

# RECLAIMING GOVERNMENT FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Almost every high-profile public debate today is, to some degree, a referendum on the role of government. Whether it is a tax debate, an effort to strengthen environmental regulations, or an attempt to improve public schools, the role and scope of the “public” in our everyday lives is in question. Yet, our shared common sense about government – that it is too big, intrusive, untrustworthy, and controlled by powerful elites – has resulted in Americans’ dismissal of government as a tool for the common good.

*Reclaiming Government for America’s Future* is a set of research findings and recommendations that aims to help people recognize that, for better or worse, government plays an essential role in our society and that we help ourselves not by dismissing it or tearing it down, but by engaging with it and making it better. With this research we hope to help advocates, policymakers, community leaders, public employees and others to communicate more effectively with their audiences, thus creating a better, more constructive understanding of government that also presents a clearer call to action and engagement with government.

***Find out more about Reclaiming  
Government for America’s Future at:***

[ReclaimingGovernment.Topospartnership.com](http://ReclaimingGovernment.Topospartnership.com)

***Password:***

byus4us



# RECLAIMING GOVERNMENT FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

## WE ARE SUBJECTS, NOT CITIZENS

Not surprisingly, the research affirms that Americans overwhelmingly hold negative views of government – related to bickering, inefficiency, bureaucracy and so forth. However, the most compelling and fundamental pattern emerging across the research points to a much more profound problem.

*Americans feel more like “subjects” than “citizens” – and living in 21st century America feels like living in another kind of country altogether, not the democratic society we are supposed to be.*

Specific complaints and attitudes about government vary widely across demographic and political lines. But, this sense of disconnection from government is now part of the “cultural common sense.” This critical pattern, and the language that accompanies it, is consistent across the political spectrum and demographic and geographic groups. At both a conscious and implicit level, people experience government as something other than the type of democratic and representative institution the Founders intended. Americans have come to believe at a gut level that government is not in our hands, in any sense. The public has internalized a picture of government that is of, by and for “them” (elites and politicians), not “us.”

This viewpoint is borne out by several widely held beliefs and perceptions.

- Government is them. People in power are others.
- The most top-of-mind functions of government have to do with order, control and authority – activities that any government, democratic or otherwise, would be expected to fulfill.
- Much of what government does has to do with making the rich richer, including politicians themselves.
- We have little sense that we and our fellow Americans can shape the course of our society or that we are unified with one another.
- We resent paying taxes, seeing it as money the government exacts from us.
- Government is often out of sight and out of mind, and we are fine with that.

Various research results demonstrate that government is not seen as “of,” “by,” nor “for” us.



Reclaiming Government for America's Future was conducted by the Topos Partnership, commissioned by a national nonprofit, Indivisible (previously Public Works) and supported by partner organizations in AR, CO, NE, NC, OR, and MI. Between 2014-2016, Topos conducted two nationally representative surveys; interviewed regular Americans in communities across 9 states; reviewed and analyzed over 200 relevant pieces in the media; conducted online testing including a protracted virtual community forum, while oversampling the opinions of people of color and Americans under the age of 30. Relying upon these various methods, the research team tried 100s of different ways to talking to people about government, looking for what ideas stuck with people and determining what led to more engaged conversations. In total, nearly 4000 Americans participated in the research.

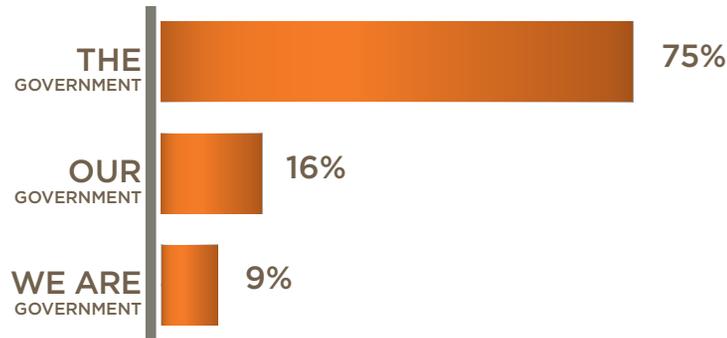
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## GOVERNMENT IS NOT US

The most basic dimension of the problem is that government is perceived as “other” – not “us” but “them.” This pattern is reflected in a question from the 2015 survey that asks Americans the question directly. Overwhelmingly, people choose language that distances us from government; “THE government,” over language that demonstrates a sense of connection to, or ownership of, government.

### CONNECTION TO GOVERNMENT

*Do you tend to think of it as “THE government”, more as “OUR” or as “WE”. we are government”?*



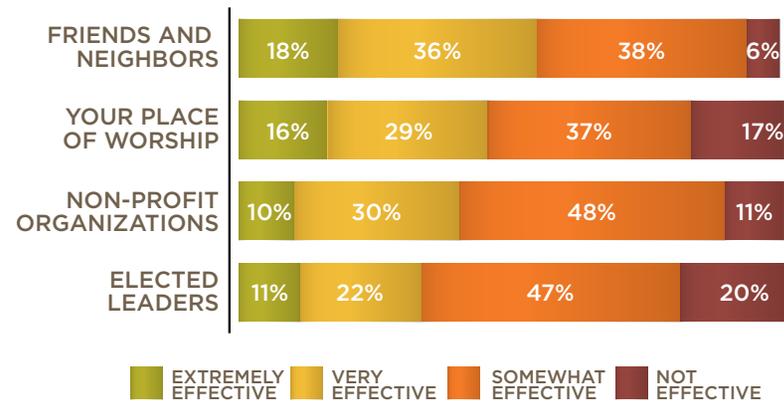
## GOVERNMENT IS NOT “BY” US.

In qualitative data, research subjects rarely talk about how regular people can affect the course of our society, or the choices of government. And, when asked in the 2015 survey about how they might make a difference in problems they see, people were more likely to believe they can make a difference by working with friends and neighbors, their place of worship or nonprofit organizations than with elected leaders.

Furthermore, when asked about how they can influence government, few are confident that this can be done, particularly in ways other than voting. Strikingly, it is as though the picture of what participation in a democratic society means has been reduced narrowly to the occasional act of voting.

### EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUPS IN MAKING A DIFFERENCE

*To make a difference on problems you see in your community or state, how effective is it to work with each of the following groups:*



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## GOVERNMENT IS NOT “FOR” US. IT IS FOR ELITES.

Not long ago, many Americans’ central concern was whether government had gotten “too big”. Now, that question seems less relevant as people focus more on the question of whom government serves.

Most Americans believe government actions benefit politicians, the wealthy, large corporations, and to a lesser extent, special interest groups. In other words, Americans believe that government actions are primarily intended to benefit the leaders making the decisions, e.g. by making them richer. Far fewer believe government actions benefit any other category or class of people.

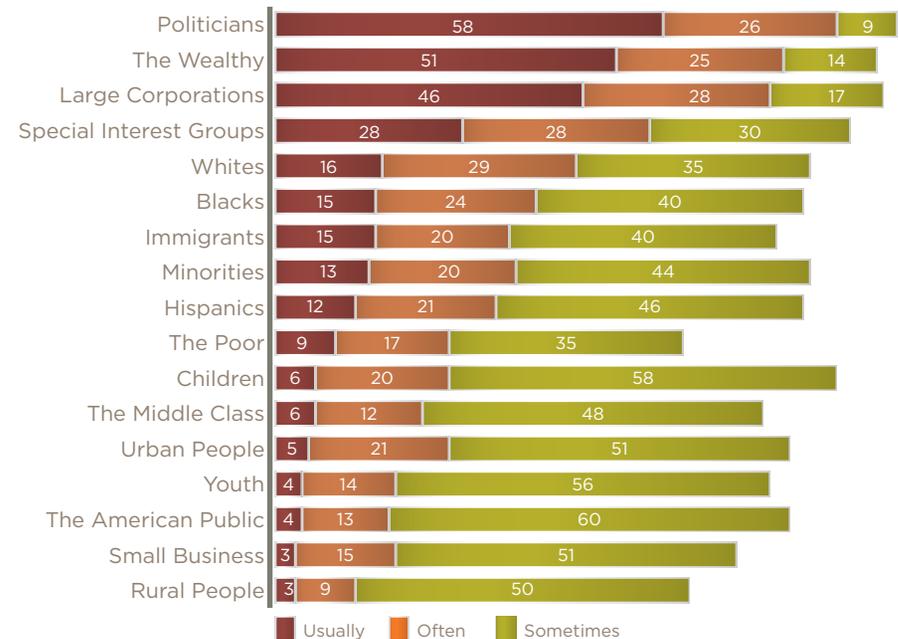
Communicators must address this resentment about who runs government and who benefits from it if we are to achieve the shift in cultural common sense we seek.

**73% AGREE, 24% DISAGREE**

**“It is not the size of government that matters.  
It’s who government works for that matters.”**

## HOW OFTEN GOVERNMENT ACTIONS BENEFIT...

*Rate how often government actions benefit each of the following groups:*



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## HAVING OUR SAY: CREATING A GOVERNMENT FOR ALL OF US

To build a new cultural common sense of government and to engage Americans in a hopeful, constructive understanding of government, we must address these problematic dynamics. The research for this effort identified a positive way forward that helps to create this shift in thinking – both by priming a meaningful and positive dialog about what we can achieve through government and also by helping people to imagine what a more engaged relationship with government is like. There are two essential components of this approach:



### *FOR THE PEOPLE*

Maintain a focus on how public institutions and policies are collective achievements that benefit us all, in order to inoculate against a focus on “government as politicians.”



### *BY THE PEOPLE*

Offer a vivid sense of how active democratic participation can work, and how it can help (essentially, an experiential rather than theoretical, model of democracy) while first acknowledging that most of us currently don't feel we have a say.

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## FOR THE PEOPLE

Americans' default perception of government focuses on the politicians in office – the people who, for better or worse, run our communities, states and country and whose actions affect us – their metaphorical subjects – as a kind of external force. It is critical to change the focus of communications to the ways that our public systems and structures benefit us all.

To do this, the research consistently finds that it is helpful to remind people of how the laws and investments we make through government are the foundations of our quality of life. We must find ways to explain how we help to create these structures and systems that make our societies work. The key is to convey an understanding of government as beneficial systems, structures and programs that are collective achievements on the part of all of us, rather than “gifts” from a benevolent group of leaders.

There are many ways to express these ideas and to embed them in discussions of other topics, such as democratic engagement. There are several keys to doing this:

- Pivot away from politicians.
- Focus on collective benefits of our public systems and structures.
- Explain how government helps create “thriving communities” – a phrase that calls to mind positive and relevant images.
- Avoid implying that we (currently) all benefit equally. (Many feel we don't – but can still have a constructive conversation about what the system is supposed to accomplish.)

### **SAMPLE LANGUAGE**

*The real story of government of, by and for the people, is a story about working together in ways that benefit all of us – from railroads and highways to the Internet; from world class colleges to libraries in every community.*

*We sometimes forget that governing isn't really about capitol buildings and politicians. It's about the laws and investments we make to benefit all of us and to create thriving communities. When we're using government well, we create prosperity by building modern transportation and communications grids, good colleges and court systems, and we make laws about clean air, food and safe workplaces.*

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## BY THE PEOPLE

For conversations about government to feel meaningful and real, they must address Americans' central concern – that they do not “have a say.” (This phrase is the most natural way of referring to the issue for non-experts, and is a helpful anchor to keep conversations grounded in a focus that is meaningful and important to people.) Many communicators feel, and the research reinforces, that it is critical both to acknowledge people's current frustration, and to remind them that part of the definition of the American way is supposed to include the people being in charge.

Just as importantly, communications should help audiences begin to experience what active democratic engagement actually feels like.

First, it is important to acknowledge that we don't seem to, but are supposed, to have a say. Regular Americans' don't have a day-to-day experience with influencing government and making their voices heard. To initially suggest they can do more than vote feels like a hollow suggestion. So, our communications should start by recognizing that most Americans feel like they don't have a say.

Conveying a new idea about how effective democracy works is essential to our communications. We need to help our audiences see that real change happens we take steps beyond voting. This can be described as “voting plus one” or “going a step or two beyond voting,” for instance. This idea proves clarifying, engaging and very “sticky” – people remember and discuss it as a new understanding about how democracy really works, and about how they themselves can take on a new, more active and impactful role.



### **SAMPLE LANGUAGE**

*Some groups are working on the idea of Voting Plus One or Beyond Voting. This is the idea that everyone should vote, but everyone also has to take a step or two beyond that. Going beyond voting is the only way we are going to get a say in how things are run in our communities and our state.*

Painting a vivid picture of the experience of democratic action is important. This picture can include several different elements:

“Success stories” – One of the most effective ways to change people’s stance towards government is through brief stories of others who have worked with government to achieve positive change.

“Starter kits” – Since the majority of Americans have so little experience feeling and acting like pro- active citizens, they like the idea that there could be “starter kits” with simple suggestions for how to go beyond voting.

“Process improvements” – Similar to the idea of “starter kits,” people appreciate hearing about simple, concrete steps governments could take – from establishing more regular community meetings to making information about upcoming decisions easier to access online – to make it easier for people to stay informed and make their views known.

All of these approaches are helpful because they offer what amounts to “second hand experience” of how meaningful democratic engagement works – and they therefore help people understand and believe that government can be a tool that serves their own interests and benefits all of us. At the same time, they offer examples, however modest, of blueprints for change. And even for groups that have no intention of beginning new engagement efforts, simply telling the stories of how we can have a say is a way of creating positive attention and energy, and a different stance towards government.

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## CONCLUSION



Americans are deeply cynical about the value of government and have very little sense that there is anything they can do, other than voting, that will make a difference. Though they recognize that they live in a democratic nation, their day-to-day lived experience is that they feel like “subjects, not citizens.” This research provides a hopeful blueprint for progress. Communicators must acknowledge that people don’t believe they have a say in how things are run. Moreover, we must remind Americans that government is supposed to be not only FOR, but also BY, the people. We have to help people connect the dots between what government does (schools, roads, public health, etc.) and how those things make up the foundations of “thriving communities.” We also have to give people a new idea of how democracy could work - it works when we all go a bit “beyond voting.” We also need to give people a sense of the experience of effective, engaged democracy by: 1) incorporating success stories of citizens coming together to make change through government; 2) offering tips and suggestions for how to be involved that could be grouped into “Voting Plus One starter kits”; and 3) reminding them of the mechanisms currently in place, and that could be in place, to allow them to “have a say.” Overcoming the negative views and the disengaged lived experiences of Americans will not happen overnight but it is fundamental to building support for, and persuading people to take action on behalf of, positive change. We need look no further than the current political discourse to see that we have no time to waste when it comes to engaging our fellow Americans in hopeful and constructive conversations about our government.