



**Like Mars to Venus:
The Separate and Sketchy Worlds of Budgets and Taxes**

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
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INTRODUCTION

While taxes and budgets have long been part of the national political debate, it is easy to argue that they have more often been wielded as ideological tools than as legitimate invitations to public education and engagement. Despite the fact that they constitute necessary concepts for the resolution of the current national and worldwide financial crisis, budgets and taxes remain relatively abstract concepts to the public, presumably freighted with past partisan rancor and media discourse. The foundational understanding that people take into 21st century decision-making about these concepts must be identified and carefully considered if public opinion is to be weighed in the process. It is not an overstatement to say that policy about budgeting and taxes is at a “crossroads” and, because they will be affected deeply by the results of the current debates and policy shifts, Americans need to understand these issues, the implication of their reform and their role in this process. Achieving meaningful public dialogue entails sorting out habits of thinking that get in the way of public consideration and discovering better ways of bridging the distance between expert and folk models of these important concepts.

The research presented here constitutes the first phase of an extended investigation by the FrameWorks Institute into how Americans think about budgets and taxes. This phase of research is sponsored by the DEMOS Center for the Public Sector and explores the ways in which engaged American citizens talk and think about the concepts of budgets and taxes and the mental models that they employ to make sense of information pertaining to these concepts. It is based on a series of cultural models interviews conducted in late 2008.

The purpose of the larger research agenda is to provide a map of both the dominant and more recessive ways of thinking and talking about budgets and taxes, in an effort to improve our understanding of *how* Americans make use of these models in the process of making sense of incoming information. In subsequent research phases, we will continue to examine how the cultural patterns laid out in this report affect advocate efforts to gain support for and implement budget and tax reform. A second related, but more general goal, is to explore strategies to improve the public’s understanding of budgets and taxes -- concepts this research has shown to be cognitively difficult and conceptually distinct. We propose to use the process of Strategic Frame Analysis™ to facilitate a perspective that clarifies and emphasizes both the relationship between these concepts and the importance of policy in improving these vital economic and social pillars that support the well-being of our country and all Americans.

This report details the results from the first phase of the sponsored research, in which interviews were conducted to identify the relevant cognitive and cultural patterns that shape Americans’ thinking about budget and tax issues. In these interviews, FrameWorks was looking not for the “what,” but rather the “how”—in other words, not the specific content knowledge or opinions of informants, but the underlying patterns of thinking that characterize people’s understanding and shape the way that they process incoming information. This approach is based on principles and data-gathering methods adapted over the last ten years from the fields of cognitive anthropology and cognitive linguistics. The resulting report offers a preliminary “map” of the most relevant cultural models that guide Americans’ thinking on budgets and taxes. The report therefore, constitutes a foundation for subsequent research in which FrameWorks intends to employ other

methods in new sites to develop and test specific strategies to reframe the concepts of budgets and taxes and highlight the importance of reform in these areas.

This research further draws upon FrameWorks' multi-year multi-method inquiry into how Americans think about Government, funded by Demos and the Council for Excellence in Government. More specifically, the central question raised in our initial approach to this topic was whether we can apply the framing recommendations that emerged from this earlier effort to "talk about government" in ways more comprehensible and compelling to the public to specific issues around budget debates and tax questions and, if so, to identify which frames work best to elevate progressive thinking. For more on this foundational research, see Appendix A.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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 advocates intended message.

RESEARCH METHOD

Findings are based on 25 in-depth interviews with adults in Baltimore, Maryland; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Cleveland, Ohio conducted by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in November of 2008.

Subjects

Informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm through a screening process used in past FrameWorks' research. In each location, informants were selected to represent variation along domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background, and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). Previous Frameworks' research findings, as well as the cultural models literature more generally, has found education to be an important source of variation in the way people talk about social issues. For this reason we were particularly sensitive to capturing variation in educational attainment.

Efforts were made to recruit a broad range of informants. However, the interview sample should not be considered representative of all Americans. The strength of these interviews and the data they produce rests in their power to reveal general patterns of thinking and cultural models that Americans commonly and repeatedly use in talking and thinking about education. For this reason, it was important to recruit informants whom we had reason to believe *do* talk and think about these issues. To ensure that our participants were engaged and were likely to have opinions about these issues without having to be primed by explicitly raising the topic prior to interviews in the recruitment process, our screening procedure was designed to select informants who reported a strong interest in current events and active involvement in their communities. These criteria were constant for both the high and low education samples.

Future stages of this research will address the issue of representativeness by employing quantitative methods designed specifically to gauge how our findings apply to various groups of Americans, as part of FrameWorks' multi-method iterative process of analysis.

Interviews

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured “cognitive interviews” lasting between one and a half, and two hours. In line with the cognitive interview methodology commonly applied in psychological anthropology,¹ interviews were designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about topics related to budgets and taxes. As the goal of these interviews is to examine the cultural models informants use to make sense of and understand these issues, a key to this methodology is giving informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions *they* deem relevant and not in the direction the interviewer believes most relevant. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of topics to be covered: the order in which these topics were covered was left largely to the informant. Put another way, researchers were able to follow the informants' train of thought, rather than interrupting to follow a pre-established course of questions. Among the topics discussed in each interview were:

- what items are on budgets at various levels,
- what makes a good budget,
- how budgets do or don't mediate competing interests,
- the relationship between budgets and taxes,
- the purposes of different types of taxes,
- their effectiveness in meeting these purposes, and
- the idea of paying taxes for services that individuals don't directly use.

Throughout the interview process, informants were asked to relate concepts while working through explicit problems, narrating examples, and constructing explanations—cognitive tasks in which, research has shown, individuals make use of cultural models.

At the end of each interview, we also explored two ideas for shifting thinking about taxes in more positive directions and making the cognitive connection between the concepts of budgets and taxes. The interviewer presented the ideas of “*taxes as investment*” and “*taxes as exchanges*” and guided the informant through a discussion of these concepts.¹ All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points but identifying information has been excluded to ensure informant anonymity.

Analysis

¹ These ideas as possible reframing directions emerged from two distinct sources. The idea of taxes as *investments* comes out of George Lakoff's work at the Rockridge Institute (Lakoff, G. (2006). *Simple Framing: An introduction framing and its use in politics.*), while the idea of taxes as *exchanges* comes from a careful reading of Marcel Mauss' seminal anthropological work on gifts and exchange (Mauss, M., & Halls, W. D. 1990. *The gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies.* New York: W.W. Norton.)

Analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology were adapted to examine how informants understand budget and taxes. As part of this inquiry, FrameWorks re-examined and updated its method of cognitive interviewing to align more closely with the scholarly work in the field. Elements of social discourse analysis were applied to identify larger cultural models. First, common *discourses*, or ways of talking, were identified. These were frequently elaborate and interconnected, and often revealed an underlying organizational set of assumptions and connections people make and use when thinking about a topic. Anthropologists refer to these patterns of tacit understandings and assumptions that underlie patterns in talk as cultural models. For more on the theoretical foundations of this analytic approach, see Appendix B.

CULTURAL MODELS OF BUDGETS AND TAXES

Because of the striking result that budgets and taxes were largely unlinked concepts in the minds of most of our informants we discuss these topics separately. For both budgets and taxes, the report first lays out the dominant cultural models that were used by participants in understanding each of these concepts. We also discuss the implications of each dominant model. We also discuss how informants described the differences between good and bad budgets in a separate section.

In addition to uncovering three dominant models that organized the way informants talked about budgets and three that structured their discussions of taxes, research revealed two recessive models associated with each concept. In many cases, these recessive models represent promising reframing directions and may be strategically important in shifting the discussion of budgets and taxes towards a more positive policy direction.

SECTION I: BUDGETS

A. How Budgets Work

1. Dominant Model: Government as an undifferentiated and complex body presided over by a few elite individuals

Informants' thinking about budgets was largely shaped by a dominant cultural model that we first observed in our research on how Americans understand "government." In this model, "government" is assumed to be an impossibly large, tangled, and complicated mass of indistinct workings, with a few elite individuals who serve as its "mind."² Put another way, Americans lack a cultural model that structures or clarifies the specific interworkings of government at any level. What replaces, or stands in for the impossibly undifferentiated mass of government is a small group of elites—mainly the president and his closest advisors-- who stand at the top of our national government and guide its process behind closed doors. This dominant model for

² Mind and Monolith: Findings from Cognitive Interviews about Government. The Frameworks Institute, July 2004

thinking about government was employed by the informants in our interviews to make sense of how budgets work.

When you hear about all these...people in the government, and all the bureaucracy, I mean the people that are making, you know, a lot of money, an the bureaucracy that... that's just all the paper work, and they make it so difficult to get anything changed. It's people that have to keep track of all these you know, all these like letters and forms that you would have to maybe fill out to go through things to have things changed. You know, it just seems like a lot of unnecessary steps, and precautions.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

Interviewer: Who is involved in the budget do you think?

Uh...whoever is up ahead of the fiscal management or accountants um...auditors may be involved in that...executives?

Black Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

The application of this model to thinking about budgets was apparent in the following hallmarks of informant discussions. These sections provide important nuances of the dominant model.

Budgets Lack Transparency.

Most informants did not have a budget-specific model that they could apply to organize information about the budgeting *process*. Because budgets were “thought” using the model of government described above, budgets were overwhelmingly discussed as lacking transparency. This was largely because informants viewed the government as operating on a scale impossible to comprehend, void of any process in guiding its indistinguishable parts. Informants also discussed this lack of transparency as the result of the workings of the elite few who make decisions “behind closed doors.” Informants repeated words like “it’s just not transparent” and “it’s totally hidden” in their discussion of budgets with considerable frustration. The invisibility of the budgeting process stemmed from a general inability to think about and understand what government actually is and does. Without a clear picture of the parts of government and its process, the more specific task of setting a budget was rendered cognitively invisible.

It's like the social contract has been broken when that happens. And, you know, so transparency to me [is] our major problem right now with our national economy. People don't trust the government because it has been opaque and not transparent. People have to know what you're doing. I mean your right hand can't be doing something while your left is doing something else!

White Liberal Woman, age 56-62, Ohio

You would have to be able to see it. I know Senator Obama had mentioned he was going to itemize line-by-line, and go over governmental spending. That is all well and good, but we are still taking your word for it. You know, it is like with the bailout bill – me and my

friends talk about this a lot. We said that there should be some type of website where we can go online and see exactly where every single dollar of that money was spent.

White Independent Male, age 60-67, Maryland

It is almost like an us and them, you know, well if we have to pay it, we have to do it, but there is no obligation on the other end, and it is kind of hard just getting answers, and figuring out well, did that happen the way it was intended to happen, you know, and getting truthfulness, you know, from that. I guess for me, if I knew honestly what was being done with it, I would feel better even though I may not be satisfied...but at least I would know...

Black Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

Budgets are Uncoordinated and Inefficient.

The cultural model of government that informants employed also structured and precipitated frequent discussions of budgets as highly *uncoordinated* and *inefficient*. Informants explained that the sheer size and “scale” of the government make coordination difficult, if not impossible. Informants believed that much of the budget is made by an invisible web of disparate individuals resulting in a lack of communication and cooperation. Without coordination or process to guide these individuals, every “piece” of the government asks for whatever it needs without considering the big picture. Informants felt that this decentralized mass of uncoordinated parts results in inefficient overspending.

I mean what exactly do we need? Because some of the stuff that they put in the budget you don't need. I mean you don't need to have a subgroup of another subgroup, of another subgroup in your budget. You don't really need more government to govern us. You just don't!

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

Like, you know, you have a cabinet to a cabinet...That is not necessary.

White Liberal Woman, age 56-62, Ohio

It [the budget] works, but I think it could work definitely more effectively. I think it could be definitely more efficiently done. Maybe we have to allow new blood to be infused in some of these systems and some of these so called quote unquote “authorities” so that they become less stagnated.

African American Independent Man, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

Budgets are Corrupt and Wasteful.

Another manifestation of the use of the model of government in thinking about budgets was informants' focus on corruption and waste. The government model in which the mass is “manned” by a few disconnected elite translated into an understanding that budgets are set

exclusively by these elites. Because these elites were characterized as corrupt and dishonest, there was a strong connection between budgets and waste.

Well...There has to be balance...and rationality. I'm sure there are groups that do that, you know, they monitor government waste, but has anything been done about it? I think a lot of it is due to corruption too, that you know, we lose a lot, and that stuff is like, underneath the radar screen. You can't see that stuff. So how do you solve that - those problems?

I mean, I think the US government it's biggest, one of it's biggest problems is it's inefficiency of utilizing its resources, there's a lot of waste in the government. It just wastes a lot of money because they are not effectively utilizing the resources.

African American Independent Man, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

Greed! All politicians follow the same route. They're all pimps! You know? The other word I want to use and I'm not going to use it! But they're all pimps and they're thieves! I mean like who are we to come in and say, all right, you know, Mr. President you need to change? I mean in reality that ain't going to happen. Because we're not sitting in that oval office out there at the White House with this guy and saying, 'All right, look, come on, you know, Obama, brother, you know? 'You know, this gotta change.'

African American Liberal Man, age 56-59, Pennsylvania

It's just when I hear in the media about like this, you know, government spending. That just seems outrageous or money like wasted, and I just always hear about it in the news, and that just makes me like so upset.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

2. Implications of this Dominant Model: *No place for reform, unframed information has little impact*

The public's use of the "government as a mass of corrupt politicians" leaves little room for public input into the process, crowds out the fact that the budget is ultimately designed to meet the public's needs, and obscures the possibility of reforming this process. In short, by employing this model of government to understand budgets, the public is unable to arrive at an understanding of how budgets *work*. Without an understanding of this process, the public is ill equipped to think about how budgets affect them as well as their role in this process. Put simply, when budgets are "thought" from within the model of government, the budget process becomes invisible and impossible to think. Due to this inability, unframed communications on the subject have no cognitive place to "go" and little impact on the public.

It upsets me, but again, there is more people that know about it, than me. I just hope that they [government officials] understand - that they are using it [public money] wisely, and they know exactly what they are doing. I don't have the choice in the matter.

White Liberal Man, age 40-45, Pennsylvania

Well, I thought there was a budget director. I thought there was a treasury – or I thought there was a uh...a segment that was just dedicated to the distribution of money, but I am very curious now as to how that works to be honest with you, now that I've heard about all of the craziness that goes on, on how the money is spent. Um...

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

Eh...um...we pay for the government obviously, and if they said, who's the government, I have no idea of how to explain that to them...the people that run the country I guess. You pay them and they keep the money and pay the things that need to get paid.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

B. How Budgets Are Made

1. Dominant Model: Mentalist Orientation

Mentalist models are a familiar feature in the “swamp” or milieu of cultural models that Americans use in processing information. Past Frameworks’ research on social policy issues--ranging from education to health has revealed the dominance of this model in American culture. According to the mentalist model, individual internal discipline and motivation are the ultimate determinants of outcomes.

Informants in our budget and taxes interviews employed this mentalist model in thinking about how budgets are made. They talked about how the foundation of budgets is *disciplined individuals* who are willing to make hard decisions, sacrifice, and even suffer. In informants’ use of the mentalist model, budgets were about individuals being disciplined in the decisions they make, in how they face hard choices, and in their willingness to “do what *must* be done.” The essence of this internal discipline was the willingness to put *needs* before *wants*.

I mean I would start off like I would probably start off with like some kind of a spreadsheet, you know, like a balance sheet, and looking at everything that what do you need most like does it have running water? Like, I am thinking like does it have electricity, running water, all this stuff. Like those would be my priorities, just like basic living needs...

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Pennsylvania

The mentalist cultural model is highly individualistic and situates budgets and budgeting in the hands of the isolated *individual* making hard decisions over needs versus wants. For this reason, we describe the mentalist model as being nested in an even more general American cultural model: individualism. In this more general model, people understand outcomes narrowly as the result of individual decision-making and actions---without a consideration of the contexts in which these individuals live and make these decisions.

The use of the mentalist cultural model in understanding budgets was seen throughout our interviews and structured the following frequent themes.

Budgets Are “Hard.”

Informants overwhelmingly focused on the *difficulty* of budgeting. This difficulty was characterized by an implicit assumption that budgeting was almost entirely dependant on individuals being disciplined in prioritizing needs over wants, even when this decision required suffering. The budget concept was dependent on the mentalist model of understanding the world, in which discipline and hard decisions are necessary and success and positive outcomes are a function of an individual’s motivation.

I mean, you know, you know, there are certain things that are going to be shut down. Certain things are going to be uh...curtailed. Certain things are going to be shortened. You know, like – like the libraries, there is certain ones that are going to be closed permanently, and then the other ones are going to be cut back. I think whenever you have a situation where you have more going out than maybe what’s available then there’s got to be some belt tightening. I mean there has got to be some sacrificing. There’s got to be some hard decisions made as to prioritizing.

African American Independent Man, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

It’s very difficult for politicians not to be corrupted because you’ve got contractors and friends and relatives who think that because they’re your relatives or your friends, they deserve to win a bid because that’s their status with you. Hmm. And it’s very hard to resist that kind of pressure as a politician, I can tell you from experience.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Ohio

Budgets Are Not Always Popular.

Informants’ discussions also focused on the fact that budgets are not necessarily popular. These types of statements were structured by the tacit assumption that making budgets is essentially about being disciplined, making sacrifices, and suffering. In the process, what individuals really want is the “wants,” and it is through the application of discipline that individuals are able to successfully push these wants aside in favor of more practical needs. This led many informants to explain that good budgets *shouldn’t* necessarily be popular, but rather, that the mark of a good budget was a certain amount of complaining.

If everybody is complaining, you did a good job. I mean some people just like to complain! It’d [a good budget] either be one that nobody complained about ...which I know is impossible. It’s never going to happen. Or if everybody is complaining, then I think you probably had a good budget because you spent the money in a way that was responsible and everybody is complaining...

White Conservative Man, age 46-55, Ohio

2. Implications of this Dominant Model: Individualizing and devoid of “process”

The use of this model to understand budgets may appear promising at first glance. Discipline and sacrifice seem to be clear values, and establishing productive values is a positive step in the process of reframing social issues. However, this model holds incredible potential to further individualize the issue--- past Frameworks research has shown mentalist thinking to work in direct opposition to promoting the “publicness” of an issue and the role of policy. This individualizing effect is well-documented both qualitatively and quantitatively in our past research, which leads us to conclude that perceiving issues to be determined by individual internal motivations generally obscures any sense of collective benefit or social purpose. Additionally, applying a mentalist cultural model to conceptualize budgets blocks out informants’ ability to see any process in this concept. In short, if budgets are all about making hard decisions and being disciplined, then thinking productively about how budgets actually work and seeing the systems into which they are embedded is difficult, if not impossible. So while discipline and sacrifice are in fact values, they are not the type of values around which to frame communications. The mentalist model creates a serious roadblock in helping the public think productively about budgets as collective public interests that are formed by processes in institutions rather than just individual motivations.

Well okay, now you can see it, now you can look at it, and I guess it is up to the individual to determine what’s important and what’s not, and whoever is looking at it, whoever – whoever is governing what areas saying okay, well this is a priority to me – it might be to me, but if you look at it, your priorities might be ranked differently.

White Independent Man, age 60-70, Maryland

Uh...I think it all comes pretty much down to the uh...individual interest a person has in a specific part of the budget. If they have a child with special needs obviously they will want to increase the budget for programs for kids with special needs. Um...if they are a farmer and they need farm subsidies, they will want to increase the budget for that. So whatever their personal interest is, is what to push for.

White Conservative Man, age 46-59, Maryland

C. What Budgets Do

1. Dominant Model: Inputs Must Equal Outputs

Americans’ views and understandings of a wide range of issues are shaped by the tacit assumption that the world works like a market—that the events occurring around us can be understood as a series of rational assessments of production and consumption, costs and benefits, and the “bottom line.” Frameworks calls this taken for granted assumption that the world functions like a rational market, a “consumerist cultural model.” Like the mentalist and individualist models mentioned above, we have found the consumerist model to be vital in understanding how Americans process information on a wide range of social issues.

Within this broad foundational American cultural model, our interviews revealed a more nested, specific model, which was used by informants to understand what budgets are for and what they do. Analysis revealed that informant discussions were shaped powerfully by a tacit assumption

that budgets exist ultimately to assure that there is a *direct correspondence between inputs and outputs*, between money put in by individuals and goods paid out to individuals. The common sense ring of this assumption is evidence of its existence as a tacit and implicit pattern that organizes how we and other Americans think about budgets and budgeting. And, while at some level this is consistent with the expert understanding of what budgets do and are for, the dominance of this model crowds out other important considerations and aspects of understanding what budgets are for. Put another way, a narrow view of the success of a budget as being in the direct, as one participant said “one to one,” correspondence between what goes in and what comes out, crowds out thinking about the collective benefit and long-term investment aspects of budgets.

You know, money spent wisely. Um...and I guess, you know, that would mean; although I don't know how much money is coming in, but whatever is coming in better be used, you know it had better be used wisely, you know, [for] specific things.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

The role of this model, again nested in the more general consumerist cultural model, was apparent in the following pervasive themes offered by informants.

One to One Correspondence.

The need for one to one correspondence between money coming in and going out was extremely important for informants and their understanding of what budgets should do.

Wow! A good budget and a bad budget? I guess, you know, meeting your budgetary guidelines, you know? Not over spending or not under spending.

Black Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

First of all I want to know does it break – does it break even?

African American Liberal Man, age 36-45, Ohio

Ins Could Occasionally Outnumber Outs but Reverse Is Never OK.

Informants reported that it was *occasionally* OK for budget inputs to be greater than outputs. This was interpreted to mean that some of the budget's money was actually being saved, which most informants said was acceptable in the short run. However, if budgets repeatedly took in more than they spent--if the ins were consistently more than the outs, something was surely amiss. When probed, informants overwhelmingly employed the dominant model of government described above to explain that “corruption” was how a budget could have more inputs than outputs.

[A bad budget] has a surplus. Or I want to say...Maybe we should have some surplus, but if it's overabundance... if we've got three or four billions of dollars- Like I heard

Iraq or Iran has \$80 billion dollars in surplus and we're over there rebuilding their country. You know? It's like uh... maybe that might be a little bit too much

African American Liberal Man, age 36-45, Ohio

While informants explained that inputs could temporarily outweigh outputs, the reverse was never acceptable and was the hallmark of a bad budget.

It's a step toward having a good budget because again, the objective is to operate within the budget. So we can have a short term negative impact, but we have to have a plan to have a balanced. You have to look at how close you're going. You have to show some progress.

African American Liberal Man, age 56-62, Ohio

2. Implications of this Dominant Model: *Collective expenditures and long-term spending are hard to think*

In the “inputs must equal outputs” model, informants started from the assumption that every input must have a direct output or benefit to individuals. This assumption has several important implications for social policy reform. Thinking budgets using this model leaves no room for any benefit in which the ins *don't* directly correspond with the outs to each *individual*. Like the other dominant models used to think budgets, this model makes collective benefits “hard to think.”

In addition, this direct balancing of limited resources constructs a decidedly short-term perspective in which balance between competing interests and inputs and outputs must be achieved at all costs. When people think about budgets using this model there is no room for realizing the necessity of long-term investment in public structures--investments that create a time lag between inputs and outputs. In short, if a direct and immediate balance between inputs and outputs is the dominant model used to think about what budgets do, the public has little ability to think about benefits that do not accrue directly to isolated individuals (collective benefits) or benefits that are not realized in the immediate short term (long term investments).

You know, right now, it doesn't seem like it's [the budget] being spent all that wisely. I understand that area needs to be relatively calm for the world to prosper, you know, I get that, but...

White Conservative Man, age 46-55, Ohio

Well, you base it on the immediate need. You know, do we need to reduce costs? Like say if I'm one to one in the budget, “sorry school system, you're not getting your new computers because we're one to one right now.” So maybe do some cost cutting initiatives. Well, because now I'm starting to think is it an immediate need?

White Republican Man, age 26-35, Ohio

I guess for me, if I knew honestly what was being done with it, I would feel better even though I may not be satisfied... but at least I would know... I wouldn't have this, you know, façade that it's going to make everything, you know, bright and happy and wonderful.

Black Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

I don't know. There is so much that we don't know. Just it seems money is abused in government at the city level, at the state level, at the government level, and there is a lot that we don't know, and I am sure we never will know, and maybe we don't want to know where that money is going, and I think that is one of the big problems that if we were more aware of how money is spent, I think we would be less uh ...negative

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

D. Good and Bad Budgets

The dominance of the three dominant models described above in shaping how informants talked and thought can be seen clearly in how participants discussed good and bad budgets.

A good budget is set such that the all the money you have is spent – but no more.

A good budget would be umm... Not excessively spending money that doesn't need to be spent. That's what I would do. I guess that's it. I don't know what else to say.

White Independent Male, age 46-55, Pennsylvania

Interviewer: Are they good budgets?

Um...apparently not since they are always over budget.

White Conservative Man, age 46-59, Maryland

A perfect budget would be...I set a dollar aside, I spend a dollar. I mean, if we went over...not a good budget. If we went under, still not a good budget, right?

White Conservative Male, age 26-35, Ohio

In a good budget, the items on which money is spent represent a clear prioritization of needs over wants.

Well, with a good budget I am going to be able to take care of my responsibilities. That would be, to me, a successful budget where I have the means, and the material, the resources to do the things that we designated that we need to do. That's a good budget.

African American Independent Male, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

A good budget would have to be something that was realistic and something that you could adhere to. Um...and by doing what you really need...look at the specific departments or items in the budget, and figure out exactly what is needed what isn't needed.

White Conservative Man, age 46-59, Maryland

A good budget precipitates a fair amount of complaining, as complaining is an indirect measure of the discipline that has gone into the budget--that needs have been funded rather than wants. But at the same time, too much complaining is a likely sign that not all the available money has been spent (corruption).

Corruption again, which of course, drains away value-you're spending more and you're getting less.

White Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Ohio

Maybe if everybody is complaining, you did a good job. I mean some people just like to complain! It'd [a good budget] either be one that nobody complained about ...which I know is impossible. It's never going to happen. Or if everybody is complaining, then I think you probably had a good budget...because if you spent the money in a way that was responsible and everybody is complaining...

White Conservative Man, age 46-55, Ohio

A good budget is one that not only is set such that the ins correspond to the outs, but one that is managed with discipline---one in which what was set is stuck to.

It has to be what you actually want. You know, you spend \$10,000 on advertising because of your budget and you actually did...you budgeted \$10,000 and you actually spent \$10,000!

White Conservative Male, age 30-35, Ohio

Oh, managing the budget. It's not just – you can't just throw a budget out there. You've got to manage the budget. A good budget is one that you've managed and met it. You know, you can have an exceptionally high budget, but if it's not managed properly and you're still under budget that doesn't necessarily mean it's a good budget.

African American Liberal Male, age 56-62, Ohio

A good budget is transparent. Transparency reduces the resentment that people feel for the elites who are spending their money.

Well, I would like to know, well right here in Baltimore I would like to know what budget there is for police officers, and for the city protection of our city um...you know, we have had a lot of crime here, and are they going to start cutting the police force in the city, are they going to spend that money somewhere else, are they just going to cut it across the board? For our own protection I want to know how the money is being spent.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

And I think how they spend it has to be more transparent. If that were more transparent, I think there'd be a lot less resentment...

White Liberal Woman, age 46-55, Ohio

Overwhelmingly informants explained that any budget that runs at a deficit is bad. In our interviews a deficit was *always* bad. Just like spending more than you have in your personal budget, a government budget that spends more than it has at its disposal is a failure.

Now, if we are spending too much money for things that we can't afford, that's a bad budget.

African American Liberal Male, 36-45, Ohio

Now we have this humungous deficit so obviously it is not working.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

I don't think anything [any budget] really breaks even. But when it's something that's so far and you're so far under that you have to cut a lot of stuff, something's wrong...big time!

White Conservative Woman, age 46-55, Pennsylvania

A bad budget is wasteful and inefficient. And waste occurs, moreover, when not all of the money that comes in goes out.

Well, a bad budget is one that grossly over-estimates its numbers. You can't just come out with your budget and say everyone has X amount of money because if you give people an inch they're going to take a mile.

White Independent Male, age 30-35, Ohio

An imperfect budget is anything outside of that [a budget in which all money is spent wisely without a deficit]! So, I mean, “Hey, yeah, we got more money left over, but you know, what can we do better this time.” I mean, if we would’ve known we would have all that money we could’ve paid for some of those priorities. We could’ve added those priorities that we put aside. Instead of saying we had to wait until next year for you to get your thing, we could’ve done it!

White Conservative Male, age 26-35, Ohio

Informants explained that, in a bad budget, the wrong things get funded. The reason this occurs is that the person making the budget lacks sufficient discipline to fund *needs* and instead caves in to pressure and fund *wants*.

Because we cannot function with our current base dollars. We’re continuously operating in the negative and it’s getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And we’re borrowing against that debt which is additional cost. So it’s not being managed properly. The Department of Defense and all of those administrative –took on this added cost without any plans to finance it.

Interviewer: So an unsuccessful budget would be what?

One that you cannot meet. Where you’re over-budget and somehow you’ve got to make some adjustments next year.

African American Liberal Man, age 56-62, Ohio

Well, I think irresponsible people spending more trying to bring goods and services in with the promise that you’ll pay them back later...just people making bad decisions for us. Overspending.

African American Liberal Man, age 36-45, Ohio

E. Recessive Models on Budgets

There were two other, more recessive models that a small number of informants were able to use for a short time in place of the three dominant models discussed above.

1. Household Budgets

Several participants were able to apply a model derived from their personal household budgets to make sense of how government budgets work. The cultural model used to understand and think about personal budgets contained a clear and transparent process of specific decisions made to manage competing interests and balance income and expenditures.

It would be a mistake to assume that this is a common frame of reference for Americans. In fact, the measure of the model's recessiveness is underscored by the interview guide. One of the first issues we discussed in the interview was whether or not the informant had a personal household budget and how this budget was set. By starting the discussion with this question, we may have activated a model of personal budgeting, which some informants were able to use in the subsequent discussion. This priming effect was intentional, as past Frameworks research and cultural models theory more generally suggests that models that derive from personal experiences or everyday events and objects may be particularly fertile and useful in organizing more abstract concepts---like government budgets. However, that the model was used by far less than a quarter of informants in the discussions that followed this initial prime underscores the recessiveness of the model in understanding budgets more generally. However, that this model was used even by a small number of informants to think about *a process*—albeit an overly simplistic one-- suggests a promising direction for future research.

Yeah, and I would think it [budgeting] would be the same on the government level, only on a larger scale. Um...and then each state has to put in whatever their needs are for various things in their state, and when the government looks at that and allocates the money accordingly.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

Well, I guess I think of it um [the national budget] probably works the same way the house [budget] does. I mean, you know, so much money comes in, and then you've got so much money to do stuff with, and you've got to do the basic things, and I mean I just think about that as, you know, education, our roads, our healthcare and how it all has to be spent, but spent wisely.

White Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

2. Government Officials as Experts

A second recessive model for thinking about budgets, which was used by three informants, was that government officials are actually *very qualified* to set and manage budgets. Three informants used this model periodically in place of the more dominant assumption that those few elites at the head of the government are corrupt and make decisions based on self-interest. However, due to the relatively small number of individuals who actually employed this assumption and the tendency for discussions to devolve into the more dominant patterns described above, this model was clearly recessive. The model would require significant framing to cue if it is to shift the assumption away from 'officials as corrupt and disconnected' to 'officials as experts and particularly proficient in managing public funds'.

They're [government officials] a good thing because people are able to study something and they're good at something. I would explain to him [his son] that just as he is an expert at toy cars, "you know how you love your toy cars and you study all these details about your toy cars? You know more about these toy cars than I could ever tell you about. There are other people who study larger structures that know more about things that I wouldn't even begin to understand about, and I have people that I have elected on a local level that I have access to." That's good. That's a good way to explain that.

African American Liberal Male, age 36-45, Ohio

[Sigh] Well, I know they have budgeting people. People who this is their forte, this is their job, this is what they've studied, and so they go to these people for the answers. They go to these people to um... to come up with uh...you know, the facts and figures of how they are going to go from point A to point B and then break it down, you know?

African American Independent Male, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

SECTION II: TAXES

While there were three dominant cultural models that patterned the way informants discussed taxes, the concept of taxes was generally poorly understood—even in relation to budgets.

Um ...I know like now, they do like the taxes, I know they could definitely do like a one time tax. Sometimes you will see stuff like that. Like they tax your check one time a year um...to kind of raise money because they need money for um...whatever. I don't know, like roads or something.

White Conservative Female, age 30-35, Pennsylvania

The application of the models outlined below structured a very limited ability to think productively and generatively about what taxes are, why we pay them, and where they go.

A. Dominant Model: Taxes Do Not Meet Individual Needs

Like the mentalist model used to think about budgets, taxes were understood through a model nested in the more general individualist cultural model. Informant discussions revealed an underlying and implicit assumption that taxes do *not* meet individual needs. This general model shaped frequent discussions of why informants did not like paying taxes and why they believed Americans in general are over-taxed. The basic tenet of this model is that our immediate personal needs as individuals and families are where the money we earn *should* go. We should be able to spend our money on these needs rather than putting our “hard earned” money towards taxes--- which according to the model do not meet these individual needs.

Because I think it takes money away from toys. [LAUGHS] It takes money away from food. It takes money away from other things that I would love to spend my time on like golf! [LAUGHS] But, it-it's necessary.

African American Independent Man, age 36-45, Ohio

We have other bills to pay. Yeah. We don't want to have to pay those taxes that we don't really see on a day by day basis, out goes.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-55, Pennsylvania

Implications of this Dominant Model: *No vision of collective benefits or the tax process*

The shared assumption that the money we pay in taxes is money that does not support our individual needs has two key implications for how advocates communicate about tax policy and reform. First of all, employing this model to understand what taxes are and what they do obscures the realization of collective benefit and public purpose of the taxes we pay. Using this model, taxes are understood narrowly as money that we *don't have* to meet our personal needs. In addition, this model of taxes being separate and distinct from personal needs does nothing to provide individuals with the tools they desperately need to understand how taxes work, and only serves to perpetuate the mystery of where tax money goes and what it's for.

I think that's up to the actual person if they want to hire that [public] service. But I think that, you know, all those outside sources are probably individual needs like on an individual basis. Yeah.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Pennsylvania

Like I think of um...let's say all the um...like um...things like um...what people need to ...you know, in case they need, like if they have to go to do something to do with the laws...

White Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

I just think [taxes] is the cost that we pay to live unless you would rather live on the other side of the fence and not work, and make things harder on other people, which comes about from upbringing and bad decisions. But there are a lot of people out here that work, you know, and a lot of people that don't. They sit on their couches eight hours a day, smoke a joint, look at the want ads and say there is no jobs out here. Well of course there are no jobs in your living room smoking a joint, but if you get up it might look a little better, and then of course you say, I made \$300, [why] I am only getting \$220. You know, people are mad about that. I am only getting \$220 a week. He took \$80 from me in taxes!

White Independent Man, age 60-70, Maryland

B. Dominant Model: Getting Your Money's Worth

Informants' discussions of taxes revealed a second pervasive model. Ideally, informants explained, we should get *out* of paying taxes the exact value that we pay *in*. For example, if in a given year a person pays \$100 in taxes, he or she should get *exactly* \$100 worth of services from the government. Furthermore, informants explained that, not only should taxes pay them *out* what they put *in*, but also that they should be able to *see* this transaction. In other words, much of the frustration informants expressed about paying taxes was because they have no way of seeing

what happens between the “paying in” and the “getting out” part. This model is clearly nested within the more general consumerist model that Americans use to understand many issues.

And I think that's where it goes wrong when people get miserable because they're not seeing... They're seeing their taxes go up, yet they're not seeing any return on what they're putting in! And then you have Freddie or Fannie and like the CEOs are getting million dollar bonuses and you're like why? You've got to be kidding me. And that's where people get miserable or disgruntled.

White Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Pennsylvania

I think taxes are the best way to fund public services... but they need to be fair. They need to be in proportion to what you are providing. If you are providing me with poor services and you are jacking me with the taxes, come on. You know, I want to move, I want to leave.

African American Liberal Man, age 60-70, Pennsylvania

I think there should be some, like I said before, some benefits and some rewards to people that contribute. I think everybody deserves to be rewarded for what contribution they make to this country and to society.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

I mean it is something that is necessary. We need to put money in to keep our government running and keep our country safe, but it seem like taxes are too high for what we are getting. It doesn't seem fair to me sometimes.

White Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

Implications of this Dominant Model: *No collective benefit, long-term investment, or concept for how taxes “work”*

This model, nested within a dominant consumerist way of understanding how the world works, has three clear implications for those wishing to communicate tax policy and reform to the public. First of all, this way of understanding leaves no room for thinking about the collective benefits that our taxes support. In short, if taxes are all about benefits accruing to *individuals* in the exact amount that *individuals* put in, there is quite literally no space for benefits of taxes that don't accumulate to individuals. This makes any substantive discussions about collective benefits derived from taxes *very hard to think*.

Secondly, because the exact balance between paying in and paying out has a short-term time frame, the public will have difficulty thinking and supporting measures that call for the long-term investment of taxes dollars. Put another way, if individuals understand that tax benefits need to be experienced directly, both in terms of amount and time, policies that propose tax dollars be used for long term development will be perceived to be, as one informant put it, “a raw deal.”

Finally, the fact that this model contains the assumption that the transaction must not only be equal but *visible* has positive and promising implications for advocates. If advocates are able to frame the issue of taxes in a way that lays out and models the process, improving transparency, the American public is likely to have a less negative reaction to paying taxes. In other words, if Americans had a better idea of what was happening to the money they pay into taxes--if they had access to a clear model for how the process works-- they would likely be less frustrated by what they now perceive to not only be an unequal but invisible exchange.

I think in theory again – I’m going to go back now to the thing about theory. In theory, yes, I would be happy to pay my taxes if I knew, that that’s what they’re really going for. But... you know, the guild is off the lily for me. I know better.

White Liberal Woman, age 56-62, Ohio

Yeah. I don’t want to pay it. It is my money, you know. I don’t make an income now, my husband does, so, you know when you see a paycheck and one-third of it goes...it is infuriating. So things are not what they are. You know you pay a price and it is never that. You have all these little surcharges, whether it is in your water bill, or your phone bill, or your cell phone bill. It is frustrating, you know? That is why I think this is frustrating.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

Basically with taxes you are paying for services in the now and the present. You are paying an employee, the police, you are paying the firemen, you are paying for medical aide for the people right now. I think it is a pay and go thing. Pay as you go.

White Independent Man, age 46-59, Maryland

C. Dominant Model: Public Services Are A Given

A third powerful dominant model that informants implicitly employed in thinking about taxes was that public services are a “given” and are not explicitly realized or appreciated. By contrast to the dominant model discussed above, in which individual needs and wants were very top of mind, the public services that taxes provide were largely taken for granted. Two informants actually recognized this tacit assumption, explaining that what our taxes *do* would only become apparent if these services ceased to be provided. As one informant said, “people don’t know what they have until they don’t have it.” This assumption about services—that they are just there—explains why so many participants had difficulty understanding where taxes “go.” This tacit assumption also informed frequent comments about resistance to paying taxes and why April 15th is the “worst day of the year.” When we understand that most Americans hold models of public services in which these “goods” are invisible and taken for granted, some of the bemoaning resistance and skepticism associated with paying taxes makes sense. If these services are invisible because Americans operate under the assumption that they are, as one informant said, “just there,” there is no need or priority to *pay for them*. Something that is assumed powerfully and pervasively to always be there is difficult to think of as a priority area.

I see it [taxes] as a necessary thing within reason. You know it could be a bad thing if it is misused. I think it could be a bad thing if people really don’t have choices, you know?

Or if the government really isn't looking at the alternatives besides raising taxes. It is a bad thing if you can't see, you know, if you don't know what those improvements are as a result of higher taxes, you know?

Black Liberal Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

If I sat down and thought about it, I would say okay hm...my property taxes, what is going on in my neighborhood, or in my community to merit these taxes being so high? If I could look around in my neighborhood and see where it was being spent, I wouldn't have a problem. If I don't see it being spent anywhere, and the blocks are looking horrible and stuff is hanging down, and I thought property taxes were to – I mean I was under the impression that property taxes were for the upkeep of our community in our neighborhood that we live in! If I were looking at my fed, I would say okay, what is my federal government doing for me with this money, and I would sit there and think inside my head going hm...what are they doing, and I know they are doing something but...

White Independent Man, age 60-70, Maryland

Implications of this Dominant Model: *Lack of priority and mysterious process*

The invisibility of the services that tax dollars support has two serious impacts for communicating with the public about the tax process. Firstly, this model structures an understanding (or contributes to a lack thereof) of taxes in which both the services and the taxes to pay for them are simply not priorities. In short, if these services are “off the radar” and remain largely disconnected from the taxes we pay, it is difficult to talk about taxes and tax reform as priority areas in which the public should be involved. Secondly, that these services remain out of cognitive view is additionally problematic because it obfuscates the tax *process*. If these services are just there, it is difficult to see why we need to support them. This lack of clarity regarding what services taxes support further entrenches the mystification surrounding this process and blocks productive thinking about reform.

D. Recessive Models on Taxes

In addition to the three dominant models outlined above, there were two recessive models that emerged from analysis of interview data. And while the three dominant models are overwhelmingly negative in their implications for those who advocate tax reform, the two recessive models represent more promising directions for reframing this conversation.

1. Collective Buying Power

Several respondents employed of model of *collective buying power* to understand why we pay taxes and what they are for. The assumption that structured the way these three informants discussed taxes was that some things are just too expensive for any one individual to buy or pay for. According to this assumption, we pay taxes to be able to finance the expenditures that are beyond our means as isolated individuals to afford. One of the individuals who employed this model used the analogy of taxes functioning like insurance in “spreading risk” to explain why we pay taxes for things that we may not directly or immediately benefit from. However, while this

model is promising in that it contains a strong element of collective benefit and social purposes, it was clearly recessive in the interviews---present in just a few interviews and giving way easily to more dominant ways of understanding taxes. Moreover, it runs the risk of setting up more consumerist thinking and devolving into the Getting Your Money's Worth model.

Okay. So it's not only things that you get to use, but it allows people to be able to collectively do something. So, for example, if just the people had to pay for, you said, the roads that use the roads, there wouldn't be any roads in the first place. So by spreading it across everybody, the project can happen. The roads can be built...Just like insurance. You know, your insurance premium doesn't – in your lifetime doesn't cost to be able to build or rebuild your house. But collectively, it's a shared risk. So some people are going to use it and some people aren't going to use it.

White Independent Male, age 30-35, Ohio

Because the collective, the small amount that I give doesn't compare to the greater benefit. I think in many ways because this concept, of, you know, I have...I only have a chicken wing but you and she, you have the carrots, she has the peas. Together we have a soup. I only had a chicken wing but I get a whole soup now versus, you know, me just having one little piece of something. It's the contribution to give a soup that we have a little bit of an appetizer that we have before a meal. I did not say how thin the soup is. [LAUGHS] How-how thick it is, how chunky it is. It's a soup.

African American Liberal Man, age 36-45, Ohio

2. Individual Benefit Derives From Collective Benefit

Less recessive than the collective buying power model described above, but still discussed with a frequency and level of immediacy *far* behind that of the three dominant models discussed above was the idea that collective benefits are really just individual benefits experienced by all. According to this assumption, the things that may not appear immediately to benefit us directly, like the funding of roads and schools, actually do lead to individual benefits in the longer-term. Roads allow us to develop businesses, schools generate future leaders who strengthen our country and improve quality of life for everyone. This recessive model has clear promise in allowing individuals to realize the benefit of programs that may, not in an immediate or direct way, be in their best interest and is a promising strategy to increase support for public service projects. However, there is also a danger in adopting this model in a reframing strategy. Framing collective benefit in terms of or through individual benefit runs the risk of defaulting to very dominant individualist models that structure thought in ways that work against the realization of social good and collective purposes.

Well, when I was paying taxes for likes schools or something, um... because I knew one day I would have a kid, or one day I would have a car, or I will be on Social Security one day. So, it's like the service is there so I'll pay into because I may one day need it, or, you know, a family member may need it. So I don't mind paying into those things that I

don't really use or they concern me. Because one day you may need it. You may need it one day.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Pennsylvania

It benefits the community, and if it benefits the community, then in some small way, at least it benefits you. You may not drive a car, but you may take taxis or you may take a bus that goes on the roads anyways, you know, so that there's some indirect use there. Every year it seems like they try to pass new school levies and stuff like that, and I typically vote for them simply because I think you know, improving the value of the homes.

White Independent Man, age 46-55, Ohio

COGNITIVE HOLES: MISSING LINKS BETWEEN BUDGETS AND TAXES

FrameWorks defines a cognitive hole as an area where no cultural model is readily available or where the model that is employed by the *public* to think about the concept is dissonant from the expert's understanding. The missing link between budgets and taxes that emerged from our analysis represents a cognitive hole in both of these respects. First, our research suggests that there *is no* model for Americans to use in connecting these concepts. Secondly, this is a clear example of a situation in which the experts and the public have dramatically different ways of understanding an issue.

The identification of these holes is a vital function of the cultural models interview stage of our iterative research process. As we move forward and begin to experiment with ways of shifting and structuring more positive ways for the public to “think” budgets and taxes, these holes represent promising cognitive slots for frame elements like simplifying models and values to fill. These holes become our “levers” for changing and facilitating a more productive understanding.

In the interviews, informants were asked to make the link between budgets and taxes in two ways. First they were *directly* asked to explain how these concepts are related. Secondly, they were asked at various points throughout the interview to make this connection more implicitly, for example, by working through an exercise in which they were tasked with making the budget for a small town. These and other exercises gave informants the opportunity to relate the concepts on their own in working through problems, narrating examples, and constructing explanations—cognitive tasks in which, research has shown, individuals make use of cultural models.

There were several participants who *were* able to connect the concept of budgets to taxes. The link that this small minority of the sample was able to make was that *taxes fund budgets*. This link---which no doubt seems like “common sense” to experts--was not only infrequent, but also poorly formed.

A budget is a list of things that we want to spend money on. So say you have a list for Christmas and these are the Christmas presents that you want. You want to buy those things. That's what a budget is. It's how you determine what things you want to buy.

Now, taxes are the way for-say you, as a group of people, had a list of things that you wanted to buy. Taxes are a way for you as a group of people to fund I guess a five year loan. Okay. So you and your friends get together and you guys decide that you want these lists of things to play with, these list of toys that would be your budget. Your taxes would be how much each of you would put in.

White Conservative Male, age 30-35, Ohio

Interviewer: Do you think there is a relationship between budgets and taxes?

Yeah...Because I would think that your taxes determine your budget. How much revenue you get determines how much money you can spend. That is what I would think, and if you don't have enough budget the taxes go up, and if you don't get enough revenue and taxes up. That is what I would think, but I don't know anything.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Maryland

Oh yeah. I would say unfortunately, and I really do mean unfortunately, out of control budgets drive things. Why is the budget out of control to make us have to pay more to keep? What we receive in taxes should predicate what we spend on, but it doesn't, and I don't know why. I don't know why our budget and what we spend, and what we are behind on dictates how much we are taxed. It shouldn't be like that.

White Independent Man, age 60-70, Maryland

Even the few informants who *were* able to make this connection were unable able to elaborate much further or to use this link to recognize problems, think productively of solutions, or realize impacts of the link that they had identified. We therefore refer to this link, for the small number of informants who were even able to make it, as weak, poorly developed, cognitively unproductive.

But for the clear majority of informants in our sample, the concepts of budgets and taxes were discrete, distinct, and unconnected. Informants were overwhelmingly unable to link these concepts during interviews, and even those who saw some connection, were unable to elaborate or use this relationship generatively. Informants stumbled again and again in both directly connecting the concepts and in more indirect tasks of narrating situations, explaining decisions and solving problems that required the integration of the two concepts. Instead, respondents answered both direct and more indirect questions either with statements like the one below, to the effect of "I have no idea," or with highly incoherent and meaningless rhetorical jargon. In short, our research revealed that *there is no dominant model available for the average American to think and talk productively about the relationship between budgets and taxes.*

BRIDGING THE GAP AND FILLING THE HOLE

After recognizing this gap early in the course of our 25 interviews, we decided to experiment with two possible ways of "filling" this hole and allowing informants to think more productively

about budgets and taxes. While not exhaustive of possible reframing directions, experimenting with these two metaphorical concepts provided useful data that will inform the next phase of research and serve as points of inquiry for focus groups. The concepts of “taxes as investments” and “taxes as an exchange” were introduced as the final component of the interview and any data on cultural models obtained following exposure to these ideas was approached cautiously in analysis due to the priming and reframing power of these metaphors.

Each concept was introduced in a brief prompt. The informant was then guided through a series of questions and exercises designed to see if they could productively employ either idea to think about what taxes were and how they related to budgets.

A. Taxes as Investments

The idea of “taxes as investments” was largely *unsuccessful*, both in improving informants’ understanding of taxes and in facilitating connections between budgets and taxes. The failure of this metaphor was due to the cultural model that informants held for “investment.” Overwhelmingly, informants interpreted the metaphor very literally.

Or let’s say I’m taking that tax revenue and I’m trying to grow it without paying my bills first, and I’m hedging on the tax revenue and saying that I’m going to be able to pay our bills because we’ll make X%, so we’ll be fine this year. That’s stupid! You worry about the needs first, and then take your excess and invest that. I might be stupid but I would think that you would first worry about that, and then take your residual and use that as an investment and grow that.

White Conservative Man, age 26-35, Ohio

You know like Social Security and things like that, it is an investment, and uh...money markets, I mean your 401 and that type thing. It’s risky investments.

White Liberal Man, age 40-45, Pennsylvania

You don’t get an exchange for your investment until you hit 62 or 65 or whatever your retirement age is. Okay. If you get sick and you can’t work then you get a return for your investment, which is your taxes. Sometimes you get it.

African American Liberal Man, age 56-59, Pennsylvania

Discussions following exposure to the metaphor were largely negative. Informants focused on the dangers of *investing* our tax money and how, given the current economic climate, investing the money that we pay in taxes in the market was a *bad* idea. The idea of investment was perceived largely through a cultural model in which investments are risky. Many informants equated the idea of investment with the concept of “betting.” Once informants adopted this connection between investment and risk they were very resistant to the idea that taxes are like investments.

I guess if you say investment, I guess thinking in terms of uh... stocks and all, things like that. You know instead of using the money for things that need to be dealt with. Now, if you’re going to take a small portion of that and consider that in those type of investments

and risk that could be considered, but I wouldn't want to think of the larger picture of taxes as someone placing these bets on the table and then spinning the wheel and the ball landing possibly landing...this is the thought of gambling! You know, an investment is something that you're putting something at risk. An investment has too many things at stake in terms of saying it may produce a certain outcome or it may not produce a certain outcome. And I don't feel the taxes should be associated with the risk factors.

African American Man, age 36-45, Ohio

In addition, following exposure to this metaphor, informants focused on *who* would be investing our tax dollars. The tacit assumption here about investments was that they are made by *individuals*. Given this assumption, there was considerable resistance to the idea of taxes as investments due to the fact that those *making* the investment were likely to be corrupt and waste tax dollars³.

Because an investment to me is something that I would choose to invest in. It would be my choice, and not, you have to invest in this, you know? It is different – it is a choice.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

There's a lot of things that make sense about it. But again, it's, you know, it's a theory versus a practice. And we need to have the taxes for the good of all man, but it's when the greed sets in that's part of the equation that. I know it's there. I know it's good, it's great, blah-blah-blah-blah. The reality is it's been bastardized. And that's the jaded cynical part where I started this conversation.

White Liberal Woman, age 56-62, Ohio

Research revealed a third element of the cultural model of investments that created problems for its use as a metaphor for taxes. Overwhelmingly, informants emphasized that investments were *long term*. This was problematic in light of the dominant model that was discussed above, that taxes should be a direct and immediate way of getting your money's worth. Starting from this assumption of how taxes should work, the notion of investments being essentially long term created problems for informants in using this idea. In effect, it created a non-productive conflict between the very definition of taxes and this emergent model.

To me it's more operational. Taxes is day-to-day operational, whereas investment is long term, more mature. When I think of investment I think of mature. There comes a day when it will pay off. Whereas I look at taxes as day-to-day operation. You want this service. This is the cost for that service. It's more short term. Investment is long term, taxes are short term.

African American Liberal Man, age 56-62, Ohio

³ This was another example that revealed the dominant cultural model of government being presided over by a few corrupt individuals discussed in an earlier section of the report

When I think about my taxes I'm thinking about the things that I'm seeing that benefit me now direct. You know, the schools, the police, the sanitation works, the city elected officials. Because well, I don't think this country has done a great job in preparing for our long term. When we look at what's happening with Social Security and we look at what's happening with the economy now I just don't think they've done a good job taking our money and putting it to invest in our future.

African American Independent Man, age 36-45, Ohio

In short, the idea of “taxes as investments” was largely unproductive due to the model that informants used to think about investments--mainly that they were risky, made by individuals, and long term. None of these entailments were productive in thinking about taxes.

B. Taxes As An Exchange

The second possible reframing concept we explored was the idea of “taxes as an exchange.” While “taxes as investments” was largely unproductive, “taxes as an exchange” generated more productive ways of thinking about taxes, but was largely ineffective in helping informants connect the concepts of budgets and taxes.

Well, if I didn't pay any taxes, I don't know where they would get the money to give me the services that I am provided with. So yeah, I agree. The taxes do pay for services that I'm used to and appreciate.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-55, Pennsylvania

Informant discussions of the exchange idea were, however, structured by a sense of trust. Exchanges were perceived to be about trust, and informants were able to export the idea of trust to think about taxes. After being exposed to the exchange idea, many informants claimed that you can't have taxes without trust, that if we did not trust that our money would be used, and used in ways that benefit us, the system would fall apart. This is a positive element of the model of exchange that informants were able to apply and use to understand a key element of taxes. The trust aspect of exchanges shifted thinking away from the damaging dominant model of getting your money's worth.

Exchange or responsibility, I have always looked at it as, you know, there's a greater good. I mean, that's kind of a trite term or whatever, but you know, the community should be more than just, you know, more important at times than the individual.

White Independent Man, age 46-55, Ohio

A second positive result of the using the exchange metaphor was that it forced informants to see the tax “process” as having *two sides*. Informants saw exchanges as being comprised of two sides, a giving side and a receiving side. The exchange metaphor allowed informants to see and discuss that by *giving* tax dollars, they must be *getting* something. This diffused the problematic “public goods are a given” cultural model discussed above by forcing, informants to realize that if taxes are like an exchange, they must be getting something in exchange for what they are

giving. In many cases, this led to a productive discussion involving what tax payers “get” for their taxes and allowed informants to see the services their money supports---services that were invisible and taken for granted when the discussion was not framed with this metaphor.

Because I think nothing in this world is for free. Anything that you're going to get you're going to pay for. And I think that for the services that we do get, I think taxes is our way of paying for them...Uh of course give and take. When my kid was smaller we was driving down the street and I was telling him well, “This is the streets. It has to be paved. This is the stoplight that has to be fixed. Those guys I be paying for. So this tax money is given to all those things that we use on an everyday basis that we take for granted type thing. From the time we get in our car to get that street. From the time we pull out at a stoplight. To the time we call the cops because we think somebody's in our backyard.

African American Independent Man, age 36-45, Ohio

I'm given me receiving the benefits in the future. Of course. I'm getting benefit out of it. Well, that's the whole purpose of paying into it when you don't get benefit out of it. I mean I'm paying into it now, but I know if I have kids someday they're going to use that pool.

White Conservative Man, age 30-35, Ohio

A sense of *obligation* was also a productive part of the informants' model of exchanges as it informed their thinking about taxes. Informants explained that, when you enter into an exchange, you become *bound* and *obligated* to, as one informant said “do your part.” Following exposure to the idea of taxes as an exchange, informants began discussing how we all receive things from the system. In the exchange, if you receive you are bound and obligated to give. Many explained that you enter into this exchange simply by living in this country, that by living here you automatically receive services and advantages, and in receiving these things you enter into a contract and are bound. Using this idea, informants were able to discuss what they received, and possibly more significantly, their role in helping provide these services and contribute to the system.

Well, I think it's a give and take. You know? You have to give to be able to take.

White Liberal Woman, age 56-62, Ohio

I mean, you know, not to be too literal with that, it's-it's figurative. It's like an exchange. It's you know, like some people say oh, you pay for your freedom. You pay for your freedom because there isn't freedom in, you know, in all countries in the world. It is a privilege to live in this country. I haven't traveled all over the world, but I would say that,

just in researching other countries I think we are fortunate and we don't pay too large of a price for that freedom.

White Conservative Woman, age 30-35, Ohio

It's true. If something happens and you need the police there you know, what creates the police to be there? Who pays the police, the government and the state, and they are the ones. They are there because of your tax money. When you put the trash out for trash every week, that's not there Friday morning when you come out because you've paid your taxes. If you didn't pay your taxes, your trash would just building up, and what would happen to that trash? You know, everything, you know the streets, will need paving. I mean everything needs to be maintained, but who is going to pay for it? Where does the money come from? It has to come from somewhere. It has to come from you. If you live in your community, you have to help your community and the way to help your community is through taxes. I mean that's just what helps makes the world go around. I mean where else are they going to get it from? There is no secret fund out there!

White Liberal Man, age 40-45, Pennsylvania

While exposure to this metaphor shifted the way informants spoke and thought about taxes in positive and productive ways there were three negative effects of employing this metaphor. First, the use of taxes as an exchange, without further information, did not lead informants to make connections between the concepts of budgets and taxes. While the metaphor facilitated a more productive way of understanding *taxes* it did little on its own to create a connection between *budgets* and taxes. Secondly, the exchange metaphor occasionally led participants to discussions of welfare programs.

And of course we all want to keep all the money we make and pay less taxes, but you know, when I hear that you need to share the wealth with people that make more to people that make less, that to me is not a fair distribution of the tax system. Because this country is the American dream of people thriving and be successful, and um...there are so many reasons why people that don't work, don't work because they are either on welfare or they are looking for a handout, in some cases.

White Conservative Woman, age 46-59, Maryland

In other words, if taxes are like exchanges, *everyone* should be giving and *everyone* should be receiving. When informants took the metaphor in this direction, discussions tended to focus on how some don't give very much and receive a lot---in short that the exchange was inequitable. This is a major challenge to using the "taxes as an exchange" metaphor and suggests the need for further research and experimentation with this metaphor as a reframing strategy.

CONCLUSION

The Americans interviewed for this research clearly have limited cognitive tools with which to think about budgets and taxes and make sense of information related to these concepts. They also lack a model that can be applied to understand how these issues are related. By designing communications that give the public *new frames* and activate promising recessive frames, advocates can position the public to think about and understand the broader social and public significance of these concepts and their role in reform.

Findings from the cognitive interviews suggest that there is considerable work to do to reframe how Americans think about and understand budgets, taxes and how these concepts interrelate. Each of these three tasks is an important precondition for budget and tax reform to become “thinkable” by the public. Our findings highlight the importance and need for careful, empirically based strategies for reframing these issues and their reform. Only by changing the public dialogue to more fully consider and appreciate how budgets and taxes fit conceptually together and the role of citizens in the budget and tax process can reformers shift dominant patterns of thinking to garner public support for policy reform.

Communications that work “along the grain” of the dominant models outlined in this report will not only experience compromised effectiveness in moving public support, but also run the risk of further entrenching these cultural models that clearly interfere with the systemic changes necessary to reform budget and tax policies.

Consequently, reformers need to put considerable effort toward providing the public with new models for how to think about these concepts—models that focus on illuminating the *processes* that underlie budgets and taxes, the systems into which they fit and, most importantly, their conceptual interrelationship in vivid, concrete, compelling, and innovative ways.

Finally, the conclusion to this research phase is the iteration of a set of exercises which we propose to test in group settings, both confirming these conclusions and extending our understanding of how these patterns of thinking are negotiated in public discourse. Additionally, this phase of research has allowed us to form hypotheses about potential ways to reframe discourse in order to fill the cognitive holes illuminated by these informants. Finally, the promising models that emerge from this research will be used as candidate reframes in this next, more experimental, phase of analysis.

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.

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APPENDIX A

HOW TO TALK ABOUT GOVERNMENT

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute’s research on public perceptions of government. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, and a toolkit with sample talking points and communication materials. (www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials. The project was sponsored by Demos and the Council for Excellence in Government.

In this summary, we provide highlights from this research, resulting recommendations, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

Situation Analysis

There are three fundamental observations that emerge from the research on the dominant discourse in America about government:

1. 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. 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.

- 2. People’s immediate reactions to the topic of government are limited to two narrow default frames: The first frame considers government to be elected leadership and its decision-making functions; the second regards government as a large, bureaucratic mass.**

FrameWorks’ original research referred to these as “Government as Mind” and “Government as Monolith” respectively. We have found advocates have an easier time understanding these two frames as “Government as Them,” and “Government as It.” Importantly, both of these frames render invisible that which government truly is and does, and discourage citizen engagement in government.

Government as “Them”: *The conflation of government with politics.* 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. We found that people are largely unaware of what government does aside from the functions associated with elected leadership such as making decisions, establishing rules, and law and order. When they do think of the rest of government, they often have an image of:

Government as "It": Government as a missionless, bureaucratic, paper-pushing thing. When reasoning in this frame, there is an exaggeration of government waste and inefficiency. With such an undeveloped understanding of what government is and does, it is not surprising that it is easy to engender public support for the privatization of government functions via claims of reduced fraud, waste and inefficiency.

3. People want to see a role for themselves as engaged citizens.

They want to engage in long-term problem solving, but see the domain of government (confused with politics) as being about short-term or shortsighted decision-making that systematically excludes them. However, when people 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 and difficult to conjure for many Americans. Clearly, we must find more effective ways to trigger a “we the people” experience.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

There are many missing ingredients in the discussion about government, namely:

- Emphasizing the mission of government 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, protector, 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 the above factors 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, from its focus on getting the most for one’s money to small picture thinking about available products and point-of-purchase decisions. By contrast, *the Citizen view* promotes engagement with the common good and recognizes the shared public purposes of government.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Government

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and clarify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal sequences, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively improve the public’s thinking about government. For the latest research findings and publications, please visit our website.

Values

The Common Good

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.

Protection

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.

Public Structures Simplifying Model

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.

Putting It All Together

Our nation's success is based on the power of people working together. 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 working together. The public structures Americans have created—from laws to highways and schools—are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. That's why we cannot tie the hands of the public sector through laws that limit its flexibility; we need to use government as one among many tools to aid us in innovating and problem-solving for the long-term.

Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about government.

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.
- Equate government narrowly with electoral politics, or citizenship with voting.
- Assume the public understands the difference between public and private sectors and don't assume the former is perceived more positively than the latter.
- Inadvertently buy into a Consumerist mind-set, encouraging Little Picture thinking about what government gives at what cost with what return.
- 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.
- Be afraid of emphasizing the values that must underpin a government dedicated to public purposes.

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.
- 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. Use images that cue up "villager mode" and make "doing government" more cognitively available to people.
- 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.
- 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 decisionmaking. This is governing as Stewardship and Responsible Management, with specific roles for citizens.

APPENDIX B

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The following are well-accepted characteristics of cognition and features of cultural models that figure prominently into the results presented in this report and in FrameWorks' research more generally.

1. Top down nature of cognition.

Individuals rely on a relatively small set of broad, *general* cultural models to organize and make sense of information about an incredibly wide range of *specific* issues and information. Put another way, members of a cultural group share a set of common general models that form the lens through which they think and make sense of information pertaining to many different issues. This feature of cognition explains why Frameworks' research has revealed many of the same cultural models being used to think about seemingly unconnected and unrelated issues--from education to health to child development. For example Frameworks research has found that people use the *mentalist* model to think about child development and food and fitness--seemingly unrelated issue areas. For this reason, we say that cognition is a "top-down" phenomenon. *Specific* information gets fit into *general* categories that people share and carry around with them in their heads.

2. Cultural models come in many flavors but the basic ingredients are the same.

At FrameWorks we often get asked about the extent to which the cultural models that we identify in our research and that we use as the basis of our general approach to social messaging applies to ALL cultures. That is, people want to know how inclusive our cultural models are and to what extent we see/look for/find differences across race, class or other cultural categories. Because our aim is to create messaging for mass media communications, we seek out messages that resonate with the public more generally and as such, seek to identify cultural models that are most broadly shared across society. We ensure the models are sufficiently broad by recruiting diverse groups of informants in our research who help us to confirm that the models we identify operate broadly across a wide range of groups. Recruiting diverse samples in our cultural models interviews often confuses people who then think we are interested in uncovering the nuanced ways in which the models take shape and get communicated across those groups, or that we are interested in identifying different models that different groups use. To the contrary, our aim is to locate the models at the broadest possible levels (i.e. those most commonly shared across *all* cultural groups) and to develop reframes and simplifying models that advance those models that catalyze systems-level thinking. The latter does not negate the fact that members of different cultural groups may respond more or less enthusiastically to the reframes, and this is one of the reasons why we subject the reframes that we recommend to our clients to rigorous experimental testing using randomized controls that more fully evaluate their mass appeal.

3. *Dominant and recessive models.*

Some of the models that individuals use to understand the world around us are what we call “dominant” while others are more “recessive,” or latent in shaping how we process information. Dominant models are those that are very “easy to think.” They are activated and used with a high degree of immediacy and are persistent or “sticky” in their power to shape thinking and understanding—once a dominant model has been activated it is difficult to shift to or employ another model to think about the issue. Because these models are used so readily to understand information, and because of their cognitive stickiness, they actually become easier to “think” each time they are activated—similar to how well worn and familiar paths through fields are when walking through a forest and in so doing these paths become even more well-worn and familiar. There is therefore the tendency for dominant models to become increasingly dominant unless information is reframed to cue other cognitively available models (or to continue the analogy here, other walking paths). Recessive models on the other hand are not characterized by the same immediacy or persistence. They lie further below the surface, and while they *can* be employed in making sense of a concept or processing information about an issue—they are present—their application requires specific cues or primes.

Mapping recessive models is an important part of the Frameworks approach to communication science and a key step in reframing an issue. It is often these recessive patterns of thinking that hold the most promise in shifting thinking away from the existing dominant models that often inhibit a broader understanding of the role of policy and the *social* aspect of issues and problems. Because of the promise of these recessive models in shifting perception and patterns of thinking, we discuss them in this report and will bring these findings into the subsequent phases of Frameworks’ iterative methodology. During focus group research, in particular, we explore in greater detail, *how* these recessive models can most effectively be cued or “primed” as well as how these recessive models *interact* with and are *negotiated* vis-à-vis emergent dominant models.

4. *The “nestedness” of cultural models.*

Within the broad foundational models that people use in “thinking” about a wide variety of issues, lay models that while still general, broad and shared, are *relatively* more issue-specific. We refer to these more issue-specific models as “nested.” For example, when informants thought about basic skills, they employed a model for understanding where these skills come from, but research revealed that this more specific model was nested into the more general *mentalist* cultural model that informants implicitly applied in thinking this issue. Nested models often compete in guiding or shaping the way we think about issues. Information may have very different effects if it is “thought” through one or another nested model. Therefore, knowing about which models are nested into which broader models helps us in reframing an issue.

