

Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action

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Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

**Talking About Government
- Findings and Recommendations -**

Milwaukee Workshops

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Current "Discourse" about Government

"More Americans can name the three stooges than the three branches of government.

Well, that's because the three stooges are more likely to get something done."

David Letterman

Problematic Perceptions

- 67% feel government generally pursues its own agenda.
- 64% feel distant and disconnected from government.
- 64% believe the federal government creates more problems than it solves
- 63% think government serves only special interests.
- 57% believe that when something is run by the government it is usually inefficient and wasteful
- 71% think poor people have become too dependent on government assistance program

Source: Hart-Teeter, CBS News, Pew Research Center, as analyzed in "By, or for the People?" a Meta-analysis of Public Opinion of Government, by Meg Bostrom, Public Knowledge.

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and on page 9 . . .

Rubella Wiped Out in the U.S.

WASHINGTON – Rubella, a virus known to cause birth defects, miscarriages and stillbirths, has been eliminated in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Monday.

A U.S. rubella epidemic in 1964 and 1965 caused 12.5 million cases, resulting in 20,000 cases of congenital rubella syndrome, 11,250 fetal deaths and 2,100 infant deaths.

Since 1969, when the rubella vaccine was introduced in the United States, occurrences have fallen from 57,686 to nine cases last year.

The United States is the second nation in the world to eliminate rubella.

The first was Cuba in 1995.



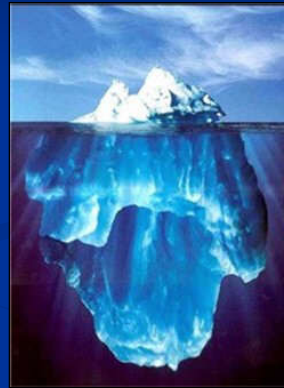
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Government as Monolith Everything below the surface

- Everything except elected leadership
- Huge, undifferentiated, bureaucratic
- Less visible
- Obscures public/private sector distinctions
- Exaggerates waste, bloat and inefficiency
- Confused about where tax money goes



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Consider the Contrasts:

The Consumer Perspective

- Government takes money that people could use.
- Government redistributes income – think taxes
- Government is a drag on the economy and a barrier to business.
- Government services are for the lazy; those who work hard will succeed.
- Government is the problem.

The Citizen Perspective

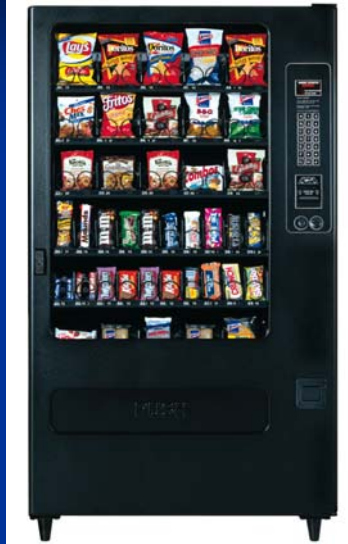
- Government is a necessary agent in maximizing quality of life.
- Government redistributes risk – think Social Security.
- Government works with citizens and business to create economic opportunity.
- Government services offer protection and empowerment when needed.
- Government is our tool for solutions.

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Consumer Stance: Government as Vending Machine



Not a productive
image to reinforce

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Reframing "Responsibility"

- Consumer Stance – Responsibility for **Me**
- Altruistic Stance – Responsibility for **Them**
- Manager Stance – Responsibility for **It/Us**

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Consumerist thinking in action

"Coloradans to Vote on State Spending Ceiling", WPost, 10/29/05

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

What's this about?

This is a 'pay for what you use' model of government.

Private enterprise is equated with democracy while government with totalitarianism.

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Citizen Thinking in Response

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

What's this about?

The impracticality of the migration of mission from public to private sector.

Vividly reminds us why government exists in our society

Gets us out of Consumer Think and thinking about the role that government needs to play in collective life.

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Missing frame ingredients in the discussion about government

- **Clarity: what government is and does**
- **Mission: why government exists**
 - Persona in keeping with democratic ideals: protector, responsible manager, watchdog, long-term planner, the people's voice
 - Values that the country as a whole embraces: shared opportunity, future possibilities, stewardship, and common good

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Addressing the Challenge

Frames, Values and a Simplifying Model

Protection

- Early research clearly showed that government's role as "protector" (safe food, clean water, product safety, etc.) was broadly recognized and supported, and helped to trigger a more positive conversation about government in general.

Common Good

- Elevating a level one, or "values", conversation about government's role proved to be very important – and successful – in the focus group explorations.

Public Structures

- Finding a way to make government more vivid and real for people is a central challenge. Related to this is the need to get people out of the dominant "interpersonal" model of government and into one that elevates a bigger picture of what government is and does.

Other values, frames and models showed promise; but "protection," "common good" and "public structures" were the ones chosen for testing in order to determine if we are moving in the right direction.

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Sample Language

The Simplifying Model

. . . the main advantages that make America so successful come from the **Public Structures** it has created

. . . these Public Structures include the *physical* structures (highways, airports, and communications grids) and the *organizational* structures (the postal system, courts) we need to get things done, and the *social* support systems that help to ensure the health and well-being of our communities

. . . it is our **well-functioning and supported** Public Structures that are essential for overall success . . .

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Simplifying Model Video

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What We Have to Do

- **Avoid triggering the dominant and negative frames**
 - Mind – just politics – partisan bickering
 - Monolith – blurry, bloated bureaucracy
 - Consumer – “what’s in it for me”
- **Elevate the mission and purpose of government** – what makes it different than the private sector – and connected to quality of life, common interests and other values.
- **Make government more vivid**; foster **concrete and pragmatic** thinking about what government is and does – **focus on structures and systems**.
- Remind the public of **effective community action** that does and can happen **through the public sector and its partnerships with business, non-profits and communities**.
- Foster **long-term thinking** and **governing as stewardship** and **responsible management**.

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Budget Battles Quotes

North Carolina has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past half century. An overwhelmingly rural state dependent upon agriculture and low-wage manufacturing, gripped by poverty and burdened by segregation has emerged as one of America’s most metropolitan, economically competitive and fastest growing places

. . . .

Wise public investments in the state’s physical infrastructure and its people sparked this transformation.

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Talking about Taxes insights from the research

- Placing taxes in the context of the **long term maintenance and stewardship** of the things we all depend on helps avoid short-term, “what’s in it for me” analysis.
- Emphasize how taxes are a **means for getting things done together**. We must all agree to contribute or many important projects will not happen.
- Making what government does **more concrete, structural and dynamic (the public structures model)** is essential.
- **Don’t reinforce bad frames**: tax burden, tax relief, tax holiday, hard-earned tax dollars, etc.

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Milwaukee Budget (frame) Battle

Preserving Our Community Heritage

Generations of Milwaukeeans built public structures to make our lives more secure, healthy and successful. They established transportation, legal systems, social services, natural green spaces, cultural resources and a governing process so everyone could achieve success. It is our turn now to protect those structures for the future . . .”

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