Having Our Say:
Getting Priority, Transparency and Agency into the Public Discourse on Budgets and Taxes

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
by
Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor and Moira O'Neil
June 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

This report details findings from a series of peer discourse sessions conducted by the FrameWorks Institute with groups of civically engaged Americans about budgets and taxes. This research builds directly upon an earlier phase of FrameWorks' research on budget and taxes in which we conducted 25 cultural models interviews in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland in November 2008. The cultural models interviews identified were conducted to reveal the cultural models (broad collections of shared understandings, norms and normative assumptions) that Americans use to think about budgets and taxes.[1]

In the second research phase discussed here, FrameWorks confirms and expands upon the results of the cultural models interviews as well as develops specific frame elements to test and refine in upcoming research. The peer discourse sessions provide an opportunity to see how cultural models function in practice — in a group setting that more closely approximates the social contexts in which discussions about budgets and taxes might naturally occur. In conducting this research, FrameWorks gathers data on how individuals use and publicly negotiate existing cultural models in reasoning and debating issues related to budgets and taxes. In addition, peer discourse sessions allow FrameWorks to experiment with primes — ideas introduced into the conversation to broaden the discourse — that represent potential reframes. We were also interested in seeing if, by intentionally priming conversations with specific frame elements such as Values and draft Simplifying Models, we could create a different type of conversation than those that characterized the unprimed conversations in the exploratory cultural models interviews.

After a summary of the research findings and a more detailed description of the peer discourse analysis methodology, we discuss the major research findings in greater detail. This discussion is organized around the three fundamental research questions that FrameWorks answers through peer discourse analysis: (1) *confirmation* — do the findings support the results of cultural models interviews and *exploration* of any variation in the group setting?; (2) *experimentation* — can research-informed primes facilitate a more productive and robust conversation about the purposes of budgets and taxes and the connections between these two concepts?; and (3) *negotiation* — how do people use both the cultural models and the primes presented to them?

Summary of Findings

I. Results of cultural models interviews were confirmed

1. **Government models are dominant in how people think about budgets and taxes.** People use dominant models of government to think about and

[1]Kendall-Taylor, N., & S.N. Bales. (2009). Like Mars to Venus: The Separate and Sketchy Worlds of Budgets and Taxes. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute. A summary of the key points of this research appears in Appendix A.

discuss budgets and taxes. The use of these models derails group conversations, "crowding out" other ways of thinking about the purposes of budgets and taxes and the relationships between these concepts.

2. **Unconnected concepts.** Budgets and taxes remain largely unconnected concepts in the minds of Americans. Participants in the peer discourse sessions had difficulty relating, integrating and thinking productively about the relationship between budgets and taxes, both when asked explicitly about this connection and in exercises that required participants to implicitly make this connection. Without a way to integrate these concepts, the difficulty in understanding what budgets and taxes "do" persists, the public's role in these issues remains unrealized, and fixing budget and tax problems through reform continues to appear unrealistic.

3. **Order Matters.** Our analysis of this data revealed that there is a difference between the types of discussions that take place when conversations begin with discussions of taxes and then move to budgets, and those that begin with budgets and then move to taxes. When budgets come first, people are better able to think about the purposes of taxes and their social orientation. We also found in small group negotiations that those groups that created and discussed their budgeting priorities first (before discussing their tax plans), were much more persuasive in garnering support for their budget/tax plans.

4. **Dominant models documented in earlier cultural models interviews were in use and derailed group conversations. "**Mentalist thinking," "the difference between ideal and real," and "getting your money's worth" emerged as dominant patterns of thinking across all six peer discourse sessions. The presence and power of these patterns of thinking in shaping group conversations confirms their dominance on the issues of budgets and taxes.

II. **Some "primes" were more effective than others, but all had both productive and less productive effects.** The ideas of "pay now or pay later," "futures/legacy" and "prosperity grid" were relatively effective in shifting group conversations away from the dominant cultural models and discourses. However, even these relatively successful primes — intentional attempts to shift discussions off the dominant models — lead in negative directions in some groups at some points. None of the primes were completely effective in keeping conversations from eventually devolving into the dominant conversational patterns and discourses that ran across all peer discourse groups. In short, all primed discussions eventually defaulted back to the dominant negative conversational patterns. We conclude that some primes are more effective than others in opening up productive discussions of budgets and taxes, but that dominant default patterns in how Americans understand, think and talk about budgets and taxes are so powerful and pervasive that even the most successful primes only achieve temporary shifts. This suggests that reframing the conversation surrounding budgets and taxes *is* possible, but highlights the dominance of patterns of thinking in this area — pointing to the need for further refinement of specific frame elements and reframing techniques to achieve more prolonged shifts and expansions in thinking.

III. **Peer discourse data revealed interesting findings in how participants negotiate and grapple with the concepts of budgets and taxes.** The negotiation exercise gave participants a sense of agency in the process, increased participants' sense of the interconnection between budgets and taxes and the difficulty of creating a national budget, and demonstrated the importance of clarity and transparency for people to understand, talk and think budgets and taxes. When participants explained their rationales for their budgets and tax policies, some defaulted to consumerist models of thinking. However, those groups that focused on budget *priorities* led to productive conversations about tax policy for the collective good and the future — both values that were relatively successful during the experimental section of the peer discourse session.

Research Method

FrameWorks approaches peer discourse analysis with three specific research objectives:

1) *confirm* the dominant models that emerged from the previous cultural models interviews by triangulating results using a different method and *exploring* variations in the models when they are used in a social setting;

2) *experiment* with speculative reframes that emerge from the earlier interviews, from other FrameWorks research or from area experts to narrow down the number and refine the execution of frame elements that are then taken into quantitative experimental research; and

3) engage people in a *negotiation* in which they experience efficacy and agency over a complex problem and have to debate and articulate a position as a group.

Put another way, peer discourse analysis is a way to explore the common patterns of talking — or social discourses — that people use in social settings and how they negotiate among these patterned ways of talking, using both cultural models that they naturally employ in understanding the issue as well as empirically based "cues," or "primes."

FrameWorks' more specific goals in these peer discourse sessions on budgets and taxes were to use the group setting to observe the specific assumptions and norms about budgets and taxes that people employed when in *social group* settings that change, constrain or reinforce the ways that people talked and thought in the *private* one-on-one interviews; to begin to see whether the introduction of specific frame elements (as "primes") creates a more collective, positive and coherent discussion of budgets and taxes and can help overcome individualizing habits of thinking and talking; and to explore how people negotiate among and work with common cultural models and discourses in forming positions and making decisions.

Subjects and Data Collection Methods

A total of six peer discourse sessions were conducted with United States citizens in March and April of 2009. They were held in three U.S. cities: Phoenix, Ariz.; Charlotte, N.C.; and Kansas City, Kan.

We recruited participants through a professional marketing firm, which used a screening process that FrameWorks developed and has employed in past research. At each location, nine people per group (along with an overflow of two to four individuals who did not participate except in cases of absenteeism) were screened, selected and provided with an honorarium for their time and participation. Participants who were selected represented variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). FrameWorks explicitly selected participants who reported a strong interest in current events and active involvement in their communities. We should also note that people who were employed or had been employed in areas such as banking or finance were screened out because we believed that they would have dominated the group dynamic and/or that other participants would have deferred to them rather than express their own viewpoints.

Based on previous FrameWorks research, we thought the responses to our questions would be particularly sensitive to variations in educational attainment, race and political identification. Based on these specific variables, two of the groups were divided by race (one African American and Latino, one White), two were divided by education (one with at least "some college," one with no college experience), and two were divided by political identification (one republican, one democrat).

The peer discourse sessions lasted approximately two hours, were audio and video recorded and were later transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points, but identifying information has been excluded to ensure participant anonymity.

The Guide

The peer discourse sessions are directed conversations and as such are moderated by a trained facilitator and follow a fixed guide. They introduce framed passages or "primes" which are designed to influence the ensuing discussion in specific ways. In this, they contrast to the cultural models interview technique, where discussion is allowed to unfold without framing directions from the facilitator. Peer discourse analysis is therefore more *prescriptive* than the *descriptive* cultural models interviews.

Based on objects described above, the peer discourse analysis guide was divided into three sections: *confirmation* and *exploration, experimentation*, and *negotiation*. Despite this organization, data from all sections were used to address all three research goals. For example, data from the *negotiation* portion of the session were also used to *confirm* and triangulate the results of previous research, and data from the experimentation section also revealed patterns of negotiation.

Section 1: Confirmation and Exploration
The first exercise used a word-association task to confirm the dominant frames attached to budget and taxes and to determine if the order in which the topics (budgets and taxes) were presented affected subsequent discussions. That is, did starting with the idea of "budgets" and moving to "taxes" have a different effect on conversations than starting with "taxes" and then moving to "budgets?"

We also wanted to ascertain if the dominant cultural models we found in our cultural models interviews would demonstrate a different pattern of expression when they were examined in a larger social setting of peers. As a result, we also use the peer discourse sessions to explore any differentiation within cultural models as expressed in one-on-one versus social environments where shared viewpoints are developed, practiced and negotiated.

Section 2: Experimentation
In the second exercise, the moderator introduced a Value and a number of Draft Simplifying Models as potential ways to unite budget and taxes and to see if, through the use of these primes, the groups could overcome the dominant patterns and habits of thinking that were observed in the cognitive interviews (for example, cultural models of government, consumerist thinking about getting your money's worth, and the taken-for-granted nature of the public goods and services that taxes fund). Our choices for these primes were driven by findings from the earlier cultural models interviews, past FrameWorks research on how Americans think about government, and results from FrameWorks research on other social issues such as race and education (for a complete list of the primes used in the peer discourse sessions see Appendix B).

Finally, within some of the primes we incorporated very explicit examples to more purposefully direct participants to the features of those primes that we thought would shift the discussion in more positive directions. For example, the "household budgets" prime includes a lengthy example dedicated to illuminating for participants the temporal/long-term nature of their own budgets and thus the possibility that government budgets might function successfully using this sample principle. The example incorporated in the household budgets prime was as follows: "For example, if something unexpected happens, like your car breaks down, you can offset the costs of replacing it by spreading payments over time — you don't have to pay for it all at once." In other primes, however, we kept the examples relatively simple to see what entailments participants would bring to them via the discussion (see for example, our protection prime).

The decision about which primes would receive more explicit "directive examples" was made based on prior research using these primes — that is, from our existing knowledge base about which primes can stand alone and which need more concrete elucidation. Overall, the purpose then of the examples (where they exist) is to illuminate the components of the primes that we think have the potential to redirect thinking away from dominant cultural models while ensuring that negative or less-effective entailments associated with our primes are minimized. We find this kind of exploratory probing to be most fruitfully pursued in this part of our research methods. Once these primes are taken into quantitative testing (the next phase of our research), the primes and any examples used will be standardized to allow for more direct comparison between them as useful frame elements.

Section 3: Negotiation
The third exercise was an abbreviated and simplified budget and tax simulation. For this exercise, each nine-person session was broken into three smaller groups of three participants who were tasked with making a federal budget for the United States — deciding how to allocate money amongst a set of spending categories. These smaller groups were subsequently asked to decide how this budget would be funded — choosing where the money for their budget would come from. FrameWorks used small, handheld digital recorders to capture the discussions and negotiations within the small groups and, in analysis, examined the arguments that people used to rationalize choices and convince others in the group of specific positions. In this third exercise, we were interested not only in participants' discourse — their patterns of talk — but also in whether the exercise provided a sense of agency, and whether this agency helped the groups overcome issues of transparency and complexity that were dominant features in unprimed conversations. In short, we asked if the exercise could diffuse the dominant models of government, individual responsibility and consumerist thinking that were present in unprimed discussions and that derailed conversations that followed the primes in the second exercise. We were, therefore, not as interested in where the groups allocated specific funds as in the rationale they used to do so.

Analysis
Similar to the methods used to analyze data from cultural models interviews, *social discourses*, or common, patterned, standardized ways of talking, were first identified across the six groups. These patterns of talk were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly taken for granted. In short, analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) and in what was not said (assumptions). Anthropologists refer to these patterns of tacit understandings and assumptions that underlie and structure patterns in talk as *cultural models*.

In addition to cultural models and social discourse analysis, discussions following the introduction of each prime were analyzed for the patterns that existed across groups in how ideas developed and the specific conversational direction in which these ideas lead. In this way, analysis focused on *what* cultural models emerged in response to the specific primes, *how* groups interpreted the primes, and in *what directions* their ensuing discussions followed.

FrameWorks also concentrated on the patterns of negotiation that emerged in the final exercise; looking specifically at *how* groups came to decisions regarding their budget and tax plans. To analyze these patterns of negotiation, audio from both break-out group (the smaller groups in which participants made their budgeting decisions) and full group discussions were analyzed.

Three FrameWorks researchers conducted independent analyses of the peer discourse data. The findings presented below synthesize these three sets of interpretations.

Results

I. Confirmation

1. Individuals employ dominant cultural models of government to think and talk about budgets and taxes.

Consistent with the results of earlier cultural models interviews[2], Americans have very dominant cultural models of what government is and does and apply these models in making sense of budgets and taxes. Clear patterns emerged in all six peer discourse groups that government is an impossibly large, tangled and complicated mass of indistinct workings, with a few elite individuals who serve as its "mind."[3] Peer discourse sessions were void of concrete, specific or detailed conversations about how government, at any level, works. Discussions of the role of government in providing services were also conspicuously absent.

Analysis of peer discourse data showed that cultural models of government models are very sticky and powerful in taking over and derailing group conversations. When one of these models appeared in the groups, other participants grabbed hold of and clung to these ideas as conversations disappeared into narrow, dead-end discussions of the problems with government. Furthermore, as evidenced in the primed discussions in the second exercise, once these government models appeared, it was very difficult to get participants to abandon or shift off of these patterns. The ability of government models to take over conversations and "eat" other ways of thinking illustrates the power of dominant cultural models to shape and restrict thinking, and of the need for reframing strategies that shift thinking off of these sticky patterns of interpreting information.

> *"I wish I knew what they did with all the money. That's all I wish. I don't mind paying it as long as I could oversee what we did with it!"*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

> *"That has to do with taxes and budget … because now I'm waiting to see what the tax man's gonna tell me, you know, some of what I was holding on to I know I'm going to have to give it up."*
>
> *"I think that's one of the things that makes paying taxes frustrating at times. We don't have a say in what the money goes to."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

---

[2] Kendall-Taylor, N., & Bales, S.N. (2009). Like Mars to Venus: The Separate and Sketchy Worlds of Budgets and Taxes. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

[3] Mind and Monolith: Findings from Cognitive Interviews about Government. FrameWorks Institute, July 2004

> *"The government can just tax you again and again. They can tax you on something else and get more money, or come up with another tax."*
>
> *"I was going to agree with Michael. He made that comment that the government puts the requirements on the everyday person, but it doesn't adhere to those same requirements! Yeah, it's fine; we go out and get a credit card, and you know, we overextend, and we get all in debt, and then 'low and behold,' here comes the government; they come back and it's like they side with the companies that gave us all of this debt, and they want to help them to get the debt back, but you don't have somebody that's over government to say, okay, you done got yourself out this far, it's time to reel you back in, and it's just like a never-ending story. You know, you want to make us 'accountable,' but they don't want to be accountable."*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*

These predictable patterns of how people think about government have major implications for how reformers and advocates communicate about budget and tax issues. When these models enter a conversation, which because of the strong implicit connection between "government" and "budgets and taxes" they inevitably do, they take over and crowd out other ideas and discussions. People are quick to jump on the bandwagon of how "screwed up," "inept" and "corrupt" the government is, and once they do, the chances of having a productive conversation about the public purposes and roles of budgets and taxes are not good.

Furthermore, these models of government have a powerful "othering" effect. They make social problems "theirs" (the few inept elite that preside over government) and not "ours." This obscures the ability to think about public policy solutions to social problems. Finally, thinking about government as an indistinguishable mass does not help people engage or envision solutions to problems that they see rooted in the government. If governments work in mysterious and indecipherable ways, then government solutions are rendered equally mysterious and out of range. In these ways, government models represent discursive "dead-ends" and communications should avoid the initial activation of these models.

2. Budgets and taxes occupy separate cognitive domains

Analysis of the peer discourse sessions confirmed the earlier finding that budgets and taxes are not implicitly connected in the minds of Americans. Put another way, when Americans think about budgets, they do not naturally make connections with the concept of taxes, and vice versa. Even after the initial association exercise, where budgets and taxes were linked both conceptually and spatially[4], subsequent group discussions focused

[4] Participants were asked to respond to one of the two terms (budgets or taxes) initially and then immediately to respond to the other term. Responses to both terms were then placed on a bulletin board

on either budgets *or* taxes and there were few conversations in which these concepts were discussed as related ideas.

The separate and distinct nature of these concepts in the minds of Americans explains the tendency in all six groups for discussions of taxes to devolve into diatribes about how taxes are the government's way of reaching into the pockets of hard-working Americans and taking hard-earned resources. Because, in most people's minds, taxes remain distinct from the budgets and services that they fund, it is easy to see taxes as an unfair drain on personal resources. While it is true that these processes are functionally distinct in terms of the policy world, the inability of the public to link them conceptually is especially problematic for creating policy conducive conversations.

Despite the overwhelming confirmation of the separate nature of these concepts in thinking, there *was* one group in Kansas that did, even before being primed in the second exercise, connect budgets and taxes. These unusual conversations about the connections between budgets and taxes were precipitated by the comments of one particularly vocal, convincing and exceptionally civic-minded group member. The excerpt below illustrates the implicit connections that this individual drew between budgets and taxes and is characteristic of the comments she made that then precipitated several discussions of the connections between these concepts in this peer discourse session. Similar connections were absent from the other five groups.

> *"I think it's difficult to be able to budget when we don't have any money, and trying to provide services for everyone, and hopefully we can 'cause there's a lot of things that we need. And I just had a conversation similar to this yesterday about the difference in the parks in where she [a friend] lives. The recreation is provided for free, because their taxes are higher. The property tax there is much higher and the overall taxes that they pay to the county are higher because they provide those services, whereas where I live, there are very few services on that order."*
>
> *Kansas, All-Democrat Group*

3. Order matters

Because taxes are not automatically or implicitly associated with thinking about budgets, and vice versa, participants had a difficult time seeing what taxes are for — why they pay taxes and what tax money supports. Therefore, discussions about taxes that were not framed by accompanying or preceding discussions about budgets became highly negative and devolved in a highly patterned way into conversations about the unfairness of having to pay taxes. Unframed discussions of taxes become about taking money away from people who have worked for it, rather than of taxes as a means to contribute to public services.

Analysis of the participants' word choice in the first exercise showed that when "taxes" was the first concept introduced, the word "budgets" elicited more negative words than

---

visible to all participants — so that the relationship between them could be central to the ensuing discussion.

when budgets were discussed before taxes. In addition, discussions of taxes were relatively more positive when they were preceded by the concept of budgets. This "order matters" effect can be explained by the fact that individuals are more likely to be positive about taxes when they can see and have in their minds the budgets and services that tax money funds. It is also likely that the notion of "budgets" brings its own set of cognitive entailments to the conversation around taxation — interjecting a sense of order, process, balance, priorities and skills that are inherently understood at the most basic level. This is especially important since the public thinks of the system of taxation as inherently chaotic (rather than process oriented) and wielded by powerbrokers without much concern for broader social priorities. As such, when budgets and services — the "goals" of taxes — are not included in how people think about taxes, individuals do not automatically see the reasons that they pay taxes. They therefore view taxes through a heavily negative lens in which taxes are simply, as one participant said, "money that I don't have to spend on my family."

The communications implication here is straightforward: Communications must ground discussions of taxes firmly and explicitly in their connection to budgets and the public services that taxes fund. A discussion which broaches taxes *before* budgets, or that does not include a discussion of what tax money funds, is likely to trigger models of unfairness and result in negative thinking about taxes. Therefore, communications should never "lead" with taxes.

4. Other dominant cultural models in peer discourse sessions

Our analysis of the peer discourse sessions also confirmed the use of the dominant cultural models that emerged from earlier interviews. These models were dominant both in the frequency with which they were employed and in their ability to take over peer conversations.

What is ideal is not what is real

Group conversations had a strong tendency to default to a familiar patterned distinction between what is *ideal* and what is *real*. According to this cultural model, there is a glaring distinction between the way that things should or ought to be and the way that they are in real life. This gap between ideal and real is so expansive that there is little individuals can do about changing their social worlds. In this way, the ideal-versus-real cultural model is nested within the much broader pattern of deterministic thinking — a fundamental American cultural model. The determinism model hinges on a general assumption about the lack of personal agency in the face of incredible complexity and inevitable conclusions. Individuals bring this tacit perception to bear in understanding a wide range of social issues on which FrameWorks has done extensive research, from education to race, and taxes to health. In short, determinism is the pervasive cultural assumption that the world works in mysterious ways that are complex, invisible, or, as one participant said, "magic," and are ultimately beyond the scope and power of individuals to understand, control or shape. As another participant has said. "Things just are the way they are." One result of the application of this model in making sense of social issues is what FrameWorks discusses as the "crisis frame" — the feeling that things are beyond remedy and control, and therefore do not warrant attention or action.[5]

Employing the ideal-versus-real cultural model, peer discourse participants disengaged again and again from productive discussions of budgets and taxes. Applying this model to understand and talk about budgets and taxes takes these issues beyond the realm of possible solutions because the expansive gap between how they should be and how they are seems insurmountable. As such, the "ideal" versus the "real" model is an unproductive pattern that limits any constructive thinking about budget and tax issues, solutions and policies.

> *"Well, I think that's certainly the 'ideal.' But then it just runs into the political realities ..."*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

> *"It's a nice goal. It's one of the goals. It's a nice goal. I don't know if it's 'true.' [LAUGHTER] I mean, I don't know that it's happening, but it is a nice goal, you know, it's a nice 'wish list.'"*
>
> *Kansas, All-Democrat Group*

> *"... this isn't really going to work out. It's a good idea, but I mean, what's it gonna do? We've been in debt for a long time. So, you know, it's just like, you know, only paying the interest on your credit card every month. See, same thing basically what this country's doing."*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*

> *"The thing of it is your budget and tax decisions are our way of 'ensuring' our future. But, we can't ensure our future of anything. So, I think it's kind of in a 'perfect world' type thing. Yeah, in the 'perfect world' if we have that, well yeah, that'd be cool, but that's not realistic. I just don't think it's realistic. It's a 'perfect world' type thing."*
>
> *Kansas, All-Democrat Group*

Mentalist thinking

A second powerful cultural model, which emerged in the early cultural models interviews and was confirmed here in peer discourse sessions, is what FrameWorks refers to as *mentalist thinking.* This is a pervasive American cultural model that FrameWorks has

---

[5] FrameWorks Institute. (2009) Strategic Messaging Framing During the Economic Downturn: Remembering the Long View. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

identified in past research on other social issues, ranging from race to education to health care.[6,7] According to the mentalist model, Americans tend to view outcomes and social problems as the result of individual concerns that reflect motivation and personal discipline. As such, the use of mentalist models by the public has a narrowing effect — it boils down complex interactions between individuals, contextual determinants and systems to either the presence or absence of individual motivation and internal fortitude — resulting in understandings of the world in which events are the exclusive product of individual drive and internal motivation. From a reform perspective, these ways of understanding the world present unique challenges in engaging the public to support *systems-level* policies.

In the peer discourse sessions, like the earlier individual interviews, mentalist thinking was employed as a way to reason and discuss why budgets fail (a lack of personal discipline and responsibility) and the problem with taxes (too many people not having enough responsibility to pay, resulting in an unfair burden on those who do).

> *"You know, I don't propose to be any better than anybody else, I pretty much came from a disadvantaged background as I'm sure some other people here have also did, but I've always budgeted my money, you know, and I never lived above my means. I always stayed within my means. I think that one of the problems that we face in this country, and this society is that people have been used to just spending as it comes."*
>
> *"I'm all about budgeting too. I think you need a lot of control and discipline to budget, but I think it keeps people's lives in order when they do budget, and amen to what Carlos said because I think that the economic problems that are facing the majority of people now, all come down to not budgeting, and overspending, and living far beyond their means …"*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*
>
> *"[It's about] discipline and <u>maintaining</u> a budget. <u>Not</u> going over. <u>Not</u> exceeding the budget. I'm sure that's what cities do when it comes to roads, and repair, and that kind of stuff. They have a budget, and they get bids on it, and hopefully they don't go over."*
>
> *Kansas, All-Republican Group*
>
> *"It's like the government has overextended themselves, so everybody else did with homes, and we were allowed to even though we probably couldn't afford that big home … we were given that 'loan,' and that's why there's a gazillion 'foreclosures' out there right now."*

---

6 Chart, H. and N. Kendall-Taylor. (2008) Reform What?: Individualist Thinking in Education: American Cultural Models on Schooling. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

7 Auburn, A., A. Brown and J. Grady. (2006) Fitness as a Personal Ideal: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations in Colorado and Chicago. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

"I just look at that as 'personal responsibility.' I have friends that were approved for an $800,000 house, but they <u>chose</u> to get a $300,000 house because they <u>knew</u> better. Because they're taking <u>responsibility</u>, and, making <u>good</u> choices."

North Carolina, All High-Education Group

"But, if they want people to have responsibility within their own budget, and if you're gonna be penalized if you go over your own budgets, then the government needs to follow the same basis."

"Some people are in worse situation than others now, but the responsible are not."

North Carolina, All High-Education Group

"There comes some responsibility on your behalf. When you sign for a car, or when you sign for a house, to 'read' and make sure that, wait a minute, does this make sense to me? Do I have the money? Will this job be here?"

"Yeah."

"Houses weren't intended for everybody."

"Exactly."

"Some people bought above their means."

"Way above their means."

Kansas, All-Republican Group

II. Experimentation

1. The most successful primes

Analysis of data from the peer discourse sessions revealed three primes that were relatively effective in shifting conversations off the default patterns of thinking and toward more productive discussions: "prosperity grid," "pay now or pay later" and "futures/legacy." However, even these more successful primes were not completely effective, and in some groups, on some occasions, these primes were unsuccessful when pitted against the dominant cultural models described in the previous section. However, in light of unprimed discussions and the conversations following the other, less promising primes, the concepts of "prosperity grid," "pay now or pay later" and "futures/legacy" facilitated more productive discussions of the purposes of and connections between budgets and taxes.

Below we discuss the measures FrameWorks used to evaluate the success of the primes. We then provide a more detailed analysis of the rationale behind, and effectiveness of, each of the six primes used in peer discourse sessions (see Appendix B for a complete list of the primes used in peer discourse sessions).

2. Measures of effectiveness:
Prosperity grid, pay now or pay later, and futures/legacy were clearly the most effective primes in their ability to meet some or all of the following criteria:

1. User friendliness
The three successful primes were "user-friendly." Participants were able to use the language of the primes, which "seeped into" or pervaded their discussions. Put another way, participants were able to effortlessly incorporate these three ideas into their discussions. As further evidence of their "user friendliness," these primes, more than the others, appeared in other areas of the sessions, even in the discussions following the introduction of subsequent primes and, in several cases, during the final budget and tax simulation exercise.

2. Shifting away from the dominant models
The three successful primes were also relatively effective in "loosening the grip" of the dominant cultural models and conversational patterns discussed above. After being exposed to these primes, group discussions were, for the most part, dramatically different than both unprimed conversations and those following exposure to some of the less successful primes. The ability to shift attention off the dominant models is probably the most important measure of a successful prime. The ability of "prosperity grid," "pay now or pay later" and "futures/legacy" to move conversations away from the dominant default models suggests that these three primes are strong elements of reframing the discussion of budget and taxes through more strategic communications.

3. Float time
Related to the ability to shift off the dominant default patterns of thinking and talking, FrameWorks looked at the "float time" of the primes. Float time refers to the time from the introduction of the prime (when the moderator finished reading the prompt), to the point at which the group conversation makes its inevitable way back to one of the dominant default discourses. Float time is a proxy for the duration of the effect of the primes — the time that the prime is able to shift people off the dominant patterns before they inevitably return to the dominant patterns. Prosperity grid, pay now or pay later and futures/legacy had the longest float time. However, regardless of the specific prime that was used, there was a point at which group conversations inevitably shifted back to ideas of individual responsibility, failing governments and/or the difference between how things should be (ideal) and how they actually are (real).

4. Filling the cognitive hole
Prosperity grid, pay now or pay later and future/legacy were also relatively successful in filling what FrameWorks calls "cognitive holes," or gaps between the ways that the public understands a concept and the way that experts do. In the case of budgets and taxes, the most conspicuous cognitive hole is the lack of connection between these two

concepts — that the public does not implicitly connect these concepts in the same way that experts do. Prosperity grid, pay now or pay later and futures/legacy were relatively effective ideas in filling this hole and facilitated discussions in which participants were able to link, both explicitly and more implicitly, budgets and taxes. These may also have been more successive because of their ability to evoke longer-term thinking, planning and stewardship — all of which have proven to be important elements to reframing the general discourse about government as well.

3. Results of individual primes

In the following section we discuss the results of each of the six individual primes that were tested in the peer discourse sessions (loosely ordered from least to most effective). We discuss the primes in light of the five measures of effectiveness discussed above.

1. Protection

The protection prime was used in the peer discourse sessions because of its success in past FrameWorks reframing experiments in generating more policy-productive thinking about government.[8] Past FrameWorks research has demonstrated that without careful framing, the public approaches information on government with derision. Deep-seated ridicule, learned and conditioned over time, is a major impediment to engaging citizens in a discussion about the public's roles in and connections to government, as well as government's role and responsibility in solving social problems. The Value of "protection" emerged from this research as a way of shifting off the dominant patterns that people use to process information about government — especially those that were inherently connected to how people thought and talked about budgets and taxes.

The protection prime had largely negative results. It elicited unproductive discussions of the need to protect people's financial investments and government's success (or lack thereof) with regulating the activities of big business.

> *"That's the reason we invest. You know, we're looking long term. This is money that we want to sit there … and let it grow for down the road. But if you look at what's going on with, for example, peoples' 401(k) …"*
>
> *"They are losing big time."*
>
> *"I mean, my 401(k), you know, I've lost about one-third of what I had in there."*
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*
>
> *"There there's a problem with the system of regulation for instance, in my 401(k), you know, I had an investment firm taking care of my funds, and I mean, if you don't have millions and millions of dollars in there, they don't pay attention to you. They don't take care of your accounts, and so you're supposed to be*

[8] FrameWorks Institute. (2006) How to talk about government: A FrameWorks message memo. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

watching over your accounts, you know?"

Arizona, All-Minority Group

This type of discussion led predictably to conversations of the "crashing" stock market and the "miserable" economy, which firmly entrenched a strong crisis frame and resulted literally and figuratively in participants throwing up their hands and concluding that "there is nothing that can be done" — that the country's problems are too big to do anything about. In short, the discussion of protection lead directly to government "regulation" and, subsequently, to feelings of disempowerment and frustration.

Discussions following the protection prime also lead several of the groups to cite the need for "protection from the protectors."

> *"Everything that was meant to "control and protect" is now its own entity, and who's policing <u>them</u>? Who's, protecting us from the USDA? You know, peanut butter one day, and [LAUGHTER] who knows? Who's protecting <u>us</u> from the <u>government</u>?"*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

This "protection from the protector" discussion cued up the negative models and discourses about government. In the two groups in which it was tested, the protection prime was overwhelmingly unsuccessful in shifting off the dominant models, and had a very short float time before groups managed to get back into default discussions about inept government and the problems of a lack of responsibility. The following excerpt is the first comment following exposure to the protection prime and is characteristic of the inability of the prime to get people away from the dominant models and the prime's short (or lack of) float time.

> *"Protection's a good thing, but it's become policing and we're actually paying for the policing in monumental ways like even with Medicare, but everything medical is just, out of whack because of the government is charging these hospitals like maybe $10 for an aspirin. There's no stopping acts and stuff like that. We have the FTC; they're out of control… the FDIC, with people pulling their money out of banks because the banks now are folding and collapsing and imploding on each other, and so as far as "protection" I think we are our own protection. There's all those agencies that we trusted, but that's a trust we <u>had</u>."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

Despite the overwhelmingly negative results of this prime, there were some more positive, if restricted, effects of the protections prime. For several participants, the protections prime elicited acknowledgments of the services that taxes support and budgets fund. For these participants, the prime was partially successful in filling the cognitive hole between budgets and taxes — it connected the two ideas through the provision and funding of necessary, although largely taken-for-granted, services. Whereas unprimed discussions were dominated by individual considerations (what *I* get out for my taxes, how they are not fair for *me*, how lack of *individual* responsibility is the problem), the protections prime, in a few cases, elicited responses about the *systems* of protection that taxes fund and budgets provide and the need for these systems for *society* to function.

> *"You see in the paper every Saturday or Sunday someone goes and inspects a restaurant to make sure that, where you go to take your kids for breakfast or lunch or dinner follows a certain standard, which has been set up by, I think by us at some point, but that's part of what we expect, I think, that our government, or our people in charge help us out, and defend us, and help us out so that someone who's bringing in food from someplace else, the peanut thing, whatever you want to talk about, the salmonella thing, that we're having someone inspect our food, and then when we go to those restaurants we feel confident that they've at least inspected it in the last month or something. So it's part of things that maybe we don't all think about all the time, that that our money goes to."*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

> *"You know a lot of the times I noticed that we tend to forget the regulations that actually help us because they are not right in front of our face. You know, since the 60s they've been putting seatbelts in cars. I've always grown up with seatbelts but the change was never really a big deal to me, but that regulation, now that it's there, it is something that is protecting me on a small level. I don't, call GM and say thank you for putting the seatbelts in, but at the same time I should, because cause they are doing something based on someone's regulation that says seatbelts are gonna save lives one way or another. So I think maybe it's the ones [protections] that we overlook, take for granted, are the ones that actually help us. It's those smaller ones that seem to make sense, and when something does go wrong, that's when we tend to focus on whether or not these regulations actually affect us as people."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

> *"Isn't that sort of the definition of "protection"? I was just sitting here running through government agencies, and military, and everything. Isn't that almost a definition for every government agency in some way? The Department of Justice protects us against Mafioso, and the Agriculture Department protects us against mad cow … the military protects us against everything … and so it's almost like it's an aspect of <u>every</u> governmental agency that they're gonna protect us from something, whatever their definition is. Now, because sometimes we feel like we need to be protected from them, that's a whole other thing, but it does seem to me like that's even, you know, that's what the whole definition of government is at some times. It's to protect us."*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

However, both these more positive effects — acknowledging taken-for-granted services, and abandoning an individual perspective for a focus on underlying systems, were infrequent and were not sustained in group discussions. In other words, these interpretations were neither top-of-mind for most participants, or viral — they did not spark conversation and were not "picked up" by other group members.

These infrequent, but none-the-less positive, effects of the protection prime suggest that, if refined through additional research, protection may be an effective frame element in helping people connect the concepts of budgets and taxes, understanding taken-for-granted services, and shift off mentalist approaches in favor of more systems-level perspectives.

2. Household Budgets

FrameWorks selected the household budgets prime because of the speculation in both the field and the media that comparing government budgets to household budgets makes government budgets easier to grasp. The outcomes from FrameWorks' earlier cultural models interviews were mixed on this point — showing that for some people comparing a household budget to a government budget was a productive way of thinking about something that was, prior to this comparison, impossibly complicated, vast, murky and incomprehensible. In other words, by comparing household budgets to government budgets, some of the informants in our earlier interviews were able to see that the fundamental tensions and decision-making processes at play in household budgets are the same as those that shape and constrain government budgets. For other informants, governments were simply too big and different from households for the comparison to be applicable, and in some cases the problems with the comparison further entrenched unproductive discussions of the problems with government. In the peer discourse sessions, FrameWorks attempted to correct for the derailing aspects of the prime to see if the idea of household budgets could drive thinking in the right direction and unify budgets and taxes in a concrete and familiar model, making these topics and their interconnections "easy to think."

Most discussions following the household budgets prime were unproductive and led to the now-familiar dominant government discourses. The most common reaction to the prime was that household budgets and government budgets are really *not alike*. Governments are so much bigger and more complex, that their budgets are not at all like the way families take in income and set and stick to household budgets. This focus on the failures of the analogy led groups back to discussions about how government is not transparent, not accountable, corrupt and too impossibly vast and complex for normal people to understand. Focusing on the *differences* between household and government budgets had a powerful "otherizing" effect. Conversations became focused on ways that "we" do "our" budgets and have to be responsible, and the ways that "they" do budgets and are not accountable to the same set of constraints as "normal citizens."

> *"Because a household budget is such a small unit compared to the government. Because in my house, at least, I know if I don't have enough money I'm either — well, I'm just gonna be in trouble. I mean, I may have to go borrow from somewhere else, or I'm gonna have to suffer the consequences. But when you get to the federal government level, that incorporates so many people, and so many*

financial aspects, it just seems the bigger the entity, the easier it is to screw it up."

Arizona, All-Minority Group

"I don't think the national budget especially, that it's anything like creating a "household budget" as far as I'm concerned. They borrowed for so many years, and they are so deep into debt. I don't think it's ever gonna get paid off."

Kansas All-Democrat Group

"The problem with the "government" budget is it's got too much pork, and junk in it. It's got bridges to <u>nowhere</u>. It's got stuff that we just couldn't put in our family budget."

"I mean the government can come back and tap us for more, more, more … and regular people don't have the … So that's where you can not parallel the regular people and the government."

"And, I think a big difference is the "accountability" because, in a household budget, if you don't budget right, then you don't eat!"

"Right.

"But the government can sort of do whatever they want to do."

"You know, [they can] borrow to do this, borrow to do that. When you borrow and borrow, and you have one income coming in. That's a greater percentage going out into the wind in interest, and we're just fighting to pay the interest on our debt. I mean, we get deeper and deeper …"

North Carolina, All High-Education Group

Discussions following the household budget prime also became entangled in the importance of discipline and responsibility — what we have called mentalist thinking. Participants thought that personal or family budgets were primarily about having discipline and responsibility, and because of the prime's analog, group conversations jumped to the fact that the current problems in our country can all be traced back to a lack of government and individual responsibility.

"Household budgets only work if you can exercise a lot of self control.

"And a lot of people can't.

[LAUGHTER]

"You need to emphasize in big bold letters 'SELF CONTROL.'"

Kansas, All-Republican Group

"Well, I base my budget on how much I make. It's cash <u>only</u>. If I don't have the money, we can't spend it. It's a completely different deal from what my household budget is compared to the government's budget. Government is completely out of control. Everything is borrow, borrow, borrow. In my household, if you don't make 'X', you don't spend 'Y'. So, the government is out of control compared to my family's budget. If we expect people to be responsible like ourselves, and I think most of us here are probably responsible, you can't spend 170% of what you make, which is what a lot of countries are doing. Japan, China, U.S. is like 140% of what they have coming in. It doesn't make sense. So to me they're out of control, and if you don't have yourself a written budget, and you follow it with what you 'know' is coming, and not what you 'hope' is coming in, you're gonna have issues down the line."

"But hasn't that been what's been happening anyway with that a lot of people have been living way beyond their budgets, living on credit cards?"

"Oh absolutely."

"Yes."

"I would be willing to bet that 80% of Americans don't do a household budget. Probably more than that, and that's the problem …"

"Right."

Arizona, All-White Group

While in most groups the household budgets prime lead to unproductive conversations, there were several instances in which this prime had more promising effects. When discussions focused on the *similarities* between these two types of budgets, rather than on their differences, participants were able to see and talk about government budgets as being about prioritization, hard decisions and weighing what gets spent with where the money comes from — considerations, that while seemingly "common sense" to advocates and experts in this area, are not readily or implicitly used in unprimed discussions of budgets and taxes. The examples below show some of the more positive effects of the household budgets prime in clarifying government budgets and taxes.

"So they are relying on us. Just like we rely on our paycheck, they rely on us to pay our taxes so that they can dole it out …"

"What just occurred to me is as people are losing jobs they are not paying taxes into the system so we can't get the benefits back that we would expect to get back …"

Arizona, All-White Group

"I would agree. I mean if you're trying to educate someone on what a budget and taxes are, this one is very easy. I think most people can relate to it."

"Yeah. It's very simple and easy to understand in comparison to the first [prime]."

"You know, if I were going to try to explain this [budgets and taxes] to my 17-year old son, they'd just kind of look at me with that deer-in-the-headlight [Chuckle] look. But if I try to use the second one [household budgets] to explain it, I think they would comprehend it, and say okay, yeah, I know what you're talking about. The household one is pretty basic, simple to understand."

Kansas, All-Republican Group

"Well, for sure. A household budget is a lot simpler than a governmental budget. There's a lot more things that are involved in a governmental budget, but the basic principles of a household budget could be applied to government. I mean, such as, having a line item for savings. I mean right now it's a different story because we're in a crisis, but when things settle down you could apply the same principles [of a household budget] to governmental budgeting."

Arizona, All-Minority Group

"I think it's a good analogy."

"Yeah. In other words, if you can keep your household budget intact, and you just magnify that up, you know, to a city, or the state, or the federal levels then it all kind of works the same way."

Kansas, All-Republican Group

Nonetheless, results from the household budgets prime reveal the ineffectiveness of current communications that rely on the comparison between personal and governmental budgets. Communications should avoid employing this analogy because of its power to lead people back to negative and unproductive models of government and powerful mentalist cultural models of the importance of responsibility and discipline in shaping outcomes.

3. Exchanges

The exchanges prime emerged from two distinct sources: George Lakoff's work, and Marcel Mauss' seminal work on gift exchange.[9,10] FrameWorks explored this idea in earlier cultural models interviews. In these interviews, the idea of exchanges was

---

9 Lakoff, G. (2006). Simple Framing: An Introduction to Framing and its Use in Politics. The Rockridge Institute

10 Mauss, M., & W.D. Halls. 1990. The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies. New York: W.W. Norton.

relatively effective in making people more conscious of the services that budgets and taxes provide. In the earlier interviews, the idea of exchanges also illuminated a *process* through which people could see how budgets and taxes are related.

The results of the exchange prime were mixed in peer discourse research. In some groups, the prime was effective in shifting discussions away from dominant directions and filling the cognitive hole between budgets and taxes. This was especially true for the all-Democratically affiliated group in Kansas, where the exchanges prime was highly successful. However, in other groups, the prime quickly defaulted to discussions of unfairness and government corruption.

On the positive side, the idea that budgets and taxes are like an exchange allowed participants to see the taken-for-granted services that government budgets provide. In short, exchanges had promise in illuminating government's role in providing the public services that enable society to function and without which individuals could not live or work.

> *"I mean, isn't that what taxes are for? To provide services? What else are they for if not for that?"*
>
> *"I think of it as a direct connection — my tax dollar goes in here, and comes out there, and it's paying this bill."*
>
> *"Well that's an 'exchange!'"*
>
> *"Yeah!"*
>
> *"You know, our whole economy is an exchange, I guess. You can think about it that way."*
>
> *"It <u>is</u> an "exchange." You know, when my kids say … 'what's taxes?' that's what I say. I say we pay the government money, and they build us some roads, and they supply parks and recreation, and the swimming pool in the summertime. They provide books in school and the library downtown …"*
>
> *Kansas All-Democrat Group*
>
> *"Well, I think there's an exchange. I mean, we all — everybody at this table, and everybody who's breathing above ground is using <u>some</u> kind of services. I mean, you're using buses, you're using the street, you're using <u>something</u>. And I know that everybody wouldn't just put into the pot if there wasn't a system for them to be quote 'forced' to put into the pot."*
>
> *"Yeah, that's true."*

> *"We're all using some, and so I think there has to be some kind of a system for everybody to put into the pot."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

> *"I think it's a system we all use, and it's a system we should all pay into. I think that's the quagmire in the whole thing. That we want more services, and to a certain extent, I mean, certain things are basic necessities and I think we would all agree that, our taxes should go for [these things]. Then there are other things that may not be just for myself [that I may not use] that may be for another cross section … you know, services that they would use."*
>
> *North Carolina, All Low-Education Group*

> *"Well, "exchange" makes me think about, okay, I give you some taxes; the city's gonna make my neighborhood look a little nicer. If I give taxes, the more money gets put into the schools, the kids will be more educated. I feel it's an exchange. I'm giving you taxes, and in return, either my city, or schools, or the police are gonna protect me if I have to call for something. I feel like an exchange sounds like what happens with tax money to me."*
>
> *Arizona All-White Group*

> *"Well, we said that in the beginning that you pay your taxes in order to have services provided. That you are putting your taxes in so that your community, whether it be your local community, or the nation, thrives, and that's what you have to build on."*

> *"I think that 'budget and taxes' should be an 'exchange' for your local government, your state government, and your national government because that's who you pay the taxes to, and the taxes we pay should be enough taxes to cover the budget. That's the way I see it."*
>
> *Kansas All-Democrat Group*

In addition to these largely promising directions, "exchanges" also elicited less promising discussions of "unfairness." Conversations about unfairness activated consumerist thinking which worked against the realization of public purposes and social responsibility.[11] Discussions of unfairness concentrated either on the idea that budgets and taxes are an unfair exchange, or that they are not like an exchange at all *because* they are not fair ***and*** largely involuntary. Taxes were seen as an unfair exchange because people don't get out what they pay in. A second unfairness discourse, precipitated by the exchanges prime, dealt with the unfairness that results from people using public services (getting something) without paying or without paying their fair share. Put another way,

---

[11] The basis of the consumerist model is that the world works like a market — that events occurring around us can be understood as interactions between individual rational producers and consumers who think in terms of "bottom line" profits and of getting the best value for limited resources.

budgets and taxes are not like an exchange because the people who use public services the most are the ones who either don't pay in at all (immigrants) or who underpay (poor urban minorities).

> *"I can't stand it [budgets and taxes being like exchanges]! When I read that I was like Ugh! I hate the whole idea of 'institutions and systems.' I think that really limits our ability to look at people as individuals. I think it's a very condemnable way of looking at people, as groups, as a collective instead of as an individual. I mean, you get ground up when you get to be part of an institution, or part of a system. I stay, as disconnected from that as I possibly can, and I didn't mind paying taxes before I read that. But I don't like it … I am perpetuating the monster!"*
>
> *"On a personal level, I don't know that I necessarily agree with it. Again, just coming from my own situation of being single with no dependents, I think I'm taxed quite heavily, and I'm not always the one using this 'network of health … education,' and all this other kind of stuff. So at a personal level, I don't know if I agree with that."*
>
> *"People who have children get tax breaks because they have children, so essentially we are paying for their kids to get in school."*
>
> *"I can see your point. I can. We pay taxes like everyone else, but yet we struggle financially now more than ever, but yet we can't access the health, and the education, and you know, the legal, and the other services that are supposed to be available to us because we make too much money, but we pay our mortgage every month, we pay our bills, we do whatever it takes, yet there are people that are out there not paying the taxes — not paying into it, that are utilizing the services, and I just feel like it's out of balance."*
>
> *"Well, I mean, we pay the taxes, but we don't access any of these 'services'! I mean, education, yeah, and our public school, and that type thing, but like Medicare or Medicaid, different programs that are out there that we pay taxes for. We're not eligible because we make too much money, and then the people that are qualified aren't paying the taxes cause they're not working, but they're using the services."*
>
> *North Carolina, All Low-Education Group*
>
> *"There's definitely an exchange because we all do pay taxes, and we have access to things like protection from the police department, fire department, but I think it's getting to the point where the rate of exchange is highly inflated, you know, we are going to be paying a huge excess for what we're gonna get."*
>
> *"Exactly, and I think we're gonna see that more and more. That the price we're paying far exceeds the returns that we're getting."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

> *"I think no matter how much we pay in taxes, or whatever, it's just never gonna end up fair. Like just because you're a normal family, and you may not call the police all the time, you don't have a fire at your house, you don't 'need' certain things, but you pay your taxes 50 years, you know, going on, and you may not need any time to call on, you know, any kind of extra service."*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

> *"Who's that [taxes] benefiting? Most of us have jobs that we go to everyday; pay our taxes, and everything. But back to the 'exchange' here, there are, classrooms with 16 students, 14 of which are non-English or second-language kids, and the parents do not speak English at all. They are getting the benefits!"*
>
> *"And they don't pay taxes."*
>
> *"<u>Pretty</u> nice!"*
>
> *"<u>They</u> don't pay taxes!"*
>
> *"They're getting the benefits of this! If our taxes work, and I know I'm gonna sound probably a racists about it … then our taxes [should be] going for 'our' American people…"*
>
> *"They don't even pay taxes!"*
>
> *North Carolina, All Low-Education Group*

The unfairness discourse was powerful in "eating" group discussions. Once one member of the group introduced this kind of argument, the group conversation inevitably veered off and remained entrenched in discussions about fairness and equity (or who has a stake in our system).

Both the positive and negative effects of this prime have communications implications. First, the ability of the idea of exchanges to illuminate taken-for-granted services is a powerful framing antidote to the dominant cultural model in which people assume the government does nothing and public services are disconnected from the taxes paid to fund them. In addition, "exchanges" has promise in connecting budgets and taxes, through the clear and simple process of "give and take" and the idea of obligation that is at the core of the metaphor. On the other hand, the peer discourse sessions suggest that this metaphor must be wielded carefully because of its tendency to cue up discussions of fairness that are narrowly construed (or fairness between groups — a concept that FrameWorks' prior research has shown to be unproductive). The "fairness between groups" discussion was a powerful trap. Even when conversations were following more positive lines — when groups were discussing systems, services and the role of government — the introduction of ideas of fairness upended and ground these more productive conversations to an immediate halt. In short, the exchanges prime shows some promise in restructuring budget and tax conversations, but requires considerable refinement so that in using this concept, communications do not inadvertently cue up fairness discourses and activate consumerist thinking, obscuring ideas of the common good and the social purposes of budgets and taxes.

4. Pay now or pay later

The idea behind the "pay now or pay later" prime emerged from FrameWorks' past quantitative survey experiments on early child policies, which have included measures of willingness to pay increased taxes to fund services. This research has shown that the idea of pay now or pay later is a powerful way of shifting thinking away from more individualistic modes of thought, towards long-term and social perspectives. In the peer discourse sessions, FrameWorks chose this prime to shift away from the short-term oriented conversations about getting one's money's worth and getting out *exactly* and *immediately* what one puts in, towards discussions of long-term goals and purposes.

Compared with the three primes discussed above, pay now or pay later had more promising effects. After being exposed to the prime, group discussions tended to focus on common good. Rather than conversations about the need for *individuals* to get out exactly what they put into the system, these conversations focused on the public purpose of budgets and taxes — to make and fund plans that are for the good of the country. In this way, the prime was successful in shifting conversations away from discussions of "what I need to get from my taxes," or "what budgets do for me" and towards the need for taxes to support "our *country*" or "our *society*."

> *"I think paying now is good, because I believe in 'prevent it.'"*
>
> *"Yeah."*
>
> *"I like that … being proactive and being preventive because that stays in the long run. So, the roads and transportation infrastructure, you know we need to invest in that because that's gonna sustain us in the long term. So, why not put the money into that infrastructure, and keep the maintenance on the roads. For example what happened in Minnesota — the bridge collapsing, you know, I-35? I mean, it was like a wake-up call for a lot of the Americans, so all the engineers started going to all these old bridges and updating them. Our highways system is great, but I think we need to think in terms of, the 'go green' type of thing. I was learning a lot of things about our interstates. There's, you know, there's easement within the roads so that they can build without costing extra money other than, let's say, if they were to repair a road, they can actually build a railway system along the interstate so that they could have some sort of a cleaner transportation for the future. So that's my thing is like, I'd rather invest now for long term."*
> *Kansas, All-Republican Group*
>
> *"Well, I think that goes right to the infrastructure problem that we're facing right now. If you defer maintenance down the line just because you don't want to spend*

the money now, or you want to keep things in line right now, or you want to make this quarter look really good, it may end up costing you hugely more down the line. You know, things like bridges collapsing in Minneapolis, and really serious disasters like that that maybe could have been prevented if somebody had a plan to maintain those bridges and roads so that there wouldn't be a catastrophic failure."

"I think it's the same thing as like car maintenance. You don't change your oil, and do your tires, your car doesn't run as good, so that is the same."

Arizona, All-White Group

The pay now or pay later prime was also successful in connecting budgets and taxes and filling the cognitive hole between these concepts. Analysis showed that the pay now or pay later prime helped participants explicitly recognize that the services and infrastructure that budgets provide and on which citizens rely have to be funded from somewhere. In other words, thinking about the need to invest in long-term services and infrastructure forced participants to recognize that these public goods have a public cost and this money comes from public taxes. This connection made the goal of taxes more explicit, and therefore shifted groups off highly negative conversations about taxes, and onto more pragmatic discussions about the need to fund public services and infrastructure and the importance for the long term.

"Well, you're saying that 'later' the price is obviously gonna be much higher than what it is now. I can do preventative maintenance today, and not have to replace the bridge. I can hire more inspectors to make sure that there's not environmental problems because I don't want to have to pay later and have to do a massive cleanup, or I don't want to short-change our students, and then have to put them in prison or something because they weren't educated."

"That's the same way I see it. If you don't pay now … you <u>will</u> pay later."

"Yeah. And I think it's better to pay now. It's not as costly, it's more beneficial, and everybody lives better."

Kansas All-Democrat Group

Finally, pay now or pay later was "user-friendly" — it seeped into conversations and participants easily identified with and gave frequent examples of the prime's underlying idea.

"[We pay now] instead of having to pay later."

"Yeah."

"In other words, later it just continues to escalate up."

"It just costs more."

> *"Yeah."*
>
> *"You bite the bullet. It's just like you need a roof on your house, right? You don't wait until it leaks inside?"*
>
> *"You 'save' the roof."*
>
> *"So that you don't have to fix the walls inside, you fix the roof!"*
> *Kansas, All-Republican Group*
>
> *"I like what they're saying, that you have to plan ahead, and you have the money, and you spend it so you aren't going to be jumping in later having to pay for a lot of things that you have to fix. It's almost like 'pay now, and save later,' so that you're not paying later, again."*
> *Kansas All-Democrat Group*
>
> *"Think about it like your stove. Your stove is old; it's getting ready to conk out, but it's still got some time left in it. If you go buy a new stove now, with new technology, energy saving, blah, blah, blah, and all the bells and whistles, it's gonna cost you $1000. But, in the long run, if you don't, you're not going to be able to cook at home, which saves you $10,000."*
> *North Carolina, All Low-Education Group*
>
> *"[Talking about another prime] And that goes back to the one [the prime] before. We're either gonna pay for the kids now, or we're gonna pay more later."*
> *Kansas All-Democrat Group*

Despite the overall success of pay now or pay later, it had two less-productive effects. First, participants had a tendency to latch on to the literalness of a part of the prime that talked about "long-term *investment*." When these three words were included in the prime's text, group discussions moved into subjects like the "the stock market," "401(k)s" and the "economic meltdown." Put another way, because of dominant crisis frames in the media at the time of the research, participants latched onto the language of "investments" and discussions veered off budgets and taxes and into conversations about the current problems with "investments." When the term "investment" was removed from the prime in a later iteration of the guide, group discussions did not move into these negative topics. The following is typical of the types of comments that followed the pay now or pay later prime when it included the terms "long-term *investments*."

> *"So, even though it's not my degree, or it's not my specialty, I'm gonna stay on top of where that money is going, and what it's doing, and although I may not panic about it immediately, or maybe I will at some point in time, but I'm still responsible — that's my money. I still want to know where it is, what it's doing, where it's going. And then 401(k)s or any other kind of retirement account, I*

mean it's my decision. That's where I chose to put my money, or I chose to put my money in some other funds or stocks or hedge funds or something."

Arizona, All-Minority Group

A second negative result of the pay now or pay later prime was its activation of the "ideal versus real" cultural model. Participants tended to agree with the idea of paying now to avoid paying more later and were thus in accord with the need to fund programs that worked towards long-term strength. However, this agreement was always one small step away from the predictable acknowledgement that while "in theory we should prepare for the future, in reality we just can't afford to do this," or that "this is simply not how government works." This dead-end discourse also had the tendency to devolve even further into the familiar "the government is inept/corrupt" discourse.

"And this one [the pay now or pay later prime] is the concept of; we need to fix what the problem is now, instead of in the future, when we'll be owned by China, or India, which is basically what's happening. So, I think we should have taxes invested in long-term goals, but, I don't know if there's <u>enough</u> money from taxes — I'm not saying they should increase them <u>at all</u>, but …"

"I mean, is that what they're really gonna do? That's what they <u>say</u> they're gonna do. But is that what they're <u>really</u> gonna do?"

"This <u>sounds</u> great. I mean, we all know that you got to pay — you got to look ahead, and think about things down the road, but as far as 'budget' I mean, our government you know, we go here for four years, and then we're focused on this long-term goals, and then we go there, [SARCASM] then we go back here a little bit. I mean, you know, we lose focus."

"This can't work because the money we get from taxes today was spent like 10 years ago."

"Exactly right."

"This isn't really going to work out. It's a good idea, but I mean, what's it gonna do?"

"I mean I agree, but you know [Sigh] I think that the people that are in power now, I mean, they're not thinking about, 'okay, if I make changes right now, you know, 100-150 years from now, this is gonna have wonderful effects.' I mean, they are thinking in terms of, 'can I get reelected in four years?'"

Kansas, All-Republican Group

While not unequivocally positive, pay now or pay later was effective in shifting conversations away from both individualistic and short-term focused conversations and was user-friendly in its ability to seep into participant discourse. However, if pay now or pay later is to be incorporated as a frame element, communications must avoid both implicitly and explicitly cuing up the idea of "investment" because of its negative baggage. The fact that removing the "investment" language from the prime eliminated literal discussions of investments further emphasizes the need to avoid this term in communications. In addition, some practical examples of pay now or pay later policies might prevent the tendency to default back to sticky "ideal versus real" patterns of thinking that have the power to hijack more positive public conversations.

5. Futures/legacy

In four of the peer discourse sessions, FrameWorks experimented with a "futures/legacy" prime. After determining that the "protection" prime, used in the first two groups, was highly ineffective, we analyzed the data from these first two peer discourse groups and designed what the data suggested would be a more effective prime. Futures/legacy emerged as a way shifting off short-term, consumerist thinking — the focus on balancing inputs and outputs and getting one's money's worth. The futures/legacy prime was therefore designed to meet similar reframing needs as the "pay now or pay later" prime discussed above. Because of the similarity of "futures/legacy" to "pay now or pay later," the two primes had similar results. Due to this similarity the discussion below has been abbreviated to avoid redundancies.

Like the pay now or pay later prime, futures/legacy was effective in facilitating conversations about shared fates and common good rather than individual interests, discipline and responsibility. Also like pay now or pay later, futures/legacy was promising in its ability to connect budgets and taxes and fill the cognitive hole between the way that experts link these concepts and the lack of a similar cognitive link in the general public's understanding. Finally, futures/legacy was user-friendly, with participants easily employing both the language and the underlying idea in their discussions. On the negative side, like pay now or pay later, futures/legacy had the tendency to lead to conversations about how, in theory, a focus on the future is great, but that, in practice, this perceptive is highly unrealistic.

One important distinction between the pay now or pay later and futures/legacy primes is that while pay now or pay later is more of a simplifying model — it is a metaphorical process that clarifies an expert understanding — futures/legacy is more of what frameworks calls a "value" — general claims about desirable social or personal conditions. This distinction and the positive effects of both primes suggest that these elements may be particularly powerful when coupled in communications. That is, we would expect that communications that could employ the pay now or pay later simplifying model *with* the futures/legacy value would be particularly effective in shifting away from dominant individualist, mentalist and government models.

6. Prosperity grid

Based on its success in some related work, FrameWorks chose to use a "prosperity grid" prime in these peer discourse sessions. Prosperity grid is a simplifying model that emerged from FrameWorks' extensive research on race. The main reason for using this prime was to see if the idea of keeping opportunity flowing would restructure conversations on budgets and taxes towards more public and less individualizing goals. In short, the prime was designed to precipitate conversations that were more about equality of opportunity and access to resources rather than unfairness.

Prosperity grid had three positive effects. These effects were most pronounced in the all-Democratically affiliated group that FrameWorks conducted in Kansas. First, prosperity grid shifted away from frequent discussions of unfairness. Instead of discussions about the need for individuals to get out what they put in, after hearing about the prosperity grid, group discussions centered on the importance of making sure that all areas had access to services, institutions and other public goods.

> *"When our budgets and taxes support the grid in all places everyone can access the services if they support it, and we [need to] have enough in our budget and taxes to do those things."*
>
> *"I guess the key thing that I'm seeing, is that it says, they support the grid 'in all places.' That's 'usually' not what happens ... It doesn't support it in all places. It doesn't get to where it <u>needs</u> to be half the time."*
>
> *"School districts are a good example. If you've got a concentration of high-dollar homes, that county's gonna get more tax dollars. So they're gonna have more to support for what they need."*
>
> *Kansas, All-Democrat Group*
>
> *"That example is pretty much a 'prosperity' type of thing. You're talking about a pretty affluent area or someplace where there is opportunity because the area has more computers, more learning ability."*
>
> *Arizona, All-White Group*

The language and concept of the prime were effective in seeping into the groups' discussions of budgets and taxes — prosperity grid was user-friendly. This can be seen in the quote above as well as in the excerpts provided below.

> *"This sounds good. This one has more 'meat' about it than the other one because you're basically trying to say the same thing [as futures/legacy prime], but the 'prosperity grid' is more solid."*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*
>
> *"Those districts that do not have any money."*
>
> *"And that's in place in some places."*
>
> *"To me it has to do with the politics, who has control of this money, and how big the grid is."*
>
> *Kansas, All-Democrat Group*

Finally, the prime was effective in fostering discussions of social purpose and common good. FrameWorks has found these themes to be integral in opening people up to seeing a role for policy and public responsibility in solving social problems. In this case, the focus on communal values and common good was highly effective in keeping conversations away from the need for individual benefits. The emphasis on equal *access* to services was also effective in keeping participants from employing mentalist models in which social problems are the exclusive result of individual failures in responsibility and discipline.

> *"I think we have to <u>create</u> that perfect world through free enterprise, co-ops, non-profits, and through faith-based initiatives. That's the people helping the people, you know? Each one reaching and looking into [doing] that with government funds, and the allotments that come from the government. That's the only way we can get a handle on things locally, and community-wide. There's all kinds of ways communities can control the government monies that we got. So I think that's a good way to keep that grid intact. If we just did that everywhere in all the neighborhoods, in all the zip codes, you know, and zip codes make up the country, you know?"*
>
> *"That's the part of it that was sounding like there's a cause and effect. Something that's good for the entire group, you know, all the people, and that was kind of what I saw, too."*
>
> *"If they allotted this money to your neighborhood, your neighborhood, your neighborhood, your neighborhood, we could start taking a little more control of things ourselves."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*
>
> *"Like the places with the better homes, and persons making the most money, they have the better schools, and better parks and recreation, all those things, but I don't think the poor child should be denied because he's poor, and because of <u>where</u> he lives."*
>
> *Kansas All-Democrat Group*
>
> *"If we think about the prosperity grid, the approach would be making sure that we take care of those areas that aren't already on the grid, so those areas that really need the textbooks, and really need small business loans; using our budgets and taxes to spur that kind of activity. To connect people who aren't currently connected."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*
>
> *"Well, I mean if this is about 'taxes,' and if we want to look at what we're paying as going towards healthier communities, and to jump-start banks lending to small businesses, and tax money going to schools and that all schools could have more up-to-date facilities, not just the ones in Myers Park, but [those] in poorer communities could <u>also</u> have better facilities, and that there was more of a sense*

of '<u>neighborhood</u>.' You know, to have real thriving, healthy communities. Wouldn't that be good?"

North Carolina, All High-Education Group

Like the other primes, prosperity grid was not without its problems. Despite its effectiveness in shifting away from conversations about unfairness and the need to get one's money's worth, there were several instances in which participants interpreted the prime as a call to "spread the wealth" — to take resources and services away from those who had earned them by paying taxes into the system, and giving them to groups who either did not pay taxes at all or did not pay an appropriate amount based on the services they used. This interpretation was most pronounced in the all-Republican party affiliated group in Kansas.

"For me, this [the prosperity grid] reads that we take from what's working well, and give to what's not working well."

"And I wouldn't agree with that."

"Maybe it's 'county' related because I surely wouldn't want my money going over to Wyandotte County or a different county. Keep it in the same county!"

"What it says is this is a 'socialistic' statement."

"Yeah."

"I would put this right along with Marxism. I shall take from you, and give to me, because 'you' work harder than I do. I would really get upset if somebody had come to me and said this. I don't care how flowery they put it."

"Yeah."

"What you're saying is that people who have worked for it should give it to those who are sitting on their butts."

"Share! [heavy sarcasm]"

"'Some of the areas in the community have a strong connection of those institutions available to again to the grid with relative ease. Others areas off the grid' — that still sounds like they want my money to do their work!"

"Why don't they have access"?

"What's going on in those areas because I like to know before you start pouring money somewhere else, what's the issue? What's going on?"

"Yeah."

"Or, can they built their own type of grid?"

Kansas All-Republican Group

A second negative result of the prosperity grid was the interpretation that the government cannot and should not be in charge of bringing resources and institutions to areas where services are lacking. Group members justified such statements with the rationales that either the government is unable, due to corruption and lack of transparency, to handle these types of developments, or that these types of developments are most efficient when left to the "power of the free market." Predictably, these conversations defaulted to dominant discourses of government and ideal versus real, which all group members, regardless of party, could engage in and from which no group could dig itself out of.

> *"Cut taxes, get the government out of some of these communities, and let the "free market" set up the markets with the fresh meats, and the neighborhood banks instead of us going and buying up these banks like we're doing now. Let the "free market" handle this. You can see some of these areas of this country, the worst places — I mean, <u>the worst</u>, you know, some of these communities that have more tax money being pumped into them and they're still, you know .... It's just like welfare, and all that. I mean, it's actually brought the poor people down <u>further</u>, and got them <u>relying</u> on the government! Get the government out of the way!"*
>
> *"I wouldn't use the budgets and taxes for a prosperity grid because a lot of people will tell you, that if you get the government and taxes out of the prosperity grid, it will take care of itself."*
>
> *"It will prosper! Exactly!"*

North Carolina, All High-Education Group

> *"That would be ideal if everybody's on the same page ... but it's still distorted badly by the political realities."*

Arizona, All-White Group

III. Negotiation

As a final exercise, participants were divided into three small groups and given a budget simulation exercise. The exercise required that they take $5,000 (in play money) and distribute it across broad categories of the United States federal system (i.e., Defense, Health and Human Services, Justice, etc.). After they had discussed their priorities in small groups and developed what they felt would be an optimal allocation of these resources in the budget, we then instructed them to decide how we (as a society) should raise the $5,000 required to fund their budget priorities (i.e., taxes from the wealthiest 5%, from corporations, excise taxes, "sin" taxes, etc.). Once they had developed both parts of the equation in their small groups — a budget and a set of mechanisms for generating revenues — we asked them to report back to the larger group and to try to persuade members of other groups (who had developed their own plans) of the efficacy of their overall approach. We recorded the small group negotiations as they debated the merits of their budget priorities/taxation plans as well as the reports back to the larger group for further insights about how peers: (1) debate the essential merits of budgets/taxes; (2) use the budget exercise and earlier primes (i.e., prosperity grid, future, etc.) to inform their negotiations around the development of raising tax revenue; and (3) presented their arguments to persuade others to defect from their own groups and throw their support behind a different budget/taxation plan. The results of this exercise are explained below.

1. Productive perceptual shifts

The most promising outcome of the negotiation session was the way in which the group discussions shifted the sense of agency and efficacy. In the course of these negotiation exercises, participant conversations shifted from an understanding of themselves as passive victims of taxation policy to discussions in which they were active citizen budgeteers. This finding speaks to the power of the perceptual shift that occurs when participants move from passive observers of the process to active participants in it.

Shifts in agency were most apparent when comparing group discussions before and after the negotiation exercise. Before the exercise, as many of the quotes presented above demonstrate, participants expressed a sense of their lack of agency in budget and tax processes and policies. This sense of inefficacy prompted conversations that “otherized” the government, or engendered a sense of the government as “them” and as impervious to individual action for reform.

> *“Well, kind of like to piggyback what Carlos and Lorraine had mentioned earlier uh … you know, the middle class runs everything, but yet we’ve — we often don’t get to choose where the money gets spent; we choose the electives, or we choose the people that get to make those decisions, but we as a people don’t often get to make those decisions, and I think in many cases we should be. I mean, I’m not — a budget does get put on the ballot every so often, uh … but on a regular basis I think if more people had more ‘say’ on where money went that, in theory at least, it might be a little bit more balanced.”*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

After the exercise, however, all of the groups became noticeably more invested in the process and more active in how they discussed budgets and taxes. Their discussions indicated that participants felt like they had some control, understanding, and ownership of the process.

> *“Very good. Roger, where are you at here?”*
>
> *“I’m … I’m good with that, too.”*
>
> *“Ditto.”*

"This is called loyalty."

"Well, it's something I worked on."

Arizona, All-White Group

"Your investment."

"My investment."

Arizona, All-White Group

"I like how we spent our money. I think it's really hard of course but I think when you have a say, you know, like this, it really just makes it — it makes it something that you feel really strong about. And that you want to back, and you want to support, and you wanna at least try it, for a little while."

Arizona, All-Minority Group

Along with increasing the participants' sense of agency and efficacy of the process, the negotiating exercise also allowed some participants to loosen the grip on their firmly held ideas about taxes and budgets. This first occurred in their recognition of the difficulty and complexity in constructing budgetary and tax policy. During the negotiation process, participants were able to take on the role of policymakers and realized some of the difficulties inherent in the decision-making process.

The ability to adopt the role of policymakers and negotiate with fellow citizens also allowed participants to think beyond their own experiences — a key perceptual shift. That is, the negotiation exercise allowed the participants to step outside of their own roles as unwilling tax payers and begin to understand budget and taxes from a different perspective.

I just didn't keep stressing mine because I felt well maybe I'm just like the old school. I know with about the criminal and the defense because I work with them two all the time. So I thought, okay, it's just me being closed mind to what I am so educated on. So, I opened up and just said, okay, you're right; we need to balance it out a little more, and-and 'future' is probably just as important, if not more, than just controlling the crime, and the defense, and the whole land security."

Arizona, All-Minority Group

The shifts in the participants' perceptions of the issues related to budget and taxes in the negotiation exercises — the encouragement of a sense of their own agency and efficacy and their ability to understand budgets and taxes as interconnected and complex — presented promising opportunities to overcome tendencies of thinking to default to the dominant "government as monolith" cultural model.

2. Transparency and clarity

During the negotiation exercise, participants were asked to construct their own budget and tax system. They were also asked to "sell" their budget/taxation plan to other groups.

Interestingly, only one group in all of the peer discourse sessions was able to convince the other groups to abandon their own plans. The unwillingness of participants to "jump ship" and sign on with other groups' plans speaks to the stakes that the participants had in their involvement in the process and the power of the exercise in creating a sense of agency. However, it is worth examining the one group whose policies were able to persuade others to abandon their own group's policies. The key to their success was the simplicity, clarity and transparency that characterized their budget and tax plan.

> *"We kind of went with the ideas of something they call the 'fair tax' where it just taxes on the consumption of everybody. We put $4,700 towards sales tax, $300 towards luxury and sin tax, and zero for everything else because if you — the more — if the individuals that control their own money, they're gonna spend more wisely, and they're gonna spend it on things, and the people who are richer are gonna spend more money, and people who are poor are gonna spend less money. The tax rate will be the same for everybody therefore there will be no complaining over who pays more taxes, who pays zero taxes and gets services for the — without paying any taxes."*
>
> *North Carolina, All Low-Education Group*

The specificities of the proposal are troubling; it essentially reduces tax policy to a sales tax and calls it "fair," which is not necessarily a desirable reform. However, the communications lesson is clear — when tax policies are clear and transparent and solutions are simple, the public is willing to support those policies. In fact, transparency in the process was particularly important when participants discussed their budget-making decisions.

> *"… the other thing we spent, we wanted to focus on, was we spent $300 on management and oversight, just feeling like if people knew that there was transparency, and in the government, and you know, what the money was being spent on, and kind of give feedback to that immediately, that would be a good thing. We kind of used the-the guidelines from the stimulus package that are out there now."*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*

The ability of one group to persuade others speaks to the power of simplifying and clarifying budgets and taxes and the sway of a clear solutions message. The exercise simultaneously allowed participants to better understand the process by which budget and tax policies are created. This transparency in the process was critical in creating opportunities for productive conversations about budget and tax policies.

3. Negotiation Strategies

The working groups employed several different strategies to create their budget and tax policies. Some groups focused on the "fairness" in their approach to designing a plan. In the negotiation exercise, ideas of "fairness" evoked conversations similar to those that occurred during the experimental section of the peer discourse session. Namely, taxes came to be seen as inherently unfair because some groups were not getting out of the system what they put in and "others" were benefitting without contributing. In constructing their tax policies, the groups that employed the "fairness" frame ensured that everyone "put in" what they would get out of the system. The idea of "fairness" continued to evoke unproductive conversations during the negotiations, particularly in the part of the exercise in which the groups were asked to devise a tax system.

> *"We took the same approach as everyone else. The majority came from the richest 5%, and the large corporations, um … and then we put an equal amount of the burden on the luxury sin tax, property taxes, and then we-we took money from both — oh, from small business and middle class, and also the low income because even though — and initially we said not to take money from the low income, but then we figured that since everyone's going to be getting something in exchange, everybody needs to put in the pot, too."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

In this quote, the idea of exchange moved the conversation to an individualist/consumerist model, or the idea that "you get out what you put in." When groups' tax strategies were designed without consideration of their budget priorities, participants tended to fall into this consumerist mode of thinking.

However, when groups focused on budget priorities when formulating their tax strategies, their deliberations were more productive. In these groups, deliberations between fellow citizens were strongly flavored by values such as the common good and the future.

> *"So our approach there was really, we're our brother's keeper, and so if we're working from the inside out, if we're prioritizing then who can afford it the most? Uh-huh. So that's pretty much the concept we used."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

> *"Oh, and the deficit and the bank; and the National Bank. Those were our top tier that ought to put in the most, and then we put the rest of them in the same category because we feel that if you're lucky enough, blessed enough to get to the top, you ought to help the rest of the country get up there with you. And that's the way we feel government should do, too. Help the rest of us get up there with them."*
>
> *Arizona, All-Minority Group*

> *"And the reason we spent such a huge chunk on economic, training, labor, unemployment and Social Security, is it's just feeling like if we are alleviating people's fears a little bit, and helping them to feel safer, that they're gonna be more generous later on down the road, once their stuff is squared up, and they're not gonna be so reluctant to um … you know, contribute to other things um … like international development.*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*

> *"So, we put in $1,500 for health, and then economic development, training, labor and unemployment, we gave $1,000. Our rationale there was um … if you have been working, and you lost your job, and it wasn't your fault, unemployment insurance is-is really important. Some of us wouldn't be getting by, you know, at times without that. Also, displaced-worker training, small business loans; we liked all that. We felt like that that would have something to do with job creation somewhere. And then uh … we gave $700 to education because we felt like that's kind of looking forward, a little bit of planning. We felt like that if we train up those now that — to be productive, and to have a skill, then perhaps they will be in a better situation to take care of themselves when they're — when they come of age.*
>
> *North Carolina, All High-Education Group*

In sum, *how* groups came to construct their budget and tax policies had discernible effects on the content of their negotiations. When budgets and taxes were clearly connected and when groups focused decision-making on budget priorities, negotiations did not default to consumerists understandings of budgets and taxes.

Conclusion

The dominant default patterns of understanding, talking and thinking about budgets and taxes that FrameWorks documented in the in-depth interviews were confirmed in the peer discourse sessions. These default patterns proved very difficult to counteract using experimental primes. However, the ideas of "pay now or pay later," "futures/legacy" and "prosperity grid" were relatively effective in shifting group conversations away from the dominant cultural models and discourses that surround budgets and taxes and towards ways of thinking and talking in which these were social issues amenable to policy solutions. These primes are promising as elements of a reframing strategy but require additional refinement and testing before they can be confidently suggested as communications recommendations.

The negotiation exercise has several important implications for advocates' communications strategies. Working with fellow citizens as policymakers, many participants were able to avoid defaulting to conversations about the government as an impervious bureaucracy. They became actively engaged in the process and committed to the work they put into their plans and decisions. These initial findings indicate that, in addition to reframing strategies, spaces for civic engagement and public deliberation regarding budgetary and tax policy need to be created to bolster support for policy solutions. Second, participants responded to clear and concrete solutions that they recognized as within the realm of possibility. Finally, when budget priorities were clearly connected to tax policies, participant conversations shifted from thinking about taxes as getting out what you put "into the pot" and participants were able to envision budget and tax policy for the common good and in the interest of the country's future. These findings suggest that a successful reframing strategy will forefront budget priorities, incorporate values statements, and present clear solutions. As with the initial findings on the primes, the results from the negotiation exercise are very promising but will need to be refined an tested with further research.

The peer discourse sessions suggest that reframing the conversation surrounding budgets and taxes *is* possible. However, this research highlights the need for further refinement of specific frame elements and reframing techniques and the incorporation of spaces and opportunities for civic engagement in order to achieve more prolonged shifts and expansions in thinking.

APPENDIX A: ***Key Findings from the Cultural Models Interviews***

1. Informants relied on three dominant cultural models to understand budgets: 1) government as an undifferentiated mass, headed by an elite few; 2) a mentalist orientation; and 3) inputs must equal outputs. These models structure an understanding of budgets that is devoid of process, narrowly individual rather than collective, and rigid in its conception of balance (between flexibility and responsiveness). In addition to these three dominant ways of thinking, other, more nuanced,versions of related models were observed and are reported here.

2. To make sense and think about taxes, informants employed three dominant cultural models: 1) taxes do not meet individual needs; 2) getting your money's worth; and 3) public services are a "given." Using these models structures a way of thinking about taxes that is inherently anti-collective, short-term and individualistic. Research also revealed that, despite the existence of these three dominant models, "taxes" remain a poorly conceptualized and underdeveloped concept leading informants to struggle with tax-related questions experts would deem basic.

3. A major finding of FrameWorks' cognitive interviews is that budgets and taxes remain largely *unconnected concepts* in the minds of Americans. This gap represents an important "cognitive hole" in how Americans think about and understand these issues. Research revealed that, while some of the same broad cultural models are used to understand both concepts, most Americans lack a well-developed model to relate, integrate and think productively about the concepts of budgets and taxes. Without such an integrative model, the implications and impacts of these issues remain poorly conceptualized and the public's role in these issues unrealized. This is a classic example of what FrameWorks refers to as a "cognitive hole" between the way experts understand a concept — in this case the relationship between budgets and taxes — and the understanding that the public brings to the same issue. In other words, while experts have a clear and well-formed understanding of how these concepts are fundamentally interrelated, the public lacks a way to integrate these processes and think productively about the relationships between these two issues.

4. The dominant models that Americans do use to think about budgets have clear implications for advocates interested in communicating about this issue. Most importantly, these dominant models leave little room for the public to think about how to reform the system and the need to do so. Our research revealed models that obscure the process by which budgets operate, and demonstrate a pressing need for reframing strategies to clarify the *processes* involved in setting and managing budgets. By individualizing the concept of budgets, the models informants employed may actually work to inhibit the realization and understanding of more systemic processes on which an improved understanding of budgets depends. Furthermore, the notion that budgets are a *collective* plan and pertain to social goods will be difficult to communicate to the public given the individualized nature of the dominant models our research has revealed. Put another way, the consumerist nature or "little picture" aspect of budgets tended to

obscure systems, processes and shared consequences. Finally, our research demonstrates the difficulty of conceptualizing *long-term* aspects of budgets and suggests that advocate communications will have limited effect without careful attention to reframing and shifting the time frame with which Americans understand budgets and budgeting.

5. Many of these dominant models are imbued with thinking that emerged from the FrameWorks research on government. Tendencies to think about government in terms of a handful of powerful (and corrupt) individuals or in terms of bloat and waste tended to distract people from more productive thinking about the government's role in budgeting and taxation. At the same time, there appeared to be more trust or at least assignment of duties to government for these particular issues, perhaps due to their inherent difficulty (see Government Officials as Experts below).

6. While the dominant models employed by informants in thinking about budgets paint a grim picture, our research revealed two more recessive models that provide valuable information on reframing this discussion. The use of a model of household budgeting to understand government budgeting is promising in its ability to simplify and clarify the process by which budgets are set and managed, and the factors that create tensions in these processes. There remain, however, serious hurdles in preventing this model from further individualizing. And, while very recessive, the model in which government officials are actually seen as well-qualified experts is promising in its ability to diffuse the more dominant assumption that government is an undifferentiated mass headed by a few corrupt politicians. Again, this model is impaired in its potential power by its confusion with a kind of "let the experts do it" approach that may result from lack of agency.

7. The dominant models that informants used to think about taxes present several important considerations for advocate messages. The way in which the public thinks about taxes is largely in terms of *individual* needs. In a very clear and direct way, this makes any message of collective benefits and public purposes hard to think. The lack of a model that informants used to understand *how* taxes work and *where* they go presents another significant communications challenge. Advocate materials that do not acknowledge this, and deliver unframed or poorly framed messages, are likely to have severely limited impact as they hit individuals without the cognitive tools to understand this information. Even worse, communications that do not anticipate individualizing models are at risk of reinforcing and further entrenching this way of thinking about taxes. Finally, the fact that the public goods supported by tax money are largely invisible and taken for granted makes the communication of messages regarding the importance of these invisible services even more challenging.

8. Two recessive models for understanding taxes — taxes as investments and taxes as an exchange — were tested; taxes as exchange proved somewhat promising in relation to the more dominant models employed to make sense of this issue. While not without problems, reframing strategies should consider the positive

effect of this recessive model in creating cognitive room for the ideas of collective benefit and social purpose in the public discussion of taxes. It should be noted, however, that this recessive model requires further investigation and execution.

9. Finally, the most striking and significant finding from this research is the conspicuous gap that exists between the concept of budgets and that of taxes. The resounding implication for advocates is that any unframed or poorly framed communications will have severely limited impact due to the lack of a link between these concepts and, by being interpreted through the largely negative dominant models, may actually work to undermine the advocate's intended message.

APPENDIX B: *Primes Used in Peer Discourse Sessions*

1. *Protection*
   One expert says that there are a variety of ways that federal, state and local agencies protect the public. For example, there are food quality standards, environmental controls, workplace and product safety standards, and consumer fraud protections. Our system of budgets and taxes determines whether we can set and enforce these protections on behalf of the public good. Is the idea of protection a good way to think about budgets and taxes?

2. *Household budgets*
   Another expert says that creating a national, state or local budget is a lot like creating a household budget. Based on your needs and long-term goals you and your family set priorities for spending. For example, if something unexpected happens, like your car breaks down, you can offset the costs of replacing it by spreading the payments over time — you don't have to pay for it all at once. Similarly, if you want to go to college you can take out a student loan that you pay off over time. And just like the federal government relies upon taxes for its income, you rely on your household salaries, assets and ability to borrow to support your budget.

3. *Exchanges*
   Here's an expert who says that budgets and taxes are like an exchange. We receive services and are given access to the network of health, educational, economic, legal and other social institutions that allow us to thrive. Taxes are our way of giving back and perpetuating this system.

4. *Pay now/pay later*
   The expert we're quoting here says that we need to adopt a long-term perspective in our approach to budgets and taxes. Using the revenue we get from taxes today to budget for things like transportation, environmental conservation and education — things that have long-term benefits — can help us avoid the higher costs of fixing problems later.

5. *Future/legacy*

Another expert says that budgets and taxes are really about making decisions *today* based on what we want for the *future* of our country. This expert says that as Americans, we have to make decisions today that will give our country the best possible chance to thrive in the future. For example, we need to give kids resources today so that they can thrive, develop and prepare for the future, so that they can give back to society later. Spending to build infrastructure (like roads and schools) is another example of a decision that we can make today that will benefit the future of our country. According to this view, budget and tax decisions are our way of ensuring our future by putting our money into maintaining our people, infrastructure and communities.

6. *Prosperity grid*
   We have an expert who says that one of our goals for budgets and taxes should be to keep opportunity flowing through the grid of American institutions — for example, neighborhoods with markets that have fresh foods, banks that give loans for small businesses, and schools with up-to-date facilities. Some areas of the country have a strong connection to these institutions and are able to plug into the grid with relative ease — other areas are truly off the grid. When our budgets and taxes support the grid in all places, everyone can access services, allowing infrastructure and talent to develop, which benefits us all.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Kendall-Taylor, Nathaniel and Moira O'Neil (2009). Priority, Transparency and Agency: Results from Peer Discourse Analysis. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.