

Talking About Government

Dominant public perceptions of government undermine efforts to engage citizens in the day-to-day work of the public sector and the many challenges, decisions and competing priorities that face our public systems. However, it is possible to create a more productive conversation about government and its unique role by consciously tapping into alternative and more supportive public attitudes.

The Challenge

Most people only dimly understand government and how it works.

Three dominant, negative images (one vivid and another blurry) distort thinking.

- The Blurry Bureaucratic Blob - wasteful and inefficient, distinctions between what is public and what is private (and why) are fuzzy at best
- Government as Vending Machine - a “consumer stance” narrows the view of government to a “what’s in it for me, can’t we get it cheaper” perspective. This narrow transactional analysis does not support the civic approach needed to address public issues.
- Government as political theater - mere partisan squabbling, a spectator sport that has nothing to do with me.

Implications:

- Once triggered, these dominant perceptions short-circuit more pragmatic considerations of government and its role.
- Any policy or program initiative that requires government is inherently suspect.
- Debates about public programs and how to pay for them are poisoned before they begin.

The Antidotes

We can help people understand the issue by framing the conversation differently. We should start by emphasizing the mission and purpose – the unique and fundamental value of government, the common good and public purposes for which it exists.

We can also help our case by providing concrete and vivid images of the public systems and structures that undergird our quality of life and the functioning of our communities.

Finally, we should try to promote citizen-manager thinking – We are the stewards and managers of the public systems and structures that we have created and benefit from; responsible management and stewardship are essential.

Making the Case:

- Elevate discussions about public sector priorities to the unique values and mission of government.

- Help people remember the decades of investment in the many and varied public systems and structures that help to create community well-being.
- Help people to ask: “what do we need to get done for the good of our communities?” Beware of triggering consumer thinking that reduces any consideration of government action to “what is it going to cost me?”
- Find practical ways to make governmental functions more inviting, transparent and responsive to citizen involvement.

The Message

A vibrant public sector helped to make America and Ohio great places to live. Whether it was setting up one of the best education systems in the world, establishing stellar universities, and ensuring that Americans were among the most educated and skilled workers or putting in place a transcontinental railroad and highway system that paved the way for industry to thrive and grow, Americans and Ohioans have historically used our public systems and structures to create a vibrant and successful society. Our focus on the common good spurred us to vastly reduce poverty among the retired elderly, put in place standards for worker safety, and clean up our air and water. By using government as our tool for public purposes we worked to ensure an educated populace, a skilled workforce, a thriving economy and a safe environment. In recent years, we’ve lost sight of some of these proud traditions and we’ve allowed our regulatory protections to collapse, inequality to grow, our safety net to unravel and our education levels to fall behind. New challenges further threaten the public structures that have made Ohio and America global leaders in the past. It is time for our state and national policy decisions to better reflect the unique role that government can and should play in creating a thriving society and addressing the challenges and opportunities of a new century.

The Project

Policy Matters Ohio and Demos are partnering on a project to reach out to citizens and leaders in Ohio about the value of the public sector. Our goal is to help Ohioans understand how better policies will ensure a stronger public sector and a more successful Ohio. We can conduct workshops, give talks, review documents or strategize about how best to understand what government does for Ohio and how best to create an effective, responsive and excellent public sector. If you are interested in learning more, please contact:

For more information, see <http://demos.org/publicworks>

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Dēmos is a national non-partisan policy research and advocacy organization that works with advocates, community leaders, and policymakers around the country in pursuit of: a vibrant and inclusive democracy; a more equitable economy; an empowered public sector that works for the common good; and responsible engagement in an interdependent world.

Policy Matters Ohio is a non-profit, non-partisan policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus. Policy Matters uses research, advocacy, media work and outreach to promote a more equitable, prosperous, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Find us at www.policymattersohio.org.