

PAVING THE WAY: Government's Role In Economic Innovation



Dēmos

November 2009

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



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

Dēmos ABOUT DĒMOS

Dēmos is a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization. Headquartered in New York City, Dēmos 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 Dēmos Center for the Public Sector was initiated by Dēmos 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.

Dēmos 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

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

Executive Summary.....	1
Background.....	2
Research.....	2
Challenges.....	3
An Effective Approach.....	5
Approaches That Miss The Mark.....	7
Ideological Debate.....	10
Endnotes.....	12
Conclusion.....	12

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paving the Way: Government’s Role in Economic Innovation is part of a larger effort undertaken by the Topos Partnership and Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector to create more constructive public dialog about public policy and economic outcomes. *Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief*¹ contains the complete findings and recommendations from this body of research.

This brief is focused on a specific application of the research—identifying an effective and compelling way of conveying the fact that government plays an important role in helping make *business/technology innovations* happen. Comparative testing with a variety of approaches established one particularly effective way of making this point:

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

This key organizing idea, in combination with a well-chosen set of examples, is both “sticky” and enlightening, and helps convey the broader idea that government plays a fundamental and proactive part—as opposed to playing a peripheral, “after-the-fact” role—in shaping the economy.

Among the key strengths of the message are that it:

- Is a user-friendly idea and image that is easily remembered, understood and repeated (i.e. it has the potential to enter public discourse and common sense);
- Establishes an important role for government while also allowing an important role for private business;
- Offers a clear and memorable alternative to the idea that government should “get out of the way;” and

- Helps direct thinking towards a historical pattern (and basic truth), as opposed to focusing narrowly on particular current events.

Importantly, the “pave the way” approach also guides thinking in a way that helps audiences avoid a variety of counterproductive default patterns in thinking, including a general lack of awareness of (“cognitive blindness” to) government’s active role in the economy, as well as ideological resistance to any important role, and skepticism about government’s ability to do anything constructive in this arena. It also helps people avoid a counterproductive focus on the latest events in the headlines (from bailouts to executive compensation).

A paragraph such as the following quickly helps people achieve a fuller and more constructive understanding of how active public policy and economic success are deeply linked:

Sample “Pave the Way” Paragraph

One of the things that has always boosted the economy most is innovation—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).
- A 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.

While communicators would adapt the central idea based on their own particular contexts and priorities, testing with some 300 research participants establishes that the “pave the way” approach is a particularly effective way of creating understanding and appreciation of government’s key role among Americans of all political persuasions.

BACKGROUND

This brief reports on part of a three-year investigation, involving a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research spanning a period of dramatic change in the economic landscape. Between 2007 and 2009, Topos, at the request of Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector, conducted an extensive investigation of Americans' understandings of the economy, and identified communications strategies to engage the public in a more constructive conversation about the ways in which government can and does shape the economy.

A guiding assumption for the entire project is that the public debate over economic policy is constrained by Americans' views and understandings of government's role—including fundamental and counterproductive perceptions and assumptions to which people easily revert by default (even if they “know better” in some sense). The goal is to develop tools and approaches that can help the public overcome those default perspectives and achieve a more constructive perspective that enables them to participate more fully in policy debates and decisions.

Anyone working to promote constructive public dialog about the role of government in the economy must inevitably bridge from the broad recommendations outlined in *Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief*¹ specific applications and topics. This memo focuses on one such topic:

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

There are several reasons to explore effective ways of conveying this important point:

- to illustrate government's important, inevitable (and often unrecognized) role in shaping the economy;
- to demonstrate that its role is not limited to regulation and enforcement—government doesn't just *limit and prevent* activity, but also triggers and creates *positive change*; and
- to explain current, relevant policies in the news, because some of the Obama

Administration's chief economic plans involve promoting innovation (in green energy etc.), and experience in communications on a range of relevant issues has shown that Americans typically overlook or deny government's important role in such changes.

Finally, exploring the dynamics around a specific point like this one is a helpful way of continuing to illustrate the broader challenges communicators face in discussing government's economic role.

RESEARCH

The research and testing for this phase of work was based on “TalkBack” testing involving roughly thirty brief texts, and a diverse pool of over 300 Americans from around the country.² TalkBack testing involves a variety of techniques—from one-on-one interviews to written questionnaires to “chains” of subjects engaged in an exercise something like the child's game of Telephone. In each case, subjects are presented with a brief explanatory text that focuses on some poorly understood aspect of the topic. The text is evaluated for “stickiness” and other qualities that determine whether it has the capacity to become a new organizing principle for thinking and communicating about the issue.

In online TalkBack surveys, participants were each presented with a single text (roughly 100 words) that approached the topic from one particular direction:

Sample Talkback Text

Economists say³ that economic innovation has usually relied on government to open the “Economic Frontier.” For example, government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, or makes major R&D investments that lead to new technologies, or sets regulations that require all businesses to competitively find new ways of doing things. One great example of how government opens a new frontier is new incandescent light bulbs. Because of a law requiring greater efficiency, traditional incandescent bulbs, which waste a lot of energy, will soon go off the market. But many companies are racing to develop better bulbs, and there have already been some major breakthroughs, like bulbs that last 3 times longer. Past government R&D investments have opened economic frontiers for the development of everything from profitable pharmaceuticals to the cell phone.

Following exposure to the test paragraph, subjects were asked to respond in various ways—including an instruction to repeat back the text as closely as possible. Subjects’ ability to remember and repeat the gist of the text is a key test of whether it is coherent enough to serve as an organizing idea, and of whether it has the capacity to enter public discourse. The testing also looked at:

- Subjects’ ability to draw inferences beyond what they were specifically told;
- Their tendency to “stay on track,” rather than digressing to other topics; and
- Most obviously, their tendency to engage in productive thinking about the topic, and to avoid common counterproductive patterns of thinking.⁴

The research also included a baseline questionnaire with a small group, designed to assess default perspectives about the government’s role in economic innovation.

CHALLENGES

Topos’s approach is informed by insights from the social and cognitive sciences, which have established that people’s reasoning is typically guided—and constrained—by the default mental pictures and models that they associate with a particular topic. Even educated and sympathetic individuals, whether they know better or not, tend to default to particular simple ideas and mental images when a topic is first brought up—and these default “frames,” “schemas,” etc. can determine whether a point is heard properly, misheard, or not heard at all. For instance, for many people global warming is “about” weather, and associated default understandings tell us that we adapt to weather, we don’t change it.

Effective communication means taking account of these default patterns of thinking, and it often means introducing simple new organizing ideas. Finding effective ones, of course, is never easy—particularly when communicators are up against default patterns of thinking that are already longstanding and deeply established.

There are a number of problematic default views that interfere with people seeing or appreciating government’s role in innovation.

“Cognitive blindness”: In Americans’ default mental images, 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.

In short, the default view people bring to this topic obscures a fundamental role for government in shaping the economy. People simply don’t see it.

Responses from Talkback Testing

“Cognitive Blindness” to Government’s Role in Innovation

Please briefly describe how economic innovations happen. These would include recent developments like cell phones and the Internet, or older ones like commercial air travel or the telephone. In a few sentences, how do these things end up getting developed and changing our lives and our economy?

I’ve never stopped to think about it. I would think that someone comes up with the idea, gets a patent, creates a prototype and attempts to get investors. I suppose it’s a matter of getting their invention seen by the right people and manufactured. This would of course be different when dealing with a company—there would be research and development teams.

35-year old liberal woman, New Jersey

Economic innovations happen because of competition. Companies that produce cell phones are continually trying to outpace their competitors so as to gain a larger consumer base. When companies compete, they try to make their products better. It’s this competition that advances technology. Additionally companies in general like to create new and interesting products that make consumers’ lives efficient. This drive to create innovative products helps advance technology.

27-year old liberal woman, New York

What is the government’s role in changes like these?

I’m not sure exactly what role the government would play.

37-year old moderate woman, North Carolina

The government’s role is to ensure the safety of the innovative products created. The government’s role is to make sure companies follow strict safety standards.

27-year old liberal woman, New York

Ideological resistance: In addition to cognitive blindness regarding government's role, there is ideological *resistance* to any role of government in business—particularly among conservatives.

Ideological Resistance

Government should not be an economic arbiter of which companies should succeed or fail. Government's role is to stay out of the way of business—so long as business pays their taxes, causes no harm and is responsible to the public.

43-year old moderate man, project manager, New York

It shouldn't be involved in free enterprise. That's why it's called "free." The government, especially now, is all about control, so it's been horning in quite a bit recently.

27-year old conservative woman, Florida

I think that the government is here only to keep consumers safe and that's the only role they should play.

25-year old conservative woman, Arizona

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

General Mistrust

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

Interference from current economic headlines: Even aside from problems understanding government's role, it can be hard to have an exchange about innovation (or other economic topics), when the attention of the popular media is focused on bailouts and other hot button

economic topics. In this climate, it is especially challenging for people to think in new ways about government's fundamental, shaping role.

Interference from Current Economic Headlines

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

No. Throwing money at industries and bailouts do not promote economic stimulation.

20-year old liberal man, human resources, California

I think that they have a role in promoting the innovation by tax credits for new businesses, but I don't think that they have to use taxpayers' money to bail out other companies. If they go down, they go down. The government isn't taking care of everyone, and it isn't fair to use tax dollars for that.

31-year old liberal woman, sales clerk, Texas

Sidetracked by specifics: Finally, communicators should also be aware that as they address this topic, conversations may be derailed by particular associations with any given specific example—such as associations with the Obama Administration itself or with "green" energy.

Sidetracked by Specifics

What do you think about the Obama administration's proposal to work on promoting the green energy industry?

A lot of money is mismanaged. Studies are done that were already done in the past. Any funding needs to be controlled better or the money is simply wasted.

40-year old moderate man, business manager, Missouri

I think it is an excellent idea, because the environment is in definite trouble.

37-year old liberal woman, North Carolina

Note that this last comment reveals a focus on the environment, rather than on economic stimulation or innovation.

A final, general observation is that, as other phases of this research have shown (and as daily headlines have increasingly demonstrated), communicators should not be optimistic that the election of Barack Obama signaled the end of the need to promote understanding of the government’s economic role. The conversations remain as difficult as ever, even if more Americans are now looking to the government for some kind of helpful action.

AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH

The testing identified several factors that will help communicators avoid the challenges discussed above and effectively make the point that government has an important role in advancing business success and innovation.

Conveying this simple point is surprisingly difficult and can easily trigger problematic reactions. However, there is one organizing idea that was highly effective in testing:

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:

Sample “Pave the Way” Paragraph

One of the things that has always boosted the economy most is innovation—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).
- A 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.

“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—that government has a real (and unacknowledged) role in helping create innovations that change our lives and shape our economy.

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 (and idea) to drive down it.

This is a key point because both historical realities and default understandings make it important to acknowledge the public *and* private contributions to creating economic change.

A Range of Examples

The particular set of examples in the text proved to be especially effective at establishing the key idea that government is involved in creating economic innovation.

The set of examples has several key characteristics:

- They are expressed in a way that is easy to understand.
- They are quite diverse—government supports research, purchases products, sets regulations—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 (in this introductory text) to risk becoming the narrow focus of people’s attention.

The result is that research participants were able to reflect something of the breadth of government’s contribution.

Responses from TalkBack Testing of “Pave the Way”

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

Economists say that economic innovation is about government paving the way . . . I agree especially during these tough economic times. I agree for NEW businesses. I do not necessarily agree with government helping the auto industry even though there are many jobs at stake there.

44-year old conservative woman, South Carolina

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

Well, we are recovering from a free for all of the past 8 years which lead to total economic breakdown. The current administration is trying to once again pave the way, which may prove to be a difficult task given the current economic climate and state of utter chaos.

38-year old moderate woman, Texas

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

It is saying that government has paved the way, making it easier for businesses (through tax rebates, lesser costs, tax breaks, perhaps) to make innovative products. I think right now the “green” economy and products are very prevalent and companies and businesses are striving for government money to help them pursue new ways to save the environment.

42-year old conservative woman, Washington

The government is paving the way with both money and regulations. This aid is helping companies stay in business.

71-year old moderate man, California

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

The government is paving the way with both money and regulations. This aid is helping companies stay in business.

71-year old moderate man, California

Tough call. In general, I favor the “get out of the way” approach. But tax breaks, grants for research, etc., sometimes do seem to have their role in assisting people and companies develop beneficial advancements. Perhaps there is a combination of both we can devise—get out and pave in balance?

39-year old conservative man, disabled, Ohio

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

“Always”

The idea that government has historically played an important role helped research participants avoid a counterproductive focus on today’s events and headlines, which have focused on bailouts and other points 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.

Results

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 individuals (usually conservatives) who disagree at least understand the point clearly—an important outcome, since so many approaches fail by triggering irrelevant, tangential responses and misreadings. And, even though most subjects don’t remember to cite all three types of examples, they do often cite two and make the point that the government is involved in multiple ways. Finally, even when prompted to relate the point to our current economic situation, subjects are more able than with other texts to stick to the real point (i.e. about innovation) rather than defaulting to problematic discussions of bailouts and so forth.

APPROACHES THAT MISS THE MARK

While the recommended approach is simple and straightforward, communicators should not be fooled into believing this is an easy point to make. The study explored a variety of other approaches that were less effective in various ways—distracting, less memorable,

and so on. A discussion of a few of these will help illustrate how conversations on the topic can easily go wrong, and how the recommended approach is distinct.

Economic Frontier

Another text used an alternative metaphor to “paving the way” (“opening the economic frontier”) and also focused on a more detailed discussion of a single case study:

Economists say that economic innovation has usually relied on government to open the “Economic Frontier.” For example, government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, or makes major R&D investments that lead to new technologies, or sets regulations that require all businesses to competitively find new ways of doing things. One great example of how government opens a new frontier is new incandescent light bulbs. Because of a law requiring greater efficiency, traditional incandescent bulbs, which waste a lot of energy, will soon go off the market. But many companies are racing to develop better bulbs, and there have already been some major breakthroughs, like bulbs that last 3 times longer. Past government R&D investments have opened economic frontiers for the development of everything from profitable pharmaceuticals to the cell phone.

Research participants did not often repeat the idea of opening the economic frontier—and discussions had more of a tendency to be focused on the narrow example rather than the broader point. In addition, the text was less likely to steer people away from a focus on irrelevant current headlines.

The relative weakness of this text illustrates the significance that a particular explanatory model/metaphor can have. “Paving the way” seems to evoke a clear, relevant and helpful new perspective on the topic, while “opening the economic frontier” appears much less successful at doing so. The effectiveness of “pave the way” is probably based on its combination of familiarity, concreteness, and close fit with the point being conveyed—e.g. it allows for two active roles (i.e. paving and traveling), and it is clearly about progress (moving forward).

By contrast, the testing suggests that research participants did not remember the idea of “opening the economic frontier,” or did not feel it was important or helpful language—and that is was less useful as an organizing idea for a new discussion.

Responses to TalkBack Testing of Economic Frontier

Please repeat as closely as you can ...

The government is offering small companies to develop new products that will last for a longer period of time. They are doing this by giving them additional funds to help them . . .

How does this point relate to our current economic situation?

This relates to us, [because the] longer the product lasts and works well, the longer it will take us to purchase this product again.

45-year old liberal woman, Florida

What is the most important idea in the paragraph?

More efficient and environmentally [friendly] products and services coming about.

49-year old moderate woman, Tennessee

The government is trying to spend money [sic] in order to spur economic activity.

48-year old moderate man, Missouri

Economic Highway

Another text tested in the research used a different metaphor (“building the economic highway”) and offered no specific examples, but only relatively generic descriptions of how the government helps promote innovation.

The metaphor and generic descriptions in this text didn’t have much ability to focus people on the main point. Responses tended to be vague, and often defaulted to a focus on bailouts and stimulus.

It is likely that this text was less successful both because the contrast between “getting out the way” and “build-

ing the economic highway” is less memorable than with “paving the way,” and because the examples are not sufficiently clear and concrete. The more effective sample paragraph mentioned earlier in the report offers specific examples such as the Internet, medicines and light bulbs, that are more likely to create a helpful mental picture.

Economists say that economic innovation usually isn’t a matter of government “getting out of the way” but “building the economic highway.” Americans tend to overlook the fact that big economic developments are usually triggered or assisted by government actions. For example, government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, or makes major investments in the R&D needed to create new technologies, or sets regulations that require all businesses to competitively find new ways of doing things. All these steps “build the economic highway” for smart businesses to create overall progress and prosperity.

Responses to TalkBack Testing of Economic Highway

Please repeat ...

It is up to our government to create an economic highway, a way of giving us incentives to do more and better...

How does this point relate to our current economic situation?

Our government is getting very involved, with bank and car industry buyouts.

24-year old moderate man, New York

What is the most important idea in the paragraph?

Concentrate the stimulus money where it will do the most good.

51-year old liberal man, Tennessee

It relates to how stimulus and tax legislation should be structured.

26-year old conservative woman, New York

Government Doesn't Lead the Way

Even seemingly subtle differences in how a text is initially framed can have real impacts on how it is understood. When a topic is first being introduced, and people are working (quickly and unconsciously) to put together a coherent mental picture of what is being talked about, almost every word can assume important weight.

For instance, one of the texts used a three-way distinction—between paving the way, getting out of the way, and *leading* the way:

Economists say that economic innovation usually isn't a matter of government "getting out of the way" or "leading the way" but "paving the way." Americans tend to overlook the fact that big economic developments are usually triggered or assisted by government actions. For example, government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, or makes major investments in the R&D need to create new technologies, or sets regulations that require all businesses to competitively find new ways of doing things. All these steps pave the way for smart businesses to create overall progress and prosperity.

This distinction made the text noticeably less effective than the texts that drew a *2-way* distinction between paving and getting out of the way. The point of the text was often misunderstood or garbled (presumably because it is relatively complex). Responses also made it clear that this text makes it too easy for those so inclined to focus mainly on the idea that government *should not lead the way*. (This is an example of mentioning the "elephant" that one doesn't want the audience to think about.)

Responses to TalkBack Testing of Government Paving, Not Leading, the Way

Please repeat ...

Economists say that economic innovation usually isn't a matter of government! Government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, make major investments.

49-year old conservative woman, Ohio

Government's role in the economy is to set the standard so that businesses and other organizations can follow, not to fix things or necessarily be the solution to all our economic crises.

23-year old liberal woman, North Carolina

What is the most important idea in the paragraph?

The government not taking over, letting you find your way.

24-year old conservative woman, North Carolina

That government needs to pave the way and not be the leader.

35-year old conservative man, Texas

IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE

Another text compared two views of the government's role:

Some Americans believe the government should have nothing to do with business or the economy—the market should be allowed to work by itself and government should stay out of the way. Others believe government should continue to “pave the way” for new industries by continuing to invest in science and technology developments, as it has throughout our history. From commercial air travel to microchips and cell phones, government-supported research has paved the way for profitable and world-changing innovations. But some say government involvement in business is simply wrong, even if individuals and companies can't afford to do this kind of R&D on their own.

While those already inclined to agree took the right point from the text—and the “pave” idea worked fairly well even in this context—the “debate” framing backfired in that those who were inclined to reject government involvement felt confirmed and vindicated.

Ultimately this amounted to another example of mentioning the “elephant” (i.e. a strong default view that ends up favoring the opposition) in a way that does more harm than good.

Public-Private Synergy

One text used the idea of *public-private synergy* rather than the “paving the way vs. getting out of the way” metaphorical contrast:

Major innovations almost always involve synergy between what companies/individuals can do, and what government can do. For example:

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

Responses to TalkBack Testing of Two Views of Government's Role

The government should stay out of business and let the market work itself out. But some people think that the government should invest in industry to keep innovation moving . . . The government does not need to spend money we don't have on R&D at this time.

31-year old conservative man, Georgia

What is the most important idea in the paragraph?

That the government should not have a hand in financing businesses.

37-year old moderate woman, Nevada

A number of people also focused on the difference of opinion itself as though it were the central point.

What is the most important idea in the paragraph?

That there is divided opinion on whether government investment should be used to stimulate economic development.

44-year old moderate woman, Indiana

Economists call this Public-Private Synergy, and it works in many different ways to create new products and industries. This Public-Private Synergy has been one of the keys to the US's traditional economic success and leadership.

Overall this text tested relatively well and represents a late stage in the development of the recommended approach. Responses to it were slightly less clear and focused, which is why the recommended approach includes a shorter list of examples, as well as the “pave” idea to help people focus on and remember the central point.

Key Role

Finally, one of the tested texts was simply a relatively straightforward assertion of the point:

Economists say that economic innovation requires the government to play a key role. For example, government offers tax incentives for businesses to move to new approaches, or makes major R&D investments that lead to new technologies, or sets standards that require all businesses to competitively find new ways of doing things. Past government leadership has led to innovations in every industry, including new medicines, cell phones, or long-lasting light bulbs.

This text showed several relative weaknesses. Notably, subjects tended to focus only on government's role in *funding R&D*, and were also more inclined to insist on a role for business.

Responses TalkBack Testing of “Key Role of Government”

What was the most important idea in the paragraph?

Tax incentives for business to find new approaches.

45-year old liberal woman, New York

Please repeat ...

Economist say that the government needs to be play a role in our economy and getting businesses to put more money into research and development. There has been past government programs that have helped the economy and businesses.

38-year old conservative woman, PA

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

I agree that government does have a role in promoting economic innovation, but I think the author neglected to give credit to private industry.

25-year old independent man, Texas

The only role I believe it should have is to offer tax incentives and then step back. The only way to promote innovation is to let businesses have the freedom to operate without government involvement.

41-year old conservative man, Michigan

CONCLUSION

The current economic and political landscape is clearly a very complex and challenging one for those seeking to communicate important ideas about economic policy. Nonetheless, the work of creating constructive public dialog about the role of government—and particularly, government’s role in the economy—is as important now as ever. The unprecedented action that government has recently taken to address the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression represents an important “teachable moment,” but to take advantage of the opportunity, communicators need to understand the challenges, and be equipped with tools they know are effective.

The role of public policy in creating economic innovation is an example of a point that the current Administration and its supporters would like to make. But this is a goal that is easier contemplated than achieved.

This research recommends using the organizing idea that:

U.S. government innovation has always paved the way for new businesses and industries, in a variety of ways.

Rigorous testing shows that this concept represents an effective way to communicate about the importance

of government’s role in creating innovation. Communicators will choose different examples and vary other points as well depending on their context and preferences. On the other hand, they should remain sensitive to the characteristics that make some messages and formulations more effective than others, including:

- A diverse set of concrete and easy-to-understand examples, mentioned briefly to establish the breadth of the point;
- An explicit statement of the idea that this is a long-standing pattern;
- A contrast with the idea of government “getting out of the way;” and
- An emphasis on the idea of truly new products, industries and technologies.

By bearing these guidelines in mind, communicators can make an effective case for government’s role in economic innovation. The perspective shift that this approach creates can also be a foundation for a broader discussion of government’s role in creating the kind of economy we want—tapping into latent but potentially powerful support for this role.

ENDNOTES

1. Available at www.demos.org/publicworks.
2. TalkBack participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, education level, ethnicity, political orientation and occupation. They were recruited from a vetted national panel of roughly 5000 subjects.
3. Note that for purposes of testing, texts often attribute language and ideas to experts, to find out what would happen if the experts *did* express themselves in this way.
4. For discussion of these counterproductive patterns, see “Challenges” below, as well as: *Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief*.



Topos Partnership | www.topos.com

Dēmos | www.demos.org