



Framing C19

Topic #2: Making a powerful case for the role of government

To come through this crisis we need governments to act. There are actions that only governments can take - and our communications can shape a robust mandate for this critical leadership.

An effective narrative about government responsibility is also a powerful antidote to us-vs-them thinking.

If government responsibility goes off the radar, we fail to get the action we need - and stigmatized groups can quickly become targets. Our narratives can help prevent simmering ageist or xenophobic resentments from boiling over into full-blown questioning of which lives are worth saving and at what cost.

But government responsibility is also a topic we must navigate carefully. When people see governments as wholly useless or corrupt, it perpetuates inaction and drives disengagement. A singular focus on partisanship, special interests, or dissatisfaction with elected leaders can obscure the potential for an effective government response. When we trigger the idea that government is all about the people in power, it's harder to focus attention on the powerful structures that we have, and need, to mount an effective response.

Here are three framing strategies that can help us lead a more productive conversation about the mission, role, and responsibility of governments at this crucial time.

1. Emphasize that we need and deserve a robust public response to this crisis.

Talk about what governments can and must do. Be clear that government action is do-able and in line with how our society can and should function.

Instead of starting and ending with government failure

"Our government is failing all of us and the most vulnerable will pay the biggest price. There is no concerted plan, dangerously unclear guidance, and crushingly inadequate support for those in most need. This is no time for politics as usual but we're seeing again and again that today's leaders are not up to the job."

Hold government accountable. Call leaders to action.

"We all rely on government leadership and action to keep our society going. Our leaders must take immediate action to slow the spread of the virus and mobilize the medical equipment and

supplies needed to keep us all safe. And they must lead us all through the problems that lie ahead, using the best tools humanity has to rebuild our societies."

2. Be clear that government action has a distinct role - different from the things businesses, nonprofits, or individuals can do.

The term "government," on its own, can spark mistrust, fear, or ridicule. It helps to pair the term government with a description of how it should act - as a protector, a long-term planner, or as the people's voice.

Instead of calling for others to fill in the gaps

"Businesses must step up, do the right thing, and look for how they can provide a product or service that fills our new needs. To protect the elderly and frail, the young and strong must put personal desires and fears aside, avoiding the temptation to stockpile food or take unnecessary outings. And we all must do what we can to support our heroic doctors and nurses - whether that's staying at home, donating supplies, or sewing protective masks."

Emphasize the roles and democratic ideals that only government can fulfill

"We are all relying on our public institutions to protect us from physical harm and economic hardship during this pandemic. Businesses, nonprofits, and individuals can all play a part, but only government can channel public resources into the things we all need like vaccines or ventilators. Only government can set and enforce the rules that keep us all safe and well. We need action that makes the biggest difference for everyone and this must be led by government."

3. Don't play the individual blame game. Instead, call leaders to action.

Avoid activating a sense that our leaders are too inept or self-serving to trust. Instead, focus on the concrete actions that specific agencies or jurisdictions can and must take now for the common good. Once attention is focused on specific elected officials, the conversation quickly shifts away from collective action and gets stuck in politics-as-usual.

Instead of talking about personalities, politicians, or politics

"Unfortunately, our current leader is more focused on protecting his reputation than he is on protecting public health. And the rest of the party is going along with it. In the end, the very voters that put him in office will be the ones who suffer the most from this pandemic. It will be interesting to see how this turns out when - or if - the next election is held."

Focus on the actions that citizens should hold government accountable for

"We all need our governments to respond swiftly to new information about the virus and act quickly to protect us. We call on agencies at every level of government to deploy every policy tool at their disposal - and to do it now. And we call on citizens to stay informed, stay engaged, and hold their representatives accountable for doing the right thing."