



## Using a Values Framework To Shift Thinking About Government

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One of the most critical paradoxes in American civic life is that **voters often express distrust of government while simultaneously desiring the very services and protections that only government can provide**. This contradiction is deeply rooted in political culture and decades of messaging (and often is a staple of partisan campaigning), but it is also a powerful opportunity for re-framing using a **values-first communication strategy**.

### Here are Seven Ways a Values Framework Can Shift Thinking About Government

#### 1. Reframe Government as the Tool for Advancing Shared Values

Rather than defending “government” per se, a values framework **reframes the conversation** around what government *does* when it’s working well:

- **Start with values people support:** security, freedom, opportunity, care, community.
- Then, link those values to **visible outcomes** made possible through public action:

“We all want to live in communities where our kids have great schools, our water is safe to drink, and our parents can get care when they need it. That’s not ‘big government.’ That’s us, coming together to build a future.”

By focusing on **collective benefit**, rather than government as an abstract institution or bureaucracy, you ground the idea of government in lived experience.

#### 2. Replace “Government” with People-Oriented Language

Research from the FrameWorks Institute and others shows that **“government” often triggers skepticism**, but alternative phrases like:

- “Public structures”
- “Our shared systems”
- “The ways we come together to solve big problems”
- “The tools we use to care for one another”

...can **sidestep ideological resistance** and reconnect audiences to the purpose behind public institutions.

Instead of: “Government should invest more in infrastructure.”

Try: “We need to invest in the systems that connect us—like roads, clean energy, and broadband—so every community can thrive.”

### 3. Reclaim the Concept of the “Public Good”

Emphasizing the **shared benefits** of public investments—and making them tangible—helps build appreciation for what government makes possible.

- Clean air and water: “We breathe cleaner air today because we decided, together, to protect it.”
- Public health: “Our health departments keep diseases from spreading—and they don’t check your insurance card first.”
- Safety nets: “No one should fall so far they can’t get back up. That’s why we have Social Security, Medicare, and public schools.”

Use **concrete examples**, not abstract policy.

### 4. Acknowledge Frustrations Without Reinforcing Cynicism

A values-based approach also requires **recognizing people’s real frustrations** without validating anti-government sentiment. For example:

“It’s true—government doesn’t always work the way it should. But that’s exactly why we need to make it better, not give up on it. When we walk away, the only ones who benefit are the wealthy and powerful.”

This both validates disillusionment **and** points toward **constructive engagement**, rather than withdrawal.

### 5. Tell Stories of Government as a Positive Force

Narratives are essential to changing perceptions. Highlight real, relatable stories of people who benefit from public programs:

- A child thriving in a well-funded public school.
- A local nurse supported by a public health initiative.
- A small business able to open because of fair lending laws.

These stories should **frame government as a facilitator of dignity, opportunity, and fairness**—not as a distant bureaucracy.

## 6. Avoid the “Government vs. Private” Trap

Instead of defending government *against* the private sector, emphasize **partnership** and **purpose**:

“When public systems and private innovation work together, we all benefit—but we need rules that keep things fair and ensure no one is left behind.”

This framing avoids ideological polarization and focuses on **accountability and outcomes**—values that cross partisan lines

## 7. Use “We” Language and Connect to Identity

People are more receptive when they feel a sense of **ownership and agency**. Use inclusive language:

- “We built this.”
- “We protect each other.”
- “We expect accountability because these systems belong to us.”

This frames government not as “them,” but as **us**—a vehicle for expressing democratic values.

## Conclusion: Bridging the Values-Government Gap

To shift perceptions of government, we must stop trying to win arguments about its size or efficiency and instead **frame it as the expression of our deepest values**: care, responsibility, freedom, and fairness. By focusing on what government enables—**thriving families, safe communities, and opportunity for all**—and telling stories that embody these values, we can reconnect people to the idea that **democracy is not something done to us, but something we do together**.

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Below is a **values-based messaging guide** designed to help advocates, communicators, and grassroots leaders shift public perception of government—**away from cynicism** and toward seeing it as a vehicle for shared values and collective good.

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## Messaging Guide: Reframing Government Through Shared Values

## Purpose

To help advocates communicate more effectively about the role of government by leading with shared values, telling compelling stories, and avoiding the traps of policy-speak or partisan framing.

### I. Core Messaging Principles

Principle	Why It Matters	What To Do
<b>Lead with shared values</b>	Values like opportunity, community, and fairness resonate across ideologies	Begin each message with a value, not a problem or a policy
<b>Use people-centered language</b>	“Government” often triggers skepticism; abstract terms don’t connect	Replace “government” with “the ways we take care of each other” or “our public systems”
<b>Tell values-driven stories</b>	Stories create emotional resonance and illustrate values in action	Use real examples showing how public programs improve lives
<b>Avoid rebutting anti-government frames</b>	Repeating myths reinforces them	Don’t say “government isn’t the problem” — instead, reframe the issue
<b>Connect services to outcomes</b>	People support services they see as effective and fair	Focus on <i>what public programs do</i> , not just what they cost or how they’re managed
<b>Acknowledge concerns, then redirect</b>	Validating people’s concerns builds trust	“It’s true government can be frustrating... but it’s how we protect what matters most”

### II. Values-First Message Templates

Here are sample messages organized around common values. You can adapt these for social media, speeches, talking points, or letters to the editor.

#### 1. Opportunity

“We all want our kids to grow up with a fair shot—good schools, clean air, and a chance to succeed. That’s what we build when we invest in strong public systems. It’s not about big or small government—it’s about doing what works for all of us.”

## 2. Community & Care

“We take care of one another—that’s what makes us strong. When we support public health, good schools, and safe streets, we’re making sure no one gets left behind. That’s not bureaucracy. That’s us, showing up for each other.”

## 3. Accountability & Fairness

“Government should work for everyone, not just the wealthy or well-connected. When we have fair rules that prevent corporations from polluting our air or ripping people off, we’re standing up for everyday people. That’s what our public systems are supposed to do.”

## 4. Freedom & Security

“Freedom means more than just being left alone—it means having the security to live your life with dignity. That’s why we invest in public schools, emergency services, and health care. It’s how we protect our freedom, together.”

### III. Talking Points to Reframe Common Issues

Issue	Avoid Saying	Say Instead
“Big government” concerns	“Government isn’t too big”	“We need smart, effective public systems that serve everyone fairly”
Politicians are corrupt	“Not all politicians are bad”	“We should demand that our public systems work for us—not special interests”
Wasteful spending	“Government doesn’t waste money”	“We all deserve good returns on public investments—like clean water and safe roads”
Privatization is better	“Private companies don’t always do it better”	“Some things are too important to leave to the highest bidder—like clean air, schools, and safety”

### IV. Storytelling Tips

- **Character:** Make the story about a real person or relatable situation.

- **Conflict:** Show the challenge they face without public investment—or the harm caused by cuts, neglect, or deregulation.
- **Resolution:** End with how a public policy, investment, or shared solution helped—or how it *could* help.
- **Moral:** Make the underlying value clear: *“We all benefit when we look out for each other.”*

## V. Quick Response Framing

When faced with pushback in conversations or forums:

Comment	Response (Reframed with Values)
“I don’t trust the government.”	“I hear you—people have good reason to be frustrated. That’s why it matters that we make our public systems accountable and effective—so they work for all of us.”
“We need less government, not more.”	“I think what most of us want is for things to work—schools that teach, roads that connect us, health care that’s there when we need it. That’s not more government—it’s better government.”
“Politicians only help themselves.”	“That’s why we need to stay involved—to make sure our systems are run by and for the people, not the powerful few.”

## VI. Closing Message

**“Government isn’t something separate from us. It’s how we pool our resources, protect what matters, and build the future together. When we focus on the values we share—opportunity, fairness, security—we can make public systems work for everyone.”**