



The Role of Government

If the solutions you advocate for, or the proposals you are working towards, involve any role for government, our society's language and public attitudes about government are getting in the way of your work. There is a solution for this. Research has shown our beliefs about government do include positive roles, and there are ways to talk about and critique government without falling into harmful stereotypes and pitfalls.

We know that creating housing opportunity fits within our collective understanding of the role of government, and that solutions we advocate for require a strong role for government. We also know that today, collective narratives and stereotypes about government are getting in the way of articulating a government role which can help us solve the problems in our communities. If you advocate for any role for government, changing the way you talk about government is important. This tool will examine current research by Public Works on communications about government. It will also help you critique government without undermining its purpose.

Background

Many of the solutions we advocate for as we work to create housing opportunity in our communities require a strong role for government — either as a funding partner or in a supportive role. Today, our collective narratives and stereotypes about government are getting in the way of articulating a government role which can help us solve the problems in our communities.

As advocates, we find that the way Americans think about government and the way we talk about government get in the way of advocacy for solutions that involve government.

Public Works conducted research into the way Americans think about government. They found hopeful news and strategies for how we can engage in a more productive conversation about government. You can read their research here: <http://www.publicworks.org/government.html>.

The three top of mind stereotypes about government found by Public Works are: 1) Government as Political Theater (a partisan spectator sport that has nothing to do with me); 2) Government as a Blurry Bureaucratic Blob (wasteful and inefficient); and 3) Government as a Vending Machine (I will pay for the services I use, and nothing more.)

Continued next page

Questions to Ask Yourself

What are the policies and systems I advocate for that include a role for government? Do I ever use language in my advocacy that might undermine a role for government (i.e., bureaucratic mess, corrupt politicians, etc.)?

Example (Courtesy of Public Works):

Before: Once again the actions of our city housing department show that it's all about who you know if you want to get anything done. If you don't have big money political clout you can't get any response out of that bureaucratic mess of an agency. As always our working-class neighborhoods are just overlooked. But we are taxpayers too! We paid our share into the city coffers and we should be getting some attention and services in return.

After: One of the most important jobs of our city government is to help create clean and safe neighborhoods where residents can live, work and play. Unfortunately, our housing department is not living up to that essential responsibility. The system needs to focus first on the neighborhoods and residents that create our thriving city, not the developers. It is time for all of us to work together to get this public agency back on track and focused on community needs.

BACKGROUND continued from page 1

We can make sure we aren't undermining governments' role in the solutions we seek in our advocacy. We can do this in a few simple ways:

1. Remind our audiences about the mission and purpose of government. Government was created by us and for us, to do the things we need to do together. It has a unique and critical mission and purpose.
2. Call up the systems and structures that government has built. Remind people of the concrete and vivid images such as the parks down the street, the public transit system, social security, the post office, all ways we've come together to solve problems and meet needs in communities.
3. Call out "Citizen-Manager Thinking." We are the caretakers of this system that we created and benefit from. Responsible stewardship and management are essential.

Public Works also recognized that often times as advocates we need to critique the government, but how we do that is critical. They created a strategy — critiquing without undermining — which suggests that you first assert a purpose or a mission that the government agency or department is there to uphold, and then talk about how it's falling short of this mission.

More Resources

Read Public Works' Research on Government: <http://www.publicworks.org/government.html>

Watch a video with Public Works' Patrick Bresette talking about their research on Government: <http://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/video-making-the-case-for-government>

Read Public Works' guide to Critiquing without Undermining: http://www.publicworks.org/uploads/1/1/1/4/11142270/critiquing_government_without_sabotage_upd_2013_4.pdf

Exercises

- › Try to identify the stereotypes about government in the above "before" example.
- › Look back through your work recently. Have you written an op-ed or a letter to the editor that sounds like the "before" example above?
- › Now try critiquing without undermining.
 - a. First, assert a purpose by picking a government agency you work with that you think could do a better job with its work. Now, define their purpose and mission. Try using some of your Level One values (See: Values).
 - b. Now, describe how the agency is falling short of achieving their purpose. How could they do a better job? Try not to rely on the common stereotypes about government.

Remember: **This is not about being a cheerleader for government or helping people "like" government. Often times, as advocates, we need to critique the work of government to improve it, but how we critique it is almost as important as the critique itself. Undermining the purpose of government by using stereotypes doesn't support our long term goals.**

Next Steps

- › Try writing a letter to the editor or op-ed using the strategy of critiquing without undermining. Ask others to read your piece – does this start a different conversation about government? Does it feel more productive?
- › Keep practicing! Our stereotypes about government can be hard to dislodge, but the good news is they are right there with more positive notions about what government can do.