"Public Structures" as a Simplifying Model for Government

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute
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October 2005

SUMMARY

Background

In this phase of research, Cultural Logic set out to identify promising explanatory strategies (one or more "simplifying models") with the potential to help Americans think more productively and concretely about the role of government in our lives. The simplifying models project was motivated by the research finding that many of the public's common complaints and misunderstandings on the subject arise from a type of "cognitive blindness" regarding much of what government is and does. In short, our working assumption is that the public's conceptual picture of government can be made richer and more accurate, and that this better understanding can lead to increased engagement and more constructive thinking.

Approach

Simplifying models are brief, "user-friendly" explanations that help lay people understand an issue in a way that is more compatible with expert understandings. They often but not always involve analogies to familiar objects or scenarios. (Examples in other issue areas include "the blanket of carbon dioxide" that traps heat in the atmosphere and causes global warming, and the ways in which early experience shape the development of a child's "brain architecture.")

The process of developing simplifying models involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refining of hypotheses. The early goal is to identify as many potential conceptual directions as possible, through a review of relevant texts (including those produced by advocates), conversations with experts, and so forth. Cognitive analysis and "TalkBack Testing" then allow the researchers to judge whether particular conceptual models have the potential to enter public discourse and to have positive impacts on thinking. TalkBack Testing involves a variety of techniques, from one-on-one interviews to written questionnaires to "chains" of subjects engaged in an exercise something like the child's game of Telephone. In each case, subjects are presented with a brief explanatory text (roughly 100 words) that focuses on some poorly understood aspect of government and/or its role. Measures of the effectiveness of the simplifying model include subjects' ability to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory idea. In other words, the testing is designed to assess whether the model has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating about government.

Recommendation

We conclude that a very effective way to improve the public discussion about Government is to focus on *Public Structures and Benefits of Public Structures*. Essentially, this approach amounts to expanding the default models of government (which collapse the topic to an often "dysfunctional" relationship between the public and their elected leaders) by adding two critical and closely related components:

Public Structures – critical systems and objects that government creates and maintains, including both physical infrastructure and also organizational systems such as courts, schools, regulatory systems, etc.

Benefits of Public Structures – the important benefits that flow to citizens and society, including greater prosperity, security, stability, efficiency, and so forth.

TalkBack testing shows that people are able to grasp the idea of Public Structures, including the idea that Public Structures refer to both physical and organizational components, from a brief explanation, that they readily acknowledge their importance, and that they recognize that creating and maintaining them is a critical role played by government.   Here is an example of an explanatory paragraph that did well in testing:

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

Among the more specific benefits identified in the research are the following:

- The model discourages a default tendency towards "personalization" of government – one that leads to a counterproductive focus on individuals, "character," resentment of authority figures, and so forth.

- It provides a way to begin discussions with a focus on things people value, and naturally connect with the role of government.

- It encourages "reasonable mode" (in which people are ready to think practically, solve problems, and take in new information) and discourages "rhetorical mode" (in which people are focused on defending or opposing a particular point of view). One measure of this effect is that Conservatives and Liberals sound more alike rather than different after hearing the model.

- The model helps counter an exaggerated Individualism – e.g. the common view that American success is *entirely* the product of smart, free and enterprising individuals. (It reinforces instead the idea that the life that Americans know also depends critically on structures that we have collectively designed and built.)

- The model helps clarify why taxes are truly necessary (even for self-described conservatives).

- The model sets up a "two-way street" view, according to which we take care of Public Structures and they take care of us. This is of course starkly different from the zero-sum game involved in redistributing wealth or feeding Government bureaucracy.

- The model promotes thinking that is dynamic rather than static. People seem to easily recognize a collective responsibility for Public Structures that entails action on their part, as well as a collective benefit.

- The public structures approach allows for conversations using a variety of different language, and focusing on a variety of different issues. (E.g. the model offers a useful conceptual tool for thinking/talking about Katrina.)

In short, conversations that use public structures as a conceptual starting point – and that also frame the topic of government in terms of values and other message components identified in the FrameWorks research – have the best chance to create forward momentum on the issue.

INTRODUCTION

This report is part of an ongoing effort to help Americans think more productively about the role of government in our lives. Previous rounds of research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and partners – commissioned by the Council for Excellence in Government and Demos – have yielded a rich understanding of the problem areas in people's current reasoning and attitudes. Some of these problems are well known and straightforward, such as the widespread attitude that government is "inefficient" and wastes money. Others are on a much more fundamental level, including a kind of "cognitive blindness" regarding much of what government is and does. This blindness leads to a variety of distorting effects that make it very difficult for average people to understand the indispensable roles that government plays in American life.[1]

Trying to improve the public's understanding means dealing with a stubborn cognitive impasse: While there are large and important topics related to government that people tend not to "see" or to know much about (including nearly everything aside from the high-profile activities of elected leaders), *this is also a topic area where they feel they know what they need to know*. People don't feel the gaps in their understanding, and are not looking for new information. (Our research has established that similar problems face communicators on other important issues in American society, such as rural development and race.) For this reason, it is no easy matter to "inform" the public about government.

The research reported on here has focused on finding effective ways of introducing new and helpful tools into people's conceptual repertoire. Through a combination of cognitive analysis and empirical research with several hundred Americans, the goal has been to identify a "simplifying model" with the capacity to move public reasoning about government in more productive directions.

The Simplifying Models Approach

Simplifying models are brief explanations that convey the essence of an expert understanding, in a form suitable for communication with the public. A successful simplifying model has two overarching qualities: (A) It has the capacity to enter public discourse (i.e. it is easily learned, remembered, used, transmitted), and (B) It produces positive effects on reasoning. While reading this report, it will be helpful to keep these and a number of more particular points in mind about the nature of simplifying models and what they are intended to accomplish.

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[1] See "Mind and Monolith: Findings from Cognitive Interviews About Government," Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute.

- Key "links"

  On a topic like government, there are innumerable facts and propositions that it might be useful for the public to understand[2]. One critical job involved in the process is determining, through analysis and empirical testing, which pieces of knowledge are actually the most helpful to convey.

- "Culturally compatible"

  Explanations typically cannot be remembered, used or repeated in the form that experts provide – expert explanations are notoriously complex and jargon-filled, and often make unsupported assumptions about what people already understand. Simplifying models research focuses on ensuring that a model is in a form that is compatible with how people actually think and communicate with each other.

- "Parallel Track" Approach

  Simplifying models are not conceived as stand-alone messages. Instead, they are critical *components* that provide a conceptual organizing principle. They work in tandem with other elements of an effective communication – such as proper framing in terms of "level-one values" identified in other phases of research.

- Concrete images

  It is a general cognitive principle that *objects* make good anchors for thinking – providing people with a new object to think about (such as the "blanket of carbon dioxide" in the case of global warming, or "brain architecture" in the case of early childhood development) is a helpful way to introduce new understanding.

  Concrete analogies and metaphors frequently make effective simplifying models – but if language is too obviously metaphorical, it can be ignored in favor of the "more basic" point, or can be uncomfortable for expert communicators.

- Implicit causality

  Because simplifying models are ultimately intended to help increase engagement and change behavior and policy, they need to imply something about cause and effect. If uninsured individuals are "missing pillars" in the healthcare system, for instance – they are not participating in the overall financial structure that supports the system – then uninsurance is destabilizing, and the problem must be addressed.

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[2] The work on government is an example of a "level one" simplifying models project, which seeks to improve people's reasoning about a broad and fundamental topic – as opposed to a narrower topic such as the meaning of "renewable energy" for instance.

- Newness

  In order to overcome people's strong tendency to interpret new information as a mere restatement of some already-familiar idea, it is important to find explanatory tools that seem clearly to be expressing something new (as well as relevant).

- Big picture

  One of the key goals of most simplifying models projects is to help people see a "bigger picture" that transcends individual perspectives and concerns. It is more helpful for people to think as responsible citizens than as aggrieved (or even enlightened) consumers or lone individuals.

METHODS

The process of simplifying models development involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refinement of hypotheses.

Generating Directions

The initial stages of the project involved review of a wide range of documents on the nature and importance of government – from the Federalist Papers through the web sites of many organizations interested in government as an issue. The goal was to identify as many potential avenues for analysis and testing as possible. This stage of simplifying models development results in long lists of potential explanatory directions that are later evaluated and/or tested with members of the public. (See Appendix 1 for a list of sample candidate directions.)

TalkBack Testing

TalkBack Testing is an approach that includes a number of different specific techniques, all aimed at assessing candidate models on the two broad criteria mentioned earlier: Do they have the potential to enter public discourse? And, do they have positive impacts on thinking? In either formal or conversational settings, subjects are presented with prospective simplifying models, and then their subsequent understandings and ability to express them are evaluated in a variety of ways. For example, some measures relate to how well people absorbed the idea that government's actions affect our everyday lives; in other cases, assessment concerned the likelihood that people would repeat a particular metaphor that was presented to them.

Subjects

In all, roughly 350 subjects from around the US participated in the project. This group was diverse in terms of occupation, education level, ethnicity, age, gender, geography and political orientation. About 150 people took part in one-on-one phone conversations. Another 75 subjects were asked to respond to open-ended questions on a written questionnaire. Roughly 120 participated in "TalkBack chains," described below.

Stimulus

Whether in phone interviews, street intercepts, or classroom questionnaires, the material for TalkBack testing consisted of very short texts (roughly 100 words) about some topic related to government, e.g.

> Experts who study the overall health of American society and economy are saying that many of the biggest problems result from one simple cause: Most Americans don't understand what the public sector is and does. The public sector refers to the *Collective Team of all the people and organizations who work on behalf of the public* rather than for the profit of private businesses. This includes public school

teachers, city council members, firemen, city employment offices, highway departments, etc. When people don't understand what the public sector is, and how it's working on behalf of the public, they don't recognize how they can help it get its job done as well as possible.

Each text was organized around a particular explanatory model (in this case the public sector as a team working on the public's behalf – see Appendix 2 for more example paragraphs).

Following exposure to the paragraphs, subjects were asked to respond in various ways. Sometimes they answered policy-relevant questions such as the following:

- What are some of the jobs that the public sector does?
- Do you feel we provide adequate support for the public sector's work?

In oral contexts, subjects were also asked to repeat as much as they could remember about the paragraph. Subjects' ability to remember and express a simplifying model are among the key criteria of its effectiveness. Others include:

- Subjects' ability to use the model in their reasoning, drawing new inferences beyond what they have specifically been told
- Their tendency to "stay on track," rather than digressing to other topics
- Most obviously, their tendency to engage in productive thinking about the topic, and to avoid common counterproductive patterns.

TalkBack Chains

The most distinctive technique of TalkBack testing is "TalkBack Chains," which resemble the child's game of "Telephone." In this methodology – which aims primarily to assess the capacity of a model to enter public discourse – subjects are presented with a paragraph as described above, and asked simply to pass the information along to other subjects as faithfully as possible. After they have explained the information the "teachers" exit and new "students" are brought in and the chain continues, for up to six or seven "generations."

Initial presentation $\rightarrow$ 1st generation TalkBack $\rightarrow$ 2nd generation TalkBack $\rightarrow$ 3rd generation TalkBack$\rightarrow$ 4th generation TalkBack $\rightarrow$ …

Researchers provide no input after the initial presentation. Subjects are not allowed to take notes, so any information that is passed along must be remembered and internalized, at least enough so that it can be explained during the brief "training" session. Note that each generation usually includes a pair of subjects working together, to reduce the chances that a chain will fail due to a single individual who for whatever reason does not do a good job of absorbing the information.

TalkBack chains represent a surprisingly difficult test for any candidate message. As each generation of subjects is exposed to the material, participants have strong tendencies to distort the information (typically in the direction of previously familiar ideas), and to introduce unwanted elements, or simply to forget what they have heard. The chains provide a severe test of the clarity and durability of an explanatory strategy. By assessing subjects' acceptance of and facility with different messages – as they try to explain and reason about the issue – we can make predictions about how effectively particular messages will be absorbed and used once they are disseminated to the public.

The strongest explanatory models show some ability to self-correct – i.e., subjects can end up arriving back at something close to the original formulation, even if they themselves heard a somewhat distorted version of the stimulus.
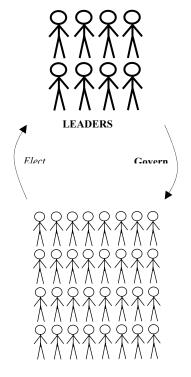
SITUATION ANALYSIS

Simplifying models development is based on the idea that there is *a significant but bridgeable difference* between how ordinary Americans and experts think about a topic like Government. We naturally expect policymakers, for example, to have a more accurate, complete, and "big picture" understanding of Government than ordinary Americans do, and it is unrealistic to assume that laypeople can become experts. The premise of this work, however, is that a basic "frame shift" can make the general public more aware of many aspects of Government's role in our society that are normally out of mind – that the respective understandings of experts and the general public can be brought closer together in important ways.

The first challenge in developing a simplifying model for Government is, in other words, to determine which elements missing from the public's understanding are most crucial, what information would be most useful for helping Americans understand what Government is and does. Building on the findings from Cultural Logic's previous round of research, we can describe the public's current default model of Government as a *simplified and selective understanding* that limits how much and how well Americans can think about Government.

The Interpersonal Model of Government

Research conducted by Cultural Logic demonstrates that most Americans, most of the time, default to a *collapsed* model of Government – one that includes two terms: Government and People. This "Interpersonal Model" sets up a very simple picture rooted in the social metaphor of an *interpersonal connection* between Government and People, nearly to the exclusion of other aspects of Government:

LEADERS

Elect   Govern

PUBLIC

10

According to this highly simplified model, Government acts on the People, and is acted on by the People (to a lesser degree – mainly through voting). The Interpersonal model has a number of specific consequences, discussed below, but one striking feature is how much of the big picture it excludes, including Government's interaction with material *Things* (as opposed to people). In short, the public's default model of Government is – by the standard of the expert model – collapsed or one-dimensional.

Cognitive Effects of the Interpersonal model

The model has a number of distorting effects, not all of them consistent with each other, as well as some effects that aren't wrong or negative per se.

- Cognitive Blindness to most of what Government is about

  In an earlier report, we suggested that for many people Government is something like an iceberg, most of which lies out of sight. The Interpersonal model profiles the "tip of the iceberg" (roughly speaking, elected leadership and the power functions of government) and masks much of the role Government actually plays in our society. In particular, the aspects of Government that do not neatly fit the interpersonal model – such as the productive day-to-day work of keeping things running and maintaining infrastructure – are left out of the picture.

- No place for the Common Good

  A particularly important casualty of the Interpersonal model of Government is an understanding of the Common Good. While most Americans have some sense of the Common Good, the Interpersonal model does not give them a way of expressing or even thinking about this important idea. As a result, the common good is, in practical terms, a culturally empty category, except among thoughtful people.

- Emphasis on elected leaders

  The social metaphor on which the Interpersonal model is based encourages us to personalize Government, i.e. to focus on the individuals who occupy positions of power in Government.

- Seeing Government officials through an Interpersonal lens

The model's strong emphasis on an interpersonal relationship encourages us to judge members of Government as if we had a personal relationship with them (e.g., by criteria that we normally use to judge spouses or parents) rather than as responsible managers with whom we don't have personal relationships.

- Government is "Them"

  Though Government is often conceived of as a person we have a relationship to, it does not act like one. A common consequence is that, rather than rejecting the Interpersonal model, people see the relationship between themselves and Government as a "bad" one, where they lack power and are acted on in ways they resent.

- Government as Parent

  The Interpersonal model makes it easy to slip into a personification of Government as Parent. While this may have positive connotations for some, it is certainly objectionable for many.

- Democracy as electing leaders

  Another consequence of the Interpersonal model of Government is that citizens' role is reduced to merely choosing their leaders (if that). The model does not suggest, for example, that they can understand the issues, or act directly on the issues that matter to them.

The Current Debate

A substantial distorting effect of the Interpersonal model of Government is its impact on public discourse. Much of the political debate about Government is trapped within this "collapsed" picture. Working within this Interpersonal frame, both Conservatives and Liberals spend a great deal of time arguing, for example, about how much of a role Government should have in people's lives, and on which issues; or about whether leaders are corrupt (in the terms of the model, whether they are *betraying* the People).

What gets left out of public discourse, and the public's thinking, is much of the reality of what Government is *for*, namely providing collective solutions to the challenges that face communities and the nation.

Advocates who want to communicate to the broad public about the role of Government are therefore faced with a basic choice. On the one hand, they can work within the dominant frame and try to rehabilitate the image of the Government. Given the power of the dominant frame to guide people's thinking, this might amount to suggesting that Government is "close" to the people, "trustworthy," a responsive "broker," or a "good provider." Alternatively, they can work within a different frame, one that provides a bigger picture about what Government does.
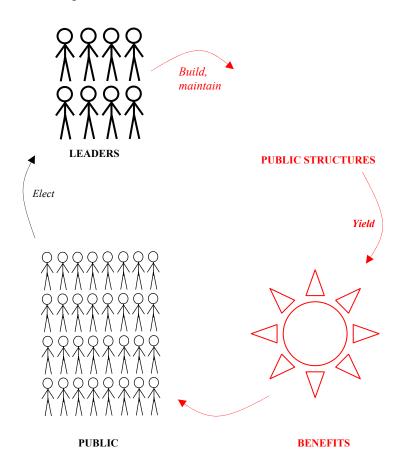
RECOMMENDATION

We conclude – based on both empirical research and cognitive analysis – that a very effective way to improve the discussion about Government is to enrich the "collapsed" and one-dimensional conceptual model of government by adding two essential conceptual links that are currently missing from people's reasoning:

Public Structures – critical systems and objects that government creates and maintains, including both physical infrastructure but also organizational systems such as courts, schools, regulatory systems, etc.

Benefits of Public Structures – the important benefits that flow to citizens and society, including greater prosperity, security, stability, efficiency, and so forth.

The resulting, more complete model can be sketched as follows:

From a cognitive perspective, the simplifying model has two basic goals:

- To introduce a new conceptual *object* – public structures – that will play an important part in people's reasoning.
- To frame the object by placing it at the center of a *causal chain* that connects Public Structures to Benefits on the one hand, and to Government on the other:

Government → Public Structures → Benefits

This causal "grammar" of public structures is a central aspect of the model.

A paragraph that follows that "grammar" (and one that performed well in testing) might read as follows:

> Economists now agree that the main advantages that make America so successful come from what are called public structures. The public structures Americans have created include physical structures we need in order to get things done like highways, airports, and communications grids, as well as the organizational structures we need like a postal system for delivering mail and courts for settling biz disagreements. Third World countries have many smart hardworking individuals, but the don't have the public structures that are essential for overall success.

Limitations of the simplifying model

This "enriched" model is still extremely simplified from an expert perspective, of course. Like all simplifying models, it inevitably leaves out much of the expert model. For instance,

- It does not explicitly address the issue of citizen participation in government – it is not designed to directly encourage people to participate in the democratic process.
- It does not refer directly to the public sector / civil service.
- It does not dwell on government as service provider to consumer/citizens
- It does not directly address government's role in protecting the most needy.

The emphasis of this model is on aspects of the expert model of government that are currently obscured, quite central, and readily teachable.

Note that this is not a model of government per se. In fact the various language we tested for conveying the model never referred explicitly to government. (See Appendix 2 for sample texts.) Nonetheless, the model provides an organizing principle for thinking more productively about the relationship between government, society and citizens.

As we discuss in the next sections, this explanatory model passes the two basic tests referred to previously: It has a good capacity to enter public discourse, and it has positive effects on people's reasoning about government.

Capacity to Enter Public Discourse

Before a model can have positive effects, people must accept it as an organizing principle for their reasoning. On this level, we conclude that the model is successful based on three basic criteria:

- Public Structures is a category that people are able to understand and accept.

  While some TalkBack subjects are thrown off by the idea that highways and laws, for instance, belong to a single category, many others accept this concept. In particular, they are able to recognize the reality of "abstract" structures like laws and procedural systems. One piece of evidence that it has become a living, productive category in their minds is that they are able to generate new items that belong to it. The following subject is responding based on a paragraph that listed "public structures such as *laws, public education, roads, and the banking system*":

  > *Q: Based on what I've just read, could you say what Public Structures are?*
  > *A: I would say the public structures you were referring to would be law, the tax code, things like building codes, things like environmental laws, labor laws, things such as that.*
  >
  > <div align="right">Conservative, age 37, Connecticut</div>

- People are able to grasp the importance of public structures.

  In a variety of different ways, discussed at more length later in the report, subjects expressed their understanding that public structures are important. Nearly every subject was able to say something meaningful on this point.

  > *Q: Based on what I've just read, could you say what Public Structures are?*
  > *A: I feel that public structures are things within the public domain, like roads, schools, police, stuff like that. Things that through voting in and putting in place a lot of elected officials, it's something that they have direct control over.*
  > *Q: Why are they important?*
  > *A: I feel that they are important because ultimately when we elect a government official, it's how the government takes care of us. It's ultimately the world*

around us, the structures as it were that take care of what we have, to give us room to grow as citizens.

<div align="right">

Conservative, age 25, Connecticut

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- People understand that government has responsibility for public structures.

  The texts to which subjects responded did not mention government explicitly. (This was a deliberate choice based on ample research demonstrating that a discussion starting with a reference to government is doomed from the start.) Nonetheless, the goal of the project is to help people think more productively about government, so it is critical to verify that that is where the conversation naturally goes.

  The excerpt above from the above conversation with a 25 year-old conservative illustrates the point that the model *is* understood to relate directly to government. In a sample of fifty transcripts based on "public structures," 80% made of subjects made explicit reference to government or taxes.

In short, we conclude from empirical testing that a model based on *the benefits provided by public structures created and maintained by government* passes the first basic test of conceptual Viability.

Positive Impacts on Thinking

The model also passes the second test of Positive Impacts. By introducing the idea of Public Structures and of what Public Structures do for us, we allow a very new and more productive conversation to take place. Much evidence suggests that once public structures become central to the conversation, the critically valuable role of government in our day-to-day lives becomes more apparent.

In this section we discuss some of the specific impacts of this focus on people's thinking, supported by evidence from TalkBack testing.

Making more parts of the reality visible, salient.

One of the most straightforward benefits of the model is that it helps people focus on aspects of government's role that fall outside the default models, and that usually escape people's awareness as a consequence. In other words, it brings people closer to the expert understanding of how Government works. For instance the woman below is forced to think beyond her normal understandings of what government is about.

> Q: *How do we maintain our public structures?*
>
> A: *Well we have to have money to maintain the highways and stuff like that, like your taxes and stuff. But as far as legal structures, how do we maintain that? That's a tough one. I mean I guess there's always going to be people who need lawyers and so turning out new lawyers by education and stuff like that.*

Avoiding a counterproductive personalization *of government.*

Many of the common problems in people's thinking in this area arise from the Interpersonal metaphor inherent in the default model of Government. When "personalization" of government occurs, questions often center on whether or not one "likes" the current leaders, for instance. Because the simplifying model refers centrally to "things," and functions, the model depersonalizes Government, and helps avoid these major traps. It makes it much harder for the public to default to a focus on individuals, personalities, rhetoric, and so forth.

One third (6 of 19) subjects responding to a brief "Control" paragraph about the services provided by government[3] "personalized" the government in some way – i.e. they defaulted to a focus on the people in government, on personal qualities, or even to a metaphorical understanding of government as a person.

> *Big Government has become self-serving.* [liberal]
>
> *We assist the government by praising him for the good deeds he does and point out to him his shortcomings.*
>
> *[A citizen's role is] electing those individuals who will represent our views, values and interests.*

By contrast, of fifty representative conversations based on the Public Structures model, only five (10%) involved references to the people in government.

The simplifying model also makes it more difficult to think of government in terms of (counterproductive) metaphors like "strict father," " protective nanny," or "nurturing parent."

Working against an exclusive focus on the Individual

The Public Structures model helps combat the common view that American success is entirely the product of smart, free and enterprising *individuals*. Instead, the life that Americans know also depends critically on structures that we have collectively designed and built. This point is usually hidden from people's understanding. But once it is made

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[3] "Americans often don't recognize all of the services that government provides for them. These include services like delivering our mail, making available small business loans, educating our kids, protecting our streets and our borders, and making sure that we have clean air and water. In short, government makes a difference in the daily life of every American."

visible, it becomes clear that the "private" and "public" modes of action are complementary, not in opposition.

> *[Public Structures] are things that we need like the post offices and stuff that keep our country running and make everything process. And without those things we'd be relying on individuals to do things.*
>
> <div align="right">Conservative, age 25, Texas</div>

> *[Public Structures] allow people to do what they need to do without thinking about it. [Otherwise], people can't get accomplished what they need to get accomplished.*
>
> *Q: What are some ways that we maintain our public structures?*
>
> *A: Well obviously taxes, but also a common belief by everybody that they should be maintained. An agreement by everyone. Traffic lights are Public Structures but if everyone didn't agree that red meant stop then they wouldn't function, so they would just be hanging there but they wouldn't mean anything. So I think a combination of government funding and a common belief that they are necessary.*
>
> <div align="right">Liberal, age 34, Massachusetts</div>

By expanding the government-public relationship, the public structures view also decreases the tendency for people to think as consumers. The "Consumer Stance" towards government has a number of serious problems (despite advocates' optimism about the power of framing government as a provider of useful services):

- It is a passive stance: Consumers choose among options and play little direct role in creating those options.
- It promotes zero-sum reasoning in which one person's gain is another person's loss.
- Since people are obligated to pay taxes (unlike consumers who choose to buy), the Consumer Stance predisposes people to see taxes as coercive, unfair, and onerous.
- It suggests that people should not have to pay (taxes) to support "services" (like schools) that they do not "use."

Interestingly, reflections of consumer thinking, common in ordinary discussions of Government, were rare in the TalkBack data.

Promoting "Reasonable mode"

Because it focuses on systems whose practical value Americans can agree on, the Public Structures approach encourages "reasonable mode" (in which people are ready to be open-minded, solve problems, and take in new information) and discourages "rhetorical mode" (in which people are focused on defending a particular point of view or identity). This constitutes an important achievement when discussing Government.

One of the most striking findings of the research was the similarity of Conservatives' and Liberals' responses to the model. The topic of government's role is one where we would have expected strong partisan differences. (See Appendix 3 for a collection of conservative and liberal responses.)

More generally, despite the well-entrenched (and well-documented) negative feelings that Americans have about government, this way of talking about government's role struck people as sensible and uncontroversial. The idea that we rely upon publicly ordered structures in order to get things done has an inescapable logic.

> *The structures that we have in the United States are important for commerce, information, and getting things done. And productivity is all the end result of our public structures in conjunction with our economic model.*
>
> *Q: And how do we maintain our public structures?*
>
> *A: Tax dollars and awareness of how important they are.*
>
> Conservative, age 42, Florida

Giving Government a clear and acceptable role

Shifting the focus of attention from the interpersonal relationship between Government and People and onto Public Structures has the effect of transforming Government from (inappropriate) Parent, for example, into something much closer to a Responsible Manager. Government is responsible for creating, managing, and maintaining our public structures.

Given the complex "boundary" negotiations involved in interpersonal relationships, and especially in the parent/offspring relationship, the cognitive risks of allowing Government to be framed as Parent are abundantly clear. By contrast, the role of Manager is well defined, clearly bounded, and appropriate.

Furthermore, the model allows a helpful shift in how people judge Government officials, from a focus on *character* (and whether, for example, individuals are "crooked" or "moral"), to their *competence.* In the quote below, a conservative (in the 3rd generation of a TalkBack chain) is trying to explain the model. He actively applies the simplifying model to the gulf coast hurricanes:

> *The government support structures that are in place to back up the public and the economy are deteriorating much as a building does. If the basic structure of a building, or the system such as electricity or heat go out,*

then a building will deteriorate. And this is what's happening to our support services, things like fire and police and FEMA have been an excellent example. They are deteriorating to the point where we can't rely on them anymore. If we put stress on these areas they are going to break. And that affects the economy in that the economy relied on these.

Conservative, age 60, North Carolina

Providing a reason for paying taxes

When Government is the focus of thinking, thinking about taxes is distorted. In the Interpersonal model, taxes are seen as going to the maintenance of Government itself (making it relatively easy to consider "starving the beast"), and/or as redistribution of wealth from those who have earned it to those who have not (a function more happily associated with private charities).

Once Public Structures are part of the picture, however, it is much more apparent why taxes are truly necessary. Even Libertarians will concede that there is nothing inherently wrong or immoral about Public Structures. Rather, they should be judged on their merits – some are useful and some are not, and making that judgment is a key part of the democratic process.

I think [Public Structures are] the key components to building a society that succeeds, especially in the information world, these public structures <u>really help us and enable us to excel</u>. And Third World countries, they don't really have these kind of public structures. They have close to none. So you can see what kind of economic state they're in.

Q: What are some ways we maintain our public structures?

A: I think a lot of it has to do with taxes.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And especially taxes like the property tax. All of the property taxes go back into the schooling system and highways that we built and road construction and so forth.

Conservative, 29, California

Three quarters (14 of 19) of subjects responding to a "Control" paragraph about the services provided by government expressed negative or critical attitudes about taxes and how tax money is spent.

too much pork (Conservative)

While our taxes fund the war our personal donations support hurricane victims. (Liberal)

not enough tax dollars spent on education and social services (Liberal)

By contrast, of a representative sample of fifty subjects responding to stimuli based on Public Structures, there were only two (4%) critical comments about taxes.[4]

Transcending short-term thinking

By their nature, Public Structures encourage people to think about the long term – we have always needed them and always will, and they outlive particular administrations. Below a liberal reflects on what her taxes go toward.

> *Q: How do we maintain our Public Structures?*
>
> *A: I'm sure some people would say that you maintain them with tax dollars. I'm happy to have my tax dollars go to those things. I don't think it's necessarily just a matter of maintenance. I think you would want to continue to improve on them in ways that are beneficial and have some sort of long-term sight in them.*
>
> Liberal, age 30, Virginia

In this way, the model should tend to depoliticize the issue of government's role, and to provide a kind of ballast to people's thinking that the Interpersonal model of Government does not.

Implying unstated benefits

When people were given a paragraph that used the term Public Structures, they were usually able to extend the arguments beyond what was contained in the paragraph. That is, they were able to deduce some more extensive arguments about why Public Structures are important. For instance, even people who heard a very general statement connecting Public Structures to "success" were able to deduce that public structures:

- increase efficiency (in contrast to a situation where everybody does everything for themselves)
- provide stability, reliability, and predictability
- enable you to do things that might otherwise be impossible (like getting an important message to someone across the country).

One Conservative respondent, for example, was able to intuit an important dimension of Public Structures when he remarked on the interaction between public and private:

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[4] Note that the "Public Structures" protocols did not specifically ask about taxes, but did ask how public structures are supported/maintained – a question that elicited some twenty-five positive or neutral comments about taxes along with the two more negative ones.

Public Structures are important for economic growth and … Third World countries have productive people but their public infrastructure and their structures are not available so that the public and the private can work together.

Conservative, age 42, Florida.

Emphasizing the "symbiotic nature" of public and private

At a deep cognitive level, the Public Structures model reinforces the idea of a two-way street. We take care of the Public Structures and they take care of us. This is of course starkly different from the zero-sum game involved in redistributing wealth or feeding Government bureaucracy.

The model promotes thinking that is dynamic rather than static. People seem to easily recognize a collective responsibility for Public Structures that entails action on their part, as well as a collective benefit. This is in sharp contrast to the often child-like passivity with which people often think about the State and what it does or doesn't do for them.

The public structure that we are used to depending on is in serious danger of deteriorating. The fact that this is going to hit the economy is going to hit you.

Conservative, age 60, North Carolina

A positive starting point for communication

The Public Structures model allows people to approach a discussion about government from a direction or starting point that is all about the things they like about government. Rather than starting a discussion about government from other familiar, negative or controversial directions like – taxation, social welfare programs, bureaucracy, Washington, politics, or regulations. Importantly, in TalkBack conversations that began with the idea of Public Structures, there was strikingly little negativity about Government.

Emphasizing the importance of the public sphere to everyday life

The model encourages people to see government as something that is important in positive ways to their own lives. Public Structures lend organizing, enabling structure to everyday life for everyone. Some of these things are commonly used, all are at least relatively familiar – they are not something that is happening "over there" to or for "other people." This counters common stereotypes that tend to limit people's understanding of government to entitlement programs and social welfare payments.

Q: And why are Public Structures important?

A: Because they enable us to do what we need to do every day. We can send mail. We can travel.

<div align="right">Conservative, age 39, Texas</div>

This sets the stage for re-framing understandings of government programs. For example, Public Structures are not just for the poor and needy. Importantly, however, this approach can be used to imply a policy-based response to poverty. Many social programs and community-building efforts can be framed as an effort to improve Public Structures or to extend them to areas where they have been absent or weak.

Discussion of "Public Structures" as a Term

The discussion until now has focused on the effectiveness of public structures (and their benefits) as an *idea*. While communicators may not be used to thinking in these terms, from the point of view of simplifying models development and TalkBack testing, the conceptual and linguistic levels are very much distinct: It is possible to convey the same idea using a variety of different language and images. In this section we offer several observations on the specific term "public structures."

Public

- "Public" conveys the idea of *shared* resources.

  Many responses made it clear that public structures are called "public" because everyone has access to them. One piece of good news here is that the term seems to discourage zero-sum thinking, where one person's gain is another's loss. Another is that it does not automatically evoke (negative) associations with ideas like "public assistance," "public education" and social programs.

- "Public" conveys the idea of shared *responsibility*.

  Subjects also understand that structures are called "public" because they are supported by the public. (The term "governmental," for instance, does not have the same associations.) Taken together with the previous point, "public" seems to convey the idea of a kind of "symbiosis" – we take care of public structures, and they take care of us.

- The term "Public" is *"durable."*

  This adjective tended to be repeated through many generations of TalkBack chains.

- "Public" does not trigger partisan thinking or rhetorical mode.

Both liberals and conservatives appreciated the points above, and put a positive value on *public spirit* and *public-mindedness*.

Other choices considered included *community*, *national*, *common, state, societal, social* among others. Though all of these are appropriate on some level, none offers the best combination of open-endedness, positive associations and clarity. *Community* and *national* both impose particular scales, rather than including the whole federal-to-local scope of government. *Common* has multiple, competing meanings and *societal* is an unfamiliar term that nevertheless sounds like jargon.   *Social* has particular meanings, as for example *social structures*.

"Structures"

Many people would use the term "infrastructure" to refer to the public structures at the heart of the model. Unfortunately, that term has several liabilities:

- "Infrastructure" is strongly associated with physical structures.

  People who heard or used the term strongly tended to narrow the discussion to roads, transportation grids, power lines, and so forth.

  By contrast, "structures" is more open-ended.

- "Infrastructure" sounds technical and offputting.

  A number of subjects explicitly expressed their discomfort with the term. It sounds like a word used by insiders, and seems (to many) to refer to some piece of specialized knowledge that they have long (and gladly) lived without.

  "Structures" is easier for (many) people to say and remember.

- Infrastructure" doesn't challenge people's assumptions.

  Importantly, this term refers to a very familiar idea and does not indicate that there is something new that needs to be evaluated and thought about.

  "Public *Structure*," by contrast, is not familiar enough to head off the learning process. People don't know exactly what it means, and so are more inclined to listen open-mindedly – and to learn that the collectively organized structures of society are *more extensive, more familiar, and more valuable than they thought*.

Other terms for Public structures – such as *assets*, *resources*, *property* – are less consistent with the dynamic, causal nature of the model. These are things we own, but not that we *use* like a highway or a zoning board.

Additional related terms carry some challenging baggage. *Public sector* and *public sphere*, in the absence of further context, are narrowly understood as contrasting terms to

private sector and *private sphere*. This distinction is not one we are trying to trigger – on the contrary, the point of the model is largely about how public structures enable (private) activity of all kinds.

In sum, while future research and experience may lead to new terms for conveying the conceptual model, the term "public structures" has a number of (analytically and empirically determined) strengths.

USING THE MODEL: FINDINGS ON SPECIFIC CONTEXTS AND LANGUAGE

The Public Structures model is versatile in that it can be effectively expressed using a variety of different language, and can be brought to bear on different issues. Because communication in the real world entails taking account of the different contexts in which ideas are expressed, we tested a number of specific ways of using the model.

A general finding is that different ways of deploying the model highlight different aspects of the general model of Public Structures. An important implication of this finding is that different advocates are likely to find given variants to be more or less appropriate to their requirements.

It is important to keep in mind that this aspect of the research does not constitute the core of our findings, and should be seen instead as an extension of the basic recommendation that advocates work to introduce the notion of Public Structures into the public conversation about Government. In this section we discuss specific options for which we have some empirical evidence. At the same time, it is clear that these findings are limited, and that more research is needed.

Support Language for "Public Structures"

We tested a number of specific directions for using the Public Structures model, some of which showed promise while others did not.

Beyond providing a simple "thumbs up" or "thumbs down," however, we were interested in exploring ways of making the Public Structures concept real and vivid in people's minds, through the use of analogies that highlight a part of the more general model. Thus, the general model Public Structures includes two different ideas. On the one hand it can refer to a (passive) structural support that metaphorically "holds up" or perhaps "protects" something. Alternatively, it can refer to a more active system that "enables" or "energizes" something. Given the fact that analogies will inevitably tend to privilege one possible meaning over another, it becomes in part a strategic choice for advocates as to which meaning is more suited to their issue.

- Public Structures are like the "Inner Workings of a House."

    In this analogy, Public Structures are compared to the hidden and inner workings and structure of a house. Things like the foundation, electrical and plumbing systems, and insulation, for example, are quickly and easily recognized to play a critical role in our well-being, and the analogy is an attempt to link the familiar understanding of how a house "works" to how the less familiar "Public Structures" work.

    Most people accepted the analogy, and many found it to be helpful in thinking about Public Structures. This analogy does two important things: It highlights the fact that our Public Structures, like the inner workings of a house, are largely invisible and taken for granted – until they stop working; and it helps people understand that it is our job to take care of our Public Structures.

At the same time, the House analogy is *felt* as an analogy, which limits its ability to be integrated into people's definition of Public Structures.

- Public Structures as the "Support System" for the Economy/Middle Class, etc.

   This metaphor highlights the *role* of Public Structures, focusing attention on what it accomplishes and/or how it accomplishes for the Economy, Middle Class, American Success, etc. The metaphor can refer to a range of different things, including *social* support systems and *life* support systems, with different connotations.

   This metaphor fits naturally as "support language" for the model – i.e. language that is helpful to explaining the model.

- Public Structures as the "Machinery" of Success

   This direction is intended to highlight the more dynamic interpretation of Public Structures – as something that "enables" or even "propels" individuals and the country as a whole. Machinery conveys a sense of the dynamic role that Public Structures play in everyday life.

   The TalkBack research showed that, while people agreed with the general direction implied by the Machinery metaphor, the term itself was not picked up.

Defining the Benefits of Public Structures

It is clear that the Public Structures model can be applied in principle to very different types of outcomes. That is to say, it would be easy to generate statements on a variety of different issues, focusing on the benefits of Public Structures, that all make sense in ordinary English.

We explored several of these in order to confirm the range of potential applicability of the model, and also to test different specific directions:

- Economy

   Most respondents responded to the idea that Public Structures are essential to a strong economy as a new and interesting point – presumably because a more common model holds the opposite: that a strong economy is the result of *individual initiative untrammeled by Government interference.* Even though this use of the Public Structures model in some ways contradicts the default understanding, it did very well in TalkBack – lasting for many generations of a chain, for instance – and was particularly effective with Conservatives.

- American Success compared with the "Third World"

  According to standard assumptions, American Success, and the "superiority" of the United States compared to other countries are based in the superiority of individuals. Americans often see themselves as better educated, more motivated, and more entrepreneurial than people in other countries. It was interesting to find, therefore, that the Public Structures model can effectively challenge this default model head-on. Most respondents were willing to agree with the proposition that American success, especially compared with "3rd World failure," comes from the strength of our Public Structures rather than the strength of our individuals.

  Not only was this argument generally accepted, but it was extremely successful at propagating itself in TalkBack chains.

- Middle Class especially dependent on Public Structures

  This direction has the effect of reinforcing the idea that the benefits of Public Structures apply to "us," rather than, for example, only the poor. Importantly, it also keeps the focus on the "big picture" - broad segments of society, rather than individuals.

  Many respondents used the term "middle class" as given, while other replaced the term with synonyms for the conceptual sense of "us." Thus, for example, a White Conservative replaced "middle class" with "Middle America," while a Hispanic Conservative spontaneously used the term "the community."

- Quality of Life

  Suggesting that Public Structures help to underwrite the quality of life in the US was the least successful direction we tested. While many respondents agreed with the basic proposition, discussions based on this idea quickly seemed to degenerate into consumer-centered complaints about what services the Government provides or fails to provide.

Other Applications of the Model

In this section, we explore several ways in which the Public Structures model might have a positive impact in specific topical areas. Please note that this is not a report of empirical findings but rather analysis that builds on the findings discussed above.

"Public Sector"

The idea of the Public Sector stands to benefit from the Public Structures model by gaining a clear and important role: The Public Sector can be defined as the people who operate and maintain Public Structures. This includes everyone from postal employees to

environmental regulators, to highway construction workers, to judges and other court employees.

"Public Management"

Similarly, once Public Structures has become part of the conversation, it has the capacity to inform how people think about the role of Public Management in our country. It becomes easy to see Public Management as both the creation and maintenance of Public Structures and the decision-making that affects everything from how fast we can drive, to how safe new home construction should be, to the age at which we should receive retirement benefits.

Judging a politician

Everyone likes to judge politicians. Introducing the Public Structures model can shift the basis of that judgment away from how much one identifies with the person and towards how well that person is doing in creating and maintaining our Public Structures.

Arguing against tax cuts

The simplifying model suggests that America is only as strong as its Public Structures. It provides a point of leverage against a political climate that privileges partisan power struggles over practical problem-solving by providing the public with a clear, easily-thought and easily-expressed picture of the more pragmatic alternative.

Encouraging people to enter politics

One of the unfortunate consequences of personalizing models of Government is that they create a nearly obsessive scrutiny of the private lives of candidates for office, in a never-ending quest to understand their "character." At the same time, they provide no clear role for people who have administrative jobs. By shifting the focus to the role of Government in maintaining and creating our Public Structures, the simplifying model opens the door to people who are interested in solving problems – both as elected officials and as civil servants.

Making a point about Katrina.

The bulk of the research leading to our recommendations took place before the terrible devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, but that tragic event has sparked a national discussion of exactly the issue of Public Structures. This conversation can and should be built on by advocates. Here is an example of how to integrate the simplifying model into a discussion of this disaster:

> *The tragic devastation wrought along the Gulf Coast by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has served as a wake-up call to Americans. People saw what happens when there is a failure of the public structures we all rely on. From physical*

infrastructure like roadways and levees, to evacuation plans and emergency response networks, too little attention has been paid to planning, maintaining and updating our Public Structures in order to ensure that they are up to the challenges we face. Every level of government has its role in maintaining these public structures and citizens have the responsibility to hold their elected and appointed officials responsible for the job they have done.

CONCLUSION

A simplifying model, especially on a topic as rich as government, is conceived as a single important component within a broader communication strategy. An improvement at the level of conceptual understanding provides an important platform for reasoning that is also guided by other factors, such as framing in terms of a particular set of values.

The role of the approach is well illustrated by FrameWorks' recently completed "priming survey" focusing on Americans' thinking about government. The Public Structures model works very effectively *in tandem with other aspects of framing* – such as a focus on the Collective Good – to improve attitudes about government and raise support for productive policies. By itself, the model has a variety of positive effects on understanding about government – for instance, it raises the percentage of people who say that government has a positive impact on people's lives – but it does not significantly and directly raise support for particular policies, such as "passing laws to encourage the use of clean energy sources." To reach that goal, more specific discussion is needed – discussion that is more effective as it builds on the conceptual foundation of the model[5]. Decades of assault on the notion of effective and constructive government have had profound consequences on Americans' reasoning, and it will take time, energy and a set of effective tools to shift the conversation in a more productive direction. The Public Structures model is one of those tools.

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[5] One of the interesting and challenging results of the priming survey is that the model seemingly increases the perception that government is involved in too many areas of American life. One possible explanation for this result is that by making the extent of government's role "visible" in ways it was not before, the model provokes a "backlash" among certain Americans who reflexively prefer a smaller government. Further qualitative research could explain this result more definitively, and establish strategies for working around it.

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE CANDIDATE DIRECTIONS

The first stage in simplifying models development involves an open-ended search for promising directions – explanatory strategies or conceptual focuses that might have the potential to lead thinking in a more productive direction. The directions listed below were among those considered in this phase of research.

- Government as "Us"(not just Them)
- Governance as Process/ Solution/Action
- Governance as rolling up your sleeves and getting to work.
- Government as the expression of Collectivity
- Governance as a vehicle for focusing on the Common Good
- Government as referee, parameter-setter, regulator
- Government as a force specifically contrasted with "Market Forces"
- Government as the reflection of another "zone" of life (public side, public dimension)
- Government as a particular set of instruments for problem-solving (public tools, public machinery, public toolkit)
- Government as service providers (Public servants, employees, teachers)
- Public/Private dualism – U.S. life as a balance between these two aspects: twin pillars
- Government prototypes: CDC, Highway system, Town Hall
- Governance as collective "conscience" – government's accountability (relative to business)
- Government as checks and balances –setting up the rules we collectively want to play by
- Government as one actor working with other actors (e.g. business, churches)

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE TEXTS

The research explored a wide variety of ways of explaining aspects of government and its role. Included here are several examples of paragraphs subjects were asked to respond to.

Economists now agree that our way of life depends on the strength of our Public Structures.The Public Structures we have created – such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, and school and colleges – *are like the inner workings of a house* that make life better even when we don't notice them – the wiring and heating system, roof, plumbing, foundation, and so forth. Public Structures are the vital but hidden support system for our economy and way of life. But economists are concerned that our Public Structures are now being neglected, and worry that the quality of American life could deteriorate.

Experts who study the overall health of American society and economy are saying that the biggest problems relate to under use of what they call *Public Tools* as opposed to private or market tools. Public tools are the ones we have for accomplishing jobs on a broad scale, everything from building highway systems, to creating standards for housing construction, to raising overall levels of educational success, to controlling the spread of diseases in communities or the nation. In order for a society to strive, both in the larger scale public tools and the smaller scale private tools, like entrepreneurship, must be working at their best capacity. So based on this can you tell me your understanding of what experts mean by public tools what are they are they for?

Economists now agree that what sets America apart from Third World countries is not our free market system but our ability to create and maintain what they call our *Public Machinery*. This public machinery includes physical structures we need in order to get things done like highways, airports and communications grids, as well as the organizational things we need like a postal system for delivering mail, courts for settling contract disagreements and schools for educating the work force. Third World countries typically have free markets and plenty of hardworking entrepreneurs, but what they don't have is the infrastructure that is essential for overall success. Economist are becoming concerned that while our market system is in good shape, our public machinery is now in decline.

Experts on American economics and society refer to the work of government as *Public Management*. Public management includes the creation of structures that we all need - like highway and postal systems and our public library systems - as well as making decisions about everything from how fast we can drive to how safe new home construction should be to what age we should receive retirement benefits. The work of Public Management is essential to American success, but economists are now concerned that this public work is being neglected as our focus shifts too strongly towards the private/individual side.

Experts who study the role of government in American life sometimes refer to government as the *Public Toolkit* as opposed to private or market tools like competition and entrepreneurship. They point out that both public and private tools are critical for ensuring America's continued success and prosperity. Public tools are the ones best suited for three kinds of jobs. These are: Jobs too big for individuals and businesses, like building a highway system or overseeing the overall health of the population. Jobs where everyone will benefit more or less equally, like assuring the quality of air and water, or making sure we have an adequate communications system. And finally jobs where there isn't a profit motive to get businesses involved, like mass producing vaccines or for protecting land areas from over development.

Experts who study the health of American society and economy, use the term *Public Side* to refer to the ways in which any given situation in the life of an individual or biz is connected to the interests of the broader society. For instance, when an individual takes an action like building a house, the public side connections include building standards that make sure the house is safe. City plumbing that brings water to the house, environmental impacts, and so forth. A key role of government is to make sure that the public side of American life is well maintained. This means maintaining physical structures like water systems, as well as rules and procedures to protect the public interest.

APPENDIX 3: MINIMIZING THE GAP BETWEEN CONSERVATIVES AND LIBERALS

One of the most striking findings from the testing was that in some cases the expected differences between conservatives and liberals did not show up in the data. In discussions of taxation for example, when the conversation focused on Public Structures, both liberals and conservatives showed a fairly clear understanding of the important role of taxes and spoke of them in similar ways. Note that though *taxes* and *government* were not mentioned in the stimulus paragraphs, both conservatives and liberals understood that Public Structures are overseen by the government and funded by taxes. Below are sample answers to the question:

What are some ways that we maintain our Public Structures?

Conservatives:

- *Tax dollars and awareness of how important they are. It's not just feel good stuff, that "Ooh we can drive down the highway and be safe." It's more than just safety, it's for economic growth.*

- *Usually with government organizations. With the roads we need the government to pay when it snows to clear the roads and rebuild the roads*

- *I think a lot of it has to do with taxes. And especially taxes like the property tax. All of the property taxes go back into the schooling system and highways that we built and road construction and so forth.*

- *We tax people so that we have money, and with the money we pay people to fix the roads or pave the roads or deliver the mail.*

- *Taxes. Government spending, the budget, bills, laws, constitution.*

- *How did I think we maintain our public structures? By local government maintaining them. Funds are collected and allocated and somebody overseas the maintenance and building of these things and the people are in charge of that are generally appointed by someone we elect or elected directly.*

- *We maintain them. It takes money and manpower. So we hire people who are competent at their jobs and we pay them by collecting tax money. And passing legislation to see that these things happen. That they're paid appropriately, adequately, and that the people that they hire are doing an adequate job. And there's also some sort of accreditation that they have to meet. So people check up on them every once in a while to make sure they are meeting standards. Like the highway standards, school standards, postal standards.*

Liberals:

- *Well, first of all, I think it comes from tax money. The government, tax money, and then just work from the people in the community.*
- *With money funded by the public through the government on some level.*
- *By putting money into them so they don't fall apart.*
- *Obviously with people that work on and repair roads and things like that, which obviously our taxes are for.*
- *By investing money into it. Constantly improving upon it by new technology, educating people that are in these facilities, and always looking for ways to improve upon them.*
- *Well, I'm sure some people would say that you maintain them with tax dollars, which frankly I'm happy to have my tax dollars go to those things. I don't think it's necessarily a matter of maintenance. I think you would want to continue to improve on them in ways that are beneficial and have some sort of long term sight in them.*
- *Obviously taxes, but also a common belief by everybody that they should be maintained. An agreement by everyone. Traffic lights are public structures but if everyone didn't agree that red meant stop then they wouldn't function, so they would just be hanging there but they wouldn't mean anything. So I think a combination of government funding and a common belief that they are necessary.*

And here are sample answers to the question:

Why are Public Structures important?

Conservatives:

- *Because it's what supports our economy and our quality of life.*
- *The structures that we have in the United States are important for commerce, information, and getting things done. And productivity is all the end result of our public structures in conjunction with our economic model.*
- *They help organize the economy so that individuals can succeed.*
- *Because they enable us to do what we need to do everyday. We can send mail, we can travel, we can assume that we're getting along in the world relatively safely.*
- *Because that's what keeps us running and makes everything process. And without those things we'd be relying on for instance individuals to do things that we I*

guess we have our system and everybody does a little bit and whatever so it makes things quicker and cheaper and stuff like that.

- *They are the basic building blocks of what make this society work.*

- *Well they help our, we couldn't have our economy without those. You have to have highways to drive on to get from place to place, to deliver goods. You gotta have a postal system. You can't communicate as well. We have other ways of communicating now, but all those things are necessary pieces for our economy.*

- *To maintain structure and cohesiveness and their / amongst the people and communications.*

- *Because they allow things to get done in the society. They're institutions that allow things to happen as a cooperative effort.*

Liberals:

- *They help the economy and the countries to function.*

- *They help achieve a certain level of continuity.*

- *Because they build the community.*

- *Because they help a country be successful according to those economists.*

- *Because you need them in order for the world to communicate with everybody. You need the telephone structure, between the telephone system and the railroad system.*

- *For the economy of the country.*

- *They allow people to do what they need to do without thinking about it. Because without water, electricity, cold food, plumbing, without places for the government to work, without good transportation, people can't get accomplished what they need to get accomplished.*

- *Because they support our way of life – [they are] more or less the foundations for our culture.*

- *They certainly make things easier for all of us, we kind of depend on them. If we use the examples of highways, I suppose people could get around if there weren't highways but the whole horse and buggy thing has kind of played out. And flying isn't really an option for their everyday transportation. Laws are like the unseen support system. We all go about our daily lives just believing that they'll be there if we need them, so it kind of gives us a freedom to move around, our kind of security to move around and do what we need to do. So I guess that's important.*

If anything, far from rejecting the role of government and public structures, conservatives in our research seemed better able to articulate the practical benefits they produce.

About the Author

Cultural Logic, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment. Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.