

# Public Works

## The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

---



**Dēmos**  
A NETWORK FOR IDEAS & ACTION

**Public Briefing** is an occasional white paper series by the **Public Works** program of **Dēmos**. These papers include summaries of research and reports as well as essays and articles related to the work of the program. These and other publications from the **Public Works** program can be found at [www.demos.org](http://www.demos.org).

---

### **A Window on Government:**

An analysis of the images of government in the public mind

September 2005

No. 2

Patrick Bresette, Associate Program Director

[pbresette@demos.org](mailto:pbresette@demos.org)

Marcia Kinsey, Program Associate

[mkinsey@demos.org](mailto:mkinsey@demos.org)

In this brief, we summarize early research findings from the **How to Talk about Government** project.<sup>1</sup> This is an interpretative summary of a longer report, *By, or For, the People? A Meta Analysis of Public Opinion on Government*, written by Meg Bostrom, Public Knowledge LLC. This analysis was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for Public Works and the Council for Excellence in Government (the project's collaborators).

Public Knowledge reviewed thousands of questions from dozens of surveys that probed public attitudes toward government, most conducted within the past five years. Surveys cue particular mindsets, both intentionally and unintentionally, so the same question in a different context frequently results in significant shifts in response. In this analysis, Public Knowledge sought to understand and describe the nuances and variability in public attitudes toward government revealed in these surveys. To do this Public Knowledge examined the survey

**A word of caution:** This summary is derived from a longer research report prepared by the FrameWorks Institute and its research collaborators. Every effort has been made to abbreviate the findings while staying true to the authors' voice and to differentiate original research material from our own analysis. Interpretation of the findings by *Public Works* should be considered preliminary and the result of only one phase of a multi-layered research agenda. We are sharing this information so that interested readers can follow our research process and benefit from the insights we are gaining along the way. When all research phases are completed we will be releasing more definitive conclusions and informational materials.

context and language choices for questions about government, to determine the mindsets or “frames” that influence how respondents interpret and answer survey questions. Using this approach the author was able to identify patterns of opinion about government that could be grouped and categorized into a set of “images” or perceptions of government. While the image categories are somewhat subjective, they are meant simply to illuminate patterns in opinion that can offer strategic insights into more effective ways to communicate about government. This construct also offered a useful way to understand the wide variability of opinion evident in the polls. Importantly, the analysis is constrained by the limits of existing opinion data, meaning that other images of government undoubtedly exist but were not apparent in existing surveys.

Identifying these images of government was an important step in the early research phase of the **How to Talk about Government** project. The exploration of the types of personas government embodies in the public mind allows for an assessment of which of these images might provide a platform for public engagement and support of government’s role. This type of analysis—from a “framing” perspective<sup>ii</sup>—helped to shape the project’s subsequent research, specifically, focus group explorations and a large-scale national survey.

## Images of Government

**Government of and by the People:** a democratic relationship to government in which the public views itself as being the government.

This image of government has several very positive implications. When viewing government in this way, the public recognizes that citizenship comes with certain obligations. They consider voting, in particular, to be an important obligation of citizens. Majorities of the public want citizens to be more involved in government, and they believe public involvement can have a positive impact on government. They feel prepared to participate in their community, government and politics, and significant numbers already participate. When this image of government is the lens through which respondents are answering survey questions, they tend to agree with statements that characterize taxes as a citizen’s contribution to society.

However, the analysis also suggests that the public does not readily see itself as comprising American government. They say the government is not “of, by and for the people,” and they think of government as THE government as opposed to OUR government. Another difficulty with this image is that the public seems to confuse acts of citizenship with acts of decency. This confusion is evident in surveys in which a majority thinks activities such as attending parent teacher conferences and contributing to the less fortunate, are obligations citizens owe their country. The concern here is that if *good citizen* becomes equated with *good person* than citizen participation in government could decline even while people become more involved in their communities as charitable actors.

**Government for the People:** an image of government based on whether or not it is perceived to be acting on behalf of the public interest in some way. Public Knowledge identified several subcategories of this image: government acting as a public servant, a watchdog or protector, or a service provider.

- ***Public Servant:*** an image of government defined by the public’s consideration of whether or not the government is serving the public interest and representing the desires of the majority.

Surveys consistently demonstrate that the public believes government does not serve the public interest. They worry that the political system benefits special interests, rather than the public good. They do not believe that elected officials have a special expertise in policymaking, nor do they believe that elected officials understand average people's views. On a more positive note, the public is united in its belief that it should have significant influence on how government acts. A majority has confidence "in the public as a whole when it comes to making judgments about what general direction elected and government officials should take on various issues facing the nation."<sup>iii</sup>

- **Watchdog or Protector:** an image of government working for the best interests of the public by protecting it from harm or from the powerful.

In the surveys, this image emerged mostly in connection to government's regulation of industries. The public holds conflicting views when it considers the government's responsibilities in regulating business. In some ways, the public believes that government regulation harms business, and therefore, American prosperity. However, when asked to consider specific industries, very few people call for less regulation by government. And, in some industries, majorities support more regulation.

- **Service Provider:** an image of government as the provider of programs and services.

When people are viewing government programs overall, they typically do so from a consumer mindset. When operating from this frame, people tend to rate government services poorly, and they do not think government is a good value for the money they pay in taxes. However, when people are reminded of specific programs and services, they rate government's effect on their lives more positively. In addition, when they are reminded of the myriad services and programs the government provides, a significant majority report that they have benefited personally from government programs and services. Unfortunately, this attention to specific services and programs only reinforces the consumer mindset. The significant pitfall here is that a consumer stance distances the public from government's overarching role and frequently results in a dissatisfaction with the way government delivers services and a determination that it is wasteful and inefficient. Clearly, when the public considers what it dislikes about government, waste is among the frequent complaints. For years, surveys have shown that the public believes close to half of tax dollars are wasted. With negative perception of waste and incompetence so prominent in public thinking, it is not a surprise the public would want to keep government small. Another interesting aspect of the image of government as "service provider" is a tension between the negative view of government as wasteful and "trying to do too much" and strong support for government to do more to solve problems.

The "for the people" themes discussed above are found frequently in the public opinion polls. While there is some indication that the images of public servant, service provider and watchdog can remind people of government's positive role, they also tend to distance the public from government, reinforcing the perception of government as an entity separate from citizens.

**Big Brother:** an image of government as powerful, controlling and endangering civil liberties, but also protecting the public from external threats. This image has received quite a bit of visibility in the opinion polls since September 11, 2001.

While people are concerned that the federal government is too controlling, powerful and secretive, they do not view the government as a threat to their own rights and freedoms. In fact, most Americans are willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to fight terrorism. For example, they generally support the Patriot Act and support additional measures to protect Americans from terrorism. And, in fact, though people worry about government intrusion on privacy, more have privacy concerns about banks and credit card companies.

**Moral Guide:** an image of government based on the public’s desire to strengthen “family values.”

Americans are conflicted about issues of morality, values and religion in relationship to government. They want moral leaders but are uncomfortable with too much religious influence. They believe government can play a positive role in supporting values but don’t want places of worship to become political pulpits. Interestingly, the separation of government and religious activities is not very clear cut in the public mind. They support government acting to encourage good moral outcomes for society and believe churches play a positive role in addressing social problems.

**The Symbol:** an image invoked by references to American freedom or patriotism.

This image of government is evidenced by high levels of satisfaction with democracy in the U.S. and its inherent freedoms. People also enthusiastically assert their patriotism but interestingly, they do not connect this quality with political or civic action.

## Conclusion

The images outlined above offer a way to understand the often conflicted public opinions about government. By organizing views of government into a series of personas it is easier to see how the public thinks about government under various circumstances and through different lenses.

The utility of this type of analysis lies in its guidance about which of the many ways the public sees and understands government tend to open up public perceptions and which images tend to narrow down awareness. It also helps to identify both the pitfalls and opportunities inherent in these various government frames. Some images may offer platforms for communicating more effectively about government while others are unlikely to create a framework for public support and engagement. For instance, Public Knowledge found the images of Big Brother, Moral Guide or Symbol do not inherently offer a path for a dialogue about the broad purposes of government, and in fact have significant pitfalls. On the other hand notions of government that fall into the categories of “by the people” and “for the people” — citizens engaged *as* government, government as public servant, protector and service provider — deserve further exploration for their potential to enhance public understanding.

---

<sup>i</sup> The “How to Talk about Government” project is a collaboration between Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector and the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG). Together, Dēmos and CEG have partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to research Americans’ perceptions of government and to help identify effective strategies for communicating the important role of the public sector in American society. For more information about this project see: <http://www.demos-usa.org/page283.cfm>.

<sup>ii</sup> For more on “framing” and strategic frame analysis see the FrameWorks Institute website at: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Bostrom, Meg. *By, of For, the People? A Meta Analysis of Public Opinion on Government.*, page 30. .