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Public Structures

A constructive model for government

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Patrick Bresette, Associate Program Director

pbresette@demos.org

Marcia Kinsey, Program Associate

mkinsey@demos.org

In this brief we offer a summary of work commissioned for the **How to Talk about Government** projectⁱ by the FrameWorks Institute and conducted by Cultural Logicⁱⁱ. This element of the research was designed to develop a “simplifying model” — a communications tool intended to help evoke more productive thinking about government and its role in society.

Background

In this phase of research, Cultural Logic set out to identify promising ways to talk about government which have the potential to help Americans think more productively and concretely about the role of government in our lives; Cultural Logic refers to these explanatory strategies as “simplifying models.” The simplifying models project was motivated by previous How to Talk about Government research findings that many of the public’s common complaints and misunderstandings of government arise from a type of “cognitive blindness” regarding much of what government is and does. In short,

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.

Cultural Logic’s working assumption was that the public’s conceptual picture of government could be made richer and more accurate, and that this better understanding could lead to increased engagement and more constructive thinking.

Approach

Simplifying models are brief, “user-friendly” explanations that help lay people understand an issue in a way that is more compatible with expert understandings. They often, but not always, involve analogies to familiar objects or scenarios. (Examples in other issue areas include “the blanket of carbon dioxide” that traps heat in the atmosphere and causes global warming, and the ways in which early experience shape the development of a child’s “brain architecture.”)

The process of developing simplifying models involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refining of hypotheses. The early goal is to identify as many potential conceptual directions as possible, through a review of relevant texts (including those produced by advocates), conversations with experts, and so forth. Cognitive analysis and “TalkBack Testing” then allow the researchers to judge whether particular conceptual models have the potential to enter public discourse and to have positive impacts on thinking. 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 using this method on the issue of government, subjects were presented with a brief explanatory text (roughly 100 words) that focused on some poorly understood aspect of government and/or its role. Measures of the effectiveness of the simplifying model include subjects’ ability to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory idea. In other words, the testing was designed to assess whether the model has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating about government.

Findings

Cultural Logic concluded that a very effective way to improve the public discussion about Government is to focus on *Public Structures and Benefits of Public Structures*. Essentially, this approach amounts to expanding the default models of government (which collapse the topic to an often “dysfunctional” relationship between the public and their elected leaders) by adding two critical and closely related components:

Public Structures – critical systems and objects that government creates and maintains, including both physical infrastructure and also organizational systems such as courts, schools, regulatory systems, etc.

Benefits of Public Structures – the important benefits that flow to citizens and society, including greater prosperity, security, stability, efficiency, and so forth.

TalkBack testing showed that people are able to grasp the idea of Public Structures, including the idea that Public Structures refer to both physical and organizational components, from a brief explanation, that they readily acknowledge their importance, and that they recognize that creating and maintaining them is a critical role played by government. Below is an example of an explanatory paragraph that did well in testing:

Economists now agree that what has made America so successful is the effectiveness of our Public Structures. The Public Structures Americans have created – such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, and schools and colleges – are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. Without them, it would be difficult or impossible to get lots of important jobs done. Developing countries have many smart, hard-working individuals, but they don't have the Public Structures that are essential for overall prosperity.

Among the more specific benefits identified in the research are the following:

- The model discourages a default tendency towards “personalization” of government – one that leads to a counterproductive focus on individuals, “character,” resentment of authority figures, and so forth.
- It provides a way to begin discussions with a focus on things people value, and naturally connect with the role of government.
- It encourages “reasonable mode” (in which people are ready to think practically, solve problems, and take in new information) and discourages “rhetorical mode” (in which people are focused on defending or opposing a particular point of view). One measure of this effect is that Conservatives and Liberals sound more alike rather than different after hearing the model.
- The model helps counter an exaggerated Individualism – e.g. the common view that American success is entirely the product of smart, free and enterprising individuals. (It reinforces instead the idea that the life that Americans know also depends critically on structures that we have collectively designed and built.)
- The model helps clarify why taxes are truly necessary (even for self-described conservatives).
- The model sets up a “two-way street” view in which we take care of Public Structures, and they take care of us. This is, of course, starkly different from the zero-sum games of redistributing wealth or feeding Government bureaucracy, which many people think of when they consider government.
- The model promotes thinking that is dynamic rather than static. People seem to easily recognize a collective responsibility for Public Structures that entails action on their part, as well as a collective benefit.
- The public structures approach allows for conversations using a variety of different language, and focusing on a variety of different issues. (E.g. the model offers a useful conceptual tool for thinking/talking about Hurricane Katrina.)

In short, conversations that use public structures as a conceptual starting point – and that also frame the topic of government in terms of values and other message components identified in the FrameWorks research – have the best chance to create forward momentum on the issue.

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 For more about Cultural Logic and their work see their website at: