



Thinking Productively About Government
Supplementary Memo Based on Ten Cognitive Interviews

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute
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May 2005

Introduction

The ten interviews discussed in this memo comprise a second phase of elicitations that, in turn, is part of a larger FrameWorks Institute project exploring Americans' patterns of reasoning as they think about government. A special focus of this research is a search for opportunities to promote understandings consistent with positive and constructive views of what government is and does. The series of interviews discussed here had a two-fold purpose. First, it sought to complement the findings from Cultural Logic's first round of elicitations on the topic of government's role (see "Mind and Monolith: Findings From Cognitive Elicitations," 2004, Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute) by probing more directly on certain key points. Second, the researchers introduced specific language, ideas, and perspectives during the interview in order to observe any potential positive impacts on subjects' framing of government within the course of the interview. This second phase of elicitations, then, served as both an additional data set and as an exploratory study aimed at facilitating the Simplifying Models project currently being conducted by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute.

Subjects

These interviews were conducted in Illinois in December 2004, in Evanston and urban and suburban Chicago. Subjects were recruited using several methods including so-called "snowball recruiting" and postings on a local web-based bulletin board (craigslist.com). Subjects included six women and four men; five European-Americans, two African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, and one Hispanic-American; three conservatives and seven liberals. Six of the subjects were under forty and four were over forty.

Findings

As in the first set of interviews, these ten subjects initially tended to express a narrow interpretation of government (essentially reducing it to elected officials and the icons of the nation) and a great deal of general cynicism about its modes, motives and employees – a striking pattern given that the majority of the subjects described themselves as more liberal than conservative, yet not surprising given early rounds of research which found the same pattern. References to governmental inefficiency and corruption were frequent in the early stages of the conversations, regardless of the subject’s political orientation.

On the other hand, a degree of optimism also often eventually emerged in the conversations, as participants spoke about what governments could and should do. This change probably reflects a type of “togglng” between two modes of thinking and talking about government – a “rhetorical mode” in which subjects repeat the frames that are familiar in public discourse and a “reasonable mode” in which subjects are earnestly and open-mindedly thinking about the topic, trying to understand it and reason about it. One of the ways in which communications about government can be most productive is by helping people think about the topic in reasonable mode.

The remainder of this memo focuses on subjects’ positive perceptions of government and the context in which these understandings emerged.

Government as Consensus Builder

The interviews were successful at establishing a broader understanding of government’s role as a consensus-builder, by drawing the participants’ attention to many of the decision-making functions of government. Specific probes asked participants to consider how school curriculums are designed, speed limits are set, and the postal service operates. Each was effective at getting people to consider the consensus-building function that government provides the citizenry. These examples also helped people to gain a better awareness of the true size and role of the government, and to expand their perceptions beyond the popular culture’s cartoon of a corrupt elected official.

Q: What’s your understanding about how we decide what, for example, the speed limit should be or where roads should go? How do those kind of decisions get made?

A: I know one way is they do ask the people. Well, here, they do ask the people in the community. They hold meetings and they also send letters out – “This is what needs to be done, this is how it can be done, What is your thought on it?” – and I like that because you get the opinion of the overall community, those that fill it out. So I think that’s one way that they go about seeing about changes being made.

Note that although the interviewer frames these decisions as ones that “we” make, the subject’s strong tendency to think of government as “they” shapes her answer. The words of one informant who claimed that, “Everyone is in the government” were not reflective of general thinking and attempts by the interviewer to get people to use “we” in the discussion of government met with limited success.

Nonetheless, the response just cited takes the subject in a constructive direction.

This same subject later recognized how her perception of government had changed over the course of the interview by acknowledging that as a teacher, she too was in fact a part of the government. This observation reflects people's "cognitive blindness" to the aspects of government not associated with elected leadership, but also the capacity to shift to a more accurate and inclusive perspective on what government is and does.

She also addresses how difficult it is to please everyone when making political decisions.

Let's see, as a teacher rep – I guess that was my indirect way of being a part of government, I just thought about it! I'd like to wipe that thing out of my mind. It was not fun. I mean just the operation of things and how your opinion can hurt somebody else, and not really wanting it to hurt anyone else, but because you think it's the best decision, and it ends up being the best for some and not for others, and that's hard, that's really hard.

In the same vein as this response, the interview question that most strongly drove subjects to reflect on government's consensus-building role was a hypothetical scenario asking participants to imagine planning a town from scratch. In the process they were encouraged to consider the scope of factors they would need to address (schools, commercial zoning, sanitation, roads etc.) and the range of competing interests to which they would have to answer.

Government as Collective Public Conscience

Another promising finding was the relative ease with which the interviewer was able to get participants to back down on a commonly stated belief that governments should be run like businesses and, as such, that government efficiency and productivity should be evaluated according to the same criteria that businesses are. With only minimal guiding, the interviewer was generally successful at getting people to concede that government was responsible for undertaking certain tasks, such as road maintenance and postal service, which could never be profitable. This recognition allowed people to temporarily re-evaluate the broader parallel they often drew between business and government; if the "bottom line" were the primary factor in decision-making then some very important work would never get done and services would be unevenly distributed across society.

Business, the bottom line is how much profit can we make; on the government side, I think the bottom line should be—I'm not sure if it always is — how can we support our constituencies the best.

Despite the hedge, this response reflects a recognition of the fundamental difference between government and business. While the term "public sector" is not particularly well understood or appreciated by most people, this core concept is grasped and can be built on.

Subjects were also willing to go further in recognizing that government has a constraining, conscience-like function that is missing in the realm of business.

The question is, who are they [i.e. private military contractors operating in a war zone] going to answer to? There's no accountability there. They can shoot whomever they want, and what's going to happen? How are you going to hold them up to a certain standard of behavior?

Government was generally perceived as being less efficient than business but more likely to act with society's best interests at heart. In this respect Government was cast as the collective moral conscience of the country that would be absent if the country were run by businesses alone.

I believe that government should be a protector of their constituents, of the environment, etc, providing them with basic needs.

Subjects' considerable support for joint ventures between the private and the public sectors reflects people's belief that such collaboration combines businesses' presumed efficiency with governments' heightened social accountability. Although it is difficult to overcome people's pre-existing beliefs concerning government's inefficiency, there are promising indications that the ethical high ground of the government as collective moral conscience might serve as a useful entry point to positive thinking about government.

Government as Community-Builder

Not surprisingly, people were most positive about examples of government activity as it affected their immediate surroundings and their lived experiences. In this positive and familiar context, subjects often used the term "community." Furthermore, several people posited that government is uniquely suited to fostering community-building simply because the government provides an overarching structure that is involved in so many aspects of our lives. Even those who were generally negative about government and government intervention were supportive of its role as a community builder. One young woman spoke explicitly about this role:

I would think the idea of government regulating everything stimulates a sense of community within the people, so if everything were run by private companies, I don't think it would feel as much... there wouldn't be as much sense of a community.

Another woman expressed similar sentiments and also emphasized government's role as a mediator and a protector:

I still feel like the government is for helping the people. It should be for strengthening the community, for strengthening the city, the country, and also for keeping things regulated fairly, and just making sure things run smoothly, and trying to keep as many people happy and content as possible without causing too much confusion.

As noted earlier, there remains a significant challenge in helping people to identify with the government rather than thinking of it as an outside force. Nevertheless, the statement above and others like it are good examples of a shift to associating government in a positive way with the community.

Government as a “Tool” of the People

The model of government as community builder makes it easier for people to think of government as something they are a part of, just as they are a part of their communities. A related understanding reframes government as an instrument which people use to get things done. Consider the optimistic words of this young man:

I think when people see it [the government] as a tool and they try to use it as a tool, I think it's more effective. It's not this big, bad body that's coming to get you and take your tax money, you know, every year. I mean these are folks that are working for you, hopefully trying to simplify and give you structure to live within.

(Note that the last sentence reflects, once again, the challenge in inducing subjects to avoid thinking of government primarily as “other people,” even if good people.)

Government as Living Organism

Another promising metaphor that emerged from the interviews framed government as part of an organic body. A conservative woman with a military background introduced this metaphor:

I see how the government, the military works, and it's just amazing that some days the government can still function, because you think it should be like a whole entity working together, all the parts, you know, like a body working together, one foot in front of the other, but it's so disjointed and being pulled in different directions.

This metaphor evokes the interdependency of different parts and also the complexity of integrating the function of these complex parts. This integration role – which involves coordinating, supervising, and regulating activities in sectors too large and numerous to be managed by individuals – is another essential aspect of government’s function, and one that might be productively built on in the public’s understanding. Subjects separately identified the processes of coordinating, supervising and regulating as positive and

important roles that government performs – in this organism metaphor, these important functions are combined.

Directions for Future Communications Development

- As much as possible, the positive language of “community” should be used to help promote the idea that the government provides an infrastructure that connects us all as integral and vital members.
- Discussion of specific, concrete scenarios proved the most effective way to get people to re-consider their cynical views of government – i.e. to move from the reflexive “rhetorical mode” into the more constructive “reasonable mode.” However, it will not be productive to frame these scenarios in terms of the specific “services” that government provides – such a framing would promote a Consumer stance towards government, further reinforcing the sense that government is Others, and downplaying the role of engaged Citizen. Instead, it will be most productive to open people’s eyes to the many concrete functions that government performs on behalf of all of us, thanks to our collective investment in these parts of our communities.
- The hypothetical city planning exercise seemed particularly effective in helping people to recognize the complexity of government activity and the importance of consensus-building. More simulations of this nature should be developed as they have the potential to get people more engaged as they think about government and their role in relation to it. While a computer simulation game like *Sim City* might be an effective and entertaining way to stimulate this type of reflection, there is also a need for communications tools and strategies that have similar effects. Simply put, Americans need more sustained practice in "doing" government.
- Two metaphorical directions suggested themselves during the conversations. First was the understanding of government as part of an integrated dynamic whole in which we, as citizens, are also components (e.g. a body). Second is the government as an instrument that the public uses to achieve its purposes. Each of these metaphors promotes a shift from viewing the government to “them” to understanding it as “us.”