
THE ROOTS OF CYNICISM: HOW AMERICANS THINK ABOUT GOVERNMENT

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For five years, Public Works has been working with key leaders across the country to change public understanding of and create support for the public sector.

This work was founded on groundbreaking analysis and thorough, multifaceted research that examined Americans' attitudes toward the public sector. Rather than simply studying static public opinion about government, we wanted this research to help us to understand "how" Americans think about government. Specifically, we wanted to learn about the dominant frames or stereotypes to which Americans default when they think about government and how those frames affect public choices. Ultimately, we wanted to know how to best reframe the concept of government in order to evoke a different way of thinking, one that advances collective understanding of and support for public sector solutions to society's challenges.

This research, which was conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, revealed important new insights into how the public perceives government and the implications of those perceptions. There is both good news in what we have learned and major challenges that have been identified and must be addressed.

Negative views of government are indeed dominant. And the roots of cynicism run deep. Americans' stereotypes



of government are of politicians or alternatively, of a bureaucratic monolith. Both of these images limit the public's understanding of the many roles, activities, and structures of government. Another challenge is the way Americans view themselves in relationship to government whether they themselves as citizens of government or primarily as consumers of its services.

But, the good news is these views are not as entrenched as many believe. The testing that was conducted revealed the public is open to – in fact hungry for – a more mission-driven, "common good" sense of the public sector and its role. And, the research reveals that evoking enduring values, talking about the systems and structures of government, and focusing on role of Americans as citizens are productive and powerful ways to move Americans toward this more receptive and supportive view of government's role in society.

two coherent, but opposing, mindsets about how Americans view themselves in relation to government: as a consumer or as a citizen.

Understanding Of What Government Is And Does

Americans lack a concrete understanding of what government is and does. When thinking about government, the tendency is to toggle back and forth between two different and distinct images of government. One image is of the leadership of government, specifically elected officials, while the other is a blurry bureaucracy. Neither offers a complete picture of government. Of these two views, people most often fixate on the first – elected leadership – which they often view as corrupt and partisan. These "top of mind" negative associations color their overall view of government. In addition, this view leads people to personalize government and act as passive spectators – not participants in governance. The other

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This research into how Americans think about government shows that Americans see government and their relationship to it in narrow and distorted ways. In particular, Americans' views of government are missing two key ingredients: a concrete understanding of what government is and does, and a ready sense of the mission of government – why it exists and what differentiates it. The research also illuminated

dominant image in the American mind is of government as bureaucracy; an undifferentiated, hard to grasp monolith. From this viewpoint, they don't readily see government as an active network of agencies with employees carrying out the important daily functions of government, and they can't differentiate its inherently "public" mission.

When thinking of government from these two viewpoints:

- People can't see government as "us" - as the way Americans implement the common good. They exaggerate partisanship, ignore consensus, and see themselves as spectators, not actors, in public life. Or,
- People see only a blurry and bureaucratic monolith and have difficulty grasping what it does every day. They exaggerate waste, bloat and inefficiency, and are confused over where tax money goes and what it supports.

Missing Ingredient: The Mission Of Government

Research also revealed that public discourse about government is missing a clear sense of the mission of government, of why it exists and what differentiates it. As a result, the public has a difficult time distinguishing between the public and private sectors. There is little sense that government has a mission, goals and motivation that are entirely different from private business, and that it is by definition, supposed to be acting in the public's interest. They have a much easier time understanding the goal and mission of business, and have a perception that government and business are inherently at odds.

Despite this lack of clarity about government's mission, people would like to see their government be more proactive and address public problems before they occur. IN the research phase, when people were reminded of the goals of government and given vivid pictures to reinforce its mission, they readily engaged in discussing government and reasonable, problem-solving approaches to public issues. This way of thinking about government is, however, so rarely evoked by opportunities in Americans' daily lives that it remains vague or hopelessly idealistic for many Americans.

An Overarching Challenge: Consumer vs. Citizen View

The research also illuminated

two coherent, but opposing, mindsets toward government. The FrameWorks Institute describes these as:

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

The American public easily defaults to a consumer stance. When they adopt this stance toward government, they bring into civic thinking many of the habits of consumerist thinking, from its focus on getting the most for one's money to small picture thinking about available products and point-of-purchase decisions. Promoting a long-term reappraisal of government's role requires an understanding of the Citizen and Consumer perspectives as distinct and competing patterns of thinking that lead in markedly different directions. Strategies to change public views of the role of government in society will have to be cognizant of these powerful drivers of perception.

OVERCOMING THE CYNICISM: REFRAMING THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT GOVERNMENT

These and additional findings yield important indications about the nature of the re-framing that is needed

to change the conversation about government. These clues point to the missing ingredients that need to be infused into public discourse about government, namely:

- Making what government does more vivid and concrete and less confused with people, politics, and partnership;
- Changing our everyday public communications to help remind people of the unique mission of the public sector, the things we value about it, and its importance as a system that supports important societal goals; and
- Reframing responsibility to help Americans see a role for themselves as "citizens," rather than adopting a consumer stance towards government.

Of the ideas for reframing government that were tested in our research phase, several concrete and compelling directions proved effective.

To overcome the fuzziness of people's concepts of government, we recommend:

- Finding new analogies and metaphors that can offer more concrete images of what government is and does. In particular, our research demonstrated the effectiveness of talking about government as public structures and systems that benefit us all. By emphasizing a structural image of government,

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this metaphor helps to inoculate against stereotypes of government as bickering politicians.

- Offering a persona for government more in keeping, with democratic ideals: responsible manager, watchdog, long-term planner, the people's voice, etc. From clean water and safe food to financial regulations and public health programs, government acts everyday in ways that protect and empower us all. The idea is to emphasize the various roles of government that people do recognize and value.

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

- Connecting the role of government to important values such as planning for a prosperous and healthy future for all, stewardship of our resources, and the building and preservation of community. Talking about these concepts allows you to remind people of the purpose of government and our common responsibility to leave to our

children a country that can live up to those values. People want to improve our country "on their watch" and make sure it is there for the next generation;

- Reinforcing the notion of shared fate, in the form of the common good or quality of life, which gives rise to government in the first place. This concept allows you to promote and advance citizen thinking, advance notions of mutual responsibility, and discuss why government is a necessary agent in the functioning of society and a tool for achieving better quality of life for all; and

- Emphasizing its mission as distinct from, but not antithetical to, business. It is important to illustrate how we all benefit most when business and government work together as partners, but that it is government's unique role to ensure that the economy benefits all.

To elevate a citizen stance toward government and combat the pitfalls of applying consumerist expectations toward government, we recommend:

- Avoiding portraying government as a laundry list of services that

individuals "buy" with their tax dollars; and

- Emphasizing our shared responsibility to maintain the public structures, services, and programs that create our quality of life.

EXPERIENCE SHOWS ASPIRATIONAL APPROACH WORKS

With five years of experience in the field, it has become clear, that this approach works, not only to build support among new constituents for government, but also in opening the possibility for constructive conversations on policies that otherwise have only narrow support. Our partners across the country share stories of success in both specific campaigns for public policies and in general efforts to create a wider view of public purpose and of our rule as citizens. □

This article is a reprint from Demos "The Roots of Cynicism: How Americans Think About Government." Demos is a national, non-partisan public policy center. They can be contacted at www.demos.org.

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