

HOW TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

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Many observers have remarked, perhaps most famously Hadley Cantril and Lloyd Free in their 1967 book, *The Political Beliefs of Americans*, on the disjuncture between the public's positive agenda for government in many specific areas and its negative overall assessment of government's performance. Cantril's and Free's well-know formulation is that the American public is "operationally liberal" but "ideologically conservative". This may not be precisely the right way to put it but it does throw the paradox of American opinion on government into sharp relief.

This paradox would not matter much to advocates of active government if this operational liberalism could be easily channeled into support for worthy government programs. But it cannot. Jaundiced overall views of government consistently drag down support for government programs even in areas where the public says it wants more action. This makes it difficult to allocate sufficient resources to get the job done in these areas, which only reinforces public doubts about government effectiveness, stiffens resistance to taxation and increases sensitivity to the level of government debt. The first couple of years of the Obama administration have provided abundant evidence of this dynamic, where an underfunded stimulus, followed by a very sluggish recovery, has led to a flowering of anti-government sentiment.

For example, a May, 2010, Center for American Progress survey asked Americans "when the government in Washington decides to solve a problem, how much confidence do you have that the problem actually will be solved?" This question has been asked periodically by various news organizations over two decades, and the current results represent the lowest level of public confidence ever recorded. Just one-third (33 percent) of adults voice a lot or some confidence, 35 percent have "just a little confidence," and another one-third (31 percent) have no confidence at all. The proportion saying "no confidence" has never before exceeded 23 percent. Simply put, Americans do not feel confident that their federal government can get the job done when it takes on a challenge. And that's kind of a problem when government action is so urgently needed to build up our infrastructure, shepherd the transition to a clean energy economy, massively improve our educational system and much more.

The obvious solution is to bring the two aspects of Americans' views on government more closely into alignment so that support for government action in specific areas is matched by a more positive view of government's overall role. But how to do that?

What Is To Be Done?

Progressives generally agree that the duality of American public opinion on government is a serious problem. But that agreement does not extend to solutions.

On the broad center-left, there are three general approaches to solving the problem. First, and perhaps the most popular, is the idea that progressives must improve their *communication* about government. The recommended approach here is typically a combination of reminding people of all the good things that government already does and devising different language (or “framing”) to talk about proposed new initiatives. There is, however, no evidence that this approach has worked, or can work. People’s views on government are not produced mostly by the way conservatives talk about government and they will not be substantially changed by the way progressives talk about government. Their views are far more solidly based, reflecting their experience with government and their assessment of government’s output. In short, their views are rooted in the real world, not talk, and, even if unfair or mistaken in interpretation, these views cannot be dismissed as some form of false consciousness.

The second approach focuses on one aspect of the government, (the deficit), and asserts that solving this problem is the key to turning around public views of government. It is true that public concern about the deficit is currently high. But enhanced concern about the budget deficit and government spending is properly understood as a symptom of the underlying failure of government to function effectively, particularly in terms of improving the economy. It is the latter that is of fundamental concern to the public, not the former.

Just how low the deficit ranks as a stand-alone problem can be seen in a couple of recent polls by CBS/*New York Times* and Gallup. In the CBS/*New York Times* poll, a miniscule 4 percent thought Congress should concentrate first on the deficit/debt problem compared to 56 percent who thought economy/jobs should come first. In the Gallup poll, 9 percent thought the budget deficit was the most important problem facing the country, compared to 64 percent who selected jobs/unemployment/the economy as the key problem.

So focusing on the deficit seems an unlikely way to restore confidence in government. Moreover, by emphasizing an abstract concept like the deficit, it shares with the first approach a belief that the public’s animus toward government is not rooted in concrete experience with, and assessment of, government action.

This brings us to the third approach: improving people’s experience with government and improving the effectiveness of government action. This may be more difficult than changing the way we talk about government and more complicated than focusing on a single number like the size of the deficit, but it could actually succeed, whereas the other two approaches are bound to fail.

This approach starts with directly reforming the way government operates, rather than shrinking it, a priority, it is worth noting, that the public shares. In the CAP survey mentioned above, Americans were asked what should be the higher priority for improving the federal government: reducing the cost and size of federal government, or improving the efficiency

and effectiveness of the federal government? By a decisive margin of 62 percent to 36 percent, people said their priority is making government more efficient and more effective, not reducing its size. In the political center, where concern about deficits supposedly resides, independents (62 percent) and moderates (69 percent) both cite a clear preference for more effective government.

The CAP survey tested reactions to a strong government reform agenda (“Doing What Works”) and found very high levels of support. This agenda had three core components:

- Eliminating inefficient programs and redirecting support to the most cost-effective programs
- Evaluating government program performance and making information available to the public
- Improving the management methods and information technologies of the government

Eliminating inefficient programs and redirecting support to the most cost-effective programs garnered 71 percent support as very or fairly effective. Evaluating government program performance and making information available to the public won 70 percent support as very or fairly effective. And improving the management methods and information technologies of the government gathered 60 percent support as very or fairly effective.

After hearing these three core components, three in five (61 percent) said that the overall plan would be very or fairly effective in making the federal government work better, including strong majorities from each party and independents (67 percent Democrats, 57 percent independents, 58 percent Republicans). Both African Americans (71 percent) and Hispanics (68 percent) saw the plan as very effective.

Even among unlikely groups there was a strong belief that the reform plan would improve the government. Sixty percent of Tea Party followers, 55 percent of McCain voters, and 56 percent of conservatives/libertarians saw the plan as being effective. Both those with strong confidence in the government to solve problems (69 percent), and those with just a little confidence (63 percent) agreed. Even a majority of Americans with no confidence in the government’s ability to solve problems saw this government reform plan as effective (51 percent).

Beyond the broad outlines, the specific elements of the government reform plan enjoyed very strong support among the general public. Of the 16 reforms tested, 14 were seen as effective (rated 6 to 10 on a 10-point scale) by more than 60 percent of the public, and 11 were embraced by more than 70 percent of the public. Of all these reforms, the highest rated was this:

- “Require federal agencies to set clear goals measured by real-world results.”

Eighty-two percent of the public thought this would be effective or highly effective, with 68 percent saying it would be highly effective (71 percent among independents). This seems like a particularly promising focus for reform efforts.

Of course, the Obama administration has already done some goal-setting work. The President's Management Council has encouraged agencies to set specific high-priority performance goals for themselves. But no one knows about it. Part of the reason is the number of goals across agencies: 128. That's just too many to be communicated effectively to the public.

What is needed for that purpose is a handful of clear, quantifiable goals that anyone can understand. These goals should tie together the work of individual agencies and be presented as a contract between the president and the people. Obama and other agency leaders should repeat these goals whenever they talk about what they're trying to accomplish both in the next two years and, if re-elected, in the four years after that. And they should emphasize that they are measuring themselves against progress toward achieving these goals, progress that the public can monitor on a government website.

One good way to start: highlighting all the money that can be saved through reforming the way federal agencies do business: cutting the fat out of federal procurement, modernizing information technology, stopping improper payments, increasing tax compliance and so on. Estimates suggest such steps could save hundreds of billions of dollars. The Obama administration has already taken some of the reform steps that will do just that. It's time to let the public know about it and set a specific savings goal. This will capture public attention and is precisely the sort of goal which, if met, can start to turn around negative feelings about government.

And that's what we need at this point: a start. As noted earlier, there is plenty of demand for government action across a wide range of economic and social problems but a lack of belief among the public that the government, if it acts, can effectively address these problems. This undercuts support for the very government actions the public professes to support. Aggressively reforming government so that it works more efficiently and effectively than it has in the past—and is perceived as such—should increase confidence in government, which, in turn, should build stronger and more stable support for government action to solve problems, potentially creating a “virtuous cycle” of rising confidence and competence. Setting that virtuous cycle in motion should be the goal of progressives.

Government for the People, Not Corporations

The virtuous cycle will be easier to maintain if progressives can clarify who is served by government. Since the days of the original Progressive movement at the start of twentieth century, the issue of corruption and corporate control of government has been a powerful motivator for reform. Earlier reformers focused on how the railroads, steel, textile and natural resources industries bought policies outright or controlled state and federal action for their own purposes at the expense of workers and the broader national interest. Today corruption is more hidden within the policy-making process itself but is no less pernicious in terms of eroding public trust in government.

The government-business nexus sometimes involves outright collusion or regulatory negligence, as was most apparent with the deference to BP's interpretation of deepwater drilling safety measures by the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service prior to the Gulf oil disaster. In other cases, the complexity of policy making, and the

dominance of lobbyists and other well-connected insiders in the creation of federal policies and laws, leads to a general sense that the government is rigged in favor of elites and not on the side of the average voter.

The most obvious case of this indirect perception of corruption is the public's reaction to the TARP program and other steps taken by the Federal Reserve to stabilize the financial sector. Despite being a relative success in policy terms, the overall public attitude was that the Obama administration did everything in its power to make bankers whole and did little to nothing to address the housing and employment crisis in the real economy. Conservative media and tea party activists obviously played a large role in promoting these perceptions. But fair or not, the public belief that President Obama—who ran explicitly on changing the ways of Washington—gave away the store to Wall Street bankers undoubtedly clouded future interpretations of the administration's steps on the stimulus and health care (another policy tainted by the appearance of insider dealing). When the economy failed to measurably improve for working Americans, as profits in corporate America hit record levels and bank bonuses continued unimpeded, many voters believed the fix was in, helping pave the way for the “shellacking” of the Democrats in 2010. Perhaps more importantly, the public perception of these policy steps over the last two years clearly damaged the progressive argument that government action is necessary, benevolent and in the service of the broader middle class of Americans. If Americans continue to believe that government action serves only a select few interests at the expense of average taxpayers, the possibilities for future collective action on key national challenges like energy or a new industrial policy will be hard to promote while the conservative desire to slash the public sector will be strengthened.

Performance matters tremendously for the public's trust in government. But so does the perception of who the government is working for. President Obama may still benefit from a turn in the economy prior to 2012. Given the declining faith in American institutions across the board, progressives would be very wise to ensure that our approach to government measures up to our own standards of fair play, equity, and service to the national interest over special interests.