. “Civic” suggests “responsibility,” “duty,” and “community.” It has the positive connotation of acting collectively. “Common good” conveys “helping people” and “for the benefit of all,” but it has not become politicized in the way that “public interest” has. Finally, “citizen” has a lot of meaning for the public. When asked to mention the first words that come to mind, focus group participants said “me,” “informed,” “obligation,” “American” and “free.” Therefore, instead of referring to Americans as “the public,” “consumers,” or “voters,” communicators should choose words that connect people with a broader collective, such as “citizens,” “community,” or “townspeople.”

**In sum, public discourse about government needs to change to elevate the mission and values that are inherent in good government. It needs to actively engage citizens with a sense of collective responsibility and empower them to act for change in their communities. The table below summarizes the shift in frame elements that are necessary.**

What We've Got	What We Need
Goal: specific Level 3 policy agenda	Mission: Common good, future, consensus
Actor: Government	Actor: Citizens, partners
Messenger: Politicians	Messenger: Citizens, businesspeople
Ideological	Practical problem solving
Individual	Collective
Consumer	Citizen, villager
Nanny	Protect & empower
It, the other	Us, we
Anti-business	Anti- rogue business
Programs and taxes	Quality of life, community

## Section II: Framing Hypotheses and the Iterative Research Process

Effective framing relies upon knowing which frame elements to invigorate, as well as which traps to avoid. During the course of the focus group sessions, the research team gained a great deal of learning about what should and should not be communicated to build public engagement with government. While the central findings are summarized in the first section of this report, much can be learned about communications on this issue by following the evolution in test materials that occurred as this phase of research unfolded.

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this research is to develop a communications framework that will engage the public in government, i.e., cause the public to value a role for government. To that end, focus group participants reacted to a series of “news articles” and “editorials” that were designed to represent different frames to advance the discussion.<sup>3</sup> The mark of success was not which frame focus group participants *liked* best. Rather, the objective was to determine how focus group participants’ dialogue and understanding of the issue changed as they considered each frame. By determining the strengths and weaknesses of each frame, it is possible to determine the mix of frame elements that will advance the conversation.

### **Initial Test Series**

After the elicitation research conducted by Cultural Logic and the meta-analysis of existing public opinion conducted by Public Knowledge, the FrameWorks Institute research team met to discuss the hypothetical reframes that could result in effective communications. The team agreed on the following frames for testing:

#### **Government of and by the People:**

- Of the People Frame
- Democratic Reform Frame
- Privatization Frame

#### **The Mission of Government:**

- Public vs. Private Frame
- Common Interest Frame
- Protector Frame
- Public Servant Frame
- Consensus Builder Frame
- Constancy Frame
- Governance Frame
- Stewardship Frame
- Civic Duty Frame
- Long-term Vision Frame

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<sup>3</sup> The articles are fictional and were developed by the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge and adapted from numerous unverified sources. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

Short paragraphs reflecting each frame were rotated across several focus groups. After the initial four groups, the statements were refined and headlines were added to help reinforce the intended frame.

### Of the People Frame

**This statement was developed to remind people that citizens *are* the government; its actions are dictated by the democratic process. While people agreed with the sentiment that government actions are dictated by public will, they rejected that government currently operates this way. The rich and powerful have far more control than average citizens, they asserted. While a relationship to government based on active democratic participation is the long-term objective for communications, asserting that this democratic participation *already* exists is ineffective. It creates backlash, since people believe that average citizens have little ability to influence government.**

Tested in PA and FL:

As much as we complain about government, the reality is that we, all Americans, are our government. Government actions are dictated by our votes, our taxes, and our will. If an elected representative does not follow the will of the public, we have the power to remove that person from office. If we disagree with a policy or law, we have the right and the ability to protest. Ours is a government of, and by, the people, and we all have an obligation to support our government and participate in the democratic process.

At first, focus group participants readily agreed with this statement. “We are citizens. We are the government at every level,” asserted an Independent man from Florida.

However, after this automatic patriotic reflex, focus group participants became highly critical of this assertion. “It used to be us. It's not us anymore. We don't know who it is,” stated an Independent woman from Florida. “This may have been true 100, 150, 200 years ago, but I don't think this is quite true nowadays,” added an Independent man from Florida.

Many felt that average citizens have little say in the activities of government. “We vote for certain issues that we hope will be on the table, but the government has already decided what they're going to do,” complained a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. “I disagree with a lot of the things the government does, but what do you do?” asked an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

Several asserted that the rich and powerful are in control, not average citizens. “Money rules this country and those that have it run the country. They spend their time massaging our little minds through the media,” stated an Independent man from Florida. “It's not the people. It's the money. Absolute money corrupts absolutely,” concluded an Independent man from Florida.

When focus group participants could name a way to influence government, voting was the recourse that they suggested to express dissatisfaction with the direction of the

country. “We have the power to make changes, to remove people if we don't agree with what they're doing,” remarked an Independent woman from Pennsylvania.

Ultimately, many noted that citizens are at fault for what is wrong with government. “I think if we paid attention more...there are a lot of people that do not show up to vote. They don't know who they are voting for,” stated an Independent woman from Florida.

Finally, several focus group participants reacted negatively to the words "obligation to support." Some, particularly Democrats, interpreted the phrase as meaning an “obligation to agree.” “I think we have a responsibility to protest and say what we think, and we shouldn't be blindly supporting the government because the government says something,” asserted a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. Republicans tended to interpret this phrase a bit differently. To them it meant to be respectful of government and to participate in the democratic process.

### Democratic Reform Frame

**Like the Of the People Frame, the Democratic Reform Frame is designed to remind people that citizens *are* government. However, it also suggests that if citizens *are* to truly *be* government, then reform is necessary, in this instance a structural reform intended to enhance democratic participation. The intent of this description was not to advance these particular reforms. Rather, it was to determine whether it could inspire people to become more engaged in governing. Positioning elected officials as volunteers causes people to question their assumptions about self-interested, out-of-touch politicians, and instead begin to imagine people who are dedicated to the common good. The effective element of this test paragraph was elevating the motivation and mission of government, not trying to convince focus group participants that these specific reforms would be effective if implemented nationwide.**

Tested in PA and FL:

Democracy is founded on the principle that citizens take an active role in community decisions. Indeed, our public institutions work best when citizens are actively involved. Take New Hampshire, for example. New Hampshire residents have created a state government structure that provides citizens with a variety of opportunities to be directly involved. There are 400 Representatives and 24 Senators in the New Hampshire Legislature, making it the largest legislature in the country. Because New Hampshire has a small population, the end result is that every New Hampshire citizen is likely to know or have personal contact with a member of the legislature. Furthermore, state legislators are unpaid volunteers who come from a variety of backgrounds and professions, making elected office a realistic option for any citizen. Finally, every bill introduced in the state legislature must have a public hearing during which anyone can voice their opinion or submit amendments. American democracy would work better if the principles of citizen government exemplified by the New Hampshire process were replicated throughout the country.

To some, this relationship to government harkens back to earlier times. “If you go back 100, 150 years, that's how it worked. They were people like us and they'd go to Washington, do their thing, come back home, pick up the plow or whatever they did for living. They didn't get paid for it. It was part of their civic duty,” noted an Independent man from Florida.

People reacted positively toward this description of government, in part because it addresses a central concern they have about current political representation, which is that representatives do not actually understand nor accurately represent the people. “I feel people in the government, especially the ones that are professional politicians, they lose contact with the people,” stated an Independent man from Florida. According to an Independent man from Florida, this type of citizen engagement “would make a dramatic change in the way things get done, because we would be running the show again.”

The idea that state representatives could be unpaid volunteers that come from a variety of walks of life is very powerful. That suggests to focus group participants that a representative is engaged for the common good, not personal gain. “I think the word ‘voluntary’ just has a connotation...if you're volunteering, there's something very noble about that,” stated an Independent woman from Florida. “You know you're doing it because your heart is in it,” added an Independent woman from Florida. “It allows you to do away with big business controlling government,” remarked a Democratic woman.

However, some noted that there could be other selfish incentives to become an elected official. “Just because somebody is a volunteer doesn't mean they don't bring any financial special interest,” warned a Democratic woman. “I think that intangible called power is not necessarily financially based and the fact that they're compensated or not compensated personally doesn't mean that they don't affect a power,” stated an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

Because they assumed that state representation is a full-time job, some made the point that average people would not be able to sacrifice full-time pay for a voluntary position. “We wouldn't be able to do it. We couldn't just exit our normal life and give a certain amount of time, if we weren't compensated,” stated an Independent woman from Florida. “If you're not getting paid for it, if you're not wealthy, who is going to take the job?” asked a Democratic woman.

While several supported the idea of more citizen involvement in decision-making, many worried that significant participation would be unfeasible. Many focus group participants noted that this kind of process may work in a small state like New Hampshire, but it is unrealistic for larger groups of people. “When you get to something as large as the United States and you've got 280 million people, it's just too hard,” argued a Republican man from Florida.

**Privatization Frame**

**Like the preceding frames, the Privatization Frame describes government as “being of, and by the people,” but it also incorporates the idea that privatization is a threat to democracy. It juxtaposes the mission of the public sector (public good) with the mission of the private sector (profits). For the focus group participants, this debate was about cost and accountability. They wanted services to be provided cost effectively, but they expected the public sector to hold private business accountable. The opportunity in the privatization debate is to shift the decision from being limited to cost and, instead, use the dialogue to elevate the mission of the public sector to act on behalf of the common good.**

Interestingly, some focus group participants were confused about the meaning of privatization. Some believed that when a school is privatized, a corporation takes over the funding. “I think if a private company took over a particular school, I think the kids would get a better education because the company can furnish supplies and books,” suggested a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. “If you privatized, some will cut corners to get a higher profit, but then again, some of the private companies have the resources to get better professionals, more experienced, the top-of-the-line people,” remarked a Republican woman from Florida. Focus group participants did not express this confusion when considering other privatized institutions, such as prisons.

For focus group participants, privatizing government services was not about philosophy; it was about cost. They were willing to privatize services if it would save tax dollars. Most suggested that the private sector would be more efficient and accountable than government. “Our government has become so bureaucratic, that to make one function, you've got to have 25 people to do that one function... We have no accountability to our

Tested in PA and FL:  
 We like to think of our government as being of, and by the people. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the functions of government are being handed over to private corporations that make decisions based on profit, rather than the public good. Many public services are starting to be provided by for-profit corporations, including the management of correctional facilities and public school services. Even our military is becoming privatized. In Iraq, multinational corporations provide support services, translators, interrogators, and even armed security contractors. Do we really want a profit motive to dictate actions concerning public schools, jails, or our national security? We need to put public services back into the public sector so they are conducted on behalf of the public good, rather than private interest.

Tested in CA:  
Public Good v. Private Interest  
 We like to think of our government as being of, and by the people. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the functions of the public sector are being outsourced to private corporations that make decisions based on profit rather than the public good. Furthermore, while the public sector is required to disclose its actions to public scrutiny, the private sector has no such requirement. Many public services are starting to be subcontracted to for-profit corporations. Particularly troubling are privatization of correctional facilities and public school services. Even our military is becoming privatized. In Iraq, multinational corporations are contracted to provide support services, translators, interrogators, and even armed security contractors. Do we really want corporations dictating actions affecting our children’s education, the administration of our prisons, or important aspects of the war in Iraq? We need to make sure public officials are always in charge of the conduct of services and providing adequate oversight for those services, whether they are provided by a public or private entity. This will ensure that these efforts are always conducted on behalf of the public good, rather than private interest.

government at all,” noted an Independent man from Florida. “The major difference between the private and the public sector is that bottom line. If you don't reach it, whoever is up at the top, they're gone. There is no discussion about you ‘tried really hard. Give me four more years and I'll do better,’” asserted an Independent woman from Florida.

While less prominent, people responded to the notion that private institutions can be more expensive than public institutions. They worried that less money would be spent on services, because private institutions are motivated by profit. “I don't want a profit motive to be behind, especially our public schools and things like that, national security,” remarked an Independent woman from Florida.

The opportunity, and the challenge, in the privatization debate is to elevate the mission of government oversight on behalf of the public good, whether services are provided by government employees or private sector employees. The public expects government to hold the private sector accountable for the public service it provides. “I guess what it boils down to me is it's OK, as long as the private company is eminently fireable... I would object to somebody replacing the U. S. Postal Service. I wouldn't object to them doing certain jobs that the U.S. Postal Service does,” explained a Democratic man.

After the first four focus groups, this statement was altered to make government accountability and transparency more apparent and to include “public sector” language. California focus group participants who were exposed to this revised version stressed that government does not currently conduct the oversight that it should. “We're involved in a war with the wrong country all because of some personal grievance. There was no Congressional oversight. The Constitution requires Congress to vote on a war. There wasn't even any oversight of that,” argued an Independent man from California. The private sector has too much influence over the public sector for government to be an effective check on abuse, they asserted. “How can the public sector be our regulator when they're in bed with the private sector and taking huge donations and then making obvious choices in legislation that if you hadn't gotten that \$50,000 or \$100,000 or whatever you got, you wouldn't have been making this decision?” asked an Independent man from California. Here we witness the pernicious and persistent effects of the public's tendency to interpret a discussion about government to one about elected officials.

## Public v. Private Frame

**This test statement was designed to trigger a more overt conversation about the motivations of the public and private sectors, so that focus group participants would consider criteria other than cost savings. It was successful in causing focus group participants to consider the differences between the public and private sectors, but it also raised many of their existing concerns about government efficacy and accountability. Since this article discussed possibilities, participants were left to imagine how this program would work. A review of a successful effort would have had a different end result.**

This frame successfully sparked a conversation about appropriate roles for the public and private sector. Most, particularly Democrats, felt that this kind of initiative would be an appropriate role for government. “I think it's a good way to attract industry into the state...It will encourage new industries to move in, which means taxes -- more businesses to pay taxes,” stated a Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

Some Republicans expressed concerns about whether this involves government too much in the private sector. “Theoretically, it's great. Like Doreen said, maybe if you find a cure for one disease, but now we're crossing the line between public money and private industry. Public money now is being used to start private industry,” cautioned a Republican man from New Hampshire.

Most accepted that this is an appropriate role for government, because it is trying to achieve something that no one business would be able to achieve alone. “Say it was a cure for a cancer, but no single company or research institute or whatever could fund it, so you have to ask the government's help,” remarked a Republican man from New Hampshire.

They recognized that government should be responsible for oversight, but they worried that government would not be able to fulfill that role adequately. Some did not believe that government could be trusted to spend these funds wisely. “I don't have the comfort factor in the public that this money is going to go to good use and I can trust these people on the panel, even though it says that they are doctors and teachers and professors. I don't know why I could trust them,” stated a Republican man from New Hampshire. “That's why

Tested in NH:

### Public Good v. Private Interest

North Carolina recently passed a ballot measure to provide \$1 billion for biotechnology research, which is creating a dialogue in the state about appropriate roles for the public and private sectors. The initiative creates the North Carolina Institute for Biotechnology, which will provide roughly \$100 million a year for 10 years in grants and loans to public and private entities pursuing biotechnology studies. Final authority rests with the oversight panel, which will include representatives from the state's major medical schools, nonprofit research institutes, commercial biotechnology firms and public advocates for research in a range of diseases. Supporters say that it will make the state a magnet for innovative medical research, helping the state's economy while improving public health. If the research leads to improvement in therapies for a few of the hundreds of diseases for which biotechnology shows promise, the state would save health care expenses many times above the cost of the ballot measure. However, the non-profit Center for Research in the Public Interest says there's a potential for a lot of people to get very wealthy without accomplishing any public good and says North Carolinians should be asking public officials: “Who safeguards the funding and what interests will be represented?” The Center suggests that the oversight panel be required to present annual reports to the public demonstrating appropriate use of public funds.

it's important that you have the checks and balances. It's important that they report exactly where the money is going, to hold them accountable,” noted a Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

At the same time, they were just as concerned about corporate greed trying to abuse the funds. A Democratic man from New Hampshire warned that this initiative “is going to bring in all the people that are just looking to get a fast buck.”

In short, they supported this kind of investment and stated that it is an appropriate role for government, but worried that neither the public nor the private sector could be trusted to be accountable for the funds.

### Common Interest Frame

**The Common Interest Frame described government as a process through which people come together to advance shared values and common interests such as safe neighborhoods, good schools, etc. This Frame caused people to think selflessly and several voiced support for increasing engagement in civic affairs. They agreed that this is the correct motivation for government, but they rejected that government is currently motivated by the common interest. It is the way it *should* be, but not necessarily the way it *is*.**

The Common Interest Frame caused several focus group participants to think about the common good, rather than self-interest. “Sometimes we can be too self-focused in our own little world, our family, our day-to-day survival and forget that we have this added common responsibility,” noted an Independent man from Pennsylvania. An Independent woman from Pennsylvania added, “What jumped out is we all have to work together.” “No individuals can reach these goals alone. We have to be supportive of each other,” remarked an Independent woman from California. An Independent man from California added, “Doing what is right, instead of what is selfish.”

Tested in FL and PA:

All Americans want the same things: safe communities, educational opportunity, economic security, and the ability to provide our families with a good quality of life.

Government is the path through which we work together to advance these common interests. Our taxes fund a criminal justice system that works to keep our communities safe. We join together to support a public school system that will provide educational opportunity. We agree upon laws and regulations that protect workers while allowing for economic growth, such as wage and hour laws, and work place and product safety regulations. And we develop public services that improve the quality of life for us all: libraries, playgrounds, environmental protections, and many, many others. It is every citizen’s obligation to contribute to efforts that advance our common interests.

Tested in CA and NH:

A Path for Community

There are basic goals that we all share: safe communities, educational opportunity, economic security, and the ability to provide our families with a good quality of life. No individual can reach these goals alone; it takes citizens working together to advance these common interests and the public sector is one path through which this happens. Our taxes fund police officers to protect our communities and enforce laws. We join together to support public schools to provide educational opportunity. We agree upon laws and regulations that protect workers, while supporting economic growth, such as wage and hour laws, work place safety regulations, and economic development incentives. And we develop public services that improve the quality of life for us all: libraries, playgrounds, environmental protections, and many, many others. It is (CA: our civic duty) (NH: part of the responsibilities we have as citizens) to contribute to efforts that advance our common interests.

Focus group participants agreed that the public interest should be the driving motivation for the public sector. “Government to me is a group of people we installed to look out for our public interest. Whether we particularly like what they say or not, they should always have our best interest in mind,” stated a Republican man from Florida. “Civic duty is not about your own interests. It's about everybody else's interests as a common thread,” stated an Independent man from California.

At the same time, they are mixed in their assessment of whether or not government acts in the public interest in practice. Some could think of the ways government has improved quality of life. “The government has established these agencies, as citizens we use those to better the quality of life – have after-school camps and birthday parties at the park, and the library lady reading,” explained a Republican woman from Florida. Others worried that public interest is not always taken into account. “I think we have a country where the dollar rules and not the needs of people,” argued a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. Another Democratic woman from Pennsylvania added, “I think that's the general problem with government is that it is run by people. People do things that aren't always smart or that are wrong.” Some saw this statement as a reason to work to address these failures of government. “It helps with accountability,” noted a Republican man from New Hampshire. “If you're involved, then you know what is going on...how that \$200,000 is being spent...yeah, you need \$200,000, but tell us exactly how you are going to spend that \$200,000.”

Some of the language in the test statement distracted focus group participants from the intended meaning of the frame. For example, a few focus group participants rejected that “all Americans want the same things.” “It is sad to say, but a lot of Americans don't care about that stuff anymore. They want to be able to do what they want, when they want, and they don't want anyone to tell them they need to do otherwise,” a Republican woman from Florida complained. Furthermore, others rejected that these joint efforts are successful. “I don't think that's true. Look at all the ghettos we have, and all of the crime that we have,” noted an Independent woman from Pennsylvania. Finally, one or two noted that it is incorrect to say that government is the *only* way to achieve these goals. The statement was edited to address these concerns prior to the California and New Hampshire focus groups.

The editing allowed focus group respondents to center their attention on the main point of the frame. While they all agreed that government *should* work for the common interest, they rejected that government *always* acts on behalf of the public. Democrats, still raw from the results of the 2004 Presidential election, noted that it is unrealistic that government can act for the common interest, because the country is too divided. Republicans, on the other hand, tended to see this as a call to become more involved in civic affairs.

## Protector Frame

**The Protector Frame emphasizes government’s unique ability to protect the public from public health hazards by putting regulations in place that all are required to follow. The public firmly believes that this is an important role that only government can provide. However, recent press coverage about regulatory failures undermined public opinion and suggested to some that government may not be able to adequately fulfill this role.**

Tested in:  
PA and FL no headline  
CA and NH: The Protector

We rely on (PA/FL: government; CA/NH: our public institutions) to put the regulations in place that will protect (PA/FL: the public; CA/NH: us) from physical and financial harm. There are a variety of ways (PA/FL: the government protects; CA/NH: that federal, state and local agencies protect) public health: food quality, environmental controls, workplace and product safety to name a few. We also rely on government to hold (PA/FL: institutions; CA/NH: the private sector) accountable for their actions, as in the recent high-profile cases with Enron, Tyco and Worldcomm. Only (PA/FL: government; CA/NH: the public sector) can set and enforce these protections on behalf of the (PA/FL: public good; CA/NH: common good).

Focus group participants agreed that the government’s ability to protect public safety is a critically important role that only government can provide. “I think we are all very lucky we are here and the FDA, the different government agencies we never even think of, are saying you can’t put this harmful thing in your product. You can’t throw this and put this in the environment, and it is not perfect... but I think all of us would agree that we probably benefited from that,” stated a Democratic woman from Pennsylvania. Government acts as a check against unethical businesses. “It is not realistic that factories are going to police themselves,” stated a Democratic man.

Government is uniquely positioned to fulfill this role, they stated. “I think we do rely more heavily on government for those types of regulations... they are not things that a regular citizen knows that much about. We’re not all engineers. We don’t know about food quality, environmental controls,” noted a Republican woman from Florida. “If the government didn’t enforce this, who would? And when they continue getting away with it, who is going to follow them? Who is going to set them straight? I am?” asked a Republican woman.

At the same time, focus group participants were not anti-business. They said that they want regulations to protect the public from egregious acts, but do not want to harm businesses generally. “Sometimes they have too many regulations where you just can’t exist if you want to start up a business or something... You do need intervention to punish those who did wrong and break the rules,” cautioned an Independent woman from California. While Democrats tended to be nervous about the private sector monitoring itself, several Republicans insisted the monitoring should start with the private sector. “I feel that it should happen in the private sector first and it should be overseen by the government, and the government should step in as a last resort and make sure that the monitoring is being done and being done properly,” suggested a Republican man from New Hampshire.

Interestingly, some draw upon the Of the People Frame, introduced prior to this message, to make the case for this role for government. “Government is best equipped under our rules and regulations, because we then all contribute to having our representatives decide what these rules and regulations should be,” suggested an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

In the first four focus groups, the only criticism focus group participants mentioned was that unethical companies could buy influence with campaign donations. “The problem with that is though, a Tyco or WorldCom at some point they're giving Democrats, Republicans, whomever is running for office, money to help them run,” warned an Independent man from Pennsylvania.

The California and New Hampshire groups occurred after some significant press coverage about drug recalls and failures at the FDA. This press coverage significantly undermined the public’s confidence in the government’s ability to protect public safety. “You find out that, after using this drug for all this amount of time, all of a sudden you find out that it can cause cardiac problems,” asserted a Democratic woman from New Hampshire. “And the company knew it,” added another Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

Finally, labels convey different images. According to focus group respondents “protector” is emotional and maternal, while “watchdog” is more aggressive, but only alerts you to a problem, a watchdog does not protect you. “With a watchdog you have to be ready to respond to the alarm. The dog barks. You have to get up and see what is going on. With a protector, you don't have to. The protector is going to protect you. The watchdog is just going to alert you,” explained a Democratic man from New Hampshire. “Standard setter” is rational rather than emotional, but suggests to some that the public does not have a say in setting the standards.

### Public Servant Frame

**The Public Servant Frame portrays public employees as people who are motivated by serving the public interest. The objective was to determine whether it would be possible to make public servants the face of government and then transfer these perceptions to the image of government overall. This is not an effective approach because people did not believe that public employees are a special class of employees that are particularly motivated by public interest.**

Tested in PA and FL:  
 One out of every six Americans works in the public sector. These public servants contribute enormously to the quality of life we all enjoy. Public school teachers are motivated by the desire to help children learn and achieve. Police officers, firefighters, and soldiers put their lives on the line for the rest of us. Many elected officials at the state and local level receive little or no compensation for their efforts to work for the common good. Social workers face incredibly difficult situations, but keep going back to do what they can. We should all applaud and support those who have made the decision to spend their lives working for the public good.

While people may have generally positive perceptions of public employees, they rejected that everyone in this category has the right motivations. “There are people that are really dedicated and there are people that are there for the pension,” stated a Democratic woman

from Pennsylvania. “I think it starts out maybe that way, that public school teachers are motivated by the desire to help children learn and achieve. I don't think it ends up that way. I think they're burned out by the kids,” noted an Independent woman from Pennsylvania. “You can find bad in churches, schools, police officers. I grew up in New York and I would go to the beach and see a cop in the summertime take drugs, money away from a drug dealer and put it in his own pocket. So there are corrupt people in everything,” remarked a Republican woman.

For the most part, focus group participants rejected that the public sector has a motivation that is unique from the private sector. “The government is the entity up there that is collecting the money to pay [a police officer’s] salary because they are supplying the service. Could it be done in the private sector? You best believe it probably could be done a lot more because we wouldn't need as many police chiefs and all this other stuff,” stated an Independent man from Florida. “There is really no difference between corporate life and government anymore. Government is a corporation. It's a legal entity. It's an institution. It is something that we can't get our hands on anymore,” stated an Independent man from Florida.

### Consensus Builder Frame

**The Consensus Builder Frame is intended to create a vision of government bringing people together to plan and set a common vision for the future. It shows promise as an approach to re-connect people to government.**

Focus group participants could readily cite examples of areas that have been redeveloped due to the hard work of citizens. “In this city there are actual solid examples of exactly this -- business, citizens, government working together have made a better place,” stated an Independent man from Pennsylvania. “We've done that here in Londonderry. We have bought acres and acres of apple orchards to preserve them so that we don't have a lot of residential or commercial buildings,” remarked a Republican woman from New Hampshire.

Tested in:  
PA and FL no headline  
CA and NH: [The Consensus Builder](#)

In cities and towns all around the country, there are dramatic examples of the positive changes that communities can make when citizens, business, and government work together. City centers that were crumbling and losing their economic core have been revitalized due to the vision of committed groups of people at the local level who worked (PA and FL: together to put a plan in place and build public consensus) (CA: together with their local government to put a plan in place and build public consensus that often takes years to develop) (NH: through their local government to put a plan in place and build public consensus that often takes years to develop). From small towns like Circleville to large cities like Chicago, neighborhoods have experienced a rebirth due to citizens’ organization, hard work and vision, (CA, NH: and due to the assistance of public institutions that help citizens come to consensus and achieve common goals).

For most, this sounded realistic and achievable to participants. “This is saying that the interests of business, government, citizens can all come together and not just in kind of a visionary way, that this really does happen,” suggested a Democratic man from Pennsylvania. A few, however, insisted that this only happens in a crisis. “And the government reacts; FEMA reacts, people react. They send help. The Red Cross comes in.

FEMA comes in. Private individuals come in. That's the only time you really see that kind of cooperation,” argued an Independent man from California.

Importantly, this message engaged focus group participants in wanting to work toward these kinds of solutions; they became more civic-minded and less cynical. “It takes me out of all this negativity,” remarked an Independent woman from California. “We need to work together. You need groups, meetings and things like that. It can't be done alone. We have to work together,” stated an Independent woman from Pennsylvania. “These people did something. They didn't sit around,” remarked a Republican man from Florida. “It has to be a citizen and civic involvement that gets these things started,” noted a Republican man from Florida.

For most, “consensus” is a positive and appropriate role for government. “That is really an important role of the government and that is exactly what they should be doing,” stated a Republican man from New Hampshire. “I think consensus is accurate because you have to pull in monies from the city, from private industry...All this has to be in front of all the voters. It's hard to sneak it by under the table, so it has to have consensus of the people to some part. So I think consensus is a pretty accurate way of saying that all these people have to agree or it is not going to happen,” stated a Republican man from New Hampshire.

Problematically, many focus group participants were not aware of the role government plays in these kinds of situations; they confused public and private sector activities.

### Constancy Frame

**The Constancy Frame is intended to illuminate the actions of government that are automatic and somewhat invisible to the public and to separate those actions from the whims of politicians. It attempts to create an image of government as stable and secure. These images were not compelling to focus group participants. They rejected that incremental change is of value, and noted that many of these are examples of what is not working in government.**

Many accepted the image of government as a stable force that will always be there, but this did not change their image of government nor their relationship to government. “But who will we have there with the government? I mean the

Tested in FL and PA:

The issues of the day and the political agenda change frequently, but the operation of government is a stable force that provides constancy. Much of the work of government, like Social Security, health and safety regulations, emergency response services, and many others, are consistent over time. Because of a structure with checks and balances, the system of government changes in incremental steps rather than dramatic shifts. Public officials come and go, but the foundation of our country remains.

Tested in CA:

A Solid Foundation

The issues of the day and the political agenda change frequently, but the operation of our civic institutions is a stable force that provides constancy. The founding fathers put in place a great experiment in democracy, and each generation has worked to protect and improve what it was given. From establishing voting rights for women and minorities, to creating health and safety regulations for business, the operation of government is steady, consistent, and slowly improving over time. Because of a structure with checks and balances, the operation of the public sector changes in incremental steps rather than dramatic shifts. There is some comfort in knowing that, even though public officials come and go, the foundation of our country and the process of governing remains.

government will always be there, but what kind of people are we going to have running it?” asked an Independent woman from Pennsylvania.

Others rejected that government is stable and constant. According to an Independent man from Florida, the examples of constancy listed in the statement are “broken, broken, broken. All those things are broken.” “I don't think we're really improving. I think we're going backwards,” stated an Independent woman from California. A Democratic man from Pennsylvania made the point that improvements are incremental and slow but “when things go bad, they go bad fast -- in one administration sometimes. Like environmental issues that take 30 years to build bipartisan support and you see it wiped out in the last four years.”

This statement sounded like a phony ideal that government is trying to promote. “The stable force and constancy -- I feel like it's a facade...if we actually lifted the covers, there are things that are underneath it that are rotten and are eating away at its foundation,” asserted an Independent man from Florida. “It's almost like a cover up when I see government saying equal opportunity and then when I turn on Nightline and I see voters in Florida, African Americans, their votes weren't counted,” argued an Independent man from California.

Finally, several questioned why incremental change should be a good thing and refuted the implication that change happens without some impetus. “I think in the past public officials were more leaders and they would change things that needed to be changed and they would spearhead movements, like Roosevelt. Present-day, it almost seems like our leaders are followers. That's the reason why things don't change is because no one wants to step out and risk,” stated a Republican man. “The government doesn't evolve on its own. It only changes under political pressure from people demanding change,” asserted an Independent man from California.

### Governance Frame

**The Governance Frame test article was developed to provide a role for the public in improving governance and to transition to a conversation about government that includes elected officials. The nuances of this message did not emerge in focus group participants' comments. Instead, many interpreted this as a call for volunteerism.**

Focus group participants interpreted this test message as being about inspiring people to get involved generally, not necessarily in government affairs. “It

Tested in NH:

The Process of Governance

The issues of the day and political leadership come and go, but the operation of our civic institutions, our democracy, is stable, constant and slowly changing over time. To create long-term change, citizens need to focus attention on civic institutions, large and small, and the process of governance. Personality politics distracts us from what really matters – a discussion of a range of options to meet our common objectives. If each one of us asked questions of our city council members and our local school board, or wrote letters to the editor or mayor, we could force attention back where it belongs – on governing, not campaigning. In this way, true statesmanship could emerge, as citizens force the discussion about our country's future toward real conversations about long-term decisions, not just the next election. Forward thinking governance, and implementing changes over time, should be the work of the public sector. Citizens need to help return the process to those goals.

goes back to making the public stance, making a positive contribution to the community. We have the government; we also have the community. You can always start from a small part and go much bigger. Instead of sitting there and complaining and ‘oh, I hope this works out,’ go out and do something,” stated a Democratic woman from New Hampshire.

Among Republicans, this test message sparked a conversation about whether or not one person could make a difference. While some were skeptical, most asserted that one person could make a difference, because each individual’s actions add up. “I think a lot of us have that same attitude and that’s why so many things never get achieved, and I personally feel the same way you do. How can just myself, just writing a letter to the editor, make a difference? But maybe if 50 people wrote a letter to the editor regarding the same exact issue, then something might happen,” remarked a Republican woman from New Hampshire.

### Stewardship Frame

**The Stewardship Frame was intended to motivate engagement with government by highlighting a fundamental value that Americans hold dearly – leaving the country in good shape for future generations. This frame was successful in motivating concern about government policies. However, some focus group participants, particularly Democrats, expressed a sense of hopelessness about what this generation can do to improve things for the next. The value is strong and compelling, but the call to action was overwhelming for Democrats.**

Tested in CA and NH:  
An Eye Toward the Next Generation  
 Over the course of American history, each generation has worked to provide a better quality of life and a better system of governance for the next generation. Child welfare laws were developed to protect children from harsh work environments and public schools were founded to provide all children with an equal chance for a good education. Social Security and Medicare were created to address poverty and poor health among the elderly. The GI Bill allowed members of the military the opportunity to advance their education at the end of their service to the country. Air and water quality requirements were put in place to improve public health. All of these improvements were controversial at the time, but it is through civic duty and a public sector that rises to meet new challenges that we improve the common good and leave the country in better shape for our children. In what way will our generation demonstrate its duty to the next generation?

This frame resulted in very strong emotional reactions. It reminded focus group participants of all of the problems facing the country. “What we’ve done is make college education beyond their financial capabilities. We’ve done that for them,” a Democratic man from New Hampshire stated sarcastically. “I think we have a war dragging down this whole country and it is going to affect the next generation,” noted a Democratic man from New Hampshire.

They worried that the next generation will be worse off than they are. “I’m 50 years old and the saddest thing is, I think I’m going to leave my kid worse off,” stated a Democratic man from New Hampshire. “My grandchildren are definitely going to pay the price. I can’t offer them right now a better education or better health or better anything,” worried an Independent woman from California.

Importantly, focus group respondents expressed a sense of responsibility for policy decisions that will affect the next generation. “I just can't help but think about my son. He is 12 years old and if he were to read that at 35 and look back when he was 12 and say, ‘God, my parents -- the people my parents had in office and elected, they really screwed things up.’ That's what I'm afraid of, that he'll say that,” remarked a Republican man from New Hampshire. “I think our generation is using up and destroying our heritage for the next generation,” stated an Independent man from California. “We've lost our vision and our vision became materialism, opposed to social responsibility. I think that's the big difference in Americans. We have become individualists as opposed to wanting to be responsible for each other,” explained an Independent woman from California.

Interestingly, Republicans seemed motivated to act after being exposed to this frame, but some Democrats felt overwhelmed and cynical. “There is so much resistance from the government these days in terms of trying to do anything for the public good, that the people are just worn down when it comes to dealing with the government. They don't want to get involved with their civic duties anymore, because their attitude is cynical towards the government,” stated a Democratic man from New Hampshire.

### Civic Duty Frame

**The Civic Duty Frame defines citizenship as actions that contribute to improving public institutions – involvement in public education, community watch – to expand the role of citizenship to include actions other than voting for elected officials or other “political” acts. It was successful in inspiring people to get involved in their communities, but it did not provide a defined call to action specifically for civic responsibilities.**

Tested in CA and NH:

Civic Duty

Each of us has a role to play in improving our public institutions. When a parent works with a parent teacher organization at a public school, that parent is acting to improve the quality of public education. When a concerned neighbor sets up a community watch program, that neighbor is making the community a better place to live. The responsibilities of citizenship extend far beyond voting. A good citizen acts on behalf of the country we live in by working to improve public institutions and speaking out on issues of concern or serving on community committees.

Focus group participants were generally enthusiastic about this test statement. They were reminded of their personal responsibility to a broader community. “I think basically that we owe something to give back to our community and that we all need to do it in whatever form we can, be it volunteering in a school, or raising funds for an institution or doing anything. We're all capable of doing something,” stated a Democratic woman from New Hampshire. Some saw themselves in these examples, which reinforced their sense of citizenship. “When I read this I said, ‘Oh, good. I'm doing my civic duty. I am playing a role because I do go to school and I did start the neighborhood watch on my street. I do vote, so that's me,’” stated an Independent woman from California.

Problematically, this statement did not help to clarify the distinction between charitable acts and citizenship. When asked if volunteerism and citizenship are the same or different, a Democratic woman from New Hampshire responded, “I think they can be the same thing.

For example, the parent who volunteers to work in the school, that is volunteer work. I consider volunteer work anything you are not being paid for. It's also my civic duty.” Without a clear distinction, people will not be inspired to engage with government. Rather, they will volunteer for whatever activity interests them at the moment. A Republican man from New Hampshire explained his choices in volunteer activities: “It's what my interests were at that point in time. I don't think I considered it as being a good citizen or a bad citizen if I didn't participate. I just felt that it was something that I should do in order to make my life [or] my children's lives better. But I didn't consider it as being a good citizen because I was doing that.”

## Long-term Vision Frame

**The Long-term Vision Frame attempts to separate public institutions from politics by suggesting that the mission of public institutions is to plan for the long-term. While focus group participants reject that government plans for the long-term, it is a criteria they believe is important and could be a compelling differentiation for government.**

Tested in CA:

### Long-term vs. Short Term

Politics tends to see only as far as the next election, but our public institutions have to see as far as the next generation. In a variety of areas our public institutions are working on projects that will come to fruition in 10, 20, 30 years or more – roads and transportation systems, sources of energy, Social Security, and environmental impacts, just to name a few. The public sector has to have a long view, not just from election to election. Forward thinking governance, and implementing changes over time, is the work of the public sector. Sometimes that means getting politicians off the backs of the people who are trying to implement the public's long-term agenda. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Focus group participants stated that it is important to have a long-term view. They said they would like government to plan for the long-term, but they did not believe that government currently operates this way.

This frustration is exacerbated by focus group participants' inability to separate public institutions from politicians. An Independent woman from California disputed the statement's conclusion that politicians tend “to see only as far as the next election. It should say the next paycheck.” “Public sector has no view. They've got their heads crammed up their rear ends; they don't do what needs to be done until somebody forces them to do it,” argued an Independent man from California.

**Refined Test Series**

Following the initial test series, the research team met to refine the framing elements that showed promise in advancing a conversation about the role of government. The initial focus groups indicated that what is missing from the conversation is the mission, values and motivation of the public sector: working on behalf of the public good, advancing common interests, protecting public safety, and creating a vision for the future. This value-laden conversation has the potential to remind people that there is a higher purpose to governing. Furthermore, the research suggested that reinforcing a sense of the collective would be necessary, perhaps by reminding people of their role as citizens. Finally, the early research suggested that “protector” and “consensus builder” could each be a clear and compelling persona for government.

With several working hypotheses in hand, the research team developed three test articles that incorporated all of the frame elements that seemed to have promise, based on our analysis of the first round of focus groups. Each of the specific elements is noted in the table below.

Communications Element	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Mission/objective Level 1	Quality of Life	Preservation/Health	Common Good
Level 2	Community/Future/ Stewardship/Children	Practical Management, Security	Innovation Problem Solving
Persona	Economic Development	Food Quality	Energy (buy utility)
Government action Mechanism/ Metaphor	Consensus Builder	Rule Setter/ Protector	Rule Setter/ Innovator
	Funding/ convening Building/ Strengthening vs. Declining, Spiraling	Testing/ enforcing Monitoring	Providing services Unsticking

**Community Quality of Life Frame (See article at end of discussion.)**

**The *Springfield Plans a New Future* article develops the idea that the mission of the public sector should be to enhance quality of life. It touches on the values of community, stewardship, and the future. The article frames government as a “consensus builder” that works with citizens and business to come to agreement on important community objectives. It uses metaphorical language (spiraling decline) to explain the consequences of a public sector with few resources, and to explain the result of a vibrant public sector (building, strengthening).**

**This article is largely effective at communicating a different image of government and at reconnecting people to government. Focus group participants were able to articulate the relationship between government revenue and community quality of life. They were enthusiastic about a consensus-building role for government that engaged government, citizens, and business in a common endeavor. While they knew little of government efforts to redevelop communities, many began to see**

**communities as a system in which citizens, government and business each have a role.**

Focus group participants found this story interesting and credible because it explains a situation that focus group participants have experienced in their daily lives. “This sounds a lot like our community...with industry going and the tax base going and people having to struggle to pay more taxes and trying to freeze the taxes,” explained a Democratic woman from Wisconsin. “I don’t see this as anything different than what goes on in the rest of the country,” noted a Republican man from Wisconsin.

The article helped people understand the relationship between jobs, taxes and the health of a city. In particular, “spiraling decline” made apparent the consequences of reducing government programs during an economic recession. A Republican man from Wisconsin described the relationship between jobs and the health of a city: “You don’t have decent paying jobs, you don’t have a tax base, you don’t have folks to pay your taxes and you don’t have the manufacturing tax base to help support the infrastructure of the city.” “Obviously, there is economic decline in the community which caused the spiraling effect that goes down. But when it goes down to your schools and things like that, it is truly a matter of the snowball going downhill because you are truly dealing with the future of that community,” stated a Democratic woman from Oregon.

When they understood the relationship between the local economy, government programs and quality of life, focus group participants then recognized the importance of stable government revenue. “Let’s say if 25 percent of the income goes down, then you’re going to have anywhere from 10 to 25 percent of the people in the town seriously affected by that, whether it’s a fire fighter that got laid off, or it’s the teacher that got laid off or cut back to half-time, or the library that is not open all the time...that’s going to have a cascading effect throughout the community,” explained a Republican man from Oregon.

That all sectors of society have a role in restoring the community is a compelling element of this frame. “Isn’t that what creates a community?” asked a Republican woman from Wisconsin. Shared responsibility inoculates against the criticism that “nanny government” does too much. “People are proud when they are a part of things,” noted a Republican woman from Wisconsin. “It’s empowering and it’s positive. It’s getting everybody involved, everyone together,” stated a Republican man from Oregon. In fact, one focus group participant explained that two-way communication is inherent to democracy. “The government that succeeds the best is one that communicates with the people it governs. If there isn’t communication, the communication has to be 2 ways. If there isn’t anything being done, it’s just dictates coming down from one end, you might as well have a dictatorship instead of a representative form of government,” explained a Republican man from Wisconsin.

At the same time, a few complained that it is unrealistic to expect that everyone will come to consensus and cooperate. “This is pretty idealistic. I’ve been at enough functions where you think you’re going to get all of these people to cooperate and help

and it's like everything else – 10% of the people do everything,” stated a Democratic man from Wisconsin.

Most focus group participants supported a consensus building role for government, but many noted that it is an unrealistic role, because they have become convinced that government is incapable of effecting change. This is due, in part, to the fact that they rarely hear about government's role in making these efforts happen. The role of government in helping an area re-develop is practically invisible. Note the following range of explanations concerning how different communities transform:

- *Land developers saw a vision and bought the land. (Republican woman, Oregon)*
- *It became trendy. Younger people moving in there and more affordable houses. (Democratic woman, Wisconsin)*
- *Some sort of draw – a good restaurant or theatre – something would bring people in and then if people are coming in, more starts to develop around it. (Republican woman, Wisconsin)*
- *Another idea would be that a named entity develops a residential site. A known architect in town, a known business, and that becomes the anchor for the area. Then it builds up from there. (Republican man, Wisconsin)*

While most focus group participants began to see the community as a system in which government and business both have a role, a few Republicans continued to view government as a large and greedy institution that is separate from community systems. “Unemployment is rampant throughout the United States. But they're still saying ‘give us more bonds. We'll have more money,’” noted a Republican woman from Oregon. Wasteful government is now being checked by a tight economy, asserted a few. “When the interstate system was built, when subsidies were in place, when fuel prices were low, when you could do so much for so little and the government was there with a check – the great society of Lyndon Johnson and all of that. That's a carryover that we're now living with and the government can't afford to do it anymore, simply because they can't raise taxes high enough to do it. The trickle-down effect becomes the state can't produce as much, and therefore the local government can't produce as much revenue and we all pay for it in the long run,” explained a Republican man from Wisconsin.

Similarly, while most people agreed that there is a role for business, government and citizens working together, some Democrats were suspicious of business' motives. “Whenever I see ‘business will be involved,’ I immediately think ‘what are they going to gain from this?’ It's a pretty cynical interpretation, I'll admit that, but I never, ever see citizens aligning with businesses in a way that business isn't trying to get a buck out of it,” cautioned a Democratic man from Oregon.

Tested in WI and OR:

**Springfield, IL Plans a New Future through Economic Development**

American News Service -- In many ways, Springfield, Illinois *is* America. Small in size, with only 250,000 residents, its diversity nevertheless mirrors that of communities across the country. It is both urban and suburban, and farmland is just a few miles away. And Springfield has experienced all the trends that have affected the rest of the nation: economic decline, increasing unemployment, population growth, aging, an influx of immigrants, among others, say staff members at the National Conference of Mayors who are watching this community in transition carefully to see if others can learn from its example.

The problems it faces are nothing new. Long-time residents say that quality of life in Springfield has declined precipitously over the past 10 years. One large employer after another left town, which increased unemployment and eroded the local tax base. The local government tightened its belt and cut expenses across the board. “Every budget was cut – education, law enforcement, state salaries, everything,” explained Carol Green, local business owner and president of the Springfield Rotary, which documented these changes in a white paper presented last year to the city commissioners. “While the cuts seemed necessary at the time,” Green continued, “the end result was a spiraling decline in our quality of life. The average classroom now has 35 students. The library is only open three days a week. Roads are in disrepair. The list goes on and on.”

In response to that white paper, and a series of ten town forums conducted over the past year, city commissioners determined that the only way to stop the decline was to enlist (WI: every citizen; OR: a broad base of citizens) in creating a new vision for the community. Six months ago, the city commission convened a task force of civic leaders, business owners, and citizens to develop a Blueprint for the Future and to work with citizens in building consensus around the plan. The plan will be released next week at a public forum hosted by the Rotary. “Everyone will need to commit in some way to make this plan work,” noted Robert Campbell, a citizen member of the task force. “We are asking local business owners to work with us in attracting new employers to the area, and we are creating a loan program to encourage residents to start small businesses. Health professionals are being recruited to commit to the free clinic. Most important, we are asking taxpayers to support several bonds that will help us achieve the funding we need for quality education. If we don’t provide our children with a good education, then the future of our town is in serious jeopardy,” Campbell concluded.

It is an ambitious plan with an uncertain outcome, say critics like Tom Mitchell, owner of the largest independent restaurant chain in the city, Copper Kettles, who says he is taking a wait-and-see attitude before committing to the plan. City Commissioner Taylor Wear thinks otherwise. “We’ve all seen communities that have turned around when government, business and citizens work together,” says Wear. “We owe it to our children, the town’s future citizens, to get this done. That is what citizenship is all about.” Copies of the Blueprint will be posted to the Commission’s website at [www.springfieldfuture.gov](http://www.springfieldfuture.gov).

**Public Health Protection Frame (See article at end of discussion.)**

**This article highlights the public health objective of the public sector by bringing attention to problems in the food quality inspection program. It characterizes government as a protector and a standard setter that is responsible for monitoring and enforcing regulations to protect public safety. It incorporates values such as security, practical management and responsibility. Finally, it suggests that government is a check on business, but that business also *wants* government oversight to maintain quality.**

**Protector is a compelling persona for government. Both Democrats and Republicans worried that, if left unchecked, corporations will not act to protect public safety. At the same time, however, focus group participants asserted that businesses do not deliberately put out a bad product, or they would not be in business for long. In addition, there was a tension in the group conversation concerning participants' assumptions about where the ultimate responsibility lies – with consumers or with citizens, collectively. They did not want government to be overly protective, a nanny. Rather than assume that all businesses operate with careless disregard for public safety, focus group participants would rather center governments' energies on dealing with repeat offenders -- businesses that have demonstrated a willingness to compromise public safety. This approach allows people to discard their assumptions about government being anti-business and their concerns that government is becoming overly protective.**

Focus group participants expected to read the typical business v. government frame, in which government places undue burdens on business, so they were stunned to find that some businesses actually have higher standards than government. “If private industry is saying the government's standards are not high enough for their consumers, there is definitely something wrong with that picture,” asserted a Republican woman from Oregon. The notion that some businesses set higher standards or support higher standards is an important element of this article because it helped focus group participants discard the business vs. government mindset. Interestingly, this lens on the issue improved focus group participants' views of the good corporate citizen, but not government. Note the following conversations about Jack in the Box:

***Wisconsin Democrats***

- F: *They've taken some ownership and responsibility.*  
F: *Yeah, I thought it was admirable.*  
M: *They want to keep their business growing.*

***Wisconsin Republicans***

- F: *They're not relying on the government to come in and tell them what to do. They're going ahead and taking care of it themselves.*  
M: *They've got to protect their image.*

F: *The responsible companies will do that.*

Both Republicans and Democrats saw government as a necessary check and balance on the private sector. Across ideology, most focus group participants were nervous that corporations would try to circumvent government regulations. A Republican man from Portland wondered how having more inspectors would help “if these people are still policing themselves. They've basically still got the same problems. The inspector is there one day. They go back to do whatever they want the other days.” “When I read that corporate plants are identifying their own vulnerable points, meaning that there is little to no oversight of their production, that concerns me,” asserted a Democratic man from Oregon. Most were concerned and confused when they read about limits on government authority to act in shutting down a plant. “That’s the problem – they don’t have the authority to do something when they’re supposed to be the government. Nobody’s more powerful than the government,” stated a Democratic man from Wisconsin.

At the same time, focus group participants did not necessarily believe the government is overly concerned about the public welfare either. “I don't think a lot of corporations or even the government really cares about the public that much. I think it all has to do with money anymore,” insisted a Republican woman from Oregon.

Furthermore, some were resistant to the idea that a company would be careless about safety requirements. They noted that companies with bad products cannot stay in business for long. “No company puts out a purposely bad product,” noted a Republican man from Wisconsin. “I think, for the most part, food processing plants are owned by major corporations who have stockholders they must answer to. Obviously they do not want their name in the news for delivery of substandard product,” suggested a Republican woman from Oregon.

There was a tension in the group conversation in participants’ assumptions concerning where the ultimate responsibility lies – with consumers or with citizens collectively. While these assumptions did not rest solely with one ideology or the other, Republicans tended to assume that consumers are responsible, while most Democrats expected that collective action is necessary to achieve change. For example, Republicans emphasized the importance of individual consumers. They noted that consumers pressure business to change through their buying patterns. Democrats were more likely to assert that citizens, acting together, pressure government to enact regulations. “When I read something like this, I'll go to my email and I send out to 100 friends immediately saying this is another reason you have to call your Congressmen and put some pressure. I have every one of my Representatives programmed in my cell phone. If something is egregious like this, I will call my Senator and my Congressman and talk about it and remind people who are like minded,” noted a Democratic man from Oregon.

Focus group participants were conflicted about how much responsibility government should have in this area. Most felt strongly that there are roles only government can fulfill, such as ensuring the safety of the food system. Some others, however, worried that people expect government to take responsibility for everything, turning government

into a nanny that takes care of citizens. Note the following conflicts among Democrats in Oregon:

- F: *Obviously there is a lot of responsibility to be shared here, but the consumer shares a certain part of the responsibility, too, in that respect. I know I'm willing to pay more for meat, if I know where it came from or if I know what it was fed and I do check where I buy my meat, where it comes from and what it is fed.*
- M: *I'm a little tired of everybody expecting the government to do everything for them. ...You have to be a smart consumer. You have to think about what it is you're buying.*
- M: *We're told that we should wash our food, that we should prepare it accordingly. It should be cooked accordingly. But if the food is coming out tainted from the processor, with some type of cancerous problem right from the beginning, that's of great concern.*
- F: *You have no way of telling whether you're buying something that's good or bad.*

Both of these tensions – business v. government and individual v. collective responsibility – disappeared when focus group participants considered repeat offenders. Any company can make a mistake, but a repeat offender has crossed the line and needs to be dealt with firmly, asserted focus group participants. Republicans, in particular, wanted to punish rogue companies, rather than assume that all companies act carelessly.

Most supported funding additional inspectors. A few strongly anti-tax people, however, opposed even this expenditure, if it would mean increased taxes. “For a penny a pound, we could quadruple the number of inspectors. Obviously, you’re increasing your bureaucracy, but we all pay an extra fee on our phone bills to have 911. And we don’t even blink at doing that... You nickel and dime the people to death – a penny here, a penny there. People are complaining about this stuff. I mean it’s a philosophy of does government do it or do you let the market drive it?” asked a Republican man from Wisconsin.

Tested in WI and OR:

**Weaknesses in Monitoring Food Safety Highlight New Challenges to Protecting Public Health**

American News Service -- The nation's meat inspection system is greatly understaffed, putting public health at risk, according to documents recently released under the Freedom of Information Act. Government audits, interviews with current and former inspectors and a close look at 113 meat recalls last year -- a record number -- show that there are too few inspectors, faulty training, and little authority for dealing with repeat offenders. As a result, public health is at risk, say government inspectors and public health experts.

In years past, federal inspectors explain, they patrolled the slaughterhouses looking to reject carcasses with tumors and other obvious defects. In overhauling the system ten years ago, the department expanded its focus to include a new and growing threat from invisible pathogens. This was driven by an E. coli outbreak that killed 4 children and sickened hundreds who had eaten hamburgers from Jack in the Box restaurants in late 1992 and early 1993. The outbreak showed that food-borne bacteria, which had long been thought to produce little more than a stomachache, now had the potential to kill. (WI: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 5,000 people die, and 325,000 people are hospitalized each year from food-borne illnesses like salmonella, listeria, and E. coli. OR: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million cases of food-borne illness occur each year, resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.)

The new rules implemented in 1995 shifted much of the responsibility for safety to corporate plants, requiring them to identify vulnerable points in their own production lines and build in steps to kill germs, according to a fact sheet from the CDC. As a result, the government now has federal inspectors with extra scientific training to review plants' safety systems. But there are fewer than 300 of these federal inspectors to oversee the thousands of carcasses processed each day, say critics of the system like Joe Risoli, Professor of Public Health at Kansas State University and a nationally recognized expert on food safety. "The Agriculture Department does not have the authority to order a recall when there is a problem," explains Risoli. "All it can do is urge private companies to make recalls when contaminated meat is discovered -- sometimes because people have fallen ill -- after it has been shipped to customers. This is not the way it should work and it leaves the public vulnerable to decisions made by people who don't necessarily have its best interest at heart."

The holes in the public inspection system have caused some companies to set their own guidelines for meat processing. Since the E. coli outbreak at its restaurants a decade ago, Jack in the Box has ordered its suppliers to test far more extensively for pathogens than the government requires. Other fast-food chains and some retailers have followed suit. The result is inconsistent food safety, says Mary O'Leery, a consumer advocate for Public Food Watch, which documents corporate behavior with respect to food policy.

Alan Riley, a former meat inspector agrees. "We expect the federal government to protect us from tainted food, but the budget for public inspectors is seriously under funded. For a penny a pound we could quadruple the number of public inspectors and go a long way toward improving the nation's safety." Senator Robins, a senior member of the Agriculture Committee, also agrees: "There is nothing more important than food safety, and genuine public sector oversight is the only approach that will work. We need to get beyond the tax-cutting frenzy in Washington and put a sensible budget in place." Whether that will happen depends on hearings scheduled around the country under the leadership of the CDC. Public commentary is invited through April 2005 at [www.cdc.foodsafety.gov](http://www.cdc.foodsafety.gov).

**Common Good Frame (See article at end of discussion.)**

**This article develops the idea that the role of government is to work for the common good. Like the article on food safety, government is expected to set standards and rules, but in this instance, government is also acting to help society innovate. Business leaders uncharacteristically communicate on the side of government intervention, to protect state businesses and the state economy from the negative influence of a self-interested corporation. It is not an anti-business position; government is acting on behalf of the common good to provide services that will move the community forward.**

**Focus group respondents' reaction to this article illuminated all of the assumptions they had about the public and private sectors. They discussed government inefficiency, corporate misbehavior, public sector responsibility to the common good, and corporate responsibility to profits. A central question for focus group respondents was the difference between government as an operator, a direct provider of services, and government as a regulator. They fully supported the latter to protect the public interest, but had strong reservations about government's ability to actually operate an enterprise. Acting for the common good became a very compelling value for focus group participants. Furthermore, this article was less protectionist in tone than the food systems article. Participants did not complain about government being over-protective. Finally, the ability to plan for the long term was an important distinction between the public and private sectors that shows promise as a characteristic of government that could be developed.**

In response to this article, all of the negative stereotypes of business and government emerged, as focus group participants struggled to determine whether it would be better to have business or government manage an electric utility. They spent much of the group conversation engaged in a debate about the differences between the public and private sectors.

Focus group participants compared the mission and motivations of the public and private sectors. They asserted that companies are motivated by profit, but most focus group participants did not mean that as a criticism. The desire for profit means that a corporation will only invest in a company if it has the knowledge to run it efficiently and make a profit. Therefore, many assumed that a private business would be more knowledgeable and would have more incentive to be efficient than government. "They'd probably have the knowledge to run it. If a company's going to buy a utility company, then obviously that's their expertise," stated a Republican woman from Wisconsin. "A private company is going to run it efficient, because if they don't, they're out of business," suggested a Republican man from Wisconsin.

At the same time, several recognized that many businesses are solely motivated by profit, to the detriment of the health of the company. "Private companies will run a business into the ground to suck out the profit margin and walk away and sell it to the next bidder in line and take it as a capital write-off," asserted a Republican man from Wisconsin.

Since government is not motivated by profit, many assumed that government would have no reason to be efficient. In fact, government inefficiency was the most often voiced criticism of a plan to institute government management of the utility. “I’m a little leery of anything that’s owned by the government, because it doesn’t necessarily become more efficient. I don’t know how the State would be at running an electric utility,” stated a Republican man from Wisconsin. Government ineptitude was also a concern, according to some participants. “The state can’t even balance its own checkbook. So the last thing I want them to do is monitoring our electricity,” noted a Republican man from Oregon. Note that focus group participants’ critique of government rested on the idea that government would actually *operate* the enterprise. “It’s not the responsibility of the government to run a business. It’s not their job,” argued a Republican man from Oregon.

When they considered government as a regulator, rather than an operator, focus group participants supported an active government role to protect the public interest. “Well, my feeling is that something like power that we all need should be regulated... And it comes of people knowing who their utilities commissioners are and voting for people who are in the consumer’s interest,” stated a Democratic man from Oregon.

They recognized that government’s motivation is to act on behalf of the common good, and government’s role as regulator helped them to see that motivation. Electricity, they asserted, is necessary to modern life, just like air and water, therefore government should have a role in making sure that it is run on behalf of the public. “You have to look at what this electricity means to our life in this day and age. ...today, you can’t exist without electricity and, depending on the need to the public, if we lived in a society where we could go out, chop the wood outside, you wouldn’t then have to regulate the power industry and stuff like that. But we can’t. So the need is there and the impact on the public is so great that it needs to be regulated,” stated a Democratic man from Wisconsin. Due to the public need and the nature of the industry, most focus group participants believed that it is important to have government oversight to protect the public from the actions of a monopoly.

While they did not believe that businesses are motivated by the common good, a few focus group participants suggested that some companies try to act on behalf of the community. “Hopefully, the company would have some kind of vested interest in the community, in the state – doing other things with their money in that state,” remarked a Democratic woman from Wisconsin. Many others noted that the fact that the private investor in this article is located out-of-state suggests that they will be less receptive to the needs of the local community. “Absentee landlordism...there is a potential they might be unaccountable to Arizona. Why do they care? They’re based in New York, Vermont, Connecticut, Florida, wherever it is. So there is a risk of that. Is it a realistic possibility? Is it a legitimate concern? Who knows?” noted a Republican man from Oregon.

As they compared the details of how public and private ownership differ, some discussed the impact on upgrading the utility’s infrastructure. Some focus group participants believed that public ownership would result in more infrastructure investments, while others believed

it would be in a private company's self-interest to continue to modernize. In discussing the benefits of public ownership, a Republican man from Wisconsin stated that, "Any profits made are sunk back into the business. That becomes a big advantage, because then they have to upgrade it, the infrastructure – or they have to plug it back into the operation somehow." Another Republican man from Wisconsin disagreed, saying, "Any company is going to modernize what it can afford to do."

Forced to choose between government and business, many focus group participants were at a loss to choose one over the other. "It's just scary to look at it, either way. If you have the government involved, it's got its own tendency to build its own infrastructure, layers of bureaucracy, all the rest of it. And if it's private, you worry about them spending the money in the right areas and have no control over it. You're caught between two conflicting areas," a Republican man from Wisconsin surmised.

Similar to the response to the food systems article, focus group participants were surprised by business' support for government ownership, and it caused them to re-think their assumption that business and government interests are necessarily at odds. "I thought 'wow, that's really, really responsible of these companies to want to sort of invest in the future in the community, rather than going for their short term bottom line,'" stated a Democratic man from Oregon. Others, however, continued to wonder about business' motives. "There must be something in it for them," cautioned a Democratic woman from Oregon.

One important dynamic emerged in this group conversation that suggests an opportunity to develop a unique characteristic for government – the ability to plan for the long term. Focus group participants believed that business is more interested in short-term profit than long-term stability or sustainability. "Everybody looks at the bottom line for now – not the bottom line for 20 years from now," complained a Republican man from Wisconsin. "I think that's part of the problem, because no one really looks long term so we have a domino effect... That's the problem that I see with a lot of major companies and a lot of major investors is that they don't look at the long-term effects of things and they go too short term and then they don't see how it affects the future," noted a Republican woman from Oregon. While they did not believe that government currently demonstrates long-term vision either, it is a characteristic that focus group participants believed is important and is missing from national decision-making. Government has an opportunity to develop the public's perception of this as being characteristic of public institutions and as distinguishing government from politics and the private sector.

Tested in WI and OR:

**Power to the People: Arizonans Debate How to Move the Energy System Forward**

National Wire Service -- As energy costs across the nation continue to rise, civic organizations in one state are taking charge with a surprising solution. Arizona Electric, that state's largest utility, is becoming the object of a tug of war in which the state's business elite have aligned with civic organizations to fight a proposed sale to an out-of-state private investment corporation, Nacel, Inc., and to encourage public ownership instead.

Last week Business Customers of Southwest Utilities, which represents 45 major employers, filed a petition asking the Arizona Public Utility Commission to reject Nacel's bid. Industrial users are especially worried that a private investment company will not spend the necessary funds to upgrade Arizona Electric's transmission facilities, which could make service unreliable. "One reason that energy prices are on the rise," explained Pat Simpson, a local business owner and member of the Coalition, "is that local energy companies are increasingly becoming managed by large corporate investors who know how to make profits, but don't know anything about delivering reliable electricity at reasonable prices. These large corporate investors are stuck in a mode of thinking that prioritizes short-term profits rather than long-term investment, innovation and growth."

Because Arizona Electric is a legal monopoly, the rates it charges, and how much profit it can earn, are regulated (OR: even though the company is privately owned). The Public Utility Commission has said that Arizona law sets the monopoly's profit at 10.5 percent. However, if Arizona Electric is sold to Nacel, the state would only have the authority to review the finances of the local holding company, not the finances for Nacel, itself. Without formal disclosure, how much (WI: of the taxes included in Arizona Electric's rates that are passed on to Arizona and the federal government; OR: real profit it makes) would remain a mystery, says Michael Pettit, a state consumer advocate. "The state would also have little ability to force Nacel to modernize Arizona Electric's infrastructure," Pettit concludes.

According to Simpson, some of the state's biggest employers favor public sector ownership of the utility: "Since we have to rely upon one utility for our energy, we have to make sure that it is managed for the good of all. Public sector ownership can address our common interests for the energy system. In Austin, TX, for example, the publicly-owned utility has committed to providing 20% of its energy through renewable resources, like wind and solar power, and is investing in the infrastructure to make that happen. This is an innovation that a private company would have little incentive to provide."

Chris Cooper, a state legislator, said he has the votes to authorize revenue bonds quickly to acquire the utility's assets. "The state can manage Arizona Electric better," Cooper said, "because the state has an incentive to make long-term improvements in the utility to ensure reliable high quality electric service, which is crucial for the common good." Observers expect a vote as early as May 1 on whether the in-state partnership will make a bid for public ownership.

## Summary of Communications Recommendations

At this stage of the research, there are several solid directions that show promise in re-framing government. Additional quantitative research will help to refine these recommendations. In addition, there are some aspects of the recommendation that need further investigation, such as developing the kinds of activities that will allow for engagement beyond voting. At this point, the research suggests that communicators should:

- Set a reasonable, not rhetorical, tone to appeal to people across political ideology.
- Emphasize the values and the mission of the public sector, rather than the services or scope of government.
  - Values: community, future, stewardship and practical management
  - Mission or objective: working on behalf of the common good, improving quality of life, and preserving public health
- Communicate collective, not individual, responsibility; use words such as “citizens,” “community,” “we,” “us,” etc.
- Convey compelling personas for government such as “protector,” but avoid the “nanny” image.
- Begin to develop an image of government as a long-term planner and consensus builder by publicizing government’s existing efforts in long-term planning and community development.
- Avoid pitting government against business. Instead, differentiate between responsible businesses and rogue businesses.
- Develop opportunities for engagement beyond voting.
- Move toward a new conversation as represented in the summary table below.

What We’ve Got	What We Need
Goal: specific Level 3 policy agenda	Mission: Common good, future, consensus
Actor: Government	Actor: Citizens, partners
Messenger: Politicians	Messenger: Citizens, businesspeople
Ideological	Practical problem solving
Individual	Collective
Consumer	Citizen, villager
Nanny	Protect & empower
It, the other	Us, we
Anti-business	Anti- rogue business
Programs and taxes	Quality of life, community