

HOW TO TALK ABOUT GOVERNMENT

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute's research on public perceptions of government. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, and a toolkit with sample talking points and communication materials. (www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials.

In this summary, we provide highlights from this research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

Situation Analysis

There are three fundamental observations that emerge from the research on the dominant discourse in America about government:

1. The word "government" poses an obstacle to productive thinking.

The word "government" is so freighted with pejorative baggage that it should be used with caution and is best used only after other terms that establish its public mission. Without this redirection, government is universally greeted with derision. Deep-seated ridicule, learned and conditioned over time, remains a major impediment to engaging citizens in a discussion about government as us, and government as problem-solver.

2. People's immediate reactions to the topic of government are limited to two narrow default frames: The first frame considers government to be elected leadership and its decision-making functions; the second regards government as a large, bureaucratic mass.

FrameWorks' original research referred to these as "Government as Mind" and "Government as Monolith" respectively. We have found advocates have an easier time understanding these two frames as "Government as Them," and "Government as It." Importantly, both of these frames render invisible that which government truly is and does, and discourage citizen engagement in government.

Government as "Them": The conflation of government with politics. Among the most damaging misperceptions of government is a chronically available "default frame" that equates government with elected officials, the current Administration and politics as usual, and suffers from parallel associations with corruption, partisanship, and elitism. We found that people are largely unaware of what government does aside from the functions associated with elected leadership such as making decisions, establishing rules, and law and order. When they do think of the rest of government, they often have an image of:

Government as "It": Government as a missionless, bureaucratic, paper-pushing thing. When reasoning in this frame, there is an exaggeration of government waste and inefficiency. With such an undeveloped understanding of what government is and does, it is not surprising that it is easy to engender public support for the privatization of government functions via claims of reduced fraud, waste and inefficiency.

3. People want to see a role for themselves as engaged citizens.

They want to engage in long-term problem solving, but see the domain of government (confused with politics) as being about short-term or shortsighted decision-making that systematically excludes them. However, when people are reminded of the goals of government and given vivid pictures to reinforce its mission, they readily engage in the discussion and in reasonable, problem-solving approaches to public issues. Working on behalf of the public good, advancing the common interest, protecting public safety, planning for the future – these are the core functions of the public sector that serve to engage people. This way of thinking about government is, however, so rarely evoked by opportunities in their daily lives that it remains vague and difficult to conjure for many Americans. Clearly, we must find more effective ways to trigger a “we the people” experience.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

There are many missing ingredients in the discussion about government, namely:

- Emphasizing the mission of government as distinct from, but not antithetical to, business.
- Reinforcing the notion of shared fate, in the form of the common good or quality of life, which gives rise to government in the first place.
- Offering a persona for government more in keeping with democratic ideals: responsible manager, protector, long-term planner, the people’s voice, etc.
- Connecting the role of government to values that the country as a whole embraces such as planning for a prosperous and healthy future for all, stewardship, and the building and preservation of community.

As the above factors emerged, they began to draw a distinction between two coherent and opposed views of government held by the public. *The Consumerist view*, while widely held, does little to move people to appreciate, protect and preserve a vigorous role for government in public life. Rather, it substitutes a “buyer beware” individualist mindset in the place of collective action, from its focus on getting the most for one’s money to small picture thinking about available products and point-of-purchase decisions. By contrast, *the Citizen view* promotes engagement with the common good and recognizes the shared public purposes of government.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Government

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal sequences, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively improve the public’s thinking about government. For the latest research findings and publications, please visit our website.

Values

The Common Good

Our nation’s success is based upon the power of people working together and each in his or her own way. We all benefit when citizens work with the public sector to identify problems and come to consensus on a vision to address those problems. Whether it is revitalizing a crumbling downtown, restoring parkland, or determining health and safety regulations, our nation’s quality of life now and into the future depends upon citizens and public agencies working for the common good.

Protection

We rely on our public institutions to set and enforce the regulations that will protect us from physical and financial harm. There are a variety of ways that federal, state and local agencies protect the public including: food quality standards, environmental controls, financial securities regulations, consumer fraud protections, workplace and product safety standards, to name a few. With the support of citizens and business, public sector institutions can set and enforce these protections on behalf of the public good.

Public Structures Simplifying Model

Economists now agree that what has made America so successful is the effectiveness of our Public Structures. The Public Structures Americans have created—such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, and schools and colleges—are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. Without them, it would be difficult or impossible to get lots of important jobs done. Developing countries have many smart, hard-working individuals, but they don’t have the Public Structures that are essential for overall prosperity.



Putting It All Together

Our nation's success is based on the power of people working together. Whether it is revitalizing a crumbling downtown, restoring parkland, or determining health and safety regulations, our nation's quality of life now and into the future depends upon citizens working together. The public structures Americans have created—from laws to highways and schools—are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. That's why we cannot tie the hands of the public sector through laws that limit its flexibility; we need to use government as one among many tools to aid us in innovating and problem-solving for the long-term.



Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about government.

DON'T:

- Invoke the word "government" at the start of any communications; you will cue up the "joke" response and likely the equation of government with electoral politics.
- Equate government narrowly with electoral politics, or citizenship with voting.
- Assume the public understands the difference between public and private sectors and don't assume the former is perceived more positively than the latter.
- Inadvertently buy into a Consumerist mind-set, encouraging Little Picture thinking about what government gives at what cost with what return.
- Focus in narrowly on public servants or particular public goods; rather show people coming together to resolve issues. This is as important to address pictorially as it is explanatorily. We need more images that cue up "villager mode" and make "doing government" more cognitively available to people.
- Be afraid of emphasizing the values that must underpin a government dedicated to public purposes.

DO:

- Begin communications by explaining government's mission—remind the public of the role of government in advancing common interests, protecting public welfare, working with citizens and business to advance common welfare. This is an important "set up" to any conversation about government's role in particular issues.
- Make government vivid by focusing on structures, not people in power or public servants. Show people coming together to resolve issues. This is as important to address pictorially as it is explanatorily. Use images that cue up "villager mode" and make "doing government" more cognitively available to people.
- Remind people of efficacious community action, of people coming together to solve common problems through such active and ongoing vehicles as city commissions, courts, neighborhood task forces, etc. Focus on the available public structures for achieving justice or consensus, not the people as victims or heroes.
- Identify the role for citizen action and citizen engagement in long-term national, state and local problem-solving around a particular issue, not merely short-term decisionmaking. This is governing as Stewardship and Responsible Management, with specific roles for citizens.