



**The Best Defense is (still) a Good Offense**  
**This is not the time to throw away the playbook**

December 2010

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Next month state legislative sessions across the country will begin. The continuing effects of the national recession on state finances are creating budget pressures that elected officials, public managers and advocates alike have not seen in their lifetimes. In January, newly elected leaders will take their respective oaths of office following a campaign cycle in which “overspending” by government was often portrayed as the cause of today’s dismal economic conditions. In the overheated rhetoric of the election season, it seemed as if limiting, “resetting” and reducing government were the keys to unleashing economic curative powers. While many new, and some newly empowered, leaders rarely ran against specific activities of government, their generalized characterizations of what actions are needed - cut waste, get government out of the way, etc. - are likely to shape and influence upcoming budget debates and decisions. We know the kind of hardships these

decisions can mean for struggling families and communities. And, we understand how detrimental such decisions can be to building a better future for our states and our nation.

As we develop our upcoming communications, outreach and advocacy strategies for 2011, it is understandable that we might be asking ourselves and each other whether or not we should throw out our past playbooks as we begin a period of “playing defense.” The answer is “No.” Our best defense is still a good offense. Now more than ever we need to make an affirmative case for the role of public services, systems and structures. We believe that recent polls, local tax referenda results, and successful state campaigns back up this assertion. We may need to update our playbooks and prepare ourselves to combat the dominant frames now being deployed but our overarching task remains the same. We must help Americans reconnect the dots between the shared goals and desires they have for their communities and the public tools and resources necessary to achieve them.

Our best advice for moving toward this goal in the near-term is to:

- 1. Stay aspirational and keep a focus on the future;**
- 2. Defend against budget cuts in ways that make the case for why public structures matter to “all of us”, and, in particular, why they matter now; and**
- 3. Recognize and reframe the dominant discourse about state budget crises.**

To help you integrate this advice into your communications and advocacy plans this guide will:

- 1) demonstrate via recent polls and local tax referenda that, when presented with clear arguments about what is at stake for their communities, people do in fact understand that government is necessary to promote the common good;
- 2) review three dominant anti-government refrains in current public discourse, discuss the underlying counterproductive thinking these tend to trigger, and offer suggestions for effective responses; and
- 3) highlight the framing and messaging strategies employed in two recent successful statewide campaigns against major tax cut ballot initiatives.

## Polls and Local Tax Referenda Suggest a Reasonable Populace

In the weeks leading up to Election Day, three major polls ([Washington Post/ Kaiser/ Harvard](#)<sup>i</sup>, [Gallup/ USA Today](#)<sup>ii</sup>, and the [Pew Center on the States](#)<sup>iii</sup>) went beyond querying voters about candidate preferences and approval ratings and asked basic questions about support for government and public programs. While distrust in government is very high (with only half expressing even a fair amount of trust in government), there is still considerable support for the actual activities of government. In the Pew poll of residents in five states, four out of 5 respondents expressed concern about the potential impact of further state spending cuts. Moreover, pluralities in all five states were willing to pay higher taxes to prevent cuts to public schools and health and human services. In the Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard national poll, when asked about specific federal programs, very high percentages reported that these programs are somewhat to very important {Medicare – 96%; Social Security – 95%; Federal School Aid – 91%; Unemployment benefits – 91%; and Food Stamps – 82%}. What is notable about these findings is how clearly they show that the decidedly anti-government rhetoric of the campaign season was not necessarily reflective of where the public actually stands.

When presented with clear arguments about what's at stake for their communities, people do in fact understand that government is necessary to promote the common good.

This is also a conclusion that can be drawn from local referenda votes on tax increase proposals around the country. In October, the Associated Press [published an analysis](#) of local tax referenda. The review looked at 2,387 revenue measures in 22 states where they appeared on local primary and special-election ballots this year. Voters in 19 states — or 86 percent of those holding such elections — passed 50 percent or more of the local tax initiatives that came before them.

These recent poll results and referenda outcomes underscore the central research findings from our [How to Talk about Government](#) project. When presented with clear arguments about what's at stake for their communities, people do in fact understand that government is necessary to promote the common good.

### 3 Dominant (and Familiar) Anti-Government Refrains

The overarching strategy of anti-government advocates is to disconnect people from their government, to set up an “us versus them” dynamic whenever possible. The specific messages used to accomplish this goal often take advantage of current public anxieties and concerns. Let’s take a look three dominant public narratives about public budget challenges and the counterproductive thinking these narratives trigger.

- 1. “Our problems are caused by over-spending.”** The reality is that the cause of our current economic troubles was the collapse of a major housing bubble that was brought on by insufficient regulation and the irresponsible behavior of the financial sector, but you’d never know that by watching the news on television or reading most newspapers. Purportedly, our own personal reckless spending as well as the government’s “out-of-control” spending is the cause of today’s bleak economic conditions and forecast. Not surprisingly then, the goal of shrinking government is often described as reining in spending which will allegedly get the economy back on track. This refrain reinforces dominant images of a wasteful, bloated bureaucracy, and intentionally obscures the everyday work of federal, state and local governments (a dominant story about government discussed in [our research](#)). It stands to reason that if government spending is one of the causes of our bad economy then reducing spending will have a positive impact on economic conditions.
- 2. “Government should start living within its means.”** In a recent research initiative about government debt and deficits the [Topos partnership found that](#) “‘Living Within Our Means’ is a kind of shared common sense; a powerful folk model just as familiar to Democrats as Republicans. Overcoming this main obstacle – so that people don’t reflexively judge situations and proposals against this misguided yardstick – is one of communicators’ chief challenges.” The idea that government, like families and businesses, should live within its means triggers a household budget metaphor for thinking about government budgets. Within this frame, spending cuts are the only option for getting government “under control.”
- 3. “Growing jobs means getting government out of the way.”** With unemployment continuing to remain high and poll after poll showing that voters want government to do whatever it can to improve the job market, it’s not surprising that the top publicly stated goal of most elected officials is to increase the number of jobs, particularly private sector jobs. However, the typical jobs refrain links job growth to cutting taxes on businesses and “job creators,” reducing regulations to lower the cost of doing business, and making the policy environment more “predictable” (i.e. staunch pledges not to increase any taxes or pass any new regulations for the foreseeable future). Our [research on how Americans perceive the economy](#) shows why this strategy is effective: Americans’ default thinking is that government intervention in the economy stifles business activity and that government action should be our last resort and only to protect the truly “deserving.”

## Overcoming the 3 Dominant Anti-Government Refrains

These three dominant narratives have been front and center in recent months and will likely shape political and public discourse about what to do about state budget shortfalls in the coming year. Overcoming these refrains, and others like them, is certainly challenging. Recognizing them and what they trigger is the first step to reframing the debate. To overcome these frames we must make sure that we do not communicate within them. ***It is essential that we quickly and effectively pivot away from them and reframe the terms of the debate.***

Often our confidence that the facts and reasoning are squarely on our side in this debate can be a self-set trap. It is tempting to stay within these frames and refute them with our facts. We may not even notice when we have done so; but we do.

- When confronted with a refrain about overspending, it is tempting to respond with facts about how much smaller spending is today than it was in the past, what percentage of spending goes to education, or how much has already been cut, etc.
- When confronted with a refrain about living within our means, it's tempting to respond by saying that, like families, it's time for government to protect the vulnerable or to say that, like families, government shouldn't just cut spending but should also look to boost its income.
- When confronted with a narrative about job-killing tax increases, it's tempting to respond by saying that laying off public sector workers also kills jobs or that taxes on businesses are actually quite low.

If you find yourself saying any of these things in the first sentence of your response, you have trapped yourself within the frame presented by the other side and have thereby missed the opportunity to reframe the debate in a way that can lead to a more practical, solutions-oriented discussion.

Here are suggestions, grounded in our research findings, for some effective ways to respond to these common refrains.

### ***Dominant Frame: "Our problems are caused by over-spending."***

#### ***Example #1***

***Rhetoric:*** It's clear that Washington is through bailing out irresponsible states, so now it's up to us to rein in the overspending that we could never afford anyway.

***Pivot and Reframe:*** Our state is at a crossroads. The deepest recession in decades is lingering, impacting families AND state tax revenues. The choices we make today must be designed to spur our economic recovery and build the best possible future for the people and businesses of our state. This means we have to protect the public structures that are the foundation of our economic future. Our schools, courts, social supports and healthy environment have always been essential elements of the quality of life that has attracted businesses and workers alike. Building upon our past investments and paving the way forward will require wise and balanced decisions; new revenues need to be part of the discussion.

## **Example #2**

**Rhetoric:** Voters have spoken and they want state government to stop spending money it doesn't have.

**Pivot and Reframe:** What voters care deeply about is the well-being of their families and communities. They want a hopeful and prosperous future for their children, communities that are safe to live in, and a state that is a good place to work or run a business. The challenge before our elected leaders is to determine what we should do as a state to quicken the pace of economic recovery and secure the best possible future for our families and communities. Maintaining and improving the quality of our state's public structures such as schools, courts, health clinics and so on, is vitally important to economic recovery and setting our state on a path toward prosperity. Getting there may require more of our collective resources, but our future is worth it.

**Dominant Frame: "Government should live within its means."**

## **Example #1**

**Rhetoric:** Families across the state are being forced to do with less; now it's time for government to live within its means and stop spending like there is no tomorrow.

**Pivot and Reframe:** It is precisely because families are struggling that we need to make sure that our public systems have the resources to respond. Times like these call for government to play an active role, both in meeting emergency needs and in supporting a strong economic recovery. The central question that should drive our budget decisions is, "How do we make sure that we are keeping the foundations of our economy sound and paving the way to future prosperity?" Making sure we have the means to achieve this shared goal is the real challenge.

## **Example #2**

**Rhetoric:** Our state simply doesn't have any more money to spend on public services. Since tax increases are politically out of the question, the budget shortfall will have to be solved with spending cuts.

**Pivot and Reframe:** At many pivotal moments in our state's history we have chosen to build a brighter future for ourselves and our children. We did this not by simply asking what can we afford to do today but also asking what must we do to protect our future. Our state has tremendous resources at its disposal – hard working people, ingenuity and financial resources that can all be brought to bear in order to build a better quality of life for our state. The state budget decisions we make reflect our commitment to making that future a reality.

**Dominant Frame: “The key to growing jobs is to get government out of the way.”**

**Example #1**

**Rhetoric:** The top priority of the legislature should be to grow jobs by cutting taxes on businesses and doing away with burdensome regulations that are tying the hands of companies that want to begin hiring again.

**Pivot and Reframe:** The foundation of our economy rests on the health and stability of our public systems and structures. Economic activity depends on our transportation systems, energy and communications grids. It is supported by the courts, the postal system and our educational institutions. Business activity and private enterprise would be impossible without these essential public functions. America’s strong investments in public structures in the past have been the keys to building our economy, creating jobs and paving the way for innovation. Undermining the foundation of our economy and the rules that foster good competitive growth is no way to get our economy moving again. We should instead be finding ways to bolster and expand the public structures that business depends on and that will pave the way to a strong recovery.

**Example #2**

**Rhetoric:** If government would get out of the way, private businesses and job creators will get this economy going again.

**Pivot and Reframe:** Government is, and always has been, an essential partner to business success. Throughout our history, government has paved the way for new businesses and industries in a variety of important ways.

“Our economy isn't metaphorically like an ecosystem, it is a literally an ecosystem. And to argue that we would be better off by limiting government, because if we do it will promote business, is precisely like arguing that we will have more animals if we limit plants. It is exactly like it. In every ecosystem that you will find on Earth, you will find that the more plants there are the more animals there are, and vice versa. They are inextricably intertwined. And in every economy on Earth where you find a robust, prosperous, growing economy, you will find an equally robust, growing public economy because these things are in symbiosis, and you can't have one without the other.” ([Direct quote](#) from Washington Venture Capitalist Nick Hanauer)

## **Massachusetts and Colorado Two Defensive Victories Won by Playing Offense**

On Election Day, voters in Massachusetts and Colorado actually [rejected tax-cutting ballot initiatives](#). The organizations that spearheaded the efforts against these tax-slashing measures won by making strong affirmative cases for what those tax dollars are spent on and the benefits that accrue to “all of us” when we adequately maintain our public systems.

In these two states, advocates, community leaders, and concerned citizens worked hard to get real with their neighbors. They talked seriously and directly about the impact that the tax cuts would have on quality of life and future prosperity. Many of our state partners were deeply involved in these campaigns and effectively used the insights and recommendations from our work in their efforts. We need to celebrate these bright spots of success in a challenging time.

## Colorado

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In Colorado, voters soundly rejected [“the Bad Three”](#) – three ballot initiatives that would have slashed funding for state and local services and even banned the use of any kind of debt by the state of Colorado. The ground work to get to this result was impressive. As our friend Wade Buchanan from the [Bell Policy Center](#) put it:

“. . . the statewide coalition that came together to fight these measures was broad, deep and bi-partisan, and the statewide coalition was mirrored by similar coalitions in communities throughout the state. And it was through those local efforts that we were able to back up the statewide messaging with tangible, local examples of valuable public structures and systems that were threatened by the measures. By making these local connections and turning the resources of the Bell and other statewide groups to analyzing the local impacts, the conversation in communities often included informed discussions of what would happen to the local college, the local schools, the local fire district, the local water utility and much more.

Local, tangible, nonpartisan – all backed up as much as possible with “citizen” language and talk about public structures and assets.”

The votes weren’t even close – all were defeated by over 2 to 1 margins. The [Colorado Progressive Coalition](#) had this to say after their victory:

"The failure of A60, A61, and Prop 101 by more than 68% illustrates the strength and commitment that Coloradans have to strong communities. We value equal opportunities, a strong infrastructure, safety and efficient government. We care about the services that are available and provided to EVERYONE in our state. We understand that we are stronger when we pull our tax dollars together. We sent this message out to the anti-tax and anti-government faction loud and clear. Colorado is worth it!"

For another great example of how this campaign connected the future prosperity of Colorado to healthy public structures, check out this terrific, popular [op-ed-style video](#) that “went viral,” so to speak, during the campaign.

## Massachusetts

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In Massachusetts, an initiative to roll back the sales tax from its (temporary) rate of 6.25% to 3% (Q3) was also defeated. This tax cut would have meant a loss of over \$2.5 billion in state revenue. Two other



damaging initiatives – one to repeal a new sales tax on alcohol (Q1) and another that would have undermined affordable housing (Q2)—were also on the ballot. A “No, No, No” campaign to defeat all three was spearheaded by our longtime partners and practitioners at [One MA](#) along with an array of other organizations. [The Massachusetts Coalition for Our Communities](#) developed a specific campaign to defeat Q3 – the sales tax roll-back – and they used some great materials and [video ads](#). A last minute infusion of money and advertising succeeded in pushing the alcohol sales tax repeal through. However, the campaigns to defeat Q2 and Q3 were successful.

It is illuminating to look at the ballot documents for Q3 that include 150 word arguments from those for and against (see box below for ballot examples). In the Q3 wording, opponents used a strong values statement and focused on the systems and services that are essential to community life. Their strong assertion of the importance of funding public services stands in stark contrast to the anti-tax, anti-government hyperbole of the proponents.

<b>Language of Massachusetts Ballot Measure</b>	
<p><b>A YES VOTE</b> would reduce the state sales and use tax rates to 3%.</p> <p><b>A NO VOTE</b> would make no change in the state sales and use tax rates</p>	
<b>The Argument for Voting YES</b>	<b>The Argument for Voting NO</b>
<p>Last year, the State Legislature and Governor Deval Patrick raised the sales tax to 6.25%. Thousands of people lost their jobs.</p> <p>Your YES vote rolls back the sales tax to 3% and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creates 32,929 productive, sustainable jobs</li> <li>• gives back an average of \$688 – every year – to each taxpayer</li> <li>• saves Northern Massachusetts Retail Businesses and jobs by keeping shoppers here – instead of driving them to New Hampshire’s 0% sales tax</li> <li>• attracts shoppers from Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont and New York.</li> </ul> <p>It safely trims fat: 5% from \$52 billion in total state government spending. It does NOT reduce spending for cities and towns, police, firefighters, schools, roads — NOR any essential service. Not a dime.</p> <p>Vote YES to reduce:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government Waste</li> <li>• Bureaucracy</li> <li>• Sweetheart Deals for rich corporations</li> <li>• Union-inflated plush pensions that give government employees full retirement pay as early as age 54.</li> </ul> <p>Vote YES for fiscal responsibility and desperately-needed JOBS.</p> <p>Authored by: Carla Howell, Alliance to Roll Back Taxes <a href="http://www.RollBackTaxes.com">www.RollBackTaxes.com</a></p>	<p>The sales tax helps pay for things we all value and rely on. We all want good schools, police and fire protection, safe roads and bridges, clean water and quality health care. Cutting the sales tax by more than half will prevent us from achieving these goals we share.</p> <p>Our communities rely on local aid to pay for schools, public safety, and emergency services. Local aid has already been cut by 25 percent in the last two years, forcing communities to reduce services. This proposal would result in further cutbacks.</p> <p>This proposal would take away \$2.5 billion in state revenue. This is about half the total amount the state sends to our communities each year to help pay for public education.</p> <p>The recession has forced communities to reduce services. We cannot keep cutting without doing lasting harm to our schools, health care and the services that strengthen our communities.</p> <p>Authored by: Joanne Blum MA Coalition for Our Communities <a href="http://www.votenoquestion3.com">www.votenoquestion3.com</a></p>



In addition to this ballot description language, another example of how the opponents reframed the debate is this statement from One MA about what was at stake:

“Community advocates, organizations, and officials have been working for decades to build a stronger, safer, more vibrant Massachusetts. They know that it is only *together* that we are able to provide each person in our state with the opportunity to build a successful life. Our shared investment is essential to expanding health and prosperity in Massachusetts.

Each of the ballot questions up for vote on November 2, 2010 would jeopardize the wellbeing of our communities by reducing that investment or by limiting access to the programs that make Massachusetts a better place to live.”

Certainly, other Election Day results, such as the defeat of tax increase proposals in Washington, were deeply disappointing. But, it is worth taking a minute to recognize that in Colorado and Massachusetts effective cases were made for the importance of public structures and the revenues that are needed to keep them functioning. Even in difficult economic times, people were able to look beyond their own pocketbook anxieties and make practical and rational decisions about the public systems and services we all benefit from. These victories are noteworthy in the face of the media’s assertion that this recent election cycle was evidence of a broad anti-government, anti-spending, anti-tax success. We all know that the real story is not so simple. Good work is going on all around the country to change this debate – and to win it.

## Conclusion

The polls, research, and recent experiences all suggest that people are able to hear and act upon a solid case for adequately funded, well-functioning public structures. It’s up to us to continue to connect the dots even during these challenging, defensive times. We reiterate the three central tasks:

- 1. Stay aspirational and keep a focus on the future;**
- 2. Defend against budget cuts in ways that make the case for why public structures matter to “all of us”, and, in particular, why they matter now; and**
- 3. Recognize and reframe the dominant discourse about state budget crises.**

As always, we look forward to working together with you to make the case for government and to make it well.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/fedrole.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/143735/Americans-View-Federal-Government-Role.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/news\\_room\\_detail.aspx?id=61073](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=61073)