

Public Works

The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector



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Making it Real

Key findings from the second round of cognitive interviews about public perceptions of government.

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In this brief, we summarize early research findings from the **How to Talk about Government**ⁱ project. These findings are from one-one-one interviews commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute and conducted by Cultural Logic for Public Works and the Council for Excellence in Government (the **How to Talk about Government** project collaborators). This second set of interviews (called cognitive elicitationⁱⁱ) had a two-fold purpose. First, it sought to verify and deepen the findings from Cultural Logic's first round of elicitation on the topic of government (see **Public Briefing #1, Thinking about Government**); and, second the researchers introduced specific language, ideas, and perspectives during the interview in order to observe any potential positive impacts on the subjects' framing of government within the course of the interview. This second goal reflects the iterative nature of the FrameWorks research process, as these second elicitation were informed by observed problems in the early focus groups and were tasked with exploring ways around those problems. As in the first round, interviews were conducted with a small, diverse group of individuals.

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.

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Findings

Cultural Logic found that similar to its first set of interviews, the subjects initially tended “to express a narrow interpretation of government (essentially reducing it to elected officials and the icons of the nation) and a great deal of general cynicism about its modes, motives and employees. References to governmental inefficiency and corruption were frequent in the early stages of the conversations, regardless of the subject’s political orientation.”

On the other hand, as interviews progressed a degree of optimism often emerged, as participants discussed what government could and should do. Cultural Logic asserts that “this change probably reflects a type of “togglng” between two modes of thinking and talking about government—a “rhetorical mode” in which subjects repeat the frames that are familiar in public discourse and a “reasonable mode” in which subjects are earnestly and open-mindedly thinking about the topic, trying to understand it and reason about it.” The positive perceptions of government were often triggered by evoking specific images or “personas” of government which are discussed below.

Government as Consensus Builder

In the interviews Cultural Logic was able to establish a broader understanding of government’s role as a consensus-builder by drawing attention to many of the decision-making functions of government. Specific exercises asked participants to consider how school curricula are designed, speed limits are set, and how the postal service operates. Each was effective at getting people to consider the consensus-building function that government provides. As the researchers report, “these examples also helped people to gain a better awareness of the true size, scope and role of government, and to expand their perceptions beyond the popular culture’s cartoon of a corrupt elected official.”

Government as Collective Public Conscience

Getting participants to reconsider and reject a commonly stated belief that government should be run like businesses proved easier than expected. Cultural Logic reports that it only required minimal guiding to get people “to concede that government was responsible for undertaking certain tasks, such as road maintenance and postal service, which could never be profitable” and had broader public purposes. This led people to recognize that “if the ‘bottom line’ were the primary factor in decision-making, then some very important work would never get done and services would be unevenly distributed across society.”

Cultural Logic describes other interesting aspects of this contrast between the public and private sectors:

- Subjects recognized “that government has a constraining, conscience-like function that is missing in the realm of business. In this respect, government was cast as the collective moral conscience of the country—a role and characteristic that would be absent if the country were run by businesses alone.”
- Subjects expressed “considerable support for joint ventures between the private and the public sectors; reflecting people’s belief that such collaboration combines businesses’ presumed efficiency with government’s heightened social accountability.”

Additional Positive Images

It may come as no surprise that the researchers found people to be “most positive about examples of government activity as it affected their immediate surroundings and their lived experiences”—their community. The image of government as community-builder resonated well—even among those subjects who had generally expressed more negative views about government and its interventions. This model also made it easier for people to think of government as something they are a part of, just as they are a part of their communities. A related understanding reframes government as an instrument or “tool” that people use to get things done. Another promising metaphor that emerged from the interviews framed government as part of an organic body. As the researchers explain, “this metaphor evokes the interdependency of different parts and also the complexity of integrating the functions of these complex parts. This integration role—which involves coordinating, supervising, and regulating activities in sectors too large and numerous to be managed by individuals—is another essential aspect of government’s role, and one that might be productively emphasized.”

Promising Directions

Out of this second set of interviews the researchers of Cultural Logic have offered a number of promising observations:

- Evoking the positive language of “community” helped promote the idea that the government provides an infrastructure that connects us all as integral and vital members. Through this lens the concrete functions of government were more apparent and seen as a “collective investment” in our communities.
- Discussion of specific, concrete scenarios proved the most effective way to get people to re-consider their cynical views of government—i.e. to move from what Cultural Logic terms the reflexive “rhetorical mode” into the more constructive “reasonable mode.” Such exercises also helped people to recognize the complexity of government activity and the importance of consensus-building.
- Cultural Logic notes that two metaphorical directions suggested themselves during the conversations. First was the understanding of government as part of an integrated dynamic whole in which we, as citizens, are also components (e.g. a body). Second is “government as an instrument” that the public uses to achieve its purposes. Each of these metaphors promotes a shift from viewing the government as “them” to understanding it as “us.”

These and additional findings will help direct further research and exploration. However, a few core implications emerge from this early research: it is important to find ways to get people to look beyond their superficial images of government, which are often partisan and polarized, and to examine the role of government from a reasonable and practical viewpoint. If this can be accomplished, then the role that people want government to play can be considered in a more thoughtful way.

ⁱ 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>.

ⁱⁱ “Elicitations” are semi-structured one-on-one interviews with members of various key constituencies to discern how they think about the issues being studied. This approach combines techniques from cultural anthropology and cognitive linguistics. Essentially the researchers look for the way people think about a topic, their patterns of reasoning, the connections they make to other issues, and the devices they use to resist new information. In-depth interviews conducted from this perspective allow the researchers to map the cultural models that guide people’s thinking about abstract issues. See Cultural Logic’s website at: <http://www.culturallogic.com/>.