



How to Talk About Government

**A FrameWorks Message Memo**

March 2006

*“It all depends on whether you look out and see a nation of consumers, or a nation of citizens.” Bill Moyers*

Social policy proponents have long suspected that even the best model program or policy solution falls on deaf civic ears because the locus of solution – government – is immediately suspect. This memo reports on findings from the FrameWorks Institute’s recent research on how the public views government, as well as the consequences of public reasoning about government. In addition to adding to our understanding of public thinking, this memo also makes research-based recommendations for changing the public conversation about government toward a more broadly shared belief in the essential role of the public sector in pursuing public purposes, advancing the common good and improving the quality of public life in America.

Beginning in 2004, Demos and the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG) partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to identify ways to communicate more effectively about government and its purpose. The ultimate goal of this effort is “to help renew the commitment by Americans to government’s essential role in achieving the common goals of our society.” Project partners at CEG and Demos hope to facilitate this transformation in public conversation by “working with civic leaders, policymakers and advocates to collaborate in a sweeping effort to revitalize a shared belief in government’s public purposes. Reaching out through diverse networks, this project will make the case for government’s unique ability to advance the quality of public life.”<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, this endeavor will require a multi-faceted strategy for growing a richer national dialogue over time, one in which government can be seen to play a strong role as problem-solver, not denigrated as problem-maker. The full scope of such a long-term strategy to fundamentally reframe government lies beyond the purview of this MessageMemo, which concentrates instead upon the closely-related issue of the message that such a movement must deliver. It is important to recognize that FrameWorks researchers are not suggesting that Message substitute for Organization and Movement-building, but rather that they are critical to each other’s success.

To effect long-term change, all those who explore and explain the value of government action will need to engage in overcoming pervasive and corrosive stereotypes that have become dominant in media and political rhetoric. Media content analyses conducted previously for the Council for Excellence in Government<sup>2</sup> found that civil servants are routinely buffooned in the nightly news and public officials have become television’s least likeable occupation group on network entertainment. Think Newman on *Seinfeld* or Mayor Quimby on *The Simpsons*. Only by shifting public attention away from these familiar and derogatory stories can we help the public evaluate the role that government at all levels can and should play in promoting the public good. These stubborn stereotypes are resistant to new information, but they can be displaced, as the new FrameWorks research readily attests. We are not alone in making that assertion. Indeed, a more recent report by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International<sup>3</sup> shows that significant numbers of those who watch TV shows with government and civic themes, such as *Boston Public* or *Judging Amy*, say they have changed their views about

a particular social issue as a result, as well as their views of government and its workers. Identifying and explaining proven ways of overcoming entrenched stereotypes, and “defogging” the lens on social issues and government’s role in addressing them is a major focus of this MessageMemo.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of these other researchers, the conclusions are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

## **Background**

Beginning in March 2004, the FrameWorks Institute began a multi-year investigation to determine how the public thinks about government and to recommend communications strategies to enhance public understanding of, and support for an active government, dedicated to advancing public policy solutions to societal challenges.

To inform its work, the FrameWorks Institute brings together a group of communications scholars and practitioners with a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on “frames,” or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These frames can be triggered by language choices, different messengers or images, and these communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Traditionally, news media are the main source of Americans’ information about public affairs. The way the news is “framed” on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to these embedded and reinforced frames. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to either repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement’s strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition’s frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis can be found at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord it public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about our issues. They influence what images will come to mind and what solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications

defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized. Choices in the way we frame the role of government in general and such specific issues as health care reform or taxes must be made carefully and systematically to create the powerful communications necessary to ensure that the public can reasonably consider the recommendations of social policy experts and the various roles for government that they propose.

Doing this effectively requires a base of research that probes beneath visible public opinion to determine why people think the way they do. This research must help communicators choose wisely between competing options on the basis of empirical evidence. Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research was initially designed to explore the following questions:

- How does the public think about government and government’s role in resolving social problems?
- What dominant frames are applied to government in public discourse and in media?
- Are there default frames about government that appear almost automatic in public reasoning?
- How do these public and private frames affect public choices?
- How can government and its role be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative policy choices?

This Memo is informed by the following set of iterative, interactive and integrated research reports.

- A meta-analysis of existing public opinion research in the public domain, encompassing more than 100 surveys conducted primarily within the past 5 years, as analyzed by FrameWorks’ research partner Public Knowledge, resulting in “By, or For, the People?: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion of Government,” Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge, for the FrameWorks Institute, June 2004.
- Twenty “elicitations” or one-on-one open-ended interviews with ordinary people to determine the frames available to them as they think about government and the consequences of those frames for positive engagement with government. Interviews were conducted in California, Rhode Island, and Vermont and published as “Mind and Monolith: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations about Government,” Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady/Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, July 2004. A series of subsequent elicitations resulted in “Thinking Productively About Government, A Supplementary Memo Based on Ten Cognitive Interviews,” Axel Aubrun, Joseph Grady and Charley Scull/Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, May 2005.
- Twelve focus groups with engaged citizens – Republicans, Democrats and Independents who are news attentive and active in their communities – in Philadelphia, Tampa, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Hampshire, Oregon and

Wisconsin. Findings are summarized in “Without a Mission: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Perceptions of Government,” Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge for the Frameworks Institute, May 2005.

- Development of a simplifying model that can be demonstrated to help Americans think more productively and concretely about the role of government in our lives. Roughly 350 subjects from around the US were recruited, representing diversity in occupations, education level, ethnicity, age, gender, geography and political orientation. A variety of methods – from phone interviews to open-ended questionnaires and experimental designs – were employed, resulting in “Public Structures as a Simplifying Model for Government,” Axel Aubrun, Andrew Brown and Joseph Grady/Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, October 2005.
- A national survey of Americans’ reactions to a series of “primes” and other experimental cues, designed to test the impact of reframes on attitudes toward government and policy preferences associated with government, resulting in the report “Rediscovering the Mission: Analysis of a Priming Survey Exploring Views of Government,” Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge for the FrameWorks Institute, October 2005.

Synopses and executive summaries of these reports can be found at <http://www.demos-usa.org/page288.cfm>. Since these are readily available, we have not repeated the research findings in this MessageMemo but have chosen to look across the reports to isolate the common findings that are most important for advocates to grasp as they take stock of the opinion landscape and evaluate reframing options.

## Situation Analysis

There are five fundamental observations that emerge from the research:

1. **It’s not as bad as we think it is.** While it is indeed true that Americans view government as negative and dissociated from themselves, this view is not as entrenched as many believe. The good news in this research is that, in both qualitative and quantitative tests, Americans can respond quite positively to the idea, mission and role of government. When people are in “villager mode,” concerned with community and the common good, they are eager and willing to “do government.” This finding emerged, however, after an extensive imaginative indoctrination in village-building and governance in which we asked focus group participants to develop a plan for governance on an imaginary island. Ripped out of the context of daily affairs and the pejorative stigma of doing government, their instincts for collective action, respecting consensus building in the setting of priorities and safeguarding the public good, were impressive. Clearly, we must find quicker, more effective ways to trigger “villager thinking.” The fact that most Americans do not experience a regular and sustained connection to the

process of government -- a “we the people” experience -- makes it more difficult to find venues in which new stories about government can be introduced.

2. **The word “government” poses an obstacle to productive thinking.** The word “government” is so freighted with pejorative baggage that it should be used with caution and is best used only after other terms that establish its public mission. Without this redirection, government is universally greeted with derision – and that response is socially expected across Democrats, Republicans and Independents. Deep-seated ridicule, learned and conditioned over time, remains a major impediment to engaging citizens in a discussion about government as us, and government as problem-solver. If government is allowed to be identified as a “joke,” the rest of the conversation hardly matters.
  
3. **Strong, entrenched frames misdirect thinking about government.** Among the most damaging misperceptions of government is a chronically available “default frame” that equates government with elected officials, the current Administration and politics-as-usual, and suffers from parallel associations with corruption, partisanship, and elitism. When government is “about” people in power, this easily available mental short-cut effectively concretizes and personifies government, literally shutting down deeper thinking. People reach quick judgments about government based on their attitudes to politics in general or the specific party in power. As long as government is seen as being about electoral politics, the focus is on people and those people most likely to come to mind are elected officials, not those who are responsible for implementing the ongoing business of the country nor the governmental structures we have in place to ensure that the country runs smoothly.

Relatedly, Cultural Logic identified two chronic ways people have of looking at government as: (1) government as MIND (or associated with politicians and elected leadership or decision-making functions) OR government as MONOLITH (everything else – the bureaucracy, a huge undifferentiated, inanimate blob). People’s immediate reactions were narrowly limited to these two views.

When viewing government through the lens of MIND or MONOLITH, Americans see government in narrow and distorted ways. They can’t see government as “us” – as the way Americans implement the common good. They can’t see regular every-day chores that government performs on the public’s behalf. They can’t see beyond highly rhetorical discussions about the misdirection, corruption or bloated size of government. They exaggerate partisanship, ignore consensus, and see themselves as spectators, not actors, in public life. All this “baggage” comes with the dominant frames of discourse about government. Moreover, most of what government is and does is invisible to people, including the fact that libraries, parks, and countless other institutions they take for granted are created and operated by this invisible entity. This dual view of government explains moreover why people often see government as huge and bloated, but personify it in terms of a few highly visible public officials.

4. **Distinctions between public and private hold little meaning.** There is widespread confusion over the difference between the public and private sectors, and numerous

manifestations of this confusion. First, the private sector is presumed to be more accountable and efficient. Since there is little understanding of differences in goals and motivation between the sectors, the public sector has been degraded to a role that is, by definition, less effective than the private sector. When operating in this mindset, government would be better if it were “run like a business” because government would adopt business’ standards of accountability and be more efficient and careful with tax dollars. At the same time, people are suspicious of the private sector’s inherent lack of transparency and its “bottom-line” motivation, and see government as more open and accountable for actions. What is missing is a sense that government has a mission that is entirely different from private business: it is, by definition, supposed to be acting in the public interest. Finally, there is an expectation that government and business will be at odds, instead of working toward a common end. That expectation works to the disadvantage of government’s stake in efficient and effective problem-solving.

5. **People want to see a role for themselves as responsible and engaged citizens** – but they must overcome the notion of corruption and money in politics to be able to do so. They want to engage in long-term problem-solving and to offer their views, but they see the domain of government (confused with politics) as being about short-term and short-sighted decision-making that systematically excludes them. Similarly, people would like to see their government be more proactive and address problems before they occur. When they are reminded of the goals of government and given vivid pictures to reinforce its mission, they readily engage in the discussion and in reasonable, problem-solving approaches to public issues. Working on behalf of the public good, advancing the common interest, protecting public safety, planning for the future – these are the core functions of the public sector that serve to engage people. This way of thinking about government is, however, so rarely evoked by opportunities in their daily lives that it remains vague or hopelessly idealistic for many Americans.

### Graveyard of Reframing Hypotheses

While there have been numerous suggestions about how to reframe government, few of these recommendations have been subjected to empirical testing. Without this confirmation, many of the communications strategies currently in use cannot be reliably rejected or improved. A decade of FrameWorks’ research confirms the fact that many seemingly “logical” approaches to reframing public thinking do not yield the desired effects; in fact, many of our own researchers’ suggestions have backfired. As part of our investigations, the FrameWorks Institute set out to validate or contest the following popular options for reframing that have arisen from general perceptions of the public’s mistaken notions about government:

<u>Perception</u>	<u>Presumed Solution</u>
Government is ineffective	Give the public examples of effective programs
Government wastes tax dollars	Demonstrate that government is efficient
People don’t recognize govt services	Remind people of the govt services they like
Government can’t be trusted	Demonstrate trustworthiness and transparency

Taxes are too high	Change tax language to government services
Government doesn't affect me	Connect people to govt through self-interest
Government is a crutch	Change discussion to govt as safety net

The focus group phase of the FrameWorks research explored many of these framing hypotheses, with mixed results. In other aspects of our research, we observed these themes in public thinking and were able to evaluate their efficacy for moving the public dialogue about government forward. The observations that follow look across the body of research.

**The Demonstrate Effectiveness Hypothesis.** When government programs were demonstrated to be effective or efficient, informants questioned whether the public sector was being held to the same standards of accountability as business, which they strongly doubted. When focused on efficiency and effectiveness as the goals for government, moreover, they lost sight of the mission of improving the common good and were more likely to talk about the attractiveness of “running government like a business.” Finally, since the engine for effective and efficient programs appears to be more and more taxes, most informants questioned why increased taxes seemed to be the “solution” to every problem. In sum, this line of reasoning did not yield the intended result of a re-evaluation of government but rather resulted in the reinvigoration of a “business is better and cheaper” chain of thinking.

**The Put A Face on Government Hypothesis.** Another oft-suggested approach to reframing government – that of featuring public servants as the face of government – was tested in the focus groups. The result shows the value of empirically testing assumptions. Focus group participants did not distinguish the motivations of public sector employees from private sector employees: there are good and bad people everywhere, they said. Importantly, this discussion simply served to distract people from the broader role government plays in public life.

**The Popularity of Services Hypothesis.** Reminding people of the services they get from government or, relatedly, invigorating their self-interest in programs that support them, prove even more harmful as strategies. This frame activates consumerist thinking. Focus group participants exposed to stories that encouraged them to think about the services they get and want thought they were more likely to get them better and cheaper from business. They were also less likely to consider anyone else's need for services they personally did not desire.

**The Government as Safety Net Hypothesis.** Government should not be in the hand-outs business, said our informants. When government is seen as doing things ‘for’ people, informants judged this as irresponsible and inappropriate, dampening private initiative. They see government as “safety net” as a last option for people who are down on their luck, not a viable and integral part of what a society should provide. Moreover, when the role of government is portrayed as a safety net, FrameWorks research has consistently found that this does not yield a robust role for public policy. To borrow an example from FrameWorks' research on health care, the “safety net” frame is unlikely to get the public to want to involve government in covering the uninsured, but rather more

likely to get public support for the existing triage of emergency care. Moreover, by combining the instinct to “put a face on the problem” with the safety net frame, advocates can be tempted to foreground the plight of social service recipients in making the case for government. Scholarly research has been strongly suggestive that this framing equation does not work in the way advocates think it does, yielding instead a kind of “blame the victim” response at worst or mere sympathy for individual cases at best.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, these suggested “reframes” are ineffective precisely because they reinforce the dominance of a consumerist, market-driven mind-set in which government is perceived as something one “buys” with one’s taxes to benefit each individual. While this might prove helpful for encouraging individual retirement accounts, for example, it is unlikely to get people to understand why they should pay taxes for public schools, for example, once their own children are raised.

A word may be needed about why this information may be difficult for some to accept. Most of the first-line users of this information—as our partners at Demos and CEG readily acknowledge—have spent their careers using some versions of the above reframes to attempt to bring supporters to the side of their issues. They may have found them effective with their constituents. They may have found that the media are willing to run articles based on these same frames—an outcome often used as a proxy for the effectiveness of the public communication. These frames have the added benefit of being personally satisfying. They acknowledge and reflect the speakers’ strongly held beliefs, and audiences that already agree provide gratifyingly positive feedback. Unfortunately, none of these outcomes ensures that anyone who does not already believe in the issue at hand has been moved by the communication. Moreover, there is some considerable evidence that even those whom we would assume to be on our side are not fully persuaded and empowered by these framing strategies. To truly begin to shift public opinion and the direction of public policy will require an entirely new approach to communication, one that this research effort attempts to support.

While these suggested reframes did not lead people to a constructive reappraisal of government, they did yield important insights about why the patterns of thinking to which these frames are connected constitute enduring obstacles to a consideration of government’s mission and role. At the same time, the research yielded a number of more hopeful clues about the nature of the reframes needed to change the conversation about government. These clues focused on missing ingredients in the discussion about government, namely:

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

As these clues emerged, they began to draw a distinction between two coherent and opposed views of government held by the public. The Consumerist view, while widely held, does little to move people to appreciate, protect and preserve a vigorous role for government in public life. Rather, it substitutes a “buyer beware” individualist mindset in the place of collective action.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the Citizen view promotes engagement with the common good and recognizes the shared public purposes of government.

### **Frame and Reframe: Two Views of Government: Consumerist v. Citizen**

*“We no longer have citizens.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

*Many Americans “are strangers to politics. They are not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it. If we accept the Greeks’ definition of the idiot as a privatized man, then we must conclude that the U.S. citizenry is now largely composed of idiots.” C. Wright Mills*

We offer below a more detailed enumeration of these two opposing views of government, which can be used as a checklist against which advocates can evaluate the way they are framing government and the probable effects of their framing choices. Importantly, we make no judgment about these views in general, but rather we suggest the negative consequences of applying consumerist thinking to the domain of public life and government. While it is a fact of life that people are consumers, and strive to be better and smarter consumers, this way of thinking is not productive as a lens on government. We suggest below why we believe this to be the case.

It is imperative that advocates who wish to promote a long-term reappraisal of government’s role understand these as distinct, coherent and competing patterns of thinking that lead in different directions. To the extent that advocates use and promote Consumerist thinking, they inevitably make it harder to focus people on their roles as citizens. And, when government is identified as being anti-business, people are even more likely to worry that “their” taxes are not being used to purchase the services they need at the best possible price, and so on. This reinforces the widely held belief that government is less efficient than the private sector. All of these patterns of consumerist thinking distract from citizen thinking. Put simply, the kind of logic used to buy a car or choose an investment is not the same as that required to address emergency preparedness or immunize a population. Yet the former is considerably more available to most people most of the time.

Our colleagues at Cultural Logic have a particularly compelling way of representing how different views of the world affect our sense of responsibility:

- When in “Consumer Stance,” I am responsible for **Me**
- When I adopt an Altruistic Stance, I am also responsible for **Them**
- When I can perceive a Manager Stance, I am responsible for the **It or Us** to which both Them and Me are inextricably linked

When Americans adopt a Consumer Stance to government, they bring into civic thinking many of the habits of that way of thinking, from its focus on getting the most for one's money to small picture thinking about available products and point-of-purchase decisions. The consequences for this "privatization" of the civic sphere are pronounced.

Consider the contrasts:

- The Consumerist view assumes private gain as the goal of human activity, while the Citizen view prioritizes advancing the common good.
- In the Consumerist view, government is often perceived as a threat to the maximization of individual wealth. In the Citizen view, government is a protector, a necessary agent in maximizing quality of life.
- In the Consumerist view, government is a redistributor of income – think taxes – while in the Citizen view, government is a redistributor of risk – think Social Security.
- In the Consumerist view, individual responsibility is the hallmark of the good citizen; consumers are responsible for their choices and must live with the consequences of their own decisions. Buyer beware. In the Citizen view, the recognition of shared fate and mutual responsibility is prioritized; we are responsible for the communities and society in which we take part. Think barn-raising.
- While the Consumerist view focuses on each individual's freedom and choice, the Citizen view focuses on the inclusion of all those who are part of the community or society. The first is inherently exclusionary, with its focus on the individual unit of analysis (more for me), while the latter requires the participation of most, if not all, in order for the definition of citizen to have meaning.
- While preserving and expanding individual choice is the main goal of a Consumerist society, achieving and implementing consensus while successfully managing conflict is the goal of a Citizen-oriented society.
- Government is only needed by some, according to Consumerist thinking, while it is necessary for society to function in the Citizen view.
- Government is a crutch in Consumerist view, an unfair advantage to boost purchasing power<sup>6</sup>, while government is a tool for achieving better quality of life for all, according to a Citizen view.
- In Consumerist-think, business and government are inherently at odds and competitive for the contracts on programs and services; in Citizen-think, government and business can work together to achieve the common good, but this requires recognition of their respective missions, differing values system and need for oversight.
- A Consumerist orientation would find little fault with Robert Putnam's observation that Americans are increasingly "bowling alone," while a Citizen orientation would promote the concept that Americans are "better together," as a subsequent Putnam epistle proposed<sup>7</sup>.
- If the market is controlled by "an invisible hand," then Consumerist thinking sees acts of God and Nature as unpredictable determinants of success or failure; consequently, the Good Consumer prepares for bad luck through his individual effort. The Good Citizen sees government as a way to solve problems

prospectively and prepares for bad luck with both collective and individual strategies. Think individual health plans versus a solvent Medicare system.

It is indeed tempting to those who would redeem government to align it with the readily familiar and more esteemed Consumerist view. Indeed, revisiting the Graveyard of Framing Hypotheses tested in the FrameWorks research, it is evident that many of the suggestions drew their imaginative power from a Consumerist world-view. For example, the suggestion that public attitudes to government can be improved by showing the public what services they receive from government, or how connected they are to government, assumes that by activating Consumerist thinking, one can elevate appreciation for government. Once one understands the coherence of these views, the negative effect of playing the Consumerist card on public policies from public education to child health becomes more obvious and predictable. Clearly, a new lens must be offered up for public viewing, a lens that makes it possible to evaluate policy options from a wider perspective.

In revisiting news articles about government, the frame-sensitive reader can now discern how this pattern of thinking underlies many of the powerful charges against government. Take, for instance, an October 29, 2005 Washington Post article entitled “Coloradans to Vote on State Spending Ceiling,” in which each side made its case for and against TABOR.

Here are some of the more engaging parts of the article:

*“Gov Bill Owens – a onetime TABOR champion – and other supporters of the change say the state will have to cut billions of dollars in spending on colleges, highways, parks and medical care if TABOR is not revised. Opponents of the referendum say cuts like that would be just fine, because individuals and the private sector should provide services such as higher education, transit and recreation.”*

What’s this about? Mission problem. The Owens camp failed to provide government’s mission and to establish why these necessary services were appropriately public in nature. In light of this, their opposition played the Consumer Card and reminded people that business can do it better.

*“At civic clubs, on talk shows, in letters to the editor, opponents of the change argue that government is already too expensive and intrusive. ‘Every cent that’s taxed away decreases our personal wealthy and eliminates our freedom of choice,’ Tom Hall of Louisville wrote in a letter to the Denver Post.”*

What’s this about? Government is being portrayed as a threat to private wealth and freedom. When lost in Consumer Think, and without a counterbalancing argument, people have a hard time thinking why they shouldn’t vote for the cheaper, more effective choice.

*“John Andrews, a former Republican state senator who is now a commentator on state politics, maintains that Coloradans don’t want to live in a high-tax, big-government venue. ‘Those custodially smothered paradises of California, New York, Germany and*

*France are what Colorado's people would rather not be like,' he wrote in his column earlier this month."*

What's this about? This is the Nanny State argument, in which government because it is vague and "hard to think", can be portrayed as so huge as to suffocate the individual and to lure the citizen into a sense of false paradise – clearly not a state conducive to hard work, family values and community life.

*"Andrews argues that universities should be funded privately and that tolls or fees should pay for roads and parts. He says that medical care should be left to 'self-reliance' rather than 'Big Brother.'"*

What's this about? This is a 'pay for what you use" model of government. Moreover, private enterprise is equated with democracy while government with totalitarianism.

While there are numerous places in this article where the anti-TABOR advocates have their say, few are memorable. Most try to minimize the effects of the referendum, keeping TABOR alive. It is only in the next to the last paragraph that a compelling case is made for the Referendum:

*"'Do we want people carrying asphalt around to fill the potholes they see on the road?' asks Joan Fitzgerald, the Democratic president of the state Senate. 'Should we tell them to set aside a spare room for some drug dealer, because we can't afford prisons? Do we want some guy in his basement teaching medical students?'"*

What's this about? Finally, it's about the impracticality of the migration of mission from public to private sector. This set-up statement could have gone on to explain responsible manager, long-term planner, etc. as those roles that government plays in civic life. And this quote drove it home in vivid language that reminded the reader of why government exists in our society. While we might quibble with its choice of exemplars, and want to improve on it, nevertheless it gets us out of Consumer Think and into the role that government needs to play in collective life.

The recognition of the power and dominance of the Consumerist pattern of thought, as well as the limited ways we know to trump it, led FrameWorks to investigate other, more effective ways of breaking through the dominant models and redirecting public thinking.

### **Reconstructing the Public Meaning of Government**

*"The main problem of social life is to pin down meanings so that they stay still for a little time." Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods**

One of the most profound challenges faced by advocates for better thinking about government is the relative "fuzziness" of people's concepts of government. Government – in the fully developed way that advocates conceptualize it – remains elusive for most

Americans. Hence, the attraction of easier, more familiar models of Government as Party in Power or Government as Bureaucratic Blob.

The FrameWorks research set out to resolve this particular issue through the identification of a “Simplifying Model,” or an extremely concrete analogy that captures the essence of a particular aspect of an issue.<sup>8</sup> For example, in attempting to explain how complex weather patterns form, USA Today describes a “global conveyor belt of underwater currents which transport heat and salt around the world’s oceans...and the faster the belt moves, the warmer the Atlantic becomes,” creating hurricanes (USA Today, November 30, 2005, 9A). This vivid analogy makes the mechanism of hurricane formation far more visual, understandable and memorable to the non-expert.

The concept of government requires similar conceptual detailing. In this case, we set out to overcome: the personalization of government, an exaggerated emphasis on individualism as the contributing force behind American progress, and an under-appreciation of collective responsibility and mutuality as a force in society. In order to reduce the rhetorical nature of the discussion further, we focused on ways to provide a practical orientation to collective problem-solving.

The result of this inquiry, supported across a variety of experimental methods, was the identification of a powerful conceptual tool for improving communications about government:

**The Public Structures Model**  
 America’s prosperity and quality of life depend on the  
 Public Structures we have created.

This core idea can be expressed and illustrated in a variety of ways. Here is an example paragraph that proved effective in testing:

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

**The Public Structures Model** is intended to be used as a “frame element,” that is, as an important adjunct to values, persona, tone and other aspects of a complete way of thinking and communicating about government. It is not intended to be quoted verbatim, but rather the concept is designed to be artfully “dropped in” to explanatory paragraphs about government to add the missing element of concreteness. One of the advantages of

simplifying models is that they are able to seep into public discourse without being awkward and obvious frame redirections.

For example, when faced with a question about whether advocates merely want Big Government, one might use the Public Structures model to refocus the discussion away from size and toward stability:

Americans automatically prioritize our nation's prosperity, security and a clean environment. To secure and maintain those goals, we want to create whatever public structures are necessary, no more no less. And we want to make sure that those public structures, once created, are maintained so that they can support our country in the future.

When the Public Structures Model was combined with various Values in FrameWorks' survey research, public understanding of government moved significantly in the right direction, toward an active role for government in improving public life.

### **The Power of the Reframes**

As powerful as Simplifying Models are, they are only one among many frame elements. Typically, FrameWorks builds a frame around a core set of contributing elements which include: (1) one or more familiar Values that connect an issue to higher-level thinking, (2) a Model or Mechanism that explains how the issue works, and (3) a Solution that promotes practical problem-solving and collective action.

The hallmark of FrameWorks research is its iterative multi-method investigation. In determining what frame elements are most powerful in moving public opinion, FrameWorks researchers pursued public understanding of government in multiple ways: in one-on-one interviews, in focus groups, in experimental research, and in survey research. It is only when these multiple methods begin to conjoin on similar solutions that we feel comfortable recommending reframes. We strongly recommend that communicators avail themselves of the research reports which form the foundation for these recommendations.<sup>9</sup>

#### **The Protection Frame**

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

The qualitative round of our research concluded with the observation that what was missing from communications about government was an appreciation for its mission. While there are numerous examples of public confusion on this score, few are as poignant as this quote from a focus group informant from FrameWorks research on the food system. Confronted with examples of unsafe or unhealthy food practices among food suppliers, this man observed that “the government just wants to make money, instead of protecting our food supply.” Government and business become conjoined in this view, and neither is on the side of the people.

In keeping with the theory of Strategic Frame Analysis, we looked for values that could drive home the unique mission of government. Two values were selected for quantitative testing: Protection and Common Good. These recommendations are not the only frames that have potential for improving the public discourse; indeed, the FrameWorks researchers feel confident that there are multiple frames that could be generated to advance public thinking about government, now that we understand the views they need to incorporate. For instance, other values associated with government – responsible manager, consensus builder, or problem solver – emerged from the research as promising avenues for further exploration.

For purposes of the survey, we developed language designed to embody the values frames of Protection and Common Good. It is important to recognize that these descriptions are merely illustrative of the frame, and could be expressed in dozens of alternative ways. Indeed, the art of framing – as opposed to the science of framing – lies in amplifying and enumerating these skeletal frames that show promise in testing.

#### **The Common Good Frame**

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

The Protection Frame communicates that the role of the public sector is to protect citizens from physical and financial harm, while the Common Good Frame states that public sector institutions rely upon citizens who work together to come to consensus for the common good and to improve quality of life. The first stresses the end goal of government, while the latter puts more emphasis on the process of coming together to act in the public’s interest. Both were tested for their ability to make the case for an active role for government, as measured by shifts in attitudes and support for specific policies.

While the Values frames accomplished statistically significant shifts in public opinion in the right direction, it was when the Simplifying Model and the Values frames were

combined that we achieved the best effects. When the Protection Frame incorporated Public Structures, we saw increases in the public's belief that people working together make a great deal of difference, a more positive view of the impact of government. In addition, this frame won greater support from the public for certain obligations of citizenship, such as protesting unjust policies and keeping fully informed about news and public issues. Similarly, the Common Good Frame yielded some important shifts in public opinion – such as a decrease in the percentage of people who believe that government is doing too many things that should be left to individuals and business. However, when coupled with Public Structures, it accomplished even more; when “primed” with this frame combination of model and value, more people agree that government has a somewhat positive effect on people's lives.

What this experimental research suggests is that the two values tested – Common Good and Protection – seem to be tapping attitudes concerning different fundamental aspects of government across a variety of demographic subgroups. They move different aspects of the reframing of government, suggesting that they are not interchangeable but rather mutually supportive. This means that both values may need to be invigorated in public thinking over time, if advocates are to achieve the complete reframing goal. Fortunately, these are complementary values, lending themselves easily to joint incorporation in communications. And both gain power from their association with the Public Structures model.

### **Putting It All Together**

In sum, the frame for government currently in use is dramatically different from that needed to align public opinion with a more active role for government.

#### What We've Got

- Most communications begin with, and focus primarily upon, specific policies; this is not advancing a larger conversation about government.<sup>10</sup>
- The discussion is narrowly bounded in terms of partisan or electoral politics & bureaucracy.
- The focus is on Government, personified as a monolith, as the actor in the story.
- The tone is ideological and rhetorical.
- The focus is on the individual and how s/he will benefit or suffer from government action or inaction.
- The orientation is consumerist – government as a provider of services, commodities, etc. indistinguishable in many ways from a private business.
- When government is seen as overstepping the line between the private and public realms, which is often, it is transformed into the “Nanny State,” which does too much for people and erodes their self-sufficiency.
- Government is objectified as a thing apart from the people, “the other.”
- The presumption is that government will be against business, not in collaboration with it nor facilitating good business practices.
- The discussion reduces to one about specific programs and taxes, making Big Picture Thinking harder, such as appreciating government's role in advancing the Common Good.

- A tendency to try to put a face on those in need which triggers a “charity mode” rather than systems thinking.

### What We Need

- We need to explicitly establish the unique mission of government, using such values as Common Good and Protection, among others, to drive home the broad social goals which should inform government action.
- The focus of attention should be on government as the locus of Essential Structures that support and maintain the country’s well-being.
- The actor highlighted in communications should be citizens who do and oversee the work of government, making sure that it delivers “a government as good as its people.”
- The tone of the communications should be pragmatic, focusing on government as a practical tool for community, state and national problem-solving.
- The relationship of government to individuals (“consumer thinking”) should be downplayed in communications in favor of the relationship of government to interconnected groups (“village thinking”) – communities, cities, regions, etc.
- Instead of focusing on what government can do for each of us, the new frame must focus on our collective well-being and quality of life, the things we can’t do for ourselves that we can do together. The idea of the Citizen (the villager) must be redeemed.
- Rather than a “Nanny government” that inappropriately coddles, the reframed government should provide citizens with necessary protections against threats, help to share risk, and empower them to improve the quality of life for all.
- Government should be referred to and portrayed as the Us, something we make together.
- Instead of being anti-business, government should be portrayed as anti-rogue business, setting fair standards that hold everyone accountable
- The discussion should focus people’s attention on our shared quality of life, on the Good Community that we work to bring about, with government as an important tool in that effort.

### **Reframing Recommendations: Simple do’s and don’ts**

#### **Don’ts**

- Don’t invoke the word “government” at the start of any communications; you will cue up the “joke” response and likely the equation of government with electoral politics.
- Don’t equate government narrowly with electoral politics, or citizenship with voting.
- Don’t assume the public understands the difference between public and private sectors and, relatedly, don’t assume the former is perceived more positively than the latter.
- Don’t inadvertently buy into a Consumerist mind-set, encouraging Little Picture thinking about what government gives at what cost with what return.

- e. Don't focus in narrowly on public servants or particular public goods; rather show people coming together to resolve issues. This is as important to address pictorially as it is explanatorily. We need more images that cue up "villager mode" and make "doing government" more cognitively available to people.
- f. Don't be afraid of emphasizing the values that must underpin a government dedicated to public purposes.

### **Do's**

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

Remember that the FrameWorks research has yielded three important tools for getting us there: Values frames of (1) Protection and (2) Common Good, and (3) The Public Structures Simplifying Model. In addition, the research has shown the importance of avoiding the Consumerist mindset and Rhetorical Tone<sup>11</sup>. And, importantly, this research has demonstrated that the pejorative opinion of Government is not as entrenched as many would believe. Old values of citizenship and mutuality rumble around in public thinking, waiting to be invigorated by smart framers of the common good.

In his epic history of American civic life, Michael Schudson states that "we require a citizenship fit for our own day."<sup>12</sup> He also proposes that we find it, amidst the ashes and embers of the old citizenship, which we must transform for our time. Schudson helpfully puts forward four models of citizenship that arose to meet the needs of past eras, each as kind of necessary improvement over past conceptualizations:

"The ideals of republican virtue, party loyalty, informed citizenship, and rights-conscious citizenship, by themselves, cannot adequately serve as moral guideposts for us today," he writes. "I hold out the hope, nonetheless, that the sum of them, reconceived and reinvigorated, may still serve us well."

That act – of reconceptualizing and reinvigorating a new idea of "a nation of citizens" and the Public Structures they can create to promote the Common Good – is precisely the

challenge facing advocates at this juncture. In the wake of such momentous re-examinations of public infrastructure as Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, can a new-old view of public life be readied for public broadcast, and can it help people see the old civic life in ways that are more inclusive, more engaging and yield a better quality of life for all? This research has attempted to follow the bread crumbs of public opinion toward that door.

***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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the purpose and thinking behind this project, see <http://www.demos.org/page283.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> See "Government In and Out of the News," Center for Media and Public Affairs for the Council on Excellence in Government, July 2003, at [www.excelgov.org](http://www.excelgov.org).

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<sup>3</sup> “Changing Channels: Entertainment Television, Civic Attitudes, and Actions,” Princeton Survey Research Associated International for Media, Citizens & Democracy, September 2003, at [www.excelgov.org](http://www.excelgov.org).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this body of research, see “Framing Public Issues,” FrameWorks Institute, 2005 at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

<sup>5</sup> Emblematic of this perspective was a recent explanation from an FDA spokesperson who, in response to criticism of government’s approval of carbon monoxide in meat packaging to artificially convey freshness, suggested that shoppers “use the skills you have as a consumer to be aware of what is a safe and fresh meat product.” *Studies Attest to Buyers’ Focus on Color of Meat*, Rick Weiss, Washington Post, February 22, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Think of this distinction in terms of vouchers which, following consumerist thinking, should be available to all to allow better purchasing power. This thinking, in turn, obscures a discussion of the broader public mission of schools.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000; also, Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, “Better Together: Restoring the American Community,” New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For more on simplifying models, see Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady with Susan Bales, “Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models, EZine No. 19 at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org). Simplifying models are tested through a laborious and iterative process which often includes individual or group interviews with as many as 600 individuals.

<sup>9</sup> Summaries of all reports are posted in the “How to Talk About Government” section of the Demos website at [www.demos.org/page283.cfm](http://www.demos.org/page283.cfm).

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of Levels of Thinking in “Framing Public Issues,” FrameWorks Institute, 2005 at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

<sup>11</sup> Recommendations for reasonable, as opposed to rhetorical, tone are consistent across FrameWorks’ research. In FrameWorks Ezine No. 17, “Taking Tone Seriously as A Frame Cue”( posted at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org) ), we explain the reasoning behind reasonable tone.

<sup>12</sup> This and other quotes in this section are to be found in Michael Schudson’s “The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life,” Free Press, 1998.