

# PROMOTING BROAD PROSPERITY

A Topos Strategy and Research Brief



Produced by the Topos Partnership  
for Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

Axel Aubrun | Meg Bostrom | Joe Grady

October 2009



Dēmos



## ABOUT TOPOS

---

Founded by veteran communications strategists Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

[www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com)



## ABOUT DĚMOS

---

**DĚmos** is a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization. Headquartered in New York City, DĚmos works with advocates and policymakers around the country in pursuit of four overarching goals: a more equitable economy; a vibrant and inclusive democracy; an empowered public sector that works for the common good; and responsible U.S. engagement in an interdependent world.

**Public Works: The DĚmos Center for the Public Sector** was initiated by DĚmos as a deliberate attempt to address America's lack of trust in, understanding of and support for the essential roles of government. Grounded in thorough research and refined through extensive field-work with state organizations and national constituencies across the country, the Public Works approach to this problem has yielded enhanced understanding of how we can create a more receptive public audience for constructive conversations about government.

DĚmos was founded in 2000.

Miles S. Rapoport, President

Tamara Draut, Vice President of Policy and Programs

220 Fifth Avenue, 5th floor | New York, New York 10001 | [www.demos.org](http://www.demos.org)

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

---

This analysis is based on a three year investigation by Topos of American understandings of government's role in the economy. An Exploratory phase in 2007 included an analysis of expert and advocate communications, a review of public opinion data, and a series of in-depth interviews (cognitive elicitations) with average Americans. The Strategy Development phase conducted in 2007—2008 included Talkback testing of explanatory messages, focus groups, and a survey. In order to verify and update the recommendations after the dramatic turn in the economy in late 2008, a new round of research was conducted in March—July 2009 including new reviews of recent public opinion research, plus more individual interviews and TalkBack testing of messages.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

INTRODUCTION.....	I
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
METHODS.....	3
THE SHAPE OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING.....	3
<i>Good News</i>	4
<i>A Difficult Topic</i>	5
<i>A “Natural” Economy</i>	5
<i>Government’s Role</i>	6
<i>The Individual Actor Model</i>	7
TRAPS.....	9
<i>Individual Actor Traps</i>	9
<i>Strength/Health Trap</i>	10
<i>Socialism Trap</i>	10
<i>Incompetent Government Trap</i>	10
<i>Expert Domain Trap</i>	11
RECOMMENDED APPROACH.....	11
<i>The Transformation</i>	11
<i>The Economic Value of “Public Structures”</i>	12
<i>Extending the Model</i>	13
<i>The Middle Class Is No Accident</i>	14
ADDITIONAL TOOLS FOR EXPLAINING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT.....	16
<i>Paving the Way</i>	16
<i>Directing the Flow of Money</i>	18
CONCLUSION.....	20
APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	21
<i>Analysis of Current Expert and Advocate Communication</i>	21
<i>Review of Surveys</i>	21
<i>Cognitive Elicitations</i>	21
<i>Simplifying Models Development and Re-Framing Research</i>	21
<i>TalkBack Testing</i>	21
<i>Survey Experiment</i>	22
ENDNOTES.....	23





## INTRODUCTION

---

Since the Spring of 2007 and continuing into the Summer of 2009, Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector and the Topos Partnership have collaborated on a Ford Foundation-funded effort to create a new public conversation on the role of government in the economy. This effort has included a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research efforts, spanned a period of dramatic change in the national economic landscape, and built on earlier research conducted by Topos principals concerning the public's view of government<sup>1</sup> and public understandings of low wage work.<sup>2</sup> The analysis that follows is a synthesis of the key findings and recommendations from a number of research reports by Topos.<sup>3</sup>

The project was inspired by a perception among advocates that public discourse on economic policy is constrained by the American public's views and understandings of government's role. It was unclear to what extent the public appreciated the importance of policy choices in creating economic outcomes, for instance, or what kind of criteria the public tended to use in evaluating the economy. Previous work conducted for Public Works had made it clear that default perspectives about the nature of government make constructive dialog difficult on a number of important topics, and the same might well be true for thinking about the economy and economic policy. What kinds of communications approaches might effectively overcome problematic patterns in public understanding?

In early stages of the work, before the economic downturn, the project identified a set of strong default patterns of thinking and discourse that had the power to impede public engagement on the topic. Later stages of the research were conducted in the wake of the economic upheaval and have explored related changes in these defaults and well-established patterns that remain the same despite the dramatic change in the economic context. Without a good understanding of the obstacles they face as they advocate policies to create an economy that works well for people, communicators can easily run up against assumptions and misunderstandings that hinder effective communication and

present obstacles to sustained public sector efforts to reach this goal.

Creating and sustaining broadly shared economic prosperity in this country will require new tools, new policies and an active role for government. This project's overall objective has been to develop a communications frame that helps the public see: 1) government's important role in shaping the economy and 2) a way of judging the economy based on the quality of life it creates for average people. Ultimately, any new communications approach should empower people as citizens relative to the economy—i.e. help them see the economy as a public good and themselves as relevant stakeholders in and stewards of that common good. The new way of framing the topic should also inform conversations on a wide variety of particular questions about policy, helping advocates make a broad and mutually reinforcing case for policies that are responsive to the needs of average Americans.

This research synthesis describes the existing patterns in public understanding that inhibit citizen action, as well as the recommended elements of a framing approach that will build public will and mobilize citizen involvement in economic policy.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The economic turmoil of the past year, followed by high profile public debates over government actions to stimulate the economy, have undoubtedly led to more public awareness of some of the ways in which government intervenes in the national economy. However, our research indicates that these shifts in public awareness are relatively superficial and that many fundamental, counterproductive perspectives continue to shape public understanding of government's role in the economy.<sup>4</sup>

Most Americans are not resistant to government “interference” in the economy based on ideological views. Rather, the more fundamental problem is that they find it difficult to even *see* that policy shapes the economy. Many default to thinking of the economy as either “natural” (a “free” market that will “turn around”) or shaped by the decisions of multiple individual actors (greedy business executives who offshore jobs, irresponsible consumers who buy more than they should, hard-working small employers who treat employees well, unskilled workers who aren't prepared for certain jobs, etc.). In neither case is intentional, collective action to shape the economy relevant to the public's considerations. After all, you can't legislate away the irresponsibility of consumers who borrow more than they should, or create policies to cause executives to stop making decisions based on personal greed.

The challenge for communicators is to create a different lens that allows the public to see the role of intentional systems and structures that create and shape our economic fate. Our research suggests the most effective communications approach for creating constructive conversations and perspectives combines two core ideas:

- » ***The Intentional Middle Class:*** A strong middle class, which is the engine driving our economy, doesn't arise by accident, but is the result of deliberate and proactive choices.
- » ***Public Structures as Economic Foundation:*** The “public structures” created and maintained by government are foundational to prosperity and economic stability, as well as the strength of the middle class.

When exposed to these points, which can be expressed in a variety of different ways, research respondents shift to more constructive perspectives that assume a role for government. They begin to see that:

- » Collective responsibility and proactive steps—the actions we take *as a nation* (rather than as individual economic actors) are what create the outcomes we want.
- » “Middle class” means “all of us,” so steps to help and strengthen the middle class are steps that build broad-based prosperity and are in our collective interest.
- » True prosperity rests on collective success, not just individual opportunity or success.
- » Systems (like the FDIC, community colleges and Social Security) are built collectively and yield collective benefits.
- » Public structures are smart investments that end up paying for themselves, and are worth supporting even if it means more debt in the short-term.

In addition to the two core recommendations listed above, the research developed two further tools to advance particular ideas:

- » Currently, Americans tend to assume that new businesses and industries (of the kind that drive economic growth) are the product of creative and energetic individuals or companies—with little contribution from government or policy. When they hear that the true process usually involves government “paving the way” rather than “getting out of the way,” they gain a new appreciation of government's fundamental and proactive economic role.
- » Americans are relatively unaware of the many ways in which policy inevitably shapes the distribution of income and wealth. A user-friendly explanation in which government policies direct the flow of money to different parts of our society helps people focus on how policies lead to particular outcomes and meet particular economic objectives.

Each of these recommendations is discussed in more depth in the analysis that follows.

## METHODS

---

This ongoing project has been designed to take into account social and cognitive science perspectives on communication and cognition. Rather than focusing on particular opinions or policy preferences, for instance, it focuses on the basic *organizing ideas* (sometimes called “frames”) that guide thinking, and shape responses to messages.

*Default patterns of thinking and association* shape how people understand any issue, including government’s role in the economy. To take an example from another issue area, people’s default thinking about weather influences how they understand global warming. The “Weather Frame” includes associations with comfort vs. discomfort, daily variation and unpredictability, and—very importantly—a passive stance. We don’t make the weather; we adapt to it. All of these defaults can come into play and interfere with constructive conversation as global warming advocates try to communicate about how we are changing the climate and what the implications might be. Successful communications in that topic area need to take account of the cognitive “traps” inherent in the weather frame. Likewise in all other issue areas, default patterns of thinking and association can either help or hurt a given communication.

Another framing lesson particularly relevant to this project is that *fundamental gaps in understanding* can impede engagement. To draw on another example from the global warming issue, most Americans still don’t understand the basic heat-trapping mechanism that causes global warming—a thickening layer of carbon dioxide created by burning fossil fuels is trapping heat in the atmosphere. As a result, they are less able to distinguish meaningful solutions from “spin,” and are also less able to engage with a topic they basically don’t “get.” Once offered a simple, clarifying picture, many become more engaged and more able to participate in informed and responsible dialog about the issue.

This project on government and the economy has included several stages and components of research designed to pay particular attention to basic organizing

ideas, default patterns of thinking and association, and fundamental gaps in understanding. An initial, exploratory phase (conducted prior to the economic downturn) investigated default patterns in thinking and talking about the topic, and included: an analysis of how experts and advocates think and talk about the topic; a review of relevant public opinion data; and a series of in-depth interviews (“cognitive elicitations”) with a cross-section of non-experts. The first phase of Strategy Development, also conducted prior to the economic downturn, included “TalkBack” testing of explanatory approaches (“simplifying models”) to determine their clarity and effectiveness; focus groups exploring the conversational dynamics of particular messages; and a survey experiment designed to quantitatively assess the effects of the recommended approach. In order to check, update and refine the findings in the new economic context, an additional round of research took place in Spring and Summer of 2009, including new reviews of recent public opinion research, plus more individual interviews and TalkBack testing of messages. (See the Appendix for detailed discussions of each project component and timelines.)

## THE SHAPE OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

---

Exploratory research identified the default patterns of thinking that average Americans bring to the topic, as they consider *government’s role in creating a good economy*.

In the course of the research, both before and after the economic downturn, a number of key patterns emerged as the dominant tools that non-experts use to think about the topic. These are not necessarily conscious beliefs or theories about the world, but are patterns of association and assumption that guide thinking without our even realizing it (which can be especially hard to address or combat).

A number of these patterns pose significant obstacles to building public support for sustained, constructive economic policy. In this section, we describe several of the obstacles as well as the central mental model

that people rely upon to understand how the economy works.

Before addressing these challenges; however, it is worth reviewing some apparent “good news” from the research.

## GOOD NEWS

From the perspective of those who desire more action by government to effect economic outcomes, one promising finding is that Americans’ bottom-line criteria for evaluating the economy are often closer to what advocates frequently focus on—such as unemployment rates, wages, expendable income and job security—than to what economists and economic reporters often focus on—such as stock prices or the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). People tend to judge the economy based on their perceptions of *how they and people like them are doing*; as this quote from a research respondent illustrates:

*Money spent on Wall Street is fine, but it’s still not putting cash in the everyday person’s pocket. If we don’t have money to spend or deposit, it’s not really helping in the long run.*

**34 year-old moderate woman, Tennessee<sup>5</sup>**

And in fact, for average people the phrase “the economy” usually *means* the economic circumstances on the ground—as opposed to the much more complex and structural picture that insiders associate with that term.

This focus on the experience of average people, the “lived economy,” has some downsides (e.g. it can obscure thinking about the behind-the-scenes forces that shape economic outcomes), but it also represents a potential head-start for progressive communicators: Average people already more or less sympathize with their ultimate goals, even if they disagree or have little idea of how to get there.

Another piece of good news is that the downturn has created a more attentive audience for messages about government’s role in creating an economy that works for all. Many advocates have made the assumption that the public, given conditions in 2009, is newly

open to vigorous government intervention and more aware than in the past of how that intervention builds prosperity and protects us from disaster. In part, these assumptions are certainly right. Compared with the recent past, the public is now more aware of government’s role and has higher expectations about government intervention. It is expected that the Obama Administration will take active steps to improve the economy—and the Administration will be judged largely by the effectiveness of those steps.

For example, when forced to choose between two statements, 62% of Americans side with the view, “It’s time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American,” while only 35% select, “Turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good.” (Gerstein/Agne)

## WHICH STATEMENT IS CLOSER TO YOUR VIEW?

It’s time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American.

**62%**

Turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good.

**35%**

Source: Gerstein/Agne, March 2009

This new state of awareness and expectation doesn’t necessarily translate to greater *understanding* of how the government shapes the economy, and it certainly doesn’t displace some of the strong default ways of thinking about the topic (discussed below)—but it does represent an opportunity: Communicators discussing government’s economic role can expect a more engaged hearing than they could have in the recent past. Public opinion has reached a potential tipping point, creating a window of opportunity to re-shape for the long-term how Americans understand economic conditions and causality.



## A DIFFICULT TOPIC

Unfortunately, the high level of public concern and willingness to have government “do something” in the current context does not necessarily translate into real knowledge of what kind of action is needed. It does not mean that average Americans understand the full range of government’s possible roles, support the particular interventions or approaches recommended by advocates, or can withstand the opposition’s accusations of Socialism, “big government” etc. While public concern about the economy may create an *opportunity* for communicating successfully about the topic, the *need* for that communication is as great as ever.

One important reason is that the topic is often difficult for average people to think and talk about. While they are happy to offer opinions, non-insiders are usually much less comfortable thinking and talking about general questions such as what the economy is and how it works. When asked to think about such common concepts as GDP or the role of the Fed, research respondents often feel this is a difficult and abstract domain “better left to the experts.”

**Q:** *If you had to explain to someone what the economy means, what would you say?*

**A:** *Umm, probably how all of the different businesses and, umm, various companies kind of work together and the big general, you know, the inner workings of everything.*

**Liberal woman, Hartford**

In part, this discomfort certainly reflects the sheer complexity of the domain. Advocates themselves focus on a wide variety of different (though connected) ideas about the economy—from the role of unions in creating good wages and conditions, to the idea that Americans are ultimately all in the same economic “boat,” from the importance of skills and human capital in creating prosperity, to the role of regulations in creating fair business practices, and so forth. Business writers often focus on one particular “subtopic” or area of emphasis at a time. In short, it is not easy for anyone to get a mental picture of the whole complex topic

area. But while experts and advocates may be capable of seeing one overarching economic conversation that includes a number of policy areas—tax policy, globalization, income equality, economic opportunity, regulation, housing and so on—lay people have a much harder time connecting the dots. Effective communicators need an overarching message and approach that serves to connect these dots.

## A “NATURAL” ECONOMY

Importantly, the perspective gap between average Americans and experts is *not* about simple ideological resistance to government “interference” in the free market.

Instead, the research makes it clear that the problem goes deeper, and involves a *fundamental difficulty with seeing the existence of policy and collective decision-making in shaping the economy*. It is difficult and unnatural for lay people to think about the economy, and about the government’s role, in ways that would make fundamental change seem achievable or even desirable.

When research respondents discussed the economy generally, they frequently painted a picture of a “Natural Economy”—a “free” market, economic “cycles,” or an economy that will “turn around.”

**Q:** *Many experts say that the economy is just too complicated to engineer and we should just let things run naturally. What to you think of that?*

**A:** *I agree with this statement. I don’t think we really should mess with something that actually has been working for many, many years. If you work the system it works for you.*

**39 year-old conservative man, Ohio**

Importantly, the Natural Economy mode of thinking is a default perspective on how the economy *does* work, rather than an opinion about how it *should* work, and it obscures the whole question of *how* the economy comes to be as it is—much as a passive-voice sentence pushes offstage the whole question of *who* is respon-

sible for a particular action. (“A lamp *got broken*.”) The Natural Economy is taken as a given, like the weather. And as with the weather, the sensible response to a Natural Economy is to adapt to current conditions and hope for better days ahead. The Natural Economy is also *unstructured*, and operates by its own organic logic, making it difficult to even focus on the idea of intervention.

Experts’ and advocates’ models are based on a more *structural* view of the economy and economic forces, which creates one of the biggest distinctions between their thinking and the public’s.

## GOVERNMENT’S ROLE

At some level, of course, respondents do understand that government plays a role in shaping the economy, but the research makes it clear that this understanding is weak and does not direct people’s thinking most of the time. When forced to consider government’s role in the economy, respondents want government action, but are reluctant to recognize its actions as fundamental and necessary, and some worry that governmental action will be detrimental.

### *Government Help is a Last Resort*

The public concludes that the objective of government intervention in the economy must be to assist those who are failing in the existing system, such as the poor (especially children) or those who are unable to work. (Note that this thinking focuses on *people* who need help. Propping up industries, companies, banks, etc. is an entirely different matter, and not part of the usual image of helping those in real need, though the two may sometimes be connected.)

This pattern of thought focuses attention on individual success and failure, not the flaws in the system or government’s ability to influence the system. It also clearly relegates government action to a kind of “remedy of last resort.”

### *Government Help Creates Dependency*

Since they assume government intervenes to address individual failures, ordinary Americans worry that too

much intervention coddles people—the famous “moral hazard.” Accordingly, the public supports government actions that enhance individual initiative (i.e., education), and rejects actions that may undermine individual responsibility and create “dependence” on government.

*Is it really my responsibility to make sure that you have this? If I’m taking care of my family, why do I have to pay more in taxes to make sure that you have the same thing? Not to sound like I wouldn’t want to help somebody, but if you are giving all these things away, people are going to expect handouts, basically.*

Cleveland, GOP professional woman

**Q:** *Do you think we should try to make things more equal when it comes to the economy?*

**A:** *Well, yeah. For those that want to do what’s right. Yeah. ‘Cause there’s a lot of people out there that don’t want to work and they want to be out there and just sit at a desk or sit in the park somewhere and let the other guy work.*

54 year-old conservative man, California

### *Government Smothers Business Resourcefulness*

While anti-corporate sentiments are quite intense since the downturn, Americans also worry that intervention by Big Brother government will limit business ingenuity and drive. They want protections from rogue businesses while not limiting responsible businesses.

“Fully 76% agree, “Elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly,” a response that is basically unchanged for over 10 years. A strong majority (56%) rejects the statement, “Most elected officials care what people like me think,” which has had a more varied response, but not by more than 6 percentage points since 1988.” (PSRA March/April 2009)

“Just one-third (32%) of survey respondents say they can trust the government in Washington just about always (6%) or most of the time (26%).” (PSRA April 2009)

Source: “The Era of Better Government,” by the Topos Partnership, 2009.

Of course, in addition to these perspectives on government's role in the economy (or lack of role), thinking on the topic is hampered by Americans' broader skepticism about government effectiveness, integrity and so forth. While the election of Barack Obama created a great deal of optimism based on his perceived personal qualities, fundamental views of government have not shifted dramatically. Majorities continue to have negative views of elected officials, feel disconnected from government, and express little trust in government.

The bottom line is that even if Americans feel that leaders should intervene in the economy, their default thinking about government can easily lead to doubt about whether it can be effective.

Furthermore, reflexive hostility to taxes remains strong. To the extent that effective government action to shape economic policy will require new revenue, the ability to act may well be hampered.

## THE INDIVIDUAL ACTOR MODEL

When they do think about the causal forces that shape the economy, there is one dominant mental model that average Americans turn to, which we call the "Individual Actor" model. This default perspective was predominant before the current crisis, and continues to be as strong as ever. Many of the patterns in public understanding outlined above can ultimately be traced to this way of thinking.

From the Individual Actor perspective, the economy starts with, and is almost identical with, the activity of individuals. (Concepts such as GDP, the causal role of interest rates on employment, the relevance of stock prices etc. are largely invisible.) From this perspective, the economy looks something like a village writ large, populated and shaped by individuals going about their business and having effects on each other in the process.

Sometimes the Individual Actor perspective means a focus on actual individuals—individual workers, bosses, consumers, business owners, etc. The Individual Actor perspective can also be more metaphorical, as people think of companies, governments or coun-

tries as Individual Actors, with needs, desires, intentions, etc.

## *Moral Implications*

From the perspective of the Individual Actor model, *moral* qualities are an important causal force—an important reason economic conditions are what they are. When people act decently, the economy is good. Hard-working people swell the ranks of the middle class, innovative people create new products and industries, fair-minded employers lead successful companies, and so on. When people are lazy, greedy, disloyal, mean, etc., they create economic problems: Corporate executives take American jobs abroad, or pay their workers too little out of greed, or offer meager benefits, or defraud the public, or charge them too much for essential goods. Unions aren't willing to negotiate lower wages to keep manufacturing jobs in the US, or workers aren't skilled/smart enough to get a new industry off the ground. Some research participants (particularly before the downturn) even placed blame on greedy consumers who work extra jobs so they can shop more or selfish moms who work to buy luxuries, thereby driving prices up. Since the crisis, of course, we have new groups of individuals to blame our troubles on, including both unscrupulous (individual) lenders and irresponsible borrowers.

*I take the approach that banks purposely made bad loans hoping they would be passed off to someone else. I think the term "moral hazard" is appropriate here ... let an entity take responsibility for their actions and they are less likely to repeat the error. Give them a slap on the hand and say, Bad Bank ... and they will repeat it over and over and over.*

**38 year-old independent man, Texas**

*I think our economic problem, for the most part, is that everyone bit off more than they could afford and now everyone is paying for it. People who bought huge homes to keep up with the Joneses started these problems.*

**39 year-old conservative woman, Illinois**

Through an Individual Actor lens, even big-picture issues such as recession, unemployment rates, outsourcing, inflation, the declining middle class and increasing poverty, the costs of war, etc. are understood in terms of individual choices and actions, either moral or amoral.

### *A Broadly Shared Model*

Importantly, the Individual Actor model is broad enough so that it easily accommodates both liberal and conservative perspectives—and it is just as dominant among these two groups. For liberals, the model focuses their attention on the struggles between average people and “fat cats,” for instance. For conservatives, it fits the default idea that success is up to the individual.

*Large corporations, Mattel, they're making a good profit, aren't they? Did they protect us? All the jobs went to China.*

Cleveland, working class Democratic woman

*If you're really wealthy, really rich, you'll be dragged down a little bit too. Everybody is shifting downward, but the poor people and the welfare are the ones dragging this whole thing down.*

Phoenix, working class Republican man

*Just the fact that the middle class is drying up and it's because I think we have a lot of people -- a welfare state here in this country who could be working and become middle class citizens, if they would put forth the effort.*

Phoenix, working class Republican woman

But while this model is widely shared, it certainly favors a limited governmental role more, since it effectively “hides” the very significant role the public sector plays in shaping economic activity.

### *Distortions of the Model*

The limiting (though not “false”) perspective of the Individual Actor model creates important obstacles for communicators:

- » **Since it is ultimately about morals and behavior, the model leaves very limited room for government intervention.** After all, we can't legislate morality, force business owners to be nice or loyal, force workers to work harder, etc.
- » **The Individual Actor economy is incompatible with planning and structure.** If the economy is created and shaped by individual actors, government has very specific (and very limited) roles to play:
  - *Policing* especially egregious business practices (of the kinds that would be easily recognized as felonies); or,
  - *Rescuing* people who are truly deserving and in need (e.g. by providing some level of social safety net, or by intervening to correct a systemic hardship like creating minimum wage and benefit parameters, etc.).

Suggestions that government can play a larger role quickly bump up against other models used to reason about the economy, including the idea that, overall, businesses create benefits for everyone when they are allowed to operate as freely as possible; the idea that “handouts create dependency;” etc.

- » **The model recognizes two roles for people as actors in the economy—Worker and Consumer—but obscures the role of Citizen.** The idea of a responsible citizen—someone who contributes to the collective management of society, keeps an eye on economic policy, weighs in on important decisions—depends on a big-picture, collective vision that the Individual Actor model obscures.
- » **The model makes Economic Inequality seem like a natural outcome, even a right one.** Different individuals naturally wind up in very different economic places, and basic American moral understandings even suggest that they *should*. For example, hard working people who are careful with their finances join the ranks of the middle class, while those who do not work hard or who spend their money foolishly, will struggle economically. Most importantly, the model obscures any ways in which inequality

itself might be a harmful factor overall (e.g., a growing income gap is harmful to the economy generally), just as it hides other “structural” aspects of the economic domain.

Contrary to the assumptions of some advocates, Americans already tend to define a good economy as one where average people are doing well. They don’t focus on such abstractions as GDP or the performance of the Dow. But their thinking about *how economic conditions come to be what they are* provides them with few tools for thinking about how we might collectively work to make them better.

### ***Deep Roots Of The Model***

There are various good reasons why the Individual Actor model is the dominant way for average people to think about how the economy works: The model lines up nicely with a variety of well-established ways of thinking; it is compatible with basic tendencies in how human beings most naturally perceive and understand the world; and it reflects perspectives that are characteristically American.

First, it is simply much easier and more natural to think in terms of individual actions and choices than to contemplate the more abstract forces, policies or structures that economists often focus on. By nature, people everywhere tend to focus much of our energy and thinking on the social domain of relationships among individuals. Anthropologists who study a variety of cultures have recognized a universal tendency to try to *explain the unknown* in terms of intentional actions of individuals relating to each other.

Finally, the Individual Actor model of the economy is a strong fit with various typically American understandings, such as individualism (individuals are and should be responsible for their own fates), rational choice (individual workers, bosses, business owners are simply pursuing their own interests), and default understandings of what good/bad jobs and workers are like.

The unfortunate bottom line is that the deep roots of the Individual Actor perspective make it very challenging to overcome. Overcoming this particularly dominant model in order to promote a broader per-

spective is one of the chief goals of the recommendations discussed later in the report.

## **TRAPS**

---

The previous section discusses the default understandings that often shape average Americans’ thinking about the government’s role in the economy, and in particular the implications and distortions of the Individual Actor model of how the economy works.

In this section we describe a number of more particular ways in which thinking can go wrong as communicators try to engage audiences on the topic. Some of these are nuances of the Individual Actor model; others are additional hurdles that emerged in our investigation. They are all default understandings that are easy to trigger, even inadvertently. They misdirect and “trap” audiences in counterproductive thinking.

While the prior section referred to many of these concepts, this section provides a quick summary of common, specific patterns that can undermine public support for progressive economic policymaking.

Communicators should keep this checklist of “Traps” in mind as they evaluate their communications approaches.

### **INDIVIDUAL ACTOR TRAPS**

The Individual Actor view of how the economy works obscures awareness of structural problems, productive policy interventions, etc. Communicators can easily trigger this kind of thinking if they focus on good and bad *actors*—e.g. executives who ship jobs overseas or make irresponsible loans, economic success stories of the “self-made man” and so on.

There are also some default understandings about Individual Actors that are particularly easily triggered.

#### ***Self-interested Elites***

It is easy for average Americans, particularly in tough economic times, to feel that elites (Individual Actors) are “rigging” the game in their own favor, one way

or another. Intervention in the economy—by government, big business or both—must be working against average people. This view obviously implies both a passive and defeatist stance.

### ***Winners and Losers***

Messages that (inadvertently) cause people to focus on the economic fates of some Americans vs. others make it difficult to focus on the big-picture idea of overall economic leadership. There are many ways to trigger this unproductive focus.

For instance, a “disappearing middle class” message can trigger the idea of a zero-sum competition between middle-class Americans and “the poor.” (The middle class is struggling because it has to support welfare recipients, while the rich use their influence to avoid paying taxes.)

Messages that nod to the importance of individual effort can easily trigger the idea that individuals succeed and fail in the economy based on their individual merits.

Messages about a “lack of opportunity,” can trigger backlash because assumptions that everyone has opportunity are so strong.

“Putting a face” on the problem by telling stories of hard-working individuals who are struggling to survive can trigger the default view that the poor should work harder or make better choices.

### ***Educated Individuals***

Americans often feel that if people would only get themselves a better education, they would have more success in life. While education is of course important to economic success, spotlighting this idea can end up reinforcing the role of *individual* effort and accomplishments. (Furthermore, it can imply that only college-educated people should expect to succeed economically.)

## **STRENGTH/HEALTH TRAP**

The national conversation on the economy, particularly at this time, tends to focus on its overall “strength” or “health”—a focus that can play into the hands of conservatives and market fundamentalists, by elevating the needs of “the economy” above the needs of real people.

This trap is seductive partly because it is reasonable and accurate on one level—it *is* important that there are enough jobs to go around, for instance. But the Overall Strength perspective can also be very limiting. For instance, it is compatible with a focus on measures like GDP, which tell us nothing about the quality of life of average Americans. Whenever communicators refer to the economy’s overall health, strength, etc. they risk triggering this trap.

## **SOCIALISM TRAP**

As the discourse since the election of President Obama confirms, many average Americans, and not only conservatives, react negatively to any assertion that government can guarantee good economic outcomes, or should actively redistribute wealth. Messages are regularly rejected on this basis.

Since any new conversation resulting from this project *will* in fact address the idea of engineered outcomes in some form, one of the most important goals of the recommended approach is to talk about that planning, shaping and engineering role without triggering this trap.

## **INCOMPETENT GOVERNMENT TRAP**

Americans all too easily accept the idea that government is incompetent. When advocates try to highlight inadequacies in policy to build public support for fixing policy, they can easily reinforce negative stereotypes of government. Of course, a critique of policy is an important role for advocate communications, but messages that focus too strongly on what government *has done wrong* easily trigger the default understanding that *government isn’t capable* in economic or other matters.



## EXPERT DOMAIN TRAP

Average Americans can easily think of the economy as something that is too complex for them to have a hand in managing (or even to understand, except at the level of daily lived-experience). Messages that sound too technical can easily trigger this trap.

## RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Those who would support a more active governmental role in shaping an economy that serves all Americans are seeking a fundamental transformation in public discourse about economic affairs. Public discourse has generally advantaged a perspective that believes the economy should be “free” and unconstrained; that individual character determines success or failure; that self-interest shapes the economy; that overall economic strength is what matters; and that the government has only a minimal or after-the-fact role in the economy.

Public support for progressive economic policies requires a very different conversation: that the economy is made, not found; that it is shaped by systems and structures; that the economic interests of all Americans are interconnected; that the economic well-being of average Americans—not the rise and fall of general economic indicators—should be the criterion in our definition of a good economy; and that citizens and government have a fundamental, constructive role in shaping our national economy.

In order to promote an active role for government in shaping the economy, communicators need to effectively convey less-familiar ideas like shared fates, broad-based prosperity, government’s fundamental and proactive role, and so forth. The critical question is *how* to effectively promote these perspectives in the current context.

To trigger citizen action, communications must reveal the *structures and systems* that shape the economy. However, most advocate communications highlight the negative effects of a weak economy on people’s lives. This narrow lens on the issue prevents people from seeing the system which connects all Americans, or the factors that make the most difference in people’s lives. It *underscores* the notion of an Individual Actor economy rather than *contests* it.

Rather than basing the communications on compelling stories of struggling individuals (which triggers the role of individual character in determining success), or emphasizing trends in leading economic indicators (which does not take account of the distribution of income in determining economic success), the conversation needs to be based on two core ideas:

» **Public Structures as Economic Foundation:** The “public structures” created and maintained by government are foundational to prosperity, opportunity and economic stability, as well as the strength of the middle class.

» **The Intentional Middle Class:** A strong middle class, which is the engine driving our economy, doesn’t arise by accident, but is the result of deliberate and proactive policy choices.

The combination of the two core ideas above advances a conversation based on:

» **How it Works:** Policies and structures create a particular kind of economy, and government has a role in creating opportunity, fostering innovation and directing the flow of money.

### THE TRANSFORMATION

Dominant Perspectives	A New Economy Story
The economy is “free” and “natural”—have to adapt.	The economy is man-made and intentional—policy matters.
Individual character and luck determine outcomes.	Systems and structures affect outcomes.
Everyone competes for their own interests.	Everyone’s interests are connected and interdependent.
The strength of the overall economy matters.	The economic wellbeing of average people matters.
Government’s role is minimal and reactive.	Government’s role is fundamental and proactive.

- » **Intentionality:** We can shape the economy to meet our common goals.
- » **Interdependence:** Not only are all Americans *connected* economically, our economic fortunes are *dependent* upon each other.

Following is a discussion of each of these two key aspects of the message.

## THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF “PUBLIC STRUCTURES”

A core task for any new message about the economy is to provide a clearer picture of *how* government plays a positive role in the economy.

When people think of government, they tend to think either of bickering politicians or of massive bureaucracy. It is more difficult for people to voice the wide-ranging ways government works to serve the common good. The idea of “public structures”—systems (both physical and organizational like the postal system, interstate, national parks, communications grids, etc.) that are created and maintained by government for collective benefits—has proven to be a useful tool for framing constructive conversations about government’s role in American life generally. Ever since Topos principals first developed this concept, Public Works has used this organizing idea to good effect in helping advocates create more compelling stories about what the public sector contributes to our quality of life.

The new research leverages the power of the public structures concept by extending its significance more specifically and concretely to economic conversations.

Hand-in-hand with the idea of a deliberately-built middle class, is the idea that:

**Our overall economy and prosperity depend on public structures—they are a foundation of the economy.**

Once the idea is explained and illustrated with a few examples—from the FDIC to community colleges to water systems to Social Security— it is compelling and clear to people.

*A society cannot truly prosper unless it has both talented people and strong public structures.*

44 year-old Democratic man, Tennessee

*Although there are more ways to promote economic growth and stability, one of the most important ways is the use of public structures.*

34 year-old Republican man, South Carolina

*We need to focus on upgrading the systems and structures than enable us to be innovative and productive... Ultimately, the benefits are for the population, the taxpayers.*

49 year-old Democratic woman, Massachusetts

In fact, people are usually persuaded by the more particular idea that the *middle class* benefits from public structures, as expressed in the following statement, for example.

**One way economists define the middle class is people who make heavy use of so-called “public structures.” On average, it is middle class people who benefit most from both physical structures like highways and levees, and other public structures from the school system to air traffic control, FDIC insurance, Medicare, the court system, etc. Economists say that countries with a thriving middle class have invested significantly in these public structures. Third-world countries, by contrast, have limited public structures and no real middle class.<sup>6</sup>**

After being exposed to this concept, research respondents have a very different kind of conversation about government’s role in the economy, a conversation more conducive to an engaged, proactive role for government:

*The middle class seems to take advantage of [public structures] the most, so when the structures aren’t there, or are poorly funded, the middle class must look elsewhere and spend more money....*

28 year-old Republican woman, New Mexico



*The average middle class person relies on these systems and structures to maintain a healthy, productive lifestyle. These systems allow Americans to save money, and continue on with their lives at a productive pace. Without these systems the quality of life for Americans would greatly diminish.*

25 year-old Democratic woman, Maryland

*Instead of bailing out investors in failed commercial enterprises, money should go towards public infrastructure and systems... When we invest in public structures like roads, bridges, courts and schools, we help reduce problems for everyone regardless of how much money they have to spend or invest.*

43 year-old Democratic man, Wisconsin

Importantly, Americans of all political persuasions are willing to agree that public structures are smart investments that end up paying for themselves, and are worth supporting *even if it means more debt*. In this way, the public structures concept can help inoculate against growing American concerns about the deficit.<sup>7</sup>

Even when research respondents—including Independents and Republicans—were asked their opinion about going into debt to maintain public structures, they continued to express support for this investment:

**Q:** *What about the fact that we could go into debt by maintaining our public structures?*

**A:** *You have to spend money to make money and we need to be future oriented.*

42 year-old Independent man, Michigan

**A:** *We are in deep debt now anyway. In the long-run, if we don't maintain and improve our Structures, we will not remain the top country in the world.*

49 year-old Independent man, Illinois

**A:** *[They] need to be maintained, no matter what the cost. It's for the people... Public*

*structures are needed assets. In order for us to move forward with success there are basic needs that need to be met.*

32 year-old Republican woman, Kentucky

**A:** *It's in our best interest to... maintain our structures as best we can. But in the case it would cause debt, I'd say it's well worth it. Money spent on bettering our economy is money well spent.*

29 year-old Republican man, Kentucky

People also begin to see public structures as helping to account for the difference between our economy when it is at its best and the economies of developing countries that can afford fewer such investments.

*Allowing the demise of public structures will allow the demise of the middle class. With no middle class, we will be no better than most third world countries where there are only the haves and the have-nots. We need to invest in America by investing in public structures, including by revamping the health care system.*

42 year-old Independent man, Michigan

*In the long run, if we don't maintain and improve our structures, we will not remain the top country in the world.*

49 year-old Independent man, Illinois

## EXTENDING THE MODEL

One of the great advantages of the public structures idea is its versatility. It is not difficult to apply the model to a number of specific economic issues. The cumulative effect of relating apparently unrelated issues to a single idea creates a powerful conceptual lens on most economic issues.

Three examples of ways to use this concept illustrate this point:

### *Public Structures & Investment*

Americans tend not to think about one critical ingredient to our traditional economic success, but economists say investments in our “Public Structures” almost always pay for themselves many times over. Economic activity depends on two kinds of structures: physical ones like roads, bridges, water systems and energy and communications grids—and organizational structures like the court system, postal system and school systems. Economists say America’s strong investments in public structures in the past have been keys to building our economy. They are like the strong foundations and framework that a sturdy building depends on, and one of the biggest differences between us and third-world countries.

### *Public Structures & Crisis*

The current economic crisis is a strong reminder of how much our economy depends on what economists call Public Structures. These include physical structures we need in order to get things done like highways, airports, and communications grids, as well as organizational structures like a postal system and court system. When Public Structures are in good shape, we don’t notice them. But when they aren’t kept up, the results can be catastrophic—like a bridge collapse or a financial meltdown. It’s time to take care of the Public Structures that make our economy work.

### *Public Structures & Stability*

Public structures—from public education, to air traffic control, storm levees, FDIC insurance, or our legal system—provide the stability that average Americans depend on every day. Experts say that in tough times more than ever we need to make sure our public structures are in good working order, to provide a hedge against catastrophes. Economists point to the example of third world countries to show what happens when countries don’t invest significantly in public structures.

In short, the public structures approach—which focuses not on people, but on systems that are built collectively and yield collective benefits—is a powerful and flexible tool for shifting thinking away from the

dominant Individual Actor model of what shapes the economy, and away from a narrow focus on individual outcomes.

## THE MIDDLE CLASS IS NO ACCIDENT

The research indicated that one concept—that the American middle class does not just happen, but is constructed—yielded promising results in achieving all three of the communication goals. This perspective provides an illustration of policies at work in the economy, reinforces the notion of intentionality and creates an understanding of economic interdependence, without triggering the “traps” discussed above.

The following is one way of expressing this key idea:

**A middle class does not happen by accident—it takes long-term planning and particular kinds of policies like an affordable college education, home mortgage deductions to encourage homeownership, and tax and investment policies that allow people to build more savings. In this country we’ve worked hard to grow and strengthen the middle class, with policies like these. Some societies don’t take significant steps to build a middle class and those societies have a large class divide.**

This point, which can be expressed in a variety of different ways, is an effective tool for eliciting a number of constructive perspectives:

- » It helps people focus on the idea of collective responsibility and proactive steps—the actions we take *as a nation* (rather than as individual economic actors) are what create the outcomes we want.
- » It suggests that true prosperity rests on shared fate, not individual opportunity or success.
- » It shocks people into seeing how average people benefit from government intervention in the economy.
- » It helps people focus on broad-based prosperity and *collective stakes*, as opposed to individual outcomes. Since the vast majority of Americans see themselves as “middle class” or aspiring to be

middle class, steps to grow and strengthen the middle class are steps that are in our collective interest.

- » It puts the focus on what government *should* (try to) achieve, and avoids the question of whether government *can* achieve economic results.
- » This way of talking about the middle class defines it as an objective, a goal, not one group of people competing for resources with other groups of people. It is useful both for promoting broad-based policies as well as policies that work to lift poor and working class families, helping them to join the middle class.

The “middle class is no accident” message has two key dimensions, both of which are as effective now as in previous years, if not more so.

### **Learning**

First, there is an important *learning* component in the idea that a strong middle class doesn’t emerge by accident, but is intentionally created by smart policies. When exposed to the argument that the middle class is created by policies, people find this an important and not necessarily familiar idea:<sup>8</sup>

**Q:** *Having taken this survey what might you mention to someone (friend, spouse, etc.) about this topic? What stands out?*

**A:** *That America has always worked toward strengthening a strong middle class with the passage of such measures as the G.I. Bill and Social Security—making education and retirement available to a large group of Americans.*

70 year-old Republican man, California

**A:** *It takes long term planning and policy decisions to boost a middle class society...*

38 year-old Democratic woman, Colorado

**A:** *The US has historically used...laws to help promote a strong middle class because that is good for the economy.*

55 year-old Democratic woman, California

**A:** *Measures like the GI Bill made education available to returning members of the military and the Social Security system offers everyone security, prosperity and quality of life.*

39 year-old Independent woman, Arkansas

Once people are made aware of the important role of policy in creating a strong middle class, they focus on the ways in which we can intentionally shape the economy as well as on the goal of creating widespread prosperity.

### **Motivation**

The idea of supporting and strengthening the middle class is also a very *motivating* one for at least two reasons:

- » Americans easily accept the idea that, for a variety of reasons, middle class prosperity typically translates to prosperity for the rest of society and the economy.
- » Americans usually think of the middle class as “most Americans”—it is natural to believe that government efforts should benefit most Americans.

*Having a strong middle class is an indicator of a healthy country.*

53 year-old Democratic woman, Oklahoma

*The middle class drives the economy, so government economic policy should be crafted to allow for a broad middle class that can succeed through hard work.*

30 year-old Independent man, New York

*As the middle class goes, so does the economy and that it is important for the government to make policy that reflects that.*

28 year-old Republican man, Ohio

Importantly, this component of the message is effective when it is about broad-based prosperity, not one group of people. It is about aspiring to grow and strengthen the middle class both because the middle

class drives the overall economy, and because government policy should benefit all Americans (rather than the few). Most respondents find this a motivating idea and see this approach to government policy as leading to prosperity for all.

## ADDITIONAL TOOLS FOR EXPLAINING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

In addition to the core communications elements discussed earlier in the report, this project has also developed other explanatory strategies. One of the key problems facing communicators in this area is that Americans' default mental pictures about government and the economy omit key elements and ideas, *without which an active government role often seems unnecessary, unnatural or ill-advised*. Offering audiences new, "user-friendly" ways of seeing certain fundamental points can go a long way towards creating more constructive perspectives and dialogue—as the idea of foundational public structures does, for instance.

Two other promising approaches have emerged from the project. Importantly, each strikes listeners as a *new* way of seeing the point in question. In addition to helping clarify complex ideas, these explanatory strategies have proven to be both compelling and memorable to many Americans.

### PAVING THE WAY

Anyone working to promote constructive public dialog about the role of government in the economy must inevitably bridge from the broad recommendations outlined in the rest of this report to more specific applications and topics. There are several reasons to explore effective ways of conveying the following point:

**Government plays an important role in helping make business/technology innovations happen.**

First, the point helps reinforce government's important, inevitable (and often unrecognized) role in shaping the economy. More specifically, it demonstrates

that government's role is not limited to regulation and enforcement—government doesn't just *limit and prevent* activity (an important default view, as we have seen), but also triggers and creates *positive change*. Finally, this point is specifically germane to topics in the news, since some of the Obama Administration's chief economic plans involve promoting innovation (in green energy, etc.).

The challenges in conveying this point, however, are considerable. In Americans' default mental pictures, innovation is the result of *private* activity and creativity, on the part of individuals and companies. People mostly ignore government's role—as they do in many other areas where there is a "cognitive blindness" to such points. Even when prompted to think about government's role, most either deny government has a useful role, or are guided by the default view that government's role is simply to set and enforce rules to ensure that business is conducted safely and honestly.

There are also ideological *objections* to any role of government in business—particularly among conservatives.

More broadly, many Americans assume that government actions in this area (or others) are unlikely to be beneficial or done for the right reasons.

*Only when the invention comes out, does the government try to stick their hand in to get a piece of the pie.*

**39 year-old conservative woman, office manager, Texas**

*I don't trust the government to do anything for the "good" of the people and only for the "good" of the people. It has to be a good choice politically or financially.*

**37 year-old moderate woman, teacher, Nevada**

TalkBack testing of roughly thirty brief texts, with a diverse pool of over 300 Americans from around the country identified one explanatory approach that deals well with these challenges.

*The US government has always paved the way for new businesses and industries, in a variety of ways.*

The following sample text was used effectively in testing and expands upon this idea to include several aspects of the recommended approach:

**One of the things that has always boosted the economy most is new products, new ideas, new industries. And these major innovations have almost always depended on government “paving the way” for businesses, rather than just “getting out of the way.” For example:**

- » Government-supported researchers develop a new idea and companies make it profitable (Internet, various medicines).
- » Government creates a regulation, and companies compete to find better ways of doing things (more efficient light bulbs).
- » Company invents something, and government purchases enough to get the industry launched (microchips).

**Economists say government paving the way has always been one of the keys to the US’s economic success and leadership.**

It is worth noting several aspects of this approach:

- » *“Paving the way”* vs. *“getting out of the way”*: This metaphorical contrast proved quite effective at helping people focus on and remember the heart of the point. Importantly, the idea of “paving the way” leaves plenty of room for the contributions of private businesses and individuals as well. Even if a road is paved, someone has to have the energy and initiative to drive down it.
- » *A range of examples*: The particular set of examples in the text proved to be especially effective because of several key characteristics:
  - They are expressed in a way that is easy to understand.
  - They are quite diverse, which prevents people from focusing (unhelpfully) on a single case, or a single type of government involvement.

- They are from different time periods, making it harder to default to a focus on immediately current events.
- None of them is fleshed out in enough detail to risk becoming the narrow focus of people’s attention.

- » *“Always”*: The idea that government has historically played an important role helped research participants avoid a counterproductive focus on events and headlines unrelated to innovation.
- » *Reference to “new products,” “new industries” etc.*: Given recent headlines as well as limited default views of the kinds of influence government can have, it is helpful to be as clear as possible that we are talking about developments that are truly *new*.
- » *Economists as authorities*: Economists are natural and compelling experts to cite on how economic changes work and how they have happened in the past.

Taken together, this way of approaching the topic yields better and more engaged responses than when the point is expressed in other ways. The idea “sticks” and is convincing to most. Even the minority of individuals who disagree at least understand the point clearly—an important outcome, since so many messages fail because they trigger irrelevant, tangential responses and misreadings.

*Government paves the way for innovation in private industry by offering tax breaks and other incentives to encourage research and development in certain industries...If there was nobody making incentives for innovation, I’m not sure that our economy would be as dynamic.*

**41 year-old conservative woman, New York**

*Economists believe that government can help pave the way for economic growth, not by “getting out of the way”, but “by paving the way.” Government can help stimulate business growth by offering tax breaks, money for R&D, and regulations to give everyone an even playing field.*

**47 year-old moderate woman, Florida**

*Congress should pave the way, [and not just] loan money. By paving the way it means passing laws and lending money for R&D...If they would pave the way for green energy, it would lead companies to race to produce the best methods and supplies for providing green energy, create jobs, stimulate the economy, etc.*

40 year-old liberal man, Pennsylvania

*How does this point relate to our current economic situation?*

*In theory, the economic stimulus package can help fund a host of R&D projects, create incentives for new businesses with tax incentives, and regulate things so that more businesses can compete.*

67 year-old conservative man, Arizona

*Government has been involved with technology to help pave the way for new innovative businesses. Perhaps the government now should try to pave the way more for new business to stimulate the economy instead of spending money to bail out idiots who messed up their business.*

56 year-old moderate woman, Georgia

*Business grows because government gives tax incentives for companies to adopt new policies, or invest in new technologies...I feel [government does] have a role in promoting economic innovation, providing assistance for companies to expand into new areas and grow.*

35 year-old conservative man, Texas

*Do you agree government has a role in promoting economic innovation?*

*Yes, history proves this. The reason we have many industries and profitable companies is because of the government paving the way.... Green industry won't be possible without government paving the way. Big business isn't stepping up to get the green energy industry up and running.*

31 year-old liberal woman, office manager, Missouri

*Yes, because [this] shows from the past that the government has had a role in promoting economic innovation.*

60 year-old conservative man, agriculture, Minnesota

Finally, this recommended approach fared better than a variety of other messages that proved less memorable, more distracting, and so on. For instance, subjects were not as convinced by an argument that government policy "opens the economic frontier," or as intrigued by the metaphorical idea that government "builds the economic highway" that allows innovation to proceed, nor by the notion that innovation relies on "public-private synergy."

## DIRECTING THE FLOW OF MONEY

Another effective explanatory model is based on a "hydraulic" metaphor of money flowing through a system. The general idea of money as a fluid resource is natural to Americans, and has provided the basis for a number of previous communications strategies, including the idea of "trickle-down economics," and its progressive counterpart, "bubble up economics." In addition, this model builds in a natural way on the idea of "public structures" that government is charged with creating and maintaining.

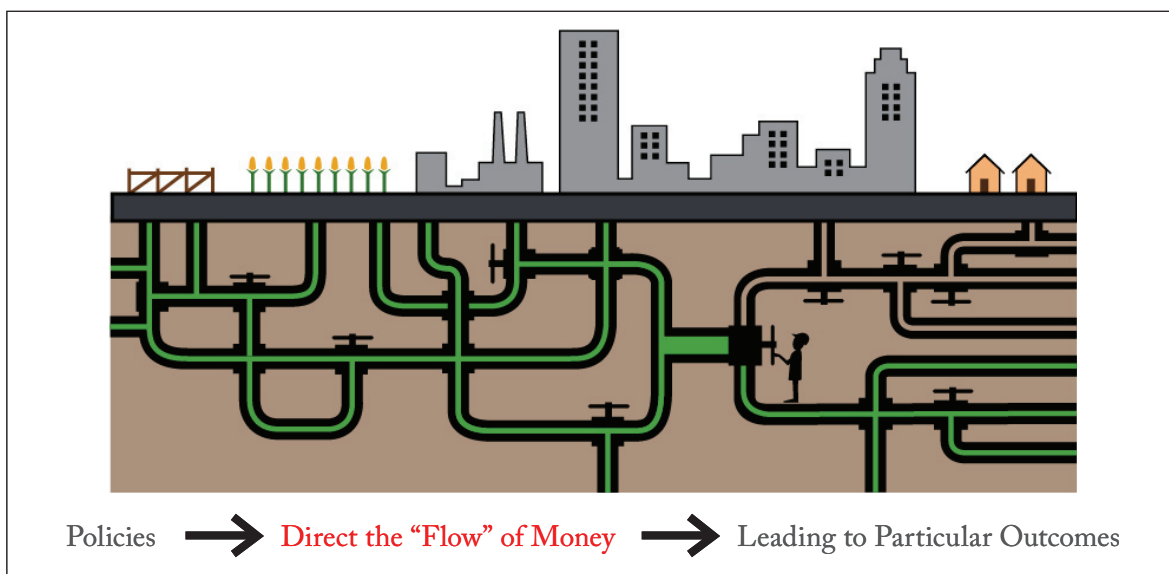
The key element of the model is that it provides a vivid mental picture for the experts proposition that policies affect outcomes.

In effect, the model provides an answer to the implicit question, "how do policies affect outcomes?" by suggesting that policies have a real effect on directing where money actually ends up. The following is one illustration, but the idea could be adapted to teach a number of economic ideas, including advancing a conversation about the stimulus package and other government economic actions:

*Experts say American voters really need to focus more attention on the complex set of laws and policies that together act like a giant plumbing system directing money to different parts of our society. Two examples of how this important system works: Laws that make it harder to declare bankruptcy end up di-*

recting money towards credit card companies, and policies that offer student loan guarantees channel money towards families. In fact, this network of policy “pipes” is how we create the kind of economy and society we want. For example, if we want to encourage certain kinds of businesses, or make families stronger, or cut down on pollution, one of the key ways we do that is by adjusting the system of policies that direct the flow of money.

This “Pipe” model works by providing a clear metaphor (a system of pipes that direct water) that grounds the mechanism in a concrete and familiar image, one that is easily communicated in graphic form:



The money-channeling perspective has a number of important qualities that help ordinary people think more constructively about government’s role in the economy:

- **A vivid depiction of how government policies affect the flow of money**

*Policies define how much money is flowing through the economy. School loans direct more money to the middle class. Making it harder to declare bankruptcy directs money to credit card companies.*

29 year-old conservative man

- **A new insight into how the economy works**

*Policies decide how money flows in the United States. Most Americans don’t understand policies.*

*If policies were explained like a plumbing system, most Americans would understand.*

38 year-old liberal woman

- **A lens that can easily be applied to other issues**

*If you keep in mind the saying “Follow the Money”, you will understand policy making much better. One has to look past the immediate effects of policies and look at the ripples they make in the economy.*

45 year-old conservative man

- **A model that lends itself to support for a more proactive government role**

*I think our policies attempt to get the money where it is needed but it doesn’t always work that way.*

58 year-old liberal woman

Together with the other recommendations contained in this report these two new explanatory models for how the economy works offer additional tools for communicators as they work to engage Americans in economic policymaking.

## CONCLUSION

---

We are living in a time of unprecedented attention to economic policy. The American public is attentive but wary. They are deeply concerned about the impact of the economic downturn and its implications for the future; they want government action but are harshly critical of bailouts and nervous about spending and the deficit. Making progress on a whole host of important economic policies, from reshaping Wall Street regulations to investing in the jobs and economy of the future will require a more active role for government than we have seen in decades. Building and sustaining public will to support this engagement by the public sector is an underlying and foundational challenge.

While some aspects of the public's thinking about the economy have certainly changed in the wake of the events of early 2009—greater attention to the availability of credit, greater urgency for elected leaders to “do something about the economy,” etc.—the fundamental challenge remains the same as last year and the year before: how to compellingly convey the idea that government (always) plays a fundamental role in creating an economy that works for all.

The research undertaken by Topos on behalf of Dēmos has uncovered deep-seated public perspectives that hinder productive engagement in economic policy. But it has also identified the core elements needed to reshape public discourse and understanding. Those who would support a more active role for government in a whole range of economic policies will need to carefully avoid the traps that trigger unproductive default thinking while consciously and deliberately evoking a new perspective.

As outlined in this paper, messages that focus on an “Intentional Middle Class” and “Public Structures As Economic Foundation” work together to create a motivating perspective on economic policy. With these ideas as a starting point, Americans are more ready to engage in constructive dialog about both the bigger picture and particular policies. They are more able to set aside their default understandings of the economy, and embrace a perspective that recognizes systems,

structures, intentional and proactive action, shared interests and a fundamental role for government. The ideas the government policies pave the way for innovation and that policies end up channeling the flow of money add additional richness and specificity to the basic conversation.

Americans need to hear—and feel comfortable telling—a story that offers alternative images and understandings that will allow them to feel competent and confident in asserting a new role for themselves as citizens and stewards of a shared prosperity. This story must also help them see the possibility of a constructive government role that implements policies, which shape economic conditions and foster a shared prosperity.

Importantly, Americans must hear this story often, from a range of sources, and in a variety of contexts. The current default perspectives are stubbornly entrenched as “common sense,” and are perpetuated, reinforced and to an extent even created by the kinds of references that are most common in the media—from the latest headline-grabbing scandal (featuring individuals as bad or good actors) to the various “forecasts” about the economy, to human interest stories about families struggling to make it in tough times, finding clever ways to adapt, getting help from the government (or not); etc. Introducing a new story to this public mix will require the committed efforts of a range of like-minded advocates and organizations.

The workings of our economy and where government fits in the mix may be difficult topics for average Americans and experts alike, but the desire to create broadly shared opportunity and prosperity is a goal that is widely shared. Engaging the public in the essential and active role that government must play to achieve this outcome is the task ahead.



## APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Topos approached the challenge with a number of complementary research strategies, described here.

### ANALYSIS OF CURRENT EXPERT AND ADVOCATE COMMUNICATION

#### *Review of the Current Conversation*

To gain a fuller perspective on how issues related to the economy and public policy are being framed in public discourse, Topos reviewed a range of communications documents produced by experts and advocates in the field, complemented by over 60 additional texts drawn from sources ranging from mass media journalism to blogs to academic monographs.

#### *Questionnaire for Expert Communicators*

In addition, individuals with expertise in economics and significant experience communicating about economic issues from a progressive point of view—including labor leaders, journalists, heads of economic policy NGOs, advocacy groups and so on—were asked to complete brief written surveys.

In some respects, the communication materials and the questionnaire responses were taken at face value—as the collective wisdom and advice of people with important experience. However, the responses were also read from a “cognitive” perspective, which focuses on identifying underlying patterns in thinking and communication.

### REVIEW OF SURVEYS

Topos reviewed over 50 publicly available national surveys. Recent surveys, completed within the prior two years, were given the most attention, but when possible the analysis included trends going back several years or even decades. All surveys were conducted by reputable, nationally known research organizations. The findings were summarized in a meta-analysis in August 2007.

## COGNITIVE ELICITATIONS

In June and July 2007, Cultural Logic conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse group of 20 individuals in four locations across the US. Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured, recorded interviews (“cognitive elicitations”). The analysis of elicitation data, based on principles of cognitive anthropology and linguistics does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious and which impact how people process messages about the economy.

### SIMPLIFYING MODELS DEVELOPMENT AND RE-FRAMING RESEARCH

The process of simplifying models development involved repeated stages of analysis and empirical testing, including TalkBack testing, focus groups, and survey work. This process was designed to continually winnow and refine the hypotheses. The assessment of a model’s effectiveness began with qualitative testing but models were then subjected to quantitative testing in survey research, to confirm their ability to support and extend values and other frame elements.

The initial stages involved an effort to identify a variety of potential avenues for analysis and testing—including both what ideas to express and how to express them. These ideas were generated partly through the review of materials produced by experts and advocates in the field, as well as through discussion with colleagues. This resulted in a list of potential explanatory directions that were later evaluated and/or tested with members of the public. As testing continued, new materials were created as directions were rejected or refined for empirical reasons.

### TALKBACK TESTING

TalkBack testing is an approach that includes a number of different specific techniques, all aimed at assessing candidate explanatory approaches on two basic criteria:

- » Do they have the potential to enter public discourse?
- » Do they have positive impacts on thinking?

In either formal or conversational settings, subjects were presented with “candidate” simplifying models—expressed in texts of 80-150 words—and their subsequent understandings and ability to express the models were evaluated in a variety of ways. Forty-eight texts were included in testing, including a number of controls.

The most distinctive technique of TalkBack testing is the “TalkBack Chain,” which resembles the child’s game of “Telephone” (or “Gossip”). This approach, developed by Cultural Logic, assesses the capacity of a model to enter public discourse, and the likely ways it will be distorted over time.

Between September 2007 and August 2009, approximately 1,300 subjects from around the US participated in testing of explanatory models. Of these, approximately 150 people took part in one-on-one phone conversations. Roughly 1,200 subjects took part in on-line, written TalkBack experiments. Roughly 80 subjects participated in TalkBack chains, and a similar number participated in videotaped interviews “on the street.” (Note: A number of subjects participated in more than one format.)

### ***Focus Groups***

Eight focus group sessions were conducted in four locations. All focus group participants were screened to meet an engaged citizen profile, meaning they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, and are involved in community organizations. All groups included a mix of participants based on gender, age, and race. Some groups were divided by class and/or party identification. Specifically:

#### **Birmingham, September 12, 2007**

- working class
- business/professional class

#### **Cleveland, October 2, 2007**

- working class Democrats/Independents
- business/professional class Republicans/Independents

#### **Phoenix, October 3, 2007**

- working class Republicans/Independents
- business/professional class Democrats/Independents

#### **Charlotte, Oct 11, 2007**

- working class
- business/professional class

During the focus groups, respondents were exposed to a number of communications approaches to determine how the course of conversation shifts when a particular lens is brought to the issue. The test materials were substantially revised over the course of the groups.

## **SURVEY EXPERIMENT**

An on-line survey was designed to determine existing perceptions of the economy and to quantify the effects of reframing government’s role in economic policy. It was conducted with 1,919 adults nationwide, from April 23—May 22, 2008. The control group (n=936) and the test group (n=983) each consisted of a national sample of adults drawn proportionate to population. To meet these dual objectives, the survey incorporated a series of experiments to determine the extent to which exposure to the reframe subsequently influenced reasoning and attitudes about the economy and government’s role in economic policymaking.

Specifically, survey respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group or a test group. Those in the test group were exposed to several questions intended to predispose a particular way of thinking. Interviewees in both the control and test groups responded to the same set of core questions about the economy, economic policy and the role of government. By comparing the responses of those exposed to test language with the responses of a control group, we can determine the relative ability of the frame to shape public understanding.

## ENDNOTES

---

1. Learn more about the research into how Americans perceive government that Public Works commissioned at <http://www.demos.org/publicworks/buildingsupport.cfm>.
2. See reports at <http://www.economythatworks.net/reports/index.html>
3. Additional reports focused on specific aspects of the research are available at [www.demos.org/publicworks](http://www.demos.org/publicworks).
4. For a focused exploration into what has and has not changed in Americans thinking about the economy in the wake of the recession see “Rethinking the Economy” by the Topos Partnership, for Public Works (expected publication November 2009), available at [www.demos.org/publicworks](http://www.demos.org/publicworks).
5. Quotes used throughout the document are drawn from various steps in the research process—cognitive elicitations, focus groups, survey responses and TalkBack testing. See the Research Methodology Appendix for more information.
6. Note that the qualitative research methods used in the project often involve short statements of this kind, which fictitiously attribute statements to economists and others, as a way of finding out what would happen if they *did* make such statements.
7. See discussion of increasing concerns about the deficit in “Rethinking the Economy?” by the Topos Partnership, sponsored by Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector (expected publication November 2009), available at [www.demos.org/publicworks](http://www.demos.org/publicworks).
8. The quotes that follow illustrate typical responses after people are asked to think about the array of policies that have been essential to the creation and maintenance of a strong middle class in America.
9. The “survey” in this prompt refers to the Internet version of TalkBack, *not* to the quantitative survey. In TalkBack, respondents are asked to answer a number of series of questions after reading a test paragraph (see the Appendix for a detailed discussion of the TalkBack method).

**Topos Partnership** | [www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com)

**Dēmos** | [www.demos.com](http://www.demos.com)

