Reframing the Public Sector

Research Insights

Winning the Debate: How to Talk About the Public Sector and Our Unions
Michigan State University
Labor Education Program
April 5, 2011

Terence Hughes
School of Human Resources and Labor Relations
hughe159@msu.edu
How people feel about the public sector

How people feel about public sector employees / unions

... and their willingness to support it with their taxes
The viability of the public sector

The viability of public sector unions
This matters. A lot.

The virtuous cycle

Stronger **public structures**

More **public value** delivered

- Greater ability to recruit good people for public service
- Higher morale
- Greater willingness of voters to support public structures
  - Self-fulfilling positive expectations when dealing with public servants
The vicious cycle

- Weaker public structures
- Public value declines
- “Untreated problems” become very expensive at the financial, individual and community level

Pessimistic attitudes about public sector

- Less support for operating budgets at state, county, city and township levels
- Less protection and prevention services delivered
- Loss of essential skills and knowledge as employees leave
The Challenge
How do people feel about the public sector?
People are contradictory & ambiguous

Obstacles in Public Perception

- The word “government” = waste, burdensome taxes, and corruption.
- Government = the “other”
- Government = politics = special interests, partisanship
- Government is a joke.
- Government’s mission and values are displaced by negative stereotypes.
- Government and business are seen as diametrically opposed.
- Americans have a tension between individual and collective responsibility that colors their perception of government’s role.
- Taxes, taxes, taxes: people see this as government’s only solution to problems.

Opportunities in Perceptions of Government

- People support the mission and values of government and reminding them of these underlying themes is important.
- Starting conversations about government’s role and activities using other words – like “public sector” — avoids triggering automatic negative associations with “government.”
- People support a long-term planning and consensus building function for government.
- Government as “protector” (clean water, safe food, honest corporations) is a beneficial persona when used carefully.
- Democrats, Independents, and Republicans are more alike than different in their perceptions of government.

Public Works
The Demos Center for the Public Sector
A Focus on Government
Key findings from focus groups
September 2005
They are fairly evenly split
They seem to be in deep denial.
People are more supportive and positive when talking about specifics rather than generalities.

Would you favor or oppose the federal government providing more funding to the states to prevent further service cuts and layoffs?

Over the past year, 45 states have had to layoff teachers, police, firefighters and other employees due to the recession. Next year, states will face continued revenue shortfalls as a result of the weak economy with some 300,000 teachers and other education workers potentially facing layoffs. Would you favor or oppose the federal government providing more funding to the states to prevent further service cuts and layoffs?

**State Funding - With & Without Explanation (In Percent)**
Democracy Corps, July 2010

[Bar charts showing percentages for Strongly Favor, Somewhat Favor, Somewhat Oppose, Strongly Oppose]
But we face an immense challenge
Why don’t people appreciate public value more? (Part 1)

- We are used to it, so we take it for granted
- When things are working, nothing bad happens
- People only hear about when something bad happens
- Much of the action occurs out of sight
- People consider themselves spectators or consumers rather than citizens
- Some aspects of public value can be adversarial
- Public servants are often given a Mission Impossible and cannot achieve full success
We take public value for granted
Much of the work goes on behind the scenes
Some aspects of public value can seem adversarial.
Why don’t people appreciate public value more? (Part 2)

They’ve been told government is…

- Ineffective and inefficient
  The private sector can do it better

- Harmful
  Regulations and excessive taxes = fewer jobs

- Unaffordable
  We’re bankrupting our grandchildren
Why do conservative critics dislike the public sector so much?

• Economic self-interest
  Lower taxes + Less regulations = Higher profits
  Media preaching to choirs = Audience loyalty

• Political motives
  Position yourself as the anti-government party, then
demonize government

• “Market fundamentalism”
  Free markets + Profit motive + Consumer self-interest =
  Greatest amount of prosperity and equity.
  Interfering with markets = Less social well-being

• Libertarianism
  Intrusive constraints / nanny state = Bad
Why do so many citizens adopt the negative view?

- Seems like common sense ("Live within our means")
- Grains of truth
- It’s in our genes.
- Displaced anger / frustration.

- The other side is doing a better job of getting their message across
Frames, hearts, minds, and ballots
Conservatives have controlled the conversation.
Frank’ Luntz’s Frames

We need Tax Relief
Lower taxes, fewer regulations = More jobs created

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of...</th>
<th>...Say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security Privatization</td>
<td>Social Security Personalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inheritance or Estate Tax</td>
<td>The Death Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Economy or Capitalism</td>
<td>Free Market Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourcing</td>
<td>Taxation, Regulation, Litigation, Innovation, Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented Workers</td>
<td>Illegal Aliens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drilling for oil</td>
<td>Exploring for energy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Frank Luntz’s Playbook

NEVER SAY: Outsourcing

INSTEAD SAY: Taxation, Regulation, Litigation, Innovation, Education

When you use the words of your opposition you are basically accepting their definition and therefore their conclusion.

We should NEVER use the word outsourcing because we will then be asked to defend or end the practice of allowing companies to ship American jobs overseas.

Rather, we should talk about the "root cause" why any company would not want to hire "the best workers in the world."

And the answer: “over-taxation, over-regulation, too much litigation, and not enough innovation or quality education." Because it rhymes, it will be remembered.
Republicans to push $4T in budget cuts

Carl Hulse / New York Times

Washington — House Republicans this week are planning to propose a steep reduction of more than $4 trillion in federal spending over the next decade by reshaping popular programs like Medicare, the party’s budget chairman said Sunday, opening a new front in the intensifying budget wars.

 Appearing on the television program "Fox News Sunday," Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who heads the budget panel, also said Republicans would call for strict caps on all government spending that would require cuts to take effect whenever Congress exceeds its limit.

"We are going to put out a plan that gets our debt on downward trajectory and gets us to a point of giving our next generation a debt-free nation," Ryan said, even as he predicted that the politically charged initiatives he intends to lay out in the 2012 budget beginning Tuesday would give Democrats a "political weapon to go against us. But they will have to lie and demagogue to make that a political weapon."

Ryan’s comments came as Republicans and
Progressives are learning to take back control of the conversation
Lakoff’s Worldview Frames

- **Conservatives** (Strict father): 35% – 40%
- **Biconceptuals** (BOTH Strict and Nurturant): 25% - 30%
- **Progressives** (Nurturant parent): 35% – 40%

Lakoff’s Insights

1. Frames define – and can redefine – our reality and notion of common sense.

“State budget woes are caused by too many high-paid employees with overly generous benefits and bank-busting pensions.”

or

“States budget woes are caused by the unparalleled greed and stupidity on Wall Street that wrecked our economy, threw millions of out work, and drove property values through the floor.”
“We have to live within our means, and that means slashing spending to reduce deficits.”

or

“More government spending is needed to make up for lack of spending by people and businesses and will shorten the recession; we’ll be able to balance the books when the economy picks up.

“lt’s up to the individual.”

or

“We’re all in this together.”
Lakoff’s Insights

2. Repetition can embed frames in the brain – even in the brains of those who oppose you.
   “We need tax relief.” “Americans need tax relief.” “Until they get tax relief, businesses will not be able to create more jobs.” “We need tax relief.”

3. Existing deep frames don’t change overnight.
   Reagan gave his first inaugural speech in 1981.

4. Simply negating the other side’s frames reinforces them.
   Pivot and invite people to see through a different lens.
Lakoff’s Insights

5. **Facts are not enough.**
   Facts can only be assimilated into the brain if there is a frame to make sense of them.

6. **Rational arguments are not enough.**
   We need new stories, not just “must do” lists. And citizens should play important roles in those stories.

7. **Speak to biconceptuals the same way you speak to your base.**
   They can apply either a progressive or a conservative moral worldview to politics – or a positive or negative view of government - but not both at the same time. Activate the progressive or positive one.
Lakoff’s Insights

1. First, articulate your ideas that make up your worldview - “A society that leaves no one out. Responsibility, fairness, community, cooperation.”

2. Next, find the right words that can carry and evoke those ideas.

3. Then, say what you believe, in a straightforward manner, persistently, with conviction.

Framing isn’t about winning and losing elections. It’s about winning and losing hearts and minds.

“We will win only when we help people discover who they truly are in their heart of hearts.”
Conservative Frame: Government Washington

• It’s ineffective and inefficient

• It’s often unnecessary
  We should rely on markets instead

• It’s harmful
  Regulations and excessive taxes = fewer jobs

• It’s unaffordable
  We’re bankrupting our children / grandchildren
It’s how we protect ourselves and those we care about

It’s how we tackle problems that none of us can solve by ourselves

The mission and purpose of the public sector are different than those of business, but no less important

It provides things that no business can provide

Without the public sector, business could not function
Progressive Frame (continued)

Public structure are the way we secure the common good

- Roads, sewers and the other infrastructure that our economy and way of life depend on
- Prevention of epidemics and unnecessary deaths from disease
- Safe homes, safe food, clean drinking water, unpolluted rivers and lakes, and breathable air
- Prevention of crime and dispensing of justice
- Protection of those unable to care for themselves.
- Prevention of business misdeeds and mistakes that harm both individuals and other businesses
- Prevention of workplace injuries and deaths
- Effective responses to disasters and emergencies
- Protection of civil liberties
Public value includes protection…
… and the structures, services and systems that enable business & society to function.
The Conservative Tax Frame

We need tax relief!

For there to be relief, there must be:

- An affliction: Taxes, which are an unreasonable confiscation of money that is rightfully ours
- The afflicted
  - Individuals, who cannot enjoy the full fruits of their labor
  - Businesses, unable to create or sustain employment due to the tax burden
- A reliever who removes the affliction (the hero)

People who try to stop the hero are villains
The Progressive Tax Frame

Taxes are dues, the price we pay for civilization

They are how we create and sustain public structures / public value

Forward Exchange (YMCA Analogy)

Much of the public value we enjoy – highways, parks, schools, libraries, the public health department - were paid for by those who came before us. The public structures we create with our taxes will benefit those who will come after us

Our country’s problem isn’t just spending -- it’s misplaced priorities and unfair tax policies
RESOURCES
to help us
Create New Frames &
Tell New Stories
Welcome to governmentisgood.com

Why a website defending government? Because, like many Americans, I am tired of the government bashing that is constantly coming from the political right. For decades conservatives have been demonizing government and not enough has been done to defend it. Ever since Ronald Reagan declared in 1981 that "Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem," Republicans have been waging a political war against this institution. Their core message: the free market is good and government is bad.

Blithely ignoring anything good about government, conservatives have conducted a relentless smear campaign against this institution, portraying it as wasteful, ineffective, corrupt, oppressive, and bad for business. And wherever they have been in power, Republican officials have pursued an anti-government
"Restoring Trust In Government"

Demos and The Democratic Strategist: A Journal Of Public Opinion & Political Strategy are jointly sponsoring an online forum: "Restoring Trust in Government."

Read More | Mar 16, 2011

Research

By, or for, the People?
A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion of Government
Read More | March 25, 2005

Analysis & Opinion

Robert Kutner
The Stimulus That Isn't
So it's clear that "bipartisanship," even on heavily Republican terms, produces no follow-through and no reciprocity. This is bipartisanship in the spirit of Neville Chamberlain. You give, and immediately they are after...
## Sample Presentation

**How to Talk About Government (Feb. 2010)** is an overview of our Talking about Government research findings with brief descriptions of the stories and frames that shape public thinking and recommendations for communicating in ways that can help change discourse about the role of government. This presentation is useful to those interested in a brief introduction to our work.

[**Narrated Presentations**](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks) includes a narrated version of this presentation.

---

This short presentation, [**Talking About Taxes**](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks), addresses how to communicate about taxes more productively. The powerpoint describes the prevailing themes in anti-tax rhetoric and includes tools to foster a more pragmatic discussion about the role that taxes play in our society. For this discussion to be fruitful, the public discourse must reconnect taxes to their purposes. Examples in this presentation demonstrate how this can be articulated. For more information, visit our [tax research](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks), [examples in the field](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks), and the [narrated version of this powerpoint](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks).

---

**Making The Case for Government's Role in the Economy** summarizes our economy research findings. The presentation describes the dominant public perception of the economy and includes a new economic narrative to reshape this perception. More resources are located in our [economy research](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks) and the [narrated version of this presentation](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks).
We need to reframe government...

... from “Them” to “Us”, from Consumers to Citizens
We need to reframe taxes

Values and Purposes
- Lead with **Common Good Values and Objectives** to set up tax conversations
- Focus on **Shared Priorities and Goals for the Future** to reconnect Taxes to Purposes

Systems & Structures
- **Connect the dots** between the **public systems and structures** that underpin our quality of life, and the **revenues** from taxes that keep those systems functioning now and into the future.
- **Take a pragmatic manager stance** – taxes as tools

Civic Thinking
- From **taxpaying consumers to “civic-minded” stewards** of communities
- Taxes as our shared exchange with the future
- **We pay for the public goods we all benefit from**
- **Transparency and Participation**
Government

Beginning in 2004, the FrameWorks Institute initiated a series of integrated research projects designed to identify ways to communicate more effectively about government and its purpose. Sponsored by Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action, and the Council for Excellence in Government, Frameworks’ *How to Talk about Government* Project seeks, as the project sponsors put it, “to help renew the commitment by Americans to government’s essential role in achieving the common goals of our society.” Achieving this objective necessarily requires a deeper understanding of how Americans currently view government, why they hold the views they do, and the influences that shape those views. Only with such understanding can the negative stereotypes of government be effectively contested and alternative views of government’s fundamental public purposes advanced. The goal of this work is not to supplant or substitute popular messages for needed remedies and proven policies. Rather, it is to translate those policies that social policy experts believe will improve our quality of life into ongoing communications that illuminate a positive role for government and build a broader constituency for that vision.

**Funders** | **Recommendations** | **Research** | **Related Research** | **Products & Tools**

Funders for this Project

Research was sponsored by Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action, and the Council for Excellence in Government.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toolkit Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Framing a Message: How to Think About Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Strategic Frame Analysis and Policy Making: Where Does SIA Fit into Strategic Plan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Thinking Strategically About Framing: Elements of the Frame: Elements of the Frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Messengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Visuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Metaphors and Simplifying Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. A Framing Checklist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Some Important Definitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Framing Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Communications Traps to Avoid: Don’t Think About Elephants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Bridging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. A FrameWorks Bibliography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

www.frameworks institute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf
Framing: Primer for a Progressive Revolution -- Part I Philosophy and Rational for Framing

By Tom Ball
02/01/05


And each time you did you were helping to legitimize the Republicans' views on the issues -- that taxation is an affliction requiring relief, that our court system is corrupt and therefore requiring reform, that a very rare procedure (usually reserved to save the mother's life) is equivalent to killing a born child, that you 'can't even die without being 'afflicted' by taxation, that the current tax structure is an assault on marriage (and in turn that the 'tax and spend' Democrats are attacking marriage.) You were reinforcing and legitimizing their frames -- their vision and context of ideas, rationales, images, and perspectives -- in short, the conservative world view.

Don't blame yourself, though. They've been perfecting these frames and their means to meld them with 'mainstream' thinking in America for decades. It's only recently that the left has realized the power and effectiveness of frames in driving the national debate and subsequently the electoral results.

Fortunately, the left is waking to this reality -- understanding the critical importance of framing, and implementing it at every stage of the game.

The introduction of framing into the progressive community could well prove to be the beginning of a revolution. But such a revolution can evolve and sustain only with a concerted, impassioned effort by progressive opinion leaders -- executed in such a way that will compel the average voter to IDENTIFY with progressive values.

The Journey Begins

As we journey down this path to framing supremacy, we will borrow generously from the pioneer in this field, George Lakoff. In his groundbreaking work, Lakoff, author of "Don't Think of an Elephant" and "Moral Politics", and a Fellow at the progressive Rockridge Institute, has set the stage for a progressive framing revolution -- a revolution that we hope to perpetuate and strengthen.

To start, we offer this primer.
Track the public’s mood (& realize the glass is usually at least almost half full)

http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/culture/public_opinion
Because sometimes we’ve got to answer those inaccurate attacks.

Also, see the references at the end of the articles posted at www.governmentisgood.com.
Remind people of the public value we all enjoy

8. Develop a list of “Facts and Figures” on the surprising and unique contributions of your organization. You can use these as talking points in your media interviews, in your news articles and agency newsletters. To help you get started, check out these samples.

- Sample Did You Know Facts
- Sample 50 Ways Government Works for Us Facts

9. Use a lesson plan from the PSRW Teacher’s Guide. Designed for middle and high school teachers of civics, social studies and American government, the Teacher’s Guide contains projects, games and discussion ideas to get students thinking and talking about government and the responsibilities inherent in citizenship.

- PSRW Teacher’s Guide

10. Organize a community event and be sure to invite your local press. Organize an information fair or exhibit event, which provides an interactive opportunity for multiple government agencies to demonstrate their programs and services to the public. To help you launch a successful event, here are some helpful tips:

- Helpful Tips

http://publicservicerecognitionweek.org
Tell stories about public service – and some of them should be about citizens as well as public servants (Government is *Us*, not *Them*)
Resource List

• www.governmentisgood.com
• George Lakoff: The Political Mind, Thinking Points (downloadable), Don’t Think of an Elephant & www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff
• Drew Westen: The Political Brain & www.huffingtonpost.com/drew-westen
• Frank Luntz: Words That Work, What Americans Really Want
• Framing Primer for Progressives: www.politicalstrategy.org/archives/001117.php
• www.demos.org (click on “Revitalizing Government”)
• Demos’s presentations and webinars: http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks
• www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html
• Charles T. Goodsell: The Case for Bureaucracy
• www.americanprogress.org/issues/culture/public_opinion
• http://publicservicerecognitionweek.org
• www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/fedpage(players/
• Imakemichiganwork.org
• http://www.bryantx.gov/departments/?name=water