



How to Talk About Government Toolkit: Frequently Asked Questions

This document is not intended to provide “the right answers” to questions you might be asked, but rather to offer illustrations of how to work with values and models that FrameWorks research has proven to be effective in improving understanding of government. In the following Q and A, we demonstrate how an advocate might think about turning unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to advance a more effective message. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these principles into practice.

Q. Is your project just another effort to put a more attractive “face” on government? Why is your organization interested in “marketing” government?

Less Effective Response:

Over the past several decades, Americans’ image of government has grown increasingly negative, largely due to very high-profile attacks on the value and credibility of government, both from the political right and left.

Analysis:

- Repeats and therefore inadvertently reinforces the negative image of government
- Allows the discussion to stay at the level of “image” as opposed to substance
- Evokes the image of partisan, rhetorical argument – taking people away from the theme of productive, responsible governance

More Effective Response:

This is really about reminding people of the important work that we all appreciate and that only happens through collective efforts on behalf of the public – everything from safeguarding our foods, our medications, our clean air and water, to establishing fair conditions for workers and a level playing field for business.

Analysis:

- Resists the “bait” of talking directly about “government”
- Instead focuses on the important *activities* of the public sector (including protector role whose value is appreciated, according to research)
- Leaves room for actors other than government per se

Q. It’s commonly accepted that the era of big government is over. Are you trying to bring it back?

Less Effective Response:

No, we believe along with most Americans that more efficient government is in everyone’s interest.

Analysis:

- Accepts government bloat as the topic, rather than bridging to a more productive topic altogether

More Effective Response:

We want the same things all Americans want for our society, like prosperity, security and a clean environment. And we want to create whatever structures are necessary to insure those things—no more, no less.

Analysis:

- Focuses on the activities and products of government
- Uses the idea of public structures as a way of expressing government’s role

Q. Many Americans believe that businesses can solve problems more efficiently and effectively than government can. What would you say to them?

Less Effective Response:

Businesses are good at many things, but as many recent scandals have reminded us, they can also act in ways that don’t serve the interests of the

broader society.

Analysis:

- Sets up competitive, either-or thinking about the roles of government and business
- Likely to trigger backlash due to positive sentiments about business

More Effective Response:

Actually, businesses, individual citizens and public agencies all play critical roles in creating and maintaining the public structures our prosperity depends on.

Analysis:

- Avoids condemning business, while promoting positive role for government
- Mentions role for others besides government in creating collective benefits

Q. What are the areas of government that need the most improvement, in your opinion?

Less Effective Response:

There is always room for government to improve in certain areas, such as explaining its activities to the public, encouraging citizen participation and getting the people's work done efficiently.

Analysis:

- Accepts critique of government as the topic, and elaborates on this topic

More Effective Response:

We're actually more interested in bolstering all the areas where the public structures we have collectively created are *working well* – making American society more successful than it could ever be simply through individual efforts. And, where these structures are breaking down, we need to stabilize and repair them.

Analysis:

- Avoids focus on government per se
- Sidesteps invitation to focus on government weaknesses/failings
- Bridges to discussion of valued activities and products of government

Q. In a democracy, we get the government we want by definition, don't we?

Less Effective Response:

Yes and no. We certainly elect the leaders we believe will best represent our interests. But voters aren't always aware of the long-term effects their choices will have.

Analysis:

- Criticizes voters rather than offering them new insights
- Accepts and reinforces the equation between "government" and elected leaders

More Effective Response:

The real question is how we get the society we want, one that provides prosperity, security and quality of life. The way we get that is by working together to build and maintain the structures that create those benefits.

Analysis:

- Builds on the Common Good perspective that is motivating to Americans
- Refers to the activities and products of government rather than "the government"

Q. Would you agree that the main difference between a liberal and a conservative is that a liberal wants more and better government and a conservative wants less?

Less Effective Response:

Yes, unfortunately today many conservatives insist that government has become "the problem." It's always a bit ironic to hear this message coming from people who have worked so hard to get elected and sent to Washington.

Analysis:

- Accepts and reinforces the ideological polarization of US politics
- Takes sides, rather than emphasizing common interests
- Tone suggests political insider perspective

More Effective Response:

Actually, most research shows that both liberals and conservatives expect something quite similar out of government – they want government to maintain the public structures that we need in order to have clean air and water, prosperous businesses, basic safety and public health, good libraries and schools, etc.

Analysis:

- Reframes the question to be about what most Americans want
- Rejects the rhetorical opposition between liberals and conservatives

Q. How can people trust a government that is so clearly influenced by big donors and other special interests?

Less Effective Response:

If some businesses have too much influence, or destructive influence, this is a problem with individual politicians or administrations, not with government as a whole.

Analysis:

- Accepts and reinforces the division between government and "us"
- Tries to distinguish between "government" and elected leaders, but probably ends up reinforcing the association instead, since it offers no help in understanding government in a more productive way

More Effective Response:

Much of what government does is actually very visible, and can give us a good sense of how effectively it is being managed. How good a job are elected officials doing in maintaining the structures that our quality of life and our prosperity are based on? Is the air cleaner? Are the schools better?

Analysis:

- Shifts the focus to what government does
- Provides the listener with a way of judging government's effectiveness and honesty by distinguishing between public structures and the current management

Q. If government is not addressing the problems that Americans care about, then particular leaders are to blame, aren't they? Who do we hold accountable?

Less Effective Response:

The wonderful thing about living in a democracy is that we can remove our elected officials from office, if we feel that they are not doing a good job, and it's the responsibility of every citizen to participate in this process.

- Allows the focus to stay on individual politicians, reinforcing the default "equation" between government and elected officials
- Reinforces the gap between government /leaders as "them," citizens as "us"
- Does evoke a collective, active idea of "citizenship" – but also reduces the role of citizens to "throwing the rascals out"

More Effective Response:

Yes, we need to put people in office who will work effectively – along with citizen groups, businesses and others – to help create the society we all want. What's most important is that people have a clear sense of judging whether this work is getting done properly. Is the air and water clean? Are schools getting better? Do more people have access to healthcare?

Analysis:

- Resists the invitation to focus on individual bad politicians
- Reinforces the actions and products of government
- Reinforces the idea of collective action for collective benefits

Q. Many, many Americans have had frustrating experiences with government at all levels. Government doesn't always do the right thing, does it?

Less Effective Response:

No-one could argue that government is perfect, but on the whole, the government and the people who work for it are focused on the public interest in a way that no other party in our society is.

Analysis:

- Needlessly repeats the idea of flawed government, inviting people's thoughts to get stuck on that point
- Asserts government's good will without offering any explanation to make the point stick (Research shows that the public simply doesn't believe in a government that is consistently well-intentioned.)
- Reinforces the us/them distinction between public and government
- Focuses on government as people (thereby inviting all the unproductive patterns relating to the "dysfunctional relationship" between government and people)

More Effective Response:

Of course not. At the same time, many of the collective efforts on behalf of the public – everything from safeguarding our foods, our medications, our clean air and water, to establishing fair conditions for workers, provide a foundation for our way of life. As citizens, we owe it to ourselves and our country to make sure these foundations are maintained.

Analysis:

- Resists the bait of apologizing for government
- Reminds the listener of the largely invisible role of government in establishing and maintaining our public structures

Q. Can't private businesses offer the same services as government agencies, only better and more efficiently, such as package delivery?

Less Effective Response:

There are many cases where people couldn't possibly expect better or cheaper service from the private sector than they receive from government agencies. To take your own example, do you know of any companies that will deliver a letter for forty-two cents?

Analysis:

- Reinforces the Consumer model and sets up a case-by-case basis for determining which government services are "worth it"
- Doesn't take the opportunity to improve people's overall understanding of government – merely refutes a narrow point

More Effective Response:

It's important to ask ourselves whether we'd be better off without public institutions and structures like the postal system, public schools and libraries, city parks and recreation departments, and so forth. And of course, much of the work that we accomplish through government really couldn't be achieved any other way, like regulation of foods and drugs, for instance.

Analysis:

- Bridges to a broader perspective rather than defending an individual program
- Reminds people of collective good, rather than just services for individuals

Q. Doesn't more government mean less individual responsibility and initiative?

Less Effective Response:

Sometimes individual responsibility just isn't enough to solve a problem, and that's when government is needed. A struggling single parent in a depressed neighborhood can't simply create opportunity where there is none.

Analysis:

- Offers people no help in getting past the powerful assumption that anyone can succeed if they try hard enough

- Frames government as the solution of last resort

More Effective Response:

It's more accurate to say that when government, communities, businesses and individuals work together, that's when we achieve our best results. It's not an either/or question. It's about how we draw from the best skills and talents we have to protect the common good. For example ...

Analysis:

- Discourages the us/them distinction between government and public
- Shifts the conversation to one about collective efforts and collective benefits
- Introduces actors besides government and individuals

(Revised, January 2011)