



By, or for, the People?

A Meta-analysis of
Public Opinion
of Government

Meg Bostrom
PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

With a preface by
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Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action is a national, public policy research and advocacy organization based in New York City. Founded in 1999, Dēmos is committed to a long-term effort to create an American democracy that is robust and inclusive, with high levels of electoral participation and civic engagement, and an economy where prosperity and opportunity are broadly shared and disparity is reduced. Through research, advocacy, and innovative communications strategies, we develop and give voice to new thinking and analysis about American society. Our three main programs — Democracy, Economic Opportunity, and Public Works — work to catalyze and strengthen organizations, advocacy networks, policymakers, and opinion leaders by developing thought-provoking research, analysis, and policy ideas, and promoting these ideas in the public debate. We have developed a highly collaborative approach to our work and made a commitment to building a network of grassroots organizing and advocacy efforts, providing materials and research to network members, actively engaging with state-specific campaigns, and facilitating opportunities for members to share experiences, learn best practices, and highlight and support each other’s work. Dēmos combines research with advocacy—melding the commitment to ideas of a think tank with the organizing strategies of an advocacy group.

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FRAMEWORKS

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank known for its development of “strategic frame analysis,” which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. The Institute is involved in empirical studies of Americans’ attitudes to the environment and global warming (with funding from the Turner Foundation), to foreign policy (Rockefeller Brothers Fund), to rural America (W.K. Kellogg Foundation), to healthcare reform in a number of states (The California Endowment and Endowment for Health/NH) and to early childhood development (David and Lucile Packard and A. L. Mailman Foundations). In addition to its innovative methods and research, FrameWorks is known for its distinctive applications materials, from toolkits to narrated CD-ROMs and online workshops.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meg Bostrom, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her rich and varied experiences as communicator, public opinion analyst, advertising agency executive, and political consultant.

Meg started her career as a political pollster: Senior Analyst at Greenberg Lake, Vice President at Mellman Lazarus Lake. In both of these capacities, Bostrom consulted for a variety of nonprofit groups, political candidates, and foundations. Desiring a better understanding of how communications is developed and implemented, Bostrom joined Trahan, Burden and Charles, an advertising and communications agency headquartered in Maryland. As Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning, she was responsible for determining communications strategy for a variety of national and international corporations.

Bostrom launched Public Knowledge in 1998 to bring her personal passion for social issues to bear on specific communications challenges. Public Knowledge works closely with the FrameWorks Institute, which has as its mission advancing the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for addressing social problems.

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Preface

At the outset of the President's second term, Congress and the White House are poised once again to debate a series of specific, pressing issues facing the country: social security, the deficit, the war against terrorism, tax cuts, environmental protection, healthcare reform, and education, among others. But behind each distinctive debate, with its unique temporal flavor, there stands an age-old meta-debate about the appropriate role and responsibility of government in resolving such issues. Indeed, these policy debates are protracted because of the unsettled view of government in the American mind. This paper argues that attending to this larger debate is of paramount importance. Unless we work to ensure that government—the principal institutional embodiment of our collective will to address shared challenges—is widely recognized and respected, we run the risk of endlessly battling isolated issues while inexorably losing the fight for shared public purposes.

For better or worse, Americans appear to harbor conflicting views of the proper role of government in society. One duality, for example, reflects the tension between individualism and collective responsibility. Americans find virtue in the pioneer settlers, entrepreneurs, and scientists whose emblematic initiative and self-reliance are considered critical components of individual and societal success. But they also find virtue in people who pursue the common interest—community leaders and elected officials whose visions of the public good produced the schools, parks, universities, and public works on which modern society depends.

Another duality reflects the tension between suspicion and trust of government. The country was founded in opposition to oppressive, remote authority. Some of its finest moments have played out when activists in the suffrage movement, the labor movement, or the civil rights movement succeeded in overcoming injustices perpetrated or condoned by governments. For many, suspicion of government continues to be warranted.

However, trust in government and approval of government activities are parallel and sometimes competing perceptions. People look to and expect assistance from government in times of national emergency, to be sure. They also ask government to fix vexing and persistent problems that individuals and corporations cannot be expected to resolve. The New Deal legislation that began to restructure the country's banking system, to address poverty among the elderly, and to create a framework for negotiated labor relations come to mind, as do the major environmental laws of the 1960s and 1970s.

One tool for attempting to understand Americans' changeable attitudes toward their government has been public opinion polling. Taking a lead from marketing specialists, in the last half of the 20th Century the art and science of polling has provided a systematic basis for charting attitudes toward government. We know, for example, that when individuals are asked whether they trust the government to do the right thing all or most of the time, polls show that public confidence in government has declined over the years. The federal government enjoyed the trust of three out of four people, as measured by responses

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to this question, when it first began to be consistently asked in 1964. In 2003, only slightly more than half held that view.ⁱ

But the story is more complex than this, as most readers surely know. Historic polls about public attitudes toward government have explored many nuances of public opinion. In response to certain questions, the public offers more positive views of government, perhaps reflecting recognition of the role of government as problem-solver and as the institutional locus for society's collective responses to problems.

Thus, polls show us that the public recognizes that government and its programs are important to the average citizen, and believe they have benefited from public programs. More than half the respondents to one poll reported that they benefited a great deal or a fair amount from environmental laws and regulations, roads and highways, and parks and

recreation programs.ⁱⁱ They even report benefiting from programs which they probably have not directly experienced. One out of two respondents say they have benefited from public universities, for example; and 55 percent say they benefit from workplace health and safety regulations.

Moreover, Americans give high ratings to many government agencies. For example, more than two-thirds of the respondents to one poll accorded high marks to the Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Food and Drug Administration. Even the much maligned Internal Revenue Service receives positive marks from over half of poll respondents.ⁱⁱⁱ

These and other findings help us flesh out public opinion toward government and thus polling has become widely used in the academic and political spheres surrounding government. The best public opinion polling conforms to rigorous standards of validity and reliability. Pollsters publish their questions and reveal and openly debate their methodologies. While public opinion research can sometimes be misused—polls can be conducted in such a way as to produce the findings desired by the polls' sponsors—on the whole polls provide reliable information on public attitudes, and thus contribute in some measure to popular input into government decision making, and to government accountability.

Yet one could review the polling data on public opinion of government and be confused, or even skeptical. Public attitudes toward government and public policies can appear inconsistent or supportive of such a wide range of views, both positive and negative, as to be virtually incomprehensible. To the casual observer, it may seem that people are quixotic about government, or remarkably tolerant of great inconsistencies in their views.

Casual observers may also wonder if people would express more coherent understanding, and perhaps approval, of government if they had better information. We heard versions of this perspective in listening sessions we have held about public attitudes toward government as well as many conversations over the years with state activists. "The public doesn't like government," such an observer might comment, "but they do like the things

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i. Trust in government has actually increased in the last few years from an historic low recorded in about 1994. Supporters of government are typically dismayed at the decline in trust, but recognize that all major social institutions are regarded less favorably than they once were. Moreover, this decline is a worldwide phenomenon, not one confined to the United States.

ii. Bostrom, p. 34.

iii. Bostrom, p. 33.

that government does for them. If we could only focus on what government does, people would realize that government actually serves them well.”

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. If it were, supporters of key government programs and services long ago would have reminded people of the good things government does, and the anti-government initiatives of recent years would have been turned aside.

A different and helpful approach to making sense of the varying and apparently conflicting public views of government is reflected in Meg Bostrom’s review of the polls presented here. This approach, one familiar to public opinion specialists, posits that people hold many perspectives in their minds simultaneously. These outlooks, internally coherent and consistent over time, are schemas or “frames” that people employ to process information. The frames people utilize in making sense of information also color that information and help shape their opinions and decisions.

Framing itself is an entirely neutral phenomenon. The use of frames to process information is simply a psychological adaptation to the need to make sense of vast amounts of information expeditiously. What draws our attention is not that people use frames to process information but the structure and composition of those frames. The very meaning of new information depends upon the frame through which the information is processed.

In the review that follows, Bostrom seeks to make sense of the disparate attitudes Americans exhibit toward government in public opinion polls by suggesting that the key to understanding this variability lies in the frames through which respondents “hear” the question being asked, and through which they form their answers. The American mindset, she suggests after an extensive review of the polls, reflects as many as five frames of reference, some with important variants.

Aside from lending some order to what otherwise appear to be disparate findings, can a frame perspective offer help in communicating more effectively about government? In principle, the answer is yes. Dominant frames that people draw upon are stable but they are not impervious to challenge or change. Indeed, as political historians point out, the focus of much policy debate is on manipulating historical frames of reference to serve immediate political or policy goals. In principle, every communication contributes to reinforcing or dissolving one or another frame. As Bostrom indicates, people embrace many frames at once, so there are opportunities to reinforce some frames and degrade others.

Just as the right wing attack on government as inherently wasteful and inferior to market-based institutions has contributed to public skepticism about the potential of government, it may be possible to enhance other frames which hold government in a more balanced light. If communications were shaped to reinforce a frame in which government plays a constructive social role, and ceased reinforcing frames in which government is consigned a negative role, supporters of a positive role for government, acting in concert, could help shape political discourse in positive ways.

The review of public opinion data in this paper begins to take us down the path of such discovery. It is part of a larger effort in which we have collaborated with the FrameWorks Institute to conduct experimental research to help us analyze the frames with which Americans process information about government.^{iv} Based on this report and additional

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iv. The project has been commissioned by Dēmos in collaboration with the Council for Excellence in Government, assisted by support from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

inquiries by social anthropologists interested in the same phenomena, FrameWorks researchers are conducting focus groups and will pursue additional polling to hone an understanding of the structures through which Americans process information about government. On the basis of the insights gleaned, we expect to recommend strategies for communicating about government in a more constructive manner. Through these efforts, we hope to reopen a positive conversation about the role of government in American society that can be broadly deliberated on the merits.

Although part of a larger project, this report also stands on its own. In it we can begin to see the validity of an approach which rejects linear interpretations of people's views of government in favor of a perspective that recognizes the multiple lenses with which government is perceived. We can also see that the public may entertain coherent views of government that may not be openly expressed, but could provide the basis of new ways of talking about the public sector.

Talking positively about government in recent years has appeared to be a relatively hopeless enterprise. Indeed, some experts have recommended avoiding the topic entirely because of the negative connotations associated with the concept. However, the analytical method used in this paper to make sense of public opinion about government reveals latent attitudes toward government that are worth exploring more deeply. Within the complex public perceptions discussed below one can even glimpse the prospect of rehabilitating the notion of government in the public mind—a prospect we believe must be pursued.

—Michael Lipsky, January 2005

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Introduction

Since the advent of modern public opinion polling, much has been written about public attitudes toward government. The range of studied topics includes: trends in public trust and confidence, support for government agencies, and recently the effect of the events of September 11, 2001 on public perceptions of government and public servants, trends in civic involvement, factors influencing political identification, and more. Typically, these analyses thoroughly review a few specific trends in public opinion, such as historical trends in perceptions of trust in government, confidence in institutions, or views of taxes, and the reasons behind those trends. Instead of replicating existing efforts, this analysis seeks to add to the knowledge base by bringing a different perspective that is grounded in Strategic Frame Analysis.

Strategic Frame Analysis is a research process developed by the FrameWorks Institute to analyze existing issue frames and recommend effective reframes. The FrameWorks Institute defines framing as referring to “the way a story is told — its selective use of particular symbols, metaphors, and messengers, for example — and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world” (Bales and Gilliam, 2002). Research on how people think demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world, and that new information provides cues to help people determine how to connect the new information to what they already know. This lens on the information then quickly defines issue understanding, priority, consequences, solutions, and responsibility for fixing the problem. This is framing. (Note: For more information on frames and framing, see the FrameWorks Institute web site at www.frame-worksinstitute.org.)

This means that on any given issue, the public may hold conflicting mindsets leading to different implications. For example, if the public is asked to consider the services provided by government, it may make its judgment based on whether or not it feels it gets what it pays for. However, if cued to regard the problems facing the nation, the result could be a desire for government action — regardless of personal cost.

Even a cursory review of public attitudes of government indicates that public perceptions of government are malleable. Slight variations in question wording or survey context can lead to dramatically different responses. For example, 58% of survey respondents say that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States when the question is asked at the beginning of a survey after a standard “right direction/wrong track” question.¹ However, if respondents are first exposed to a question about the level of freedom Americans experience, fully 78% report that they are satisfied with democracy.²

Surveys cue particular mindsets, both intentionally and unintentionally. The effect of language and survey context on public perceptions is particularly striking on views of government. The same question in a different context frequently results in significant shifts in response. For the purposes of this analysis, the malleability of opinion and the

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volatility of survey context and question wording are beneficial, because patterns of opinion can emerge with careful study. Since this analysis is based upon existing public opinion data rather than carefully controlled experiments, it is not possible to provide a clearly defined analysis of the effect of different mindsets on opinion. However, it is possible to identify overall patterns of opinion that begin to delineate different mindsets.

After a careful review of dozens of surveys and thousands of survey questions, most conducted within the past five years, the author categorized several images of government that emerge from existing surveys. These images are somewhat subjective and are simply intended to illuminate patterns in opinion that can lead to strategic insights for communicators. The analysis is constrained by the limits of existing opinion data, meaning that other images of government undoubtedly exist but were not apparent in existing surveys. In the larger project of the FrameWorks Institute to research and analyze the frames with which Americans process information about government, the next phase of qualitative research will be able to build upon and refine these initial image categories.

After careful study, the author has grouped answers to existing survey questions into the following categories:

- **Government of and by the People:** a democratic relationship to government, in which the public views itself as *being* the government. The public recognizes that citizenship has obligations, but many people also believe that being a good person is enough. Problematically, if *good citizen* becomes equated with *good person*, then citizen participation in government could decline even while people become more involved in their communities as charitable actors. To become an effective reframe for government, this approach needs to strengthen public perceptions of the distinctive value of citizenship.
- **Government for the People:** an image of government based on whether or not it is perceived to be acting *on behalf of* the public interest in some way. The **For the People** image of government distances citizens from government and from their personal responsibility for government because it positions government as a separate entity, an institution. The **For the People** image of government has several nuances:
 - **Public Servant:** an image of government defined by the public's consideration of whether or not government is reflective of the wishes of the majority.
 - **Watchdog and Protector:** an image of government working for the best interests of the public by protecting the public from harm or from the powerful.
 - **Service Provider:** an image grounded in the programs and services that government provides. This image puts the public in the role of consumer and forces people to consider whether or not they benefit from government programs and services, and whether the programs are worth the money they pay in taxes. When the public holds a negative view of government's ability to fulfill this role, they see government as a *Wasteful, Inefficient Bureaucracy*. When they consider more positive possibilities of what services government can provide, they see government as a *Problem Solver*.

- **Big Brother:** an image of government as powerful, controlling, and endangering civil liberties, but also protecting people from external threats. This image has received quite a bit of visibility in the opinion polls since September 11, 2001.
- **Moral Guide:** a less visible image of government, based on the public's desire to strengthen family values. People see appropriate and inappropriate overlap between government and religion.
- **The Symbol:** an image of government invoked by references to American freedom or patriotism. Understandings of patriotism are not necessarily tied to involvement in government. Most people assert that being a patriot does not necessarily require an active political or civic life.

The analysis that follows is a synthesis of available data, not a catalog. It is intended to illuminate patterns in opinion that lead to strategic insights. Depending upon the appropriateness of the results, both recent and archived results are reflected in this research.

The interpretation offered in this review is the author's alone. Other analysts may provide a different interpretation of the data.

SURVEYS CUE PARTICULAR MINDSETS, BOTH INTENTIONALLY AND UNINTENTIONALLY. THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE AND SURVEY CONTEXT ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IS PARTICULARLY STRIKING ON VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT.

Government Ratings, Responsibilities and Revenues

ATTENTIVENESS TO GOVERNMENT

The public is interested in national affairs and pays attention to news about government and politics. However, few people believe that the issues that matter the most get enough news attention. Fully 91% agree, “I’m interested in keeping up with national affairs.” The public also expresses interest in following local affairs, with three-quarters (73%) agreeing that, “I’m pretty interested in following local politics.” People reject (narrowly) that they are “generally bored by what goes on in Washington” (46% agree, 51% disagree).³

Older Americans report a higher level of political news attentiveness than younger Americans. Overall, a majority pays “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of attention to what’s going on in government and politics (53% pay attention, 18% a great deal of attention). More adults over 50 years old pay attention (62%) than young adults (40%) or those 30 to 49 years old (52%).⁴

Importantly, however, the public may not be seeing the news about public affairs that it believes matters. Only 39% agree with the statement, “The issues that most affect our lives usually receive the attention they deserve,” while a majority (59%) disagrees.⁵

Most Americans recognize the relevance of government, and in 2004 most placed high importance on the outcome of presidential elections. Two-thirds (68%) reported that government is relevant to their lives, while just one-quarter (25%) felt that it was not.⁶ Fully 70% reject the idea that “most issues discussed in Washington don’t affect me personally.”⁷ In 2004, Americans also placed high importance on the presidency. Nearly two-thirds (63%) stated that it would matter who won the 2004 presidential election while only 32% believed “things will be pretty much the same regardless of who is elected president.” Significantly more Americans saw the importance of the presidential election in 2004 compared with the 2000 election. At that time, only 45% stated that it mattered who won.⁸

MOST AMERICANS RECOGNIZE THE RELEVANCE OF GOVERNMENT, AND IN 2004 MOST PLACED HIGH IMPORTANCE ON THE OUTCOME OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENT

The public assigns a wide range of responsibilities to government. Strong majorities say that it is government’s responsibility to defend the nation and make the world safe; protect people from corporate greed; provide education and opportunity to all; protect the environment; provide health care; and promote freedom, democracy and privacy. Far fewer believe it is government’s responsibility to become involved with morals or provide guarantees for income, training, or retirement. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Government Responsibilities

	<i>Percentage strongly agree⁹</i>
Provide for the national defense and a strong military	84
Cooperate with other nations to make the world safe and secure	76
Keep tabs on and regulating big corporations and powerful individuals who may abuse their position and hurt others in society	71
Guarantee a quality public education	70
Keep America strong and powerful in the world	69
Protect the environment	69
Ensure equal opportunity for everyone	67
Guarantee a right to privacy	66
Guarantee all have healthcare insurance	60
Make sure individuals are free to do what they want, unless they hurt somebody else	59
Promote democracy and freedom in the world	56
Make sure no one lives in poverty	49
Make sure that it keeps the lowest level of regulation so that businesses can prosper	47
Guarantee a secure retirement	46
Make sure people have the training they need so they can get jobs that pay enough to support a family	44
Help people not fall back when they face a crisis, become unemployed or face big health care, college costs or retirement costs	40
Make sure businesses are free to do what they want, unless they hurt somebody else	37
Maintain the moral integrity of the family	28

The public provides both positive and negative assessments of government. Ratings of government vary dramatically with a slight variation in question wording or survey context. On the one hand, most Americans hold a favorable view of the federal government in Washington (59% favorable, 10% very favorable).¹¹ While not as high as the ratings immediately following the events of September 11, 2001, these ratings continue to be higher than public opinion in the summer of 2001 (50% favorable, 9% very favorable).¹² Most (58%) state that they are satisfied with the way democracy is working in this country.¹³ Finally, Americans are satisfied with the American quality of life (84%) and system of government (61%). However, far fewer are satisfied with the size of the federal government or the amount in taxes they pay. (See Table 2.)

However, when asked about “trust” and “confidence,” the public typically responds with poor ratings. Only 32% have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the federal government, with similar ratings of “your state government” and “your local government.” (See Table 3.) Similarly, only 37% trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (4%) or “most of the time” (33%).¹⁵ Importantly, measures of trust differ significantly among racial groups. Among white respondents, only 23% trust government “just about always” or “most of the time.” In comparison, 36% of African American respondents trust government. Latino respondents demonstrate the highest level of trust in government, at 46%.¹⁶

More members of the public have confidence in the federal government’s ability to handle international problems (63%) than in its ability to handle domestic problems (58%). When the different branches of government are identified separately, the highest percentage trust “the judicial branch, headed by the U.S. Supreme Court” (67%) followed by “the legislative branch, consisting of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives” (63%) and “the executive branch, headed by the president” (60%).¹⁷

Ratings of federal, state, and local government generally differ. Generally, the public gives better grades to state and local government than to the federal government. A survey conducted in June 2000 illustrates a typical pattern of response. When asked to grade different levels of government, 37% give the federal government a grade of A or B, while more give an A or B rating to state government (48%) and local government (47%). The public trusts that the state and local governments will do what is right (38% state, 39% local), while only 29% trust the federal government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time.” Similarly, the public reports different levels of confidence that a problem will actually be solved: federal government (51% have confidence that a problem will actually be solved “a lot” or “some of the time”), state government (64%), and local government (65%).¹⁸

Table 2: Satisfaction with Aspects of Life

	<i>Selected ratings, in percent¹⁰</i>	
	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Very Satisfied</i>
Overall quality of life	84	32
Our system of government and how well it works	61	17
The size and power of the federal government	48	10
The moral and ethical climate	35	5
The amount Americans pay in federal taxes	34	4

Table 3: Confidence in Institutions

	<i>In percent¹⁴</i>		
	<i>A Great Deal</i>	<i>Quite A Lot</i>	<i>Net</i>
The military	55	28	83
The federal government	13	19	32
Your state government	9	20	29
Your local government	11	22	33
The Congress	8	16	24

THE PUBLIC PROVIDES BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASSESSMENTS OF GOVERNMENT.

However, some more recent surveys indicate less distinction between federal, state, and local government ratings, or lower state ratings. A very recent rating, in February 2004, shows that the public has similar levels of confidence in “the federal government” (32% “a great deal” or “quite a lot of trust”), “your state government” (29%), and “your local government” (33%).¹⁹ In September 2003, majorities reported “a great deal of trust and confidence” in the federal government’s ability to handle international problems (63%) and domestic problems (58%), “in the government of the state where you live” (53%), and “in the local government in the area where you live” (68%).²⁰ This pattern of response should be closely watched to see if a shift is occurring in public opinion, or if this response is an anomaly.

The public feels that local politicians are the most likely to listen to its views. Roughly half the people believe their congressional representative would pay at least some attention to

what they had to say (50% “a lot” or “some,” 10% “a lot”), and slightly more believe their state representative would pay attention (58%, 11%). At the local level, however, people feel they would have the most ability to get the attention of the government representative (67%, 19%).²¹

OPINION IS GENERALLY SPLIT BETWEEN PREFERRING “A SMALLER GOVERNMENT PROVIDING FEWER SERVICES” (45%) AND “A BIGGER GOVERNMENT PROVIDING MORE SERVICES” (42%).

In the abstract, Americans divide in whether they prefer a smaller or larger government, with vast differences in response by age and race. Opinion is generally split between preferring “a smaller government providing fewer services” (45%) and “a bigger government providing more services” (42%).²² There are strong generational differences on this measure. Among

adults under 30 years old, 69% would prefer a bigger government with more services, while among older age groups a majority prefers a smaller government.²³ There are cultural differences as well. Latinos and African Americans strongly prefer a larger government with more services, while most white respondents prefer smaller government.²⁴

When taxes are part of the consideration, voters prefer smaller government. A plurality of registered voters (45%) would “rather pay lower taxes and have a smaller government that provides fewer services” while 38% would “rather pay higher taxes to support a larger government that provides more services.”²⁵

REVENUES TO SUPPORT GOVERNMENT

Public perceptions of taxes are strongly influenced by question wording and issue context. For example, in one survey half of Americans (50%) stated that the amount of federal income tax they have to pay is “too high,” while in the very next question 62% stated that the income taxes they will pay in 2004 will be “fair.”²⁶ On the surface, these responses seem to be in direct contradiction. A strategic framing perspective, however, warns us that people can hold contradictory perceptions and that a person’s response at any given point is dictated by the frame that is dominant at that moment. It may be that people believe their taxes are too high, but fair relative to what they have paid in the past, for example. Because responses to questions about taxes are heavily influenced by frames, relevant points about taxes are included in each image of government for which that finding is appropriate, which may duplicate some of the summary points included here.

Compared to prior years, the public currently demonstrates little concern about taxes. Tax policy is not currently a top-of-mind issue for registered voters. Of a series of issues, only 4% say that it is the most important issue in determining their vote and twice as many say the federal budget deficit will be the most important issue in determining their vote (9%). (See Table 4.)

In addition, several trend questions on taxes demonstrate that public perception of taxes is at lower levels of concern than in recent history. While half of Americans (50%) states that the amount of federal income tax they have to pay is “too high,” this represents a decline from the late 1990s through 2001 when roughly two-thirds of Americans felt that federal income taxes were too high. Responses to this question in 2003-04 have been at their lowest point since the 1960s, according to Gallup trends. Furthermore, 62% say that the income taxes they will pay in 2004 will be fair, a response that has been generally increasing since the late 1990s.

What most bothers the public about taxes is the feeling that some in America are not paying their fair share. They believe that middle and lower income people pay too much while the wealthy and corporations pay too little. A plurality reports that what bothers them most about paying taxes is “the feeling that some wealthy people and corporations get away with not paying their fair share” (44%), followed by “the complexity of the tax system” (26%) and “the large amount you pay in taxes” (15%).²⁸

Furthermore, the public believes that the tax burden is not distributed fairly. People tend to believe the federal tax system is unfair (62%) rather than fair (30%).²⁹ Nearly half (49%) says that lower income people are paying too much in federal taxes, while 46% reports that middle income people are paying too much. According to the public, two groups are not paying their fair share: Corporations and upper income people are paying too little (69% and 63% respectively).³⁰

The public says it wants significant tax reform, but is hesitant to endorse a radically different tax structure. The public says the tax system needs to be overhauled. A majority (52%) say “there is so much wrong with the federal tax system that Congress should completely change it” while 44% say “on the whole the federal tax system works pretty well and Congress should only make minor changes to make it work better.”³¹

At the same time, the public is not enthusiastic about proposals to fundamentally alter the way government collects revenue. When asked whether the existing graduated federal income tax system should be changed to a flat tax, there is no clear mandate for change: one-third favors a flat tax (36%), one-third prefers the current system (32%), and one-third does not know enough to choose (31%). While they believe a flat tax would be simpler than the current system (58%), they are not sure that it would be fairer. One-third believes a flat tax would be more fair (32%), while just as many believe it

Table 4: Most Important Issue in Vote for Congress and President²⁷

	<i>In percent</i>
The war in Iraq	25
Terrorism and homeland security	22
Jobs and unemployment	21
Healthcare and prescription drug coverage	11
The federal budget deficit	9
Energy and gasoline prices	5
Taxes	4
Other	2
Not sure	1

WHAT MOST BOTHERS THE PUBLIC ABOUT TAXES IS THE FEELING THAT SOME IN AMERICA ARE NOT PAYING THEIR FAIR SHARE.

would be less fair (33%), and 28% don't know. Slightly more believe that high income people would pay more under a flat tax system (41%) than less (35%). Most are sure they would end up paying about the same amount personally (44%).³²

They are just as confused, and perhaps a bit more skeptical, about changing the current tax structure to a national sales tax. Only one-quarter (24%) believes a national sales tax would be a "good idea," while 38% believe it would be a "bad idea" and 38% "don't know enough to say." While they believe a national tax would be simpler than the current system (47%), they are unsure whether it would be more or less fair (30% and 28% respectively). A plurality believes that most high income people would end up paying more in taxes under a national sales tax system (41% more, 26% less). They have mixed views about whether they personally would pay more (26%), less (26%), or about the same (36%).³³

They prefer a progressive tax system, but are not convinced that the existing system is progressive. While most (56%) have not heard the term "progressive taxes,"³⁴ philosophically it is the approach they prefer. Between two choices, a majority (57%) says that "we should make sure tax rates are lowest for those with lower incomes and higher for those with higher incomes," while 38% say that "we should institute a flat tax meaning people are taxed at an equal tax rate, no matter what your level of income."³⁵

A majority (60%) knows that those with higher incomes are taxed at a higher percentage of their income than those who make less money. At the same time, they believe that middle income people pay the highest percentage of their income in federal taxes (51%), followed by high income people (25%), and lower income people (11%).³⁶ Again, this reinforces the finding noted earlier that the public believes the middle class is paying more than its share.

While significant energy has been expended in framing tax cuts as an economic stimulus, the public is not yet convinced that a tax cut is the best way to stimulate a weak economy.

Between two alternatives, the public would rather stimulate the economy than control the budget deficit (by 72% to 22%).³⁷ However, the public is not completely convinced that a tax cut is the best way to stimulate the economy. When asked which would be more effective in stimulating the nation's economy, the public was equally likely to say tax cuts and reducing the deficit (45% and 44% respectively). Furthermore, a majority believes that spending on improvements to the nation's infrastructure would be a more effective economic stimulus than tax cuts (53% infrastructure, 39% tax cuts).³⁸

Still, the public is susceptible to framing tax cuts as an economic stimulus. In early 2004, a slim plurality (41%) believed the tax cuts passed by Congress "mostly helped the economy," while 35% stated they had no effect, and 20% felt they "mostly hurt the economy."³⁹ Interestingly, the public does not base its view of the economic power of tax cuts on their personal circumstances. Few believe they benefited from the tax cuts passed in 2003. Less than one-third felt that the tax cuts passed in 2003 helped their family finances (30%), while 61% stated that the tax cuts did not help.⁴⁰

WHILE SIGNIFICANT ENERGY HAS BEEN EXPENDED IN FRAMING TAX CUTS AS AN ECONOMIC STIMULUS, THE PUBLIC IS NOT YET CONVINCED THAT A TAX CUT IS THE BEST WAY TO STIMULATE A WEAK ECONOMY.

Emphasizing the services that government provides can cause people to reject tax cuts. However, other powerful frames, such as government waste and inefficiency, can undermine public support for taxes. The public would rather maintain spending levels on domestic programs such as education, healthcare, and Social Security rather than lower taxes (80% to 18%).⁴¹ Furthermore, 84% say they “don’t mind paying taxes because my taxes contribute to making sure we have public schools, clean streets, public safety and a national defense, and a cleaner environment.”⁴²

However, the public is not convinced that government is a good value for the money the public spends. Most believe they “pay too much in taxes for what I get from government” (61%), rather than say that they “don’t mind paying taxes when I consider what government does for me” (30%).⁴³

Part of the problem is the public perception that government wastes tax dollars. For years surveys have shown that the public believes close to half of tax dollars are wasted. Voters stated that on average, \$.47 out of every dollar that the federal government collects in taxes is wasted.⁴⁴ When forced to choose between a government waste frame and a government services frame, waste narrowly wins: Slightly more people (49%) believe that “my taxes are wasted by the government, which is too big and inefficient to solve our problems,” while 41% believe that “my taxes provide the government with the revenue it needs to invest in education, health care and retirement.”⁴⁵

Reinforcing Americans’ identity as citizens may strengthen support for government revenue. The public agrees taxes are a citizen’s contribution to society. Fully 81% agree they “don’t mind paying taxes because my taxes are part of my contribution to society as a citizen of the United States. When in this mindset, people reject the notion that government is irrelevant to their own lives. Two-thirds (68%) disagree that they “don’t like paying taxes because the government doesn’t do anything for people like me.”⁴⁶

Though they have concerns about government’s capabilities, people are unwilling to give up on government. They would like some reform and believe it is possible to improve public life. When they consider the level of reform that is necessary to improve the federal government, most (58%) state that the federal government is basically sound and needs only some reform, while 37% believe it needs very major reform, and just 4% say it doesn’t need much change at all.⁴⁷

The public firmly believes that things can be better. Nearly two-thirds (63%) see “small steps of improvement in how politics is going in America.” Furthermore, three-quarters (79%) reject the statement “we have tried so many things to improve politics in the past that I doubt anything new will work.”⁴⁸

American optimism causes the public to believe that any problem can be fixed. Two-thirds (66%) agree that “as Americans we can always find a way to solve our problems and get what we want.” A majority (58%) asserts that “I don’t believe that there are any real limits to growth in this country today.”⁴⁹

THOUGH THEY HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT GOVERNMENT’S CAPABILITIES, PEOPLE ARE UNWILLING TO GIVE UP ON GOVERNMENT. THEY WOULD LIKE SOME REFORM AND BELIEVE IT IS POSSIBLE TO IMPROVE PUBLIC LIFE.

Images of Government

As noted in the Introduction, public perception of government shifts with changes in question language or survey context. After a careful review of dozens of surveys and thousands of survey questions, the author categorized several images of government that emerged from existing surveys. These images are somewhat subjective and are simply intended to illuminate patterns in opinion that lead to strategic insights for communicators. Since this analysis is based upon existing public opinion data rather than carefully controlled experiments, it is not possible to provide a clearly defined analysis of the effect of different mindsets on opinion. However, it is possible to identify patterns of opinion that can be categorized.

This section categorizes existing public opinion data into the following images of government:

- **Government of and by the People:** a democratic relationship to government, in which the public views itself as *being* the government.
- **Government for the People:** an image of government based on whether or not it is perceived to be acting *on behalf of* the public interest in some way. The **For the People** image of government has several nuances:
 - **Public Servant**
 - **Watchdog and Protector**
 - **Service Provider** (a *Wasteful, Inefficient Bureaucracy* and a *Problem Solver*)
- **Big Brother:** an image of government as powerful, controlling, and endangering civil liberties, but also protecting people from external threats.
- **Moral Guide:** an image of government based on the public's desire to strengthen family values.
- **The Symbol:** an image of government invoked by references to American freedom or patriotism

Government of *and by* the People

The *of and by* the People image is based upon a democratic relationship to government, in which the public views itself as *being* government. Problematically, citizenship seems to become confused with the public's desire to act as a decent person would act. The public recognizes that citizens have obligations, but many also believe that being a good person is enough. If *good citizen* becomes equated with *good person*, then public participation in government could decline even if people become more involved in their communities. Acts of charity could quickly and easily replace acts of citizenship. Yet when given the option, the public wants more active engagement and believes government would be better with more citizen involvement.

The public recognizes that citizenship comes with certain obligations. Fully 96% believe that they have responsibilities to the country as an American citizen, and 89% say they live up to those responsibilities. However, only 40% report that *most* Americans live up to their responsibilities as citizens. Part of the problem, according to the public, is that most Americans have an attitude of cynicism and apathy for citizenship and participation (62%).⁵⁰

Failing to participate in certain actions is a failure of citizenship, according to the public. Nearly three-quarters (72%) state that people who routinely avoid jury duty are failing in the responsibilities of citizenship, while only 25% say, "this is understandable given how busy people's lives are these days." Two-thirds (68%) assert that "people who are eligible to vote but never do are failing to live up to the responsibilities of citizenship" while only 29% say that failing to vote is "understandable because of the quality of candidates running for office." However, far fewer (52%) say that people who never call or write their elected representatives about issues they care about are failing to live up to their responsibilities, while 43% say that is understandable because "elected officials don't pay attention anyway."⁵¹

Though Americans say they recognize and live up to their responsibilities as citizens, survey findings suggest that the public does not see itself as comprising American government and that the public may confuse acts of citizenship with acts of decency. A majority (54%) says that the government is not "of, by, and for the people," while only 39% say that it is. In addition, a majority thinks about the government as *THE* government (55%) as opposed to *OUR* government (42%).⁵²

So why do Americans say they live up to their responsibilities as citizens but also state that government is not *of, by, and for the people*? One possible explanation may be a blurring of the line between being a good citizen and being a good person. A majority (53%) states that "being a good citizen means having some special obligations" while a significant minority (41%) states "simply being a good person is enough to make someone a good citizen." Older respondents are far more likely than younger respondents to see citizenship as having special obligations. Among Baby Boomers and Seniors, roughly

MAJORITIES OF THE PUBLIC WANT CITIZENS TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN GOVERNMENT. PEOPLE FEEL CITIZENS CAN HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON GOVERNMENT IF THEY GET INVOLVED.

60% believe citizenship requires special obligations. This compares with 58% of 15 to 25 year olds who believe that being a good person is enough to be a good citizen.⁵³

Table 5 provides further examples of the unclear division between being a good citizen and being a good person. Attending parent teacher conferences is more about being a good parent than a good citizen, yet fully 89% report that it is a very important obligation that citizens owe the country. The moral act of contributing to charity is rated a very important obligation for citizenship by a larger percentage of the public (71%) than speaking out on public policies (61%) or participating in town hall meetings (59%). (See Table 4)

Furthermore, a majority (57%) believes that the country's civic life has weakened in recent years, but more people blame societal influences such as the changing family structure rather than any concern directly related to citizenship. When asked which of the following are major factors contributing to the decline of civic life in America, weakening families and declining trust were selected by the greatest percentages of the public: "Our families are weaker than they used to be" (78%); "There is a general lack of trust between people" (67%); "Our children are not educated about participation" (63%); "People don't have time anymore" (62%); "Our political leaders are corrupt" (57%); "Government has gotten too big" (54%); and "Crime has made people scared to participate" (53%).⁵⁵

Majorities of the public want citizens to be more involved in government. People feel citizens can have a positive impact on government if they get involved. Fully 88% agree that "if politics in America is going to improve, people like me need to get involved."⁵⁶

Citizen involvement is more important, according to a majority (52%), than inspirational elected officials (28%). Furthermore, they believe they can make a difference, particularly at the community level. Most (57%) believe they "can have an effect on government if I get involved" while far fewer (38%) think "people like me cannot really have much effect on government."⁵⁷ When thinking about efficacy at the community level, the public overwhelmingly asserts that people working as a group can make a difference in solving problems (89%, 56% a great deal of difference).⁵⁸

They are less sure that other Americans feel as they do. Response is divided concerning the statement "People in America are more and more willing to put themselves on the line to improve politics" (48% agree, 50% disagree).⁵⁹

When they consider changes that will improve government, efforts to engage the public are among the most popular. Of a series of suggestions to improve government, the most effective

WHEN THEY CONSIDER CHANGES THAT WILL IMPROVE GOVERNMENT, EFFORTS TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC ARE AMONG THE MOST POPULAR.

Table 5: Obligations Citizens Owe the Country

	<i>Percentage Very Important⁵⁴</i>
Report a crime that you may have witnessed	90
Attend parent teacher conferences	89
Vote in elections	87
Be able to speak and understand English	85
Serve in the military if drafted	76
Serve on a jury if called	73
Keep fully informed about news and public issues	73
Contribute to help the less fortunate	71
Protest unjust public policies	61
Participate in town hall community decision-making meetings	59
Participate in neighborhood organizations	56
Volunteer some time to community services	55
Volunteer for the military	48

tive approaches, according to the public, are increasing citizen involvement and reducing special interest influence: increased voter turnout (73%), leaders who do what’s right (71%), teaching young people about the importance of involvement (65%), more public involvement in schools (63%), reduce special interest influence (55%) and express views to elected officials (52%). They are less interested in reforms that change government’s functions: partnerships between government and business (25%), or shift federal functions to state and local governments (32%). (See Table 6.)

Table 6: Making Government Work Better

	<i>Percentage Very Effective⁶⁰</i>
More people vote in elections	73
Leaders who put politics aside and do what’s right for the country	71
Teach young people more about government and the importance of getting involved in their communities	65
People become more involved in their local schools	63
Reform the campaign finance laws to reduce the influence of special interests	55
People take the time to express their views to elected officials	52
Citizens become more involved in such local issues as development and zoning	46
Manage government in a more businesslike way	42
Government should provide a report card to citizens on its goals and its progress in meeting these goals	39
Use the Internet to help citizens be more informed about government	35
Shift certain federal government functions to state and local governments	32
More partnerships between government and business	25

Increasing voter participation tops the list of reforms, because voting is a particularly important obligation, according to the public. Fully 89% agree, “I feel it’s my duty as a citizen to always vote” and two-thirds (64%) feel “guilty when I don’t get a chance to vote.” It is important, according to three-quarters (73%) because “voting gives people like me some say about how government runs things.”⁶¹ While a plurality (49%) thinks the public “deserves better government than we get from our leaders,” a significant percentage (38%) states that the public gets “the government we deserve, because so many people do not make the effort to vote or get involved.”⁶²

Due to the expansive definition of “civic life,” appeals to the public within this frame can easily lead to support for reforms that shift government responsibilities to religious or charitable organizations. Large percentages of the public support a variety of actions to improve civic life. The public demonstrates the most

INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION TOPS THE LIST OF REFORMS, BECAUSE VOTING IS A PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT OBLIGATION, ACCORDING TO THE PUBLIC.

support for democracy education for high school students (90%, 68% strong), and changing college work-study jobs to be community service jobs (84%, 47%). However, this mindset also leads to support for decreasing reliance on social service programs (78%, 39%), creating individual service credit programs (76%, 42%), and steering government dollars toward religious and community organizations (74%, 37%). (See Table 7.)

Table 7: Improving Civic Life⁶³

	Percentage	
	Support	Strongly Support
Require democracy education in service and civics as a graduation requirement for all high school students	90	68
Place college students who received government funded work-study jobs out doing community service rather than in on-campus jobs	84	47
Decrease government reliance on social service programs and enabling church and faith-based organizations to play a larger role in addressing social problems	78	39
Create local service credit programs, under which for each hour of service performance, you could get an hour of service from someone else when you needed it in your life	76	42
Create a universal system of national citizen service where young adults would be called on to serve their country either through military or community service	74	38
Steering government dollars toward community and religious organizations that are dealing with social problems	74	37

As noted in Table 7, the public supports a universal system of national service for young adults (74% support, 38% strong), but far fewer favor the idea if it is a *required* service. A majority favor (56% favor, 40% oppose) requiring all young men “to give one year of service to the nation — either in the military forces or in non-military work such as in hospitals or with elderly people.” When asked about young women, a slim majority opposes the idea (46% favor, 51% oppose).⁶⁴

**REINFORCING AMERICANS’
IDENTITY AS CITIZENS MAY
STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR
GOVERNMENT.**

At the same time, reinforcing Americans’ identity as citizens may strengthen support for government. Among a series of statements concerning public perceptions of taxes, the public expresses high levels of agreement with statements positioning taxes as a citizen’s contribution to society. When in this mindset, people reject the notion that government is irrelevant to their own lives. The public expresses higher levels of agreement with taxes as a citizen contribution than with statements concerning government waste or with corporations and the wealthy not paying their share. (Table 8.)

Table 8: Relationship of Taxes and Citizenship

	<i>Percentage⁶⁵</i>	
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
I don't mind paying taxes because my taxes contribute to making sure we have public schools, clean streets, public safety and a national defense, and a cleaner environment.	84	15
I don't mind paying taxes because my taxes are part of my contribution to society as a citizen of the United States.	81	17
I don't mind paying taxes because I want government to play a strong role in helping people when in need.	76	23
I don't mind paying taxes because it is my contribution to make sure our government helps create opportunities and keeps the economy growing.	75	23
I don't like paying taxes because government is too wasteful and inefficient.	64	34
I don't like paying taxes because it makes me angry that big corporations and some wealthy don't pay their fair share.	61	36
I don't like paying taxes because government spends too much money on welfare and other handouts.	38	60
I don't like paying taxes because the government doesn't do anything for people like me.	28	68
I don't like paying taxes because the government doesn't do anything for me.	22	75

People feel prepared to participate in community, government and politics, and significant numbers already participate. Three-quarters (73%) say they “have the knowledge and skills I need for effective participation.”⁶⁶ In fact, significant percentages of the public have already participated in a variety of activities.

Once again, however, public response demonstrates that the public has more experience in participating in charitable or consumer activities than in citizen action. Majorities have refused to purchase from companies due to corporate conduct (58%), and nearly as many have raised money for charity (54%). The most frequent political activities include signing a petition (48%) and contacting a public official (35%). Few have protested, worked as a canvasser or contacted talk shows to express an opinion. (See Table 9.)

PEOPLE FEEL PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT, AND POLITICS, AND SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS ALREADY PARTICIPATE.

Table 9: Activity Participation

	<i>Percentage Participated⁶⁷</i>
Not bought something because of conditions under which the product is made, or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it	58
Raised money for a charitable cause	54
Signed a written petition about a political or social issue	48
Walked, ran, or bicycled for a charitable cause	38
Contacted or visited a public official at any level of government to ask for assistance or to express an opinion	35
Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express an opinion on an issue	25
Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration	18
Signed an e-mail petition	18
Bought a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it	15
Worked as a canvasser, going door-to-door for a political or social group or candidate	14
Called a radio or television talk show to express your opinion on a political issue, even if you did not get on the air	13

Government for the People

The *of and by the People* image is distinguished by the public’s relationship to government. In that image, the relevant question was whether or not the public views itself as *being* government. As explained in that section, most Americans reject that this type of relationship exists for them, though they wish it did.

The *for the People* image assumes a different kind of relationship. Instead of the people being the government, the government is a separate entity acting on behalf of the public good and representing the desires of the majority. Framing government as whether or not it benefits the public and reflects the public is distinctly different than framing the government as *of and by the People*, as analyzed in the previous section. A *for the People* government persona distances citizens from government and from their personal responsibility for government.

The *for the People* image of government includes several nuances:

- Public Servant
- Watchdog and Protector
- Service Provider (a *Wasteful, Inefficient Bureaucracy* and a *Problem Solver*)

PUBLIC SERVANT

When considering whether or not government serves the public interest, the public states that government serves the special interests and pursues its own agenda. The public firmly believes that government would be better if it more truly represented the desires of the majority.

Surveys consistently demonstrate that the public believes government does not serve the public interest.

When asked which of two conflicting opinions is closer to their own, majorities typically side with opinions that assert the government is not representative of the people: government pursues its own agenda, not the

people’s; people are distant and disconnected from government, not close and connected; government serves the special interests, not the public interest; and government policies do not reflect people’s values. (See Table 10.) While people are most likely to feel disconnected from the federal government (63% disconnected), the state government (55% disconnected) and local government (46% disconnected) also perform poorly on this measure.⁶⁹

The public worries that the system benefits special interests, rather than the public good.

A majority (58%) says that the political system “works to give special favors to some at the expense of others” while only 35% say it “works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone.”

Table 10: Perceptions of Representing the Public Interest

	Percent Statement Pairs — Closer to Your View ⁶⁸	
	Agree	Agree Much More
Government generally pursues its own agenda.	67	37
Government generally pursues the people’s agenda.	25	10
I feel distant and disconnected from government.	64	29
I feel close and connected to government.	30	12
Government serves the special interests.	63	43
Government serves the public interest.	25	8
Government policies generally do not reflect my values.	53	26
Government policies generally reflect my values.	35	15

Table 11: Power and Influence in Washington

	<i>Percentage Too Much Influence⁷¹</i>
Big companies	83
Political action committees which give money to political candidates	81
Political lobbyists	72
The news media	71
TV and radio talk shows	54
Labor unions	48
Opinion polls	36
Churches and religious groups	32
Racial minorities	31
Public opinion	18
Small business	5

Furthermore, the public feels that the system works to enhance the strength of those in power, rather than provide the weak with a voice. A majority (56%) believes that “politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves” while only 33% believes “politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing with the powerful.”⁷⁰

According to the public, the real power and influence in Washington is held by big companies, political action committees, lobbyists, and the news media. People do not believe that public opinion has too much influence. (See Table 11.) Rather, a majority of the public states that the bigger problem today is that elected officials pursue their own personal agendas rather than the public’s priorities (55%), as opposed to elected officials worrying too much about doing what is popular instead of providing leadership (28%).⁷²

Concerns about concentration of power against the majority also emerge in public perceptions of the tax structure. The public wants reassurance that those in power are also contributing to the well-being of the nation. A plurality report that what bothers them most about paying taxes is “the feeling that some wealthy people and corporations get

away with not paying their fair share” (44%), followed by “the complexity of the tax system” (26%) and “the large amount you pay in taxes” (15%).⁷³

While the public is conflicted about whether or not it has an ability to influence government, it is united in its belief that the public *should* have significant influence. The public splits in its assessment of the public’s ability to influence government officials’ decisions: half believe the majority has some influence (50%, 9% a great deal of influence), while just as many believe the views of the majority have little influence (49%, 9% no influence at all). A slim majority rejects the idea that “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does” (47% agree, 51% disagree).⁷⁴ However, the public is united in its belief that the views of the majority *should* have influence on the decisions of government officials (94%, 68% a great deal of influence).⁷⁵

A majority has confidence “in the public as a whole when it comes to making judgments about what general direction elected and government officials should take on various issues facing the nation” (54%). People believe the public can make sound judgments in public policy, both the general direction of policy, as well as the details of laws and regulations. Specifically, they believe the public is capable of making judgments about:

- “Healthcare issues, such as whether to expand health insurance coverage to the uninsured” (76% general direction, 70% details of laws and regulations)
- “Education issues, such as how much money should be spent on testing for teachers” (76%, 68%)
- “Economic issues such as what taxes should be or how the budget surplus ought to be spent” (66%, 58%)
- “Foreign-policy issues, such as whether to send our troops to another country or expanding our military” (50%, 43%)⁷⁶

At the same time, people are cautious about placing too much weight on the views of the majority. On the one hand, a majority (54%) believes “elected and government officials should follow what the majority wants, even if it goes against the officials’ knowledge and judgment” while 42% believe “elected and government officials should use their knowledge and judgment to make decisions about what is the best policy to pursue, even if this goes against what the majority of the public wants.” However, the public can be influenced in its assumption that the majority is always right by being reminded of the times in history when the majority was wrong. When reminded of positions the majority held that were later judged to be wrong, i.e., support for racial segregation, the public changes its view. With that example in mind, a majority (51%) believes officials should rely on their knowledge and judgment when they believe the majority is wrong, while 40% believe officials should do what the majority wants.⁷⁷

When the public states its support for following the will of the majority, it is trying to demonstrate its support for public influence, not for majority rule. People recognize that minority rights need protection. Fully 87% agree (65% strongly) that “decisions in the United States should follow the will of the majority, but the rights of the minority should always be protected.” In addition, a slim majority (52%) rejects the idea that “in many ways, members of minority groups have more protections and rights than white people do.”⁷⁸

The public does not want government officials to blindly follow majority will. It wants representatives to rely upon a variety of resources to make decisions. Most members of the public believe government officials currently rely upon campaign contributors and interest groups to make decisions. Instead, the public wants government officials to listen to members of the public who contact them, rely upon their own conscience about the right thing to do, use their own knowledge of the issue, and listen to policy experts. (See Table 12.) The public is skeptical of elected officials’ motives when elected officials disagree with public will. When officials make a decision that isn’t supported by a majority they do so because they “choose to follow what special interests want instead” (65%), “don’t believe the public is informed enough on the issues” (60%), or “don’t understand what the public wants” (51%). Fewer believe it is because they “are doing what they believe is ultimately in the best interests of the public” (47%).⁸⁰

Elected officials do not understand average people’s views, according to the public. Three-quarters (75%) believe that “elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly.” A majority (59%) rejects the statement that “most elected officials care what people like me think.”⁸¹ When asked directly how well most elected and government officials in Washington understand what the public thinks, 49% think they understand the public well, while just as many think the reverse (49%). A slim majority (52%) feels officials in Washington do not well represent what a majority of the public wants (52%), while 47% feels they do represent the public well.⁸²

Table 12: What Elected and Government Officials Do and Should Pay Attention to in Making Decisions

	Percentage Pay a Great Deal of Attention ⁷⁹	
	Do	Should
Their campaign contributors	59	18
Lobbyists and special interest groups	45	14
Their own knowledge on the issue	35	47
Policy experts involved with the issue	28	46
Their conscience or judgment, that is, what they think is the right thing to do	24	49
What journalists say about the issue	21	13
Public opinion polls	18	36
Members of the public who contact them about the issue	14	58

The best way for officials to learn what the majority of people in the country think about important issues is to get directly in touch with the people. Even at the end of a lengthy survey concerning the value of public opinion polls, a plurality stated the best way for officials to learn the public will is to hold town hall meetings (43%); conduct a public opinion poll (25%); talk to people at shopping malls and on the street (13%); and talk to people who call, write, or e-mail the official's office (15%).⁸³

**THE PUBLIC DOES NOT WANT
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO
BLINDLY FOLLOW MAJORITY WILL.
IT WANTS REPRESENTATIVES TO
RELY UPON A VARIETY OF
RESOURCES TO MAKE DECISIONS.**

In addition to a cynical view of the legislative decision-making process, the public does not view elected officials as having special expertise in policymaking. This reinforces public desire to replace existing leadership. Only a slim majority agrees that “elected officials are professionals with special expertise like that of an accountant, lawyer or doctor” (53% agree, 43% disagree).⁸⁴ If they associate no value with public officials’ expertise, people are easily persuaded to replace the whole lot

of them. Nearly two-thirds (63%) agree that “it is time for Washington politicians to step aside and make room for new leaders.” However, a simple reminder of the importance of experience shifts public perception dramatically. When asked to consider the statement “We need new people in Washington even if they are not as effective as experienced politicians,” only 44% agree, while 52% disagree.⁸⁵

WATCHDOG AND PROTECTOR

The Watchdog or Protector persona also falls under the category of being *for the People* in the sense that it is about working for the best interests of the public. The Watchdog or Protector persona is about protecting the public from harm or power. The public holds conflicting views when it considers the government’s responsibilities to regulate industries. In some ways, it believes that government regulation harms business, and therefore, American prosperity. In other ways, however, the public believes government regulation protects people, so the public calls for more, not less, regulation of industry.

In the abstract, public opinion polls report conflicting findings concerning the public’s desire for government regulation of business. For example, 60% agree that government “has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system.”⁸⁶ Even more (75%) state that “the strength of this country today is mostly based on the success of American business.”⁸⁷

At the same time, three-quarters (77%) believe that there “is too much power concentrated in the hands of a few big companies” and nearly two-thirds (62%) think “business corporations make too much profit.” A majority (57%) rejects that “business corporations generally strike a fair balance between making profits and serving the public interest.” Furthermore, majorities report that they have benefited from government regulations: food and drug safety regulations (58% say they have benefited “a great deal” or “a fair amount”), consumer safety regulations (58%), workplace health and safety regulations (55%) and environmental laws and regulations (50%).⁸⁹

When forced to choose between the two conflicting mindsets, a majority (53%) sides with the view that “government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest” while only 39% side with “government regulation of business usually does more harm than good.”⁹⁰

When they consider specific industries, very few people call for less regulation by government. As people consider a series of industries, very few want any of the industries to be less regulated by government. In fact, a majority (57%) does not want any of the mentioned industries to have less government regulation. Instead, majorities support *more* regulation of the healthcare and oil industries. Only 20% do not want more regulation of at least one industry. (See Table 13.)

SERVICE PROVIDER

The final *for the People* image category concerns the public’s view of government as a provider of programs and services. When they think of government as a Service Provider, people are likely to react as consumers would and consider whether or not they benefit from government programs and services, and whether the programs are worth the money they pay in taxes. Frequently they respond in the negative and determine that government is wasteful and inefficient. However, they hope that government can use its services to solve problems.

The public says it has a good understanding of the responsibilities of different government agencies and gives positive ratings to most agencies. When asked to consider a series of specific government agencies, large majorities of the public report familiarity with, and understanding of, several agencies. Most agencies also receive a favorable rating from the public, though few receive “excellent” ratings. Health-related agencies are given positive ratings by the largest percentages of the public, while the IRS receives positive ratings by the smallest percentage. (See Table 14.)

In the abstract, Americans divide in whether they prefer a smaller or larger government, with vast differences in response by age and race. Opinion is generally split between preferring “a smaller government providing fewer services” (45%) and “a bigger government providing more services” (42%).⁹² There are strong generational differences on this measure. Among adults under 30 years old, 69% would prefer a bigger government with more services, while among older age groups a majority prefers a smaller government.⁹³ There are cultural differences as well. Latinos and African Americans

Table 13: Government Regulation of Industry⁸⁸

	Percentage of Government Regulation	
	More	Less
Managed care companies such as HMOs	60	8
Health insurance companies	59	7
Pharmaceutical and drug companies	57	7
Oil companies	52	7
Tobacco companies	44	11
Life insurance companies	35	7
Hospitals	35	11
Airlines	31	11
Telephone companies	30	14
Packaged food companies	26	9
Car manufacturers	24	11
Banks	21	10
Computer software companies	11	18
Supermarkets	10	17
Computer hardware companies	8	17
None of these	20	57

Table 14: Government Agencies — Familiarity and Ratings

	Percentage ⁹¹	
	Agency Understanding	Job Rating Excellent/Good
Food and Drug Administration or FDA	98	68
Internal Revenue Service or IRS	97	51
Federal Bureau of Investigation or FBI	97	69
Social Security Administration	96	48
Centers for Disease Control or CDC	96	90
Environmental Protection Agency or EPA	90	55
Central Intelligence Agency or CIA	87	57
Federal Aviation Administration or FAA	85	76
Department of Homeland Security	81	56
Securities and Exchange Commission or SEC	76	57
National Institutes of Health or NIH	61	80

strongly prefer a larger government with more services, while most white respondents prefer smaller government.⁹⁴

When taxes are part of the consideration, voters prefer smaller government. A plurality of registered voters (45%) would “rather pay lower taxes and have a smaller government that provides fewer services” while 38% would “rather pay higher taxes to support a larger government that provides more services.”⁹⁵

Government fairs poorly as a provider of services when people are considering government programs overall. Without specific examples to remind them of their interactions with government, people rate government services poorly. People are more likely to report that “government programs have not really helped me and my family” (52%) rather than say they have helped (41%). People divide concerning whether government is “effective in solving problems” (42%) or not (46%). The public does not think government is a good value for the money it spends. Most believe they “pay too much in taxes for what I get from government” (61%), rather than say that they “don’t mind paying taxes when I consider what government does for me” (30%).⁹⁶

REMINDING PEOPLE OF SPECIFIC GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES APPEARS TO IMPROVE RATINGS OF GOVERNMENT’S EFFECT ON PEOPLE’S LIVES.

However, when reminded of the wide range of services and programs the government provides, significant majorities report that they have benefited personally from government programs and services. Visible services with which the public has regular interaction, are the services cited by the greatest

percentages of the public: roads and highways (70% say they have benefited “a great deal” or “a fair amount”), parks and recreation programs (66%) and public schools (65%). Majorities also report that they have benefited from government regulations: food and drug safety regulations (58% say they have benefited “a great deal” or “a fair amount”), consumer safety regulations (58%), workplace health and safety regulations (55%), and environmental laws and regulations (50%). Far fewer say that they or a family member have personally benefited from programs that serve narrow populations: emergency assistance (18% say they have benefited “a great deal”), veterans’ benefits (21%), and anti-discrimination laws (26%). Only 33% say they have personally benefited from student loans, but 50% say they have benefited from public universities. (See Table 15.)

Reminding people of specific government programs and services appears to improve ratings of government’s effect on people’s lives. After people consider different government activities and programs, they are more likely to report that government has a positive effect on their lives: 53% positive (11% very positive), 11% negative (4% very negative), and 34% neutral. Compared with the same question asked prior to a reminder of government services, respondents were more likely to provide a neutral rating of government and less likely to provide a negative rating. Positive ratings were largely unchanged.⁹⁸

When people assess the government’s performance in providing services, they have a generally negative assessment that government is inefficient and wasteful. What the public would like to see, however, is government acting as a problem solver. Americans struggle between two competing views. When forced to choose between two views, half (50%) say

that government “often does a better job than given credit for” while nearly as many (43%) say that it “is usually wasteful and inefficient.”⁹⁹ The public is similarly divided concerning whether the government should be more or less active. Through the 1990s, most surveys found that the public believed the government was doing “too many things that should be left to individuals and business.” At times in recent years, however, response to this question has been mixed: 47% believe that government “should do more to solve problems” while 45% think it “does too many things better left to business and individuals.” There is a significant difference by age. The youngest respondents, 15 to 25 years old, are far more supportive of using government to solve problems (64%). This view declines as people age, with just 38% of those 57 years old or older holding this view.¹⁰⁰

INEFFICIENT AND WASTEFUL BUREAUCRACY

Clearly, when the public considers what it dislikes about government, waste is among the most frequent mentions. This line of thinking provides a rationale for smaller government. When asked which of the two is the bigger problem, a majority (56%) states that “government has the right priorities but runs programs inefficiently,” while only 29% say the problem is that government has the wrong priorities.¹⁰¹ For years surveys have shown that the public believes close to half of tax dollars are wasted. According to one recent survey, voters stated that on average, \$.47 out of every dollar that the federal government collects in taxes is wasted.¹⁰² In addition, nearly two-thirds (64%) believe “the federal government creates more problems than it solves,” while only 25% believe “it solves more problems than it creates.”¹⁰³ Finally, a majority (57%) agrees with the statement “when something is run by the government it is usually inefficient and wasteful” and just as many (55%) agree with the statement “dealing with a federal government agency is often not worth the trouble.”¹⁰⁴

With negative perceptions of waste and incompetence so prominent in public thinking, it is no surprise that the public would want to keep federal government small. Most (71%) agree that the federal government “should run only those things that cannot be run at the local level.”¹⁰⁵ Most then prefer nongovernmental organizations to government in addressing social problems. Three-quarters (72%) believe that religious, charitable and community organizations do a better job of addressing social problems than government, while only 19% say government does a better job.¹⁰⁶

Table 15: Have Benefited from Government Programs⁹⁷

	Percentage	
	Great Deal/Fair Amount	Great Deal
Roads and highways	70	41
Parks and recreation programs	66	37
Public schools	65	45
Food and drug safety regulations	58	30
Consumer safety regulations	58	27
Workplace health and safety regulations	55	28
Public universities	50	28
Environmental laws and regulations	50	23
Medical research	48	26
Police and the courts	43	20
Social Security	42	23
Medicare	38	24
Student loans	33	22
Anti-discrimination laws	26	13
Veterans' benefits	21	13
Emergency assistance for victims of natural disasters	18	11

Table 16: More Federal Government Involvement

	<i>Percentage</i> ¹⁰⁷
Ensuring access to affordable health care	73
Providing a decent standard of living for the elderly	73
Making sure that food and medicines are safe	73
Reducing poverty	69
Ensuring clean air and water	67
Setting minimum educational standards for school	64
Protecting and preserving public lands	54
Promoting values and morality in the society	50

PROBLEM SOLVER

However, when the public is thinking about problems it wants solved, majorities support more federal government involvement to address several problems. Nearly three-quarters want a larger federal role in health care, supporting the elderly and ensuring food and medicine safety. The fewest people want more federal involvement in promoting values and morality, though 50% support this activity. (See Table 16.)

The public wants government to provide equal opportunity. Nearly everyone (91%) agrees: “Our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.”¹⁰⁸

In high percentages, the public believes it is the responsibility of the federal government to ensure racial equality in the courts, schools and health care. Fewer see a responsibility for government in making sure that there is equal job quality. (See Table 17.)

Table 17: Federal Government Responsibility to Ensure Equality

	<i>% Responsibility</i> ¹⁰⁹					
	<i>Total</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>African-American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Multi-racial</i>
Treatment by the courts and police equal to whites	73	69	89	80	82	71
Schools equal in quality to whites	70	65	89	79	73	72
Healthcare services equal to whites	62	55	90	78	71	63
Jobs equal in quality to whites	47	40	73	66	57	50

The public also desires a government that will address poverty, work for a good standard of living for all, and provide a strong social safety net. Three-quarters (74%) believe the federal government “has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in this country,” and just as many say the government “must see that no one is without food, clothing, or shelter” (72%).¹¹⁰ Two-thirds (65%) think the government “should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep” and that it “is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves” (66%). A majority (54%) agrees that the government “should help more needy people even if it means going deeper in debt.”¹¹¹

A majority (56%) believes the government “should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all Americans” while only 39% believe that “this is not the government’s responsibility; each person should take care of themselves.” Younger adults are

THE PUBLIC WANTS GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.

more likely to support an active government (63%), but even a majority of senior citizens (53%) believe government should work to improve the standard of living for all.¹¹² Similarly, African American and Latino respondents support a more active government role on this measure than white respondents.¹¹³

At the same time, the public is concerned about people becoming too dependent on a nanny government. Nearly three-quarters (71%) say that poor people “have become too dependent on government assistance programs” and 60% agree that many people “think they can get ahead without working hard and making sacrifices.” People believe that with enough hard work, anyone can succeed. In fact, Americans overwhelmingly admire those who “get rich by working hard” (90%). Two-thirds (67%) reject that “success in life is pretty much determined by forces out of our control,” and that “hard work offers little guarantee of success” (67%).¹¹⁴

The result of the public’s conflict between wanting to solve problems but avoid meddling, is that a slim majority (51%) determines that the government “is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and business” while 43% say “government should do more to solve our country’s problems”¹¹⁵ though response to this question has been mixed in recent years.

BIG BROTHER

There is significant public opinion data, particularly since September 11, 2001, concerning perceptions of government abuse of power. In some respects, people have a Big Brother view of government — they tend to believe that the federal government is controlling, powerful, secretive, and engaged in illicit activities. To keep government from going too far in one direction, the public supports dividing government control between the two political parties. At the same time, the public is not terribly concerned about the government taking away civil rights. While they have some concerns about losing rights, people are willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to address terrorism.

While people are concerned that the federal government is too controlling, powerful, and secretive, they do not view the government as a threat to their own rights and freedoms. A majority believes that the federal government “controls too much of our daily lives” (56% agree).¹¹⁶ In addition, a plurality (47%) says that big government will be the biggest threat to the country in the future, compared to 38% who point to big business and just 10% who select big labor.¹¹⁷ A plurality (49%) states that the federal government has about the right amount of power, but those who believe the power of the federal government is not at the right level are far more likely to be concerned that the federal government has too much power (43%) than too little (7%).¹¹⁸

Most assume that the federal government keeps information from the public. Three-quarters (73%) believe the federal government is not telling Americans everything they need to know about the war on terrorism and 45% are concerned about that.¹¹⁹ This level of sus-

THE PUBLIC ALSO DESIRES A GOVERNMENT THAT WILL ADDRESS POVERTY, WORK FOR A GOOD STANDARD OF LIVING FOR ALL, AND PROVIDE A STRONG SOCIAL SAFETY NET.

picion is widespread, including 49% who believe the “U.S. government is withholding information from the public about the existence of UFOs.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, a slight majority (51%) believes the United States government *as a matter of policy* is using torture as part of the campaign against terrorism, and 66% say the government is using physical abuse.¹²¹

This assessment of the federal government’s power does not lead most Americans to believe that the government is a threat to their personal rights and freedoms. A majority (59%) rejects the notion that the federal government has “become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens” but a significant minority (39%) believes it is an immediate threat. Without the reference to the federal government becoming “so large and powerful” even more people reject that the federal government is an immediate threat (68% not a threat, 30% immediate threat).¹²²

To keep government from becoming too extreme, the public supports dividing government control between the political parties. Given two choices, a strong majority (62%) thinks it “is better to have different political parties controlling the Congress and the presidency to prevent either one from going too far” over “it is better for the same political party to control both the Congress and the presidency, so they can work together more closely” (29%).¹²³

In fact, the public is unsure that the president and Congress could work together anyway, even when of the same party. After the elections of 2002, when informed that the presidency and Congress were both controlled by the same party, just as many felt that “Congress and the president will be able to work together to end the gridlock in Washington,” as felt that “things will be pretty much as they were before because Congress and the president always have differences” (48% and 46% respectively).¹²⁴

WHILE PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS TOO CONTROLLING, POWERFUL AND SECRETIVE, THEY DO NOT VIEW THE GOVERNMENT AS A THREAT TO THEIR OWN RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS.

The public balances its concern with sacrificing liberties with its desire to defeat terrorism. Overall, Americans are divided about how far government should go to fight the war on terrorism: 44% say, “It’s more important to ensure people’s constitutional rights even if it means that some suspected terrorists are never found,” while slightly more (47%) say, “It’s more important to find every potential terrorist, even if some innocent people are seriously hurt.”¹²⁵ At the same time, more people worry that “the country might get so caught up in fears of terrorism that we would give up too many of our rights and freedoms” (49%) than worry that “terrorists might hurt us because the country will let them take advantage of our rights and freedoms” (40%).¹²⁶

Most Americans are willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to fight terrorism. A majority (56%) states that it has been necessary “for the average person to give up some rights and liberties in order to curb terrorism in this country.” However, most Americans (78%) report

that they have not had to give up any of their own rights or liberties.¹²⁷ Few (14%) feel that government “anti-terrorist programs have taken your own personal privacy away since September 11th, 2001,” while two-thirds (64%) say they have not had privacy taken away, and 22% say “a moderate amount” has been taken away.¹²⁸

Most Americans approve of the security measures that have been taken since the events of September 11, 2001, including treating non-citizens differently than citizens in the American legal system. A majority (59%) approves of law enforcement efforts to stop and search people who are of Middle Eastern descent. Most (56%) believe that people who have been detained by the FBI or other police agencies since September 11th have had their basic rights protected. Only 26% say detainees’ rights have not been protected, and 18% are unsure.¹²⁹

Many Americans are willing to treat non-citizens very differently than citizens in the law enforcement system. A majority (54%) believes an Arab who is not a U.S. citizen who is arrested as a suspected terrorist in this country should have fewer legal rights than a U.S. citizen, while 42% believe they should have the same legal rights. Interestingly, the public’s response is only moderately tempered when it is considering a non-citizen Arab who has been arrested for stealing a car: 46% believe that person should have fewer legal rights than a U.S. citizen, while 45% support the same legal rights.¹³⁰

MOST AMERICANS APPROVE OF THE SECURITY MEASURES THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN SINCE THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001.

Citizenship conveys certain rights, according to the public. An Arab who is a U.S. citizen arrested as a suspected terrorist in this country should have the same legal rights as someone born in the U.S., three-quarters of the public (75%) assert. Even more say an Arab U.S. citizen who is arrested for stealing a car should have all the same legal rights as a person born in the U.S. (89%). Even when reminded of the American citizen who was arrested and accused of plotting to explode a radioactive bomb, a majority (58%) state that “all American citizens are entitled to be represented by a lawyer and have their day in court” while 35% side with the statement “government actions are necessary to pursue its war on terrorism.”¹³¹

Most Americans are familiar with the Patriot Act. While they disapprove of some of its provisions, they generally support the Act and support additional measures to protect Americans from terrorism. A majority (59%) is familiar with the Patriot Act which “makes it easier for the federal government to get information on suspected terrorists through court-ordered wiretaps and searches.” A plurality (43%) thinks the Patriot Act is about right in restricting “civil liberties in order to fight terrorism,” but slightly more think it goes too far (26%) than think it does not go far enough (21%).¹³²

Most disapprove of the provisions that allow secret searches of a person’s home, and that require institutions to turn over records. A slim majority approves of the provision that requires financial institutions to disclose who has accounts with its institution. (See Table 18)

Table 18: Approval of Provisions of the Patriot Act

	<i>In Percent</i> ¹³³	
	<i>Approve</i>	<i>Disapprove</i>
The Patriot Act allows federal agents to secretly search a U.S. citizen's home without informing the person of that search for an unspecified period of time.	26	71
The Patriot Act requires businesses, including hospitals, bookstores, and libraries, to turn over records in terrorism investigations and prevents the business from revealing to the patients or clients that these records have been turned over to the government.	45	51
The Patriot Act allows federal agents in terrorism or money-laundering investigations to submit lists of people to financial institutions. The institutions are required to reveal whether the people on the lists have accounts with them. The federal agents can submit the names without a judge's prior approval.	51	45

In addition, majorities favor a range of new security measures including stronger security checks for travelers and those accessing government and private office buildings, expanded undercover activities, facial-recognition technology, and more secure IDs for computer systems. A majority even favors a national identification system, according to one survey. (See Table 19) At the same time, significant percentages are concerned about abuse of these measures. They most worry that innocent people would be targeted, that judges would not require significant justification for surveillance and that there would be broad profiling based on demographics. (See Table 20)

Table 19: Proposed Security Measures

	<i>Percentage Favor</i> ¹³⁴
Stronger document and physical security checks for travelers	84
Stronger document and physical security checks for access to government and private office buildings	85
Expanded undercover activities to penetrate groups under suspicion	80
Use of facial-recognition technology to scan for suspected terrorists at various locations and public events	80
Issuance of a secure I.D. technique for persons to access government and business computer systems, to avoid disruptions	76
Closer monitoring of banking and credit card transactions, to trace funding sources	64
Adoption of national I.D. system for all U.S. citizens	56
Expanded camera surveillance on streets and in public places	61
Law enforcement monitoring of Internet discussions in chat rooms and other forums	50
Expanded government monitoring of cell phones and email, to intercept communications	36

Table 20: Concern over Use of Increased Powers

	<i>Percentage High Concern¹³⁵</i>
Mail, telephone, emails, or cell phone calls of innocent people would be checked	47
Judges who authorize investigations would not look closely enough at the justification of that surveillance	42
There would be broad profiling of people and searching them based on their nationality, race, or religion	42
Congress would not include adequate safeguards for civil liberties when authorizing these increased powers	40
Non-violent critics of government policies would have their mail, telephone, emails or cell phone calls checked	40
New surveillance powers would be used to investigate crimes other than terrorism	35
Law enforcement would investigate legitimate political and social groups	27

Overall, just 34% are “very confident” that law enforcement would use its expanded surveillance powers in a proper way, but an additional 53% are “somewhat confident,” while only 12% are “not very” or “not confident at all.”¹³⁶

Finally, though people worry about government intrusion on privacy, more are worried about banks and credit card companies. A majority (57%) is “concerned that the government is collecting too much information about people like me.”¹³⁷ However, more are worried about banks and credit cards infringing on personal privacy than the government: 57% worry most about banks and credit card companies “because they are collecting and selling marketing information about consumers;” 29% worry most about the federal government “because it can secretly collect information about people’s private lives;” and 8% worry most about law enforcement agencies “because they are using more aggressive tactics against crime like surveillance cameras in public areas.”¹³⁸

AMERICANS ARE CONFLICTED ABOUT THE APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR RELIGION IN GOVERNMENT AND FOR GOVERNMENT IN RELIGION.

MORAL GUIDE

Americans want political leaders to stand for moral values, yet they are uncomfortable with too much political influence by organized religion. The public sees appropriate roles for government in supporting values and for religion in addressing society’s problems.

Americans are conflicted about the appropriate role for religion in government and for government in religion. The public opinion data finds a slight preference, but not significant support, for more religious values in public affairs. A plurality (44%) would like to see “religious and spiritual values have a greater influence in politics and public life,” while 21% would like less influence, and 33% want about the same amount of influence.¹³⁹

In addition, subtle changes in wording can dramatically alter survey findings. In September 2003, Gallup found that a majority (56%) sided with the view that “the government should promote traditional values in our society” while 40% sided with the belief that “the government should not favor any particular set of values.”¹⁴⁰ This appears to argue for more traditional values in public life. However, three months later, CBS/*New York Times* found a very different result to a *nearly* identical question: 43% sided with the view that “government should do more to promote traditional values” while 50% chose the perspective that “government should not favor one set of values *over another*.”¹⁴¹

People worry that religion is losing influence and feel positively toward politicians who voice their religious beliefs. A majority (56%) believes that religion is losing its influence on American life, while 30% believe it is increasing its influence. When government leaders publicly express their faith in God, most (60%) think that is good for the country, while only 4% believe it is bad for the country, and 33% say it does not have much effect.¹⁴² They would like to see more public expressions of faith. A plurality (41%) says that there has been too little “expression of religious faith and prayer by political leaders” while 21% believe that there has been too much, and 29% say there has been the right amount.¹⁴³ Finally, more are worried about “public officials who don’t pay enough attention to religion and religious leaders” than “public officials who are too close to religion and religious leaders” (50% and 34% respectively).¹⁴⁴

THE PUBLIC DOES NOT CLEARLY SEPARATE THE ACTIVITIES OF RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT.

However, the public is not enthusiastic about places of worship becoming politically engaged. Only a slim majority supports places of worship speaking out on political matters, and then only if it is clearly the opinion of the clergy and not spoken from the pulpit. A slight majority (52%) believes churches and other houses of worship should express their views on day-to-day social and political questions, while 44% say they should keep out of political matters. If members of the clergy do speak out, the public feels they should express their own views (52%) and not reflect the views of their congregation (36%).¹⁴⁵ Only 28% think it is appropriate for members of the clergy to discuss political candidates or issues from the pulpit, while 65% believe this is not something clergy should do.¹⁴⁶ Finally, few say they use their religious beliefs to help decide how to vote: 22% frequently use religious beliefs to decide how to vote, 16% occasionally.¹⁴⁷

The public does not clearly separate the activities of religion and government. For example, the public strongly supports government acting to encourage moral outcomes for society. Nearly three-quarters (72%) believe the tax system should be used to encourage “things like financing a home, giving to charities, and buying health insurance,” as the current tax system does.¹⁴⁸

They also believe it is appropriate for religion to have an influence in the public realm. Fully 71% favor allowing public schools to start each day with a prayer, though there are significant generational differences on this question. While only 58% of young adults favor prayer in the public schools, 81% of senior citizens do.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, people believe that

places of worship contribute to solving important social problems (75%, 23% contribute a great deal), and a plurality (37%) states that religious organizations can do the best job of providing services to people in need, followed by federal and state government agencies (28%) and nonreligious community-based organizations (27%).¹⁵⁰

THE SYMBOL

American government is also a symbol of freedom and democracy. The Symbol image is invoked by references to American freedom or patriotism. When thinking of this image of government, the public expresses satisfaction with democracy in the U.S. and the level of freedom the public experiences. Like citizenship, understandings of patriotism merge with perceptions of decent behavior. Most people assert that being a patriot does not have to include being involved in political or civic life.

Most Americans assert that people in this country have a great deal of freedom, as much or more freedom than in the past. When in this Symbol mindset, they are more likely to express satisfaction with how democracy works. Two-thirds say that Americans have “complete” or “a great deal of freedom” (69% freedom), and 80% say Americans have the same (38%) or more (42%) freedom as in the past. Considering their own personal situation, higher percentages say they have freedom (72%), and 86% say they have about the same amount of freedom or more than in the past. After being exposed to a series of questions about freedom, fully 78% say they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the U.S.,¹⁵¹ which is 20 percentage points higher than when satisfaction with democracy is measured at the beginning of a survey without the priming for freedom.¹⁵²

MOST AMERICANS ASSERT THAT PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF FREEDOM, AS MUCH OR MORE FREEDOM THAN IN THE PAST.

Interpretations of freedom, however, are not limited to constitutional definitions. Freedom of choice is selected as important by most, and selected by a greater percentage than the freedom to participate in elections. Inner peace is important to as many people as freedom from an interfering government. (See Table 21)

Table 21: One of the Most Important or Extremely Important Things About Freedom

	<i>Percentage</i> ¹⁵³
Freedom is having the power to choose and do what I want in life.	71
Freedom is being able to express unpopular ideas without fearing for my safety.	69
Freedom is having the right to participate in politics and elections.	63
True freedom is feeling an inner spiritual peace.	57
Freedom is having a government that doesn't spy on me or interfere in my life.	56
Freedom is being left alone to do what I want.	50

Americans say they are patriotic, but patriotism does not have to include political or civic action. Fully 91% agree (56% completely agree” with the statement, “I am very patriotic.”¹⁵⁵ Nearly three-quarters (71%) are “extremely patriotic” (24%) or “very patriotic” (47%), but fewer (55%) say that *most* Americans are very patriotic.¹⁵⁶

Importantly, patriotism does not necessarily mean political activism. A majority (59%) says that to be really patriotic one *does not* have to be involved in the political or civic life of the community. Furthermore, while voting is cited by nearly all respondents as a patriotic activity, the next most often responses are either symbolic activities or activities that, while noble, have little to do with participating in government. (See Table 22.)

Table 22: Patriotic Activities

	<i>Percentage Agree Activity is Patriotic¹⁵⁴</i>
Voting	97
Volunteering in the community	89
Displaying the American flag	86
Working for the common good, even when it runs counter to one’s immediate self-interests	85
Engaging in conversations with other people about important political issues our nation faces	84
Raising one’s voice in opposition to prevailing public opinion in times of national crisis if one believes core democratic values are at stake	83
Donating money to a community organization that helps those in need	82
Questioning the decisions of our nation’s leaders, even when they are trying to rally the country	77
Demonstrating on behalf of a cause one believes in strongly even when the cause is unpopular	75
Attending a parade celebrating America	74

Conclusions and Questions for Further Research

Those who seek to communicate with the public about the roles and responsibilities of government need to understand that Americans hold several conflicting perceptions of government that have implications for effective communications. As this analysis clearly demonstrates, public opinion questions about government do not have absolute answers. The question is not whether people trust government or whether they want to expand the role of government; sometimes they do, sometimes they do not. This analysis suggests that by clustering views of government into a series of personas, it is possible to better understand what the public thinks under different circumstances.

Some government personas are unlikely to provide a platform to build long-term public support or engage the public in government decision-making. The Big Brother image seems to have little ability to engage the public in a broad dialogue about the role of government. Most Americans seem unconcerned about the threat posed by this authoritarian image. Fear of terrorism trumps fear of authority. Little data exist on the implications of the Moral Guide and Symbol images, though neither is likely to engage the public in support for government. The Moral Guide approach could undermine government as the solution by invigorating support for religious institutions as solutions. The Symbol image revolves around patriotic utterances that do not lead to activism.

Two other categories of images deserve further investigation. The *By the People* image connects people to government by reminding them that citizens *are* government. It may be that invigorating this relationship to government and clarifying the obligations of citizenship will result in more public support for government's efforts. The qualitative phase of research in the larger FrameWorks Institute project will need to determine if it is possible to invigorate this relationship, and the consequences of developing this relationship by asking such questions as: Does "government is us" trigger a picture of the everyday operations of government, or national politics? In what ways are people willing to engage? Is voting the only citizen activity that they are willing to pursue? Are there other common actions that can be redefined as citizenship, such as engagement in schools, community, etc.?

Government's ability to be *For the People*, or to reflect and embody the will of the majority, is a frequent theme in public opinion polls, whether characterized as Public Servant, Service Provider or Watchdog. Each of these roles distances the public from government by implying that government is an entity separate from citizens. Government can be beneficial in each instance, but it is separate. There is some indication in the public opinion data that reminding people of government programs and services, regulations and ability to solve problems, will improve the public's view of government and increase the public's desire for an expanded government role. However, this is an area that needs further

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research in the qualitative phase by asking questions such as: Is there a clear mission for the public sector that distinguishes it from the private sector? Is that mission sufficiently strong to engage the public? What values can be associated with the public sector that will cause people to see its relevance? Finally, as the larger FrameWorks Institute research project moves into the next phase, it is important to distinguish the role of this

review of existing public opinion from the experimental research that will follow. For those seeking to understand how the American public feels about its government, *By, or for, the People?* offers a way to decipher the often complex and seemingly contradictory public opinion reflected in polling data. It provides a strategic synthesis of what we can learn from descriptive polling data.

The experimental phase, however, will determine the *effect* of existing issue frames and reframes on public understanding. It will test promising approaches suggested in this analysis and by members of the FrameWorks Institute research team, to determine the capacity of each experimental frame to advance public understanding of problem definition, priority, consequences, solutions, and responsibility for fixing problems. In this way, we will be able to determine which frames among the many raised in this report and in use in media and other communications actually serve to engage the public in support for collective action.

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129. “The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School 2002 Civil Liberties Update,” sponsored by NPR, Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, conducted by ICR/International Communications Research. It was conducted in two series. The first, Series A, was conducted August 7-11, 2002, with a sample of 1,006 respondents 18 years of age or older. The second, Series B, was conducted August 9-13 with a sample of 1,002 respondents 18 years of age or older. Data analysis is based mainly on a sample of approximately 1,000 adult Americans.
130. “The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School 2002 Civil Liberties Update,” sponsored by NPR, Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, conducted by ICR/International Communications Research. It was conducted in two series. The first, Series A, was conducted August 7-11, 2002, with a sample of 1,006 respondents 18 years of age or older. The second, Series B, was conducted August 9-13 with a sample of 1,002 respondents 18 years of age or older. Data analysis is based mainly on a sample of approximately 1,000 adult Americans.
131. “The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School 2002 Civil Liberties Update,” sponsored by NPR, Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, conducted by ICR/International Communications Research. It was conducted in two series. The first, Series A, was conducted August 7-11, 2002, with a sample of 1,006 respondents 18 years of age or older. The second, Series B, was conducted August 9-13 with a sample of 1,002 respondents 18 years of age or older. Data analysis is based mainly on a sample of approximately 1,000 adult Americans.
132. Sponsored by CNN/*USA Today*, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,006 adults nationally, February 16-17, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
133. Sponsored by CNN/*USA Today*, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,006 adults nationally, February 16-17, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
134. Conducted by Harris Interactive, 1,020 adults nationally, February 9-16, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
135. Conducted by Harris Interactive, 1,020 adults nationally, February 9-16, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
136. Conducted by Harris Interactive, 1,020 adults nationally, February 9-16, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
137. Sponsored by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,528 adults nationally, July 14-August 5, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
138. “Survey by National Constitution Center,” conducted by Public Agenda Foundation, 1,520 adults nationally, July 10-24, 2002. Fieldwork by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
139. “A Generational Look at the Public: Politics and Policy,” sponsored by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,886 adults nationally, August 2-September 1, 2002.
140. Conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,025 adults nationally, September 8-10, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
141. Conducted by CBS News/New York Times, 1,057 adults nationally, December 10-13, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
142. Sponsored by *Newsweek*, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 1,000 adults nationally, June 27-28, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
143. “2003 Religion and Public Life Survey,” sponsored by Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,002 adults nationally, June 24-July 8, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
144. Conducted by CBS News, 1,177 adults nationally, November 10-13, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
145. “2003 Religion and Public Life Survey,” sponsored by Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,002 adults nationally, June 24-July 8, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
146. “Religion and Public Life Survey,” sponsored by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,041 adults nationally with an oversample of 197 African-Americans, March 5-18, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

147. “2003 Religion and Public Life Survey,” sponsored by Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,002 adults nationally, June 24-July 8, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
148. “National Survey of Americans' Views on Taxes,” sponsored by NPR, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, conducted by International Communications Research, 1,339 adults nationally, February 5-March 17, 2003.
149. “A Generational Look at the Public: Politics and Policy,” sponsored by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,886 adults nationally, August 2-September 1, 2002.
150. “Religion and Public Life Survey,” sponsored by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,041 adults nationally with an oversample of 197 African-Americans, March 5-18, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
151. Conducted by National Opinion Research Center, 2,817 personal interviews with adults nationally, February 1-June 5, 2000. Part of a continuing series of social indicators conducted since 1972. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
152. “Community Consensus Survey,” sponsored by the Democratic Leadership Council, conducted by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, 509 adults nationally, February 12-February 14, 1999. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
153. Conducted by National Opinion Research Center, 2,817 personal interviews with adults nationally, February 1-June 5, 2000. Part of a continuing series of social indicators conducted since 1972. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
154. Sponsored by the Harwood Institute, conducted by Gallup Organization, 1,000 adults nationally, January 4-20, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
155. Sponsored by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2,528 adults nationally, July 14-August 5, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
156. Sponsored by the Harwood Institute, conducted by Gallup Organization, 1,000 adults nationally, January 4-20, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

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