

Public Works

The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector



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Thinking about Government

Key findings from the first round of cognitive interviews

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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-on-one interviews commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute and conducted by Cultural Logic in the summer of 2004 for Public Works and the Council for Excellence in Government (the **How to Talk about Government** project collaborators).

These one-on-one interviews (called cognitive elicitationⁱⁱ) began our research exploration into how Americans think about government. A central finding of this early work is that when thinking about government people typically employ two mental shortcuts: they either think of elected officials **or** of the bureaucracy of government. Of these two they most often fixate on the first—elected leadership—which they view very negatively. This “top of mind” negative association colors their overall view of government. The other mental shortcut is of government as an undifferentiated monolithic bureaucracy. In this

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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model, they don't readily think of active agencies with employees carrying out the daily functions of government and supporting its important public mission.

From Public Works' perspective, both of these models of thinking prevent Americans from appreciating the dynamic whole of government: its day-to-day work, its agencies, its workforce, and its public mission.

Models for Understanding Government

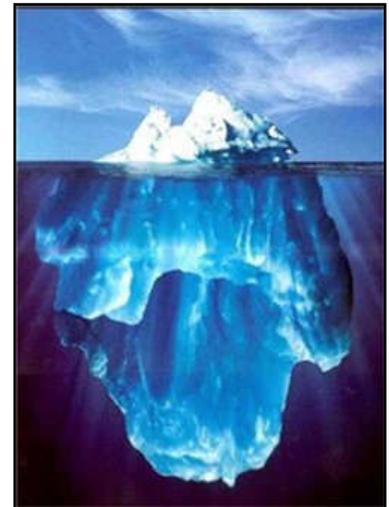
Government in the United States is not an easy thing to grasp. It is vast and multi-faceted, operating differently at the local, state and federal levels. The range of government functions—from law-making to consensus-building to finding cures for infectious diseases—is broad and heterogeneous.

In keeping with strategic frame analysisⁱⁱⁱ, the cognitive elicitations conducted and analyzed by Cultural Logic reveal the mental shortcuts or models people resort to when they try to conceptualize government. While at some level people understand that there is a general thing called "government," Cultural Logic found that for most practical purposes the American public's understanding of government is divided into two distinct models:

- Government as elected leaders and the decision-making functions of government; or
- Government as a huge, undifferentiated monolith with agencies, bureaucracies and civil servants.

Cultural Logic found average Americans most often use the leadership model to reason about government. Cultural Logic compares the public's understanding to an iceberg. The country's leadership, a relatively small part of government, is the "tip of the iceberg," above the surface and apparent to people. The other, much larger part—the bureaucracy of government—is less visible and perceived as a vast, largely undefined mass existing below the surface of awareness where it is not clearly seen.

Cultural Logic also found that when thinking about government people cannot utilize both perceptual models simultaneously. Depending on the context they "toggle" back and forth between them, compounding their confusion



Government as "Mind" or "Monolith"

In the more common of the two models, the leadership model, people associate government with its elected leaders, their views, their priorities, and their projects, as well as their power and their position of leadership. They personify government, but not in the sense of reducing government to the actual individuals who lead government. Rather they see government as the activities of a single entity representing something like the "mind" of the country. This personification includes leadership qualities such as "vision-setting" and "authority." This model focuses on activities such as setting policy agendas, making decisions, communicating, looking ahead, etc. Cultural Logic refers to this model of thinking as "Government-as-Mind."

Cultural Logic found people are relatively unaware of what the government does beyond the functions associated with elected leadership. However, when they *do* think of the rest of government, they have an image of multitudes of bureaucrats “pushing paper around and doing ‘who knows what.’” This image merges into a static monolith, disconnected from any particular sense of mission or function. While people are aware on some level of the various functions of the government beyond those of elected leadership, it is hard for them to hold this information in their minds. In this view, people treat the complex collection of people, structures and activities that make up government as an inert “thing” — a monolith. Cultural Logic refers to this mindset as “Government-as-Monolith.”

Implications of “Mind” and “Monolith” Models

These two models of understanding government, Government-as-Mind and Government-as-Monolith, have very different implications for how people perceive and judge government.

Cultural Logic found when people are using the Government-as-Mind model:

- They associate government with “establishing rules, laws, and order—i.e. literally enforcing and establishing authority.” Because they think of elected leaders (and not themselves) as making the rules and laws, this model puts people in a passive stance toward government. It also distances individuals from government; they think of “them” or “it,” seldom as “us.”
- They personify government as a metaphorical parent, and they implicitly take on the role of children.^{iv} Government can feel tyrannical to people in this mindset; they are unaware of the connection between government and the public’s (or their own) beliefs or priorities. People are ambivalent towards government’s authority. They are both appreciative and resentful of strong leadership. This ambivalence was found among both Conservatives and Liberals.
- They think of debating politicians and partisanship and associate government with the current administration. They express an exaggerated and caricatured image of politics and partisan bickering, and thus do not perceive how government creates consensus from conflicting views.
- When they think of government as being made up of only elected leaders, people do not consider the daily interactions they have with government as “government.” They underestimate the size of government, reducing it to a relative handful of elected leaders.
- On a positive note, people do appreciate the necessity of government. While interviewees often expressed dissatisfaction with government, they also saw its vision and authority functions— aspects of the “mind” model—as irreplaceable.

According to Cultural Logic when people are in the Government-as-Monolith mindset:

- “Most of what government is and does is nearly invisible. People find it hard to call to mind most of the functions of government. People are confused and ignorant about where tax money goes.” Although there are certainly many reasons why people don’t have a good understanding of government expenditures, one of these is what Cultural Logic refers to as their “cognitive blindness” regarding most of what government does.
- Waste, fraud and inefficiency are exaggerated. Because people cannot associate the “monolith” of government with functions or a mission, they naturally see it as bigger than it needs to be.
- Civil service is also nearly invisible. The millions of government employees are perceived as working “*for* the government, rather than *being part of it*.” When people can think about civil

service at all, they do so from the employee perspective, understanding it in terms of salaries and benefits.

- People have a difficult time distinguishing between the public and private sectors. With their hazy understanding of the “monolith” of government, they cannot clearly perceive government’s public nature and mission. This confusion fuels support for privatizing governmental functions. Although they don’t understand the functions of government, they believe they do understand what business is and does. As a result, privatization may make government’s functions seem more real and important.

Conclusion

The findings from the cognitive elicitations present interesting challenges to the **How to Talk about Government** project collaborators at Public Works and the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG), and to all of those working to renew a more positive view of government’s role in meeting public purposes.

From Public Works’ perspective, both of the identified models are problematic, because they lead to narrow—and generally negative—stereotypes of government. Neither model opens public perception to the heterogenic essence of government—its workforce, its agencies, its complexities, its daily functions—and therefore, neither model permits individuals to appreciate what government can do and consider its potential as an effective tool for problem-solving. These dominant frames obscure people’s views of government’s many roles ranging from national security to supporting scientific research to caring for the indigent. These models also prevent people from seeing government’s underlying missions and values. As a result, Public Works believes these dominant models undermine public support for government and for public policy solutions that include a role for government. While these deeply imbedded perceptions will not be easily dislodged, identifying them is the first step toward building and advancing a more positive framework for talking about government; one that can reawaken a deeper sense of its mission, values and integral role in our society.

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/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on strategic frame analysis see the FrameWorks Institute website - <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>.

^{iv} Cultural Logic explains that it is difficult for people to think about an authority function without personifying it, if unconsciously, as a metaphorical parent. See George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics* (1996) for an extended analysis of the significance of this analogy between political and familial relationships.