PUBLIC STRUCTURES
HOW TO USE THE SIMPLIFYING MODEL

In this section of the toolkit we provide some concrete examples of how communicators can make use of the simplifying model that emerged from the research. But first, we will take a moment to review why the model is helpful. We hope this background will clarify and reinforce the hands-on recommendations we provide later in the section.

Purpose of the Simplifying Model
The aim of the simplifying model is to provide a conceptual focus that is more productive than the ones people usually default to – including the ones that advocates often choose to evoke. The public’s conclusions about the value of government follow from particular conceptual images of government – e.g. as a distant, meddlesome figure as opposed to a network of agencies with management roles. The goal of the simplifying model is to introduce a new, user-friendly conceptual picture that guides reasoning in more constructive ways than the current ones.

A complementary communications approach
It is important to note at the outset that the simplifying model discussed in this section was developed as part of a broader communications strategy. This includes other recommendations discussed elsewhere in the toolkit, such as values cues related to government’s Protector role and to the idea of working for the Common Good. The model is intended to complement and reinforce these other aspects of effective framing and is most helpful when used in combination with them.

Understanding the model
The public’s understanding of government often collapses to a flattened and distorted view of the “dysfunctional relationship” between the public and elected leaders – the government is pushy, aloof, uncaring, meddlesome, etc. This model is cognitively satisfying to many people, and yet leaves out any sense of what government actually does. For a variety of reasons, it is helpful to reintroduce the actions and products of government, and how they improve life for all Americans. The core idea of the Public Structures simplifying model is as follows:
America’s prosperity and quality of life depend on the Public Structures we have created.

This idea never needs to be stated verbatim. The key point is that the model should serve as one of the conceptual anchors in communications about the role of government. A conversation organized around this idea has a number of advantages over the current default patterns:

• It starts with a focus on things everyone values.
• It discourages “rhetorical mode,” in which people are focused on defending or opposing a particular point of view, and encourages “reasonable mode,” in which people are ready to think practically, solve problems, and take in new information.
• It discourages Consumer thinking – focused on what the government can give me, and who might be able to give it to me better/cheaper.
• It makes it self-evident that taxes are truly necessary.
• It sets up a “two-way street” view, according to which we take care of Public Structures and they take care of us. People recognize a collective responsibility for public structures as well as a collective benefit.
• It discourages a counterproductive focus on “character,” resentment of authority figures, and so forth.

In short, conversations that take public structures as one of the conceptual starting points are more likely to be productive.

In the setting of any particular communication, the model will be stated, elaborated and illustrated in a way that suits the context and the communicator’s style. Here is an example of a paragraph that was effective in the (unusually demanding) context of TalkBack testing:

Economists now agree that what has made America so successful is the effectiveness of our Public Structures. The Public Structures Americans have created – such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, and schools and colleges – are the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. Without them, it would be difficult or impossible to get lots of important jobs done. Developing countries have many smart, hard-working individuals, but they don’t have the Public Structures that are essential for overall prosperity.

There are three points to note about this particular explanation of the idea:
• The introductory sentence refers to economists as a way of signaling that the paragraph is about practical, big-picture perspectives. (This proved helpful in TalkBack testing, where for methodological reasons, subjects are offered no prior context to help them understand the ideas they are about to hear, nor their significance.)

• The examples of public structures are chosen for breadth, ease of understanding, and universality – the central point is that such structures are all around us and we all depend on them.

• The comparison with developing countries is offered as one clear way of communicating the importance of our public structures – they are what set us apart from some less “successful” societies.

Communicators using the model will find their own ways of achieving these important goals.

Using the Model
In discussions of policy on any number of issues, the Public Structures idea can serve as an organizing principle that helps clarify the appropriate role of government in solving problems. In order to serve this function, the model should be:

• Introduced very early, rather than as an afterthought
• Returned to more than once, as one of ideas central to defining good governance
• Connected with other topics in the communication.

Example #1
Thomas Friedman begins a column about the need for greater emphasis on US technological competitiveness like this\(^1\):

What if we were really having a national discussion about what is most important to the country today and on the minds of most parents?

I have no doubt that it would be a loud, noisy dinner-table conversation about why so many U.S. manufacturers are moving abroad – not just to find lower wages, but to find smarter workers, better infrastructure and cheaper health care. It would be about why in Germany, 36 percent of undergrads receive degrees in science and engineering; in China, 59 percent; in Japan, 66 percent; and in

America, only 32 percent.

The column goes on to discuss failings in US communications technology, math and science education, and industrial R&D, as well as a National Academy of Sciences report on the issue, calling for incentives and training to produce more qualified educators, incentives for students to study critical subjects, national investments in basic research, and incentives for highly qualified foreign students to work in the US after receiving their degrees. Friedman argues that President Bush should have devoted his second term to this “New Deal” for the twenty-first century.

While the op-ed’s point might seem straightforward enough, FrameWorks research has established that many readers are unlikely to understand the role of government in improving the US standing in technology. The “public structures” concept, if inserted early in the piece, could provide an organizing principle that would bring coherence to the list of recommendations from the NAS report, and make it clear that the Bush administration should be taking responsibility for the problem. Friedman might have included a sentence along the following lines:

The National Academy of Sciences has issued a set of recommendations for addressing the problem – all of them are examples of the kinds of public structures we need to rebuild and reinforce in order to ensure American prosperity.

The public structures in this case include business incentives, educational programs and professional development programs – all paid for by taxes and intended to enhance national prosperity, independence and security. To be most effective, the op-ed would return more than once to the idea that one of government’s important roles is to look after these kinds of structures and institutions, and make sure they are doing their job.

Example #2

A press release posted at Democrats.org (12/20/05, excerpted below) frames expenditures to rebuild New Orleans in terms of moral obligations to individuals and the community (and also treats tax breaks as “gifts” that, by implication, more people should be getting).

Washington, DC - Today, local officials are scheduled to testify before a House committee about the government's failed response to Hurricane Katrina. At the same time activists and clergy will hold a rally in Washington to call on President Bush and the federal government to honor their commitment to rebuilding America's communities and helping our fellow Americans who were displaced by the storm.

Three months after the disaster President Bush and the Republican Congress have yet to follow through on the promises made by the President.
Talking about Government

The piece would do more to clarify the role of government if it helped readers see the critical importance, in practical terms, of the public structures that make New Orleans and its port viable, and if it framed government’s failure in those terms. (Since this toolkit is about reframing government, and not about partisan politics, we offer no comment on the piece’s value as a political attack.) Here are two possible rewrites of the opening paragraph – the second takes a slightly more rhetorical/critical approach:

Washington, DC - Today, local officials are scheduled to testify before a House committee about the failure of the critical public structures designed to keep the city and port of New Orleans viable. From levees and breakwaters to evacuation and rescue plans to lines of communication between agencies, the institutions and infrastructures that the city relies on – and that are the responsibility of elected officials – proved to be woefully weak and inadequate in New Orleans and elsewhere in the storm’s path.

Washington, DC – Today, local officials are scheduled to testify before a House committee about the government’s continuing inability to manage the public structures that are crucial to the survival and revival of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. From levees and breakwaters to evacuation and rescue plans to lines of communication between agencies, the critical institutions and infrastructures that the region relies on were neglected by the elected officials who were meant to be responsible. Now advocates fear that federal officials’ commitment to rebuilding is waning, and the fatal disregard for public structures may repeat itself.

Example #3

Another press release from Democrats.org (12/14/05) frames tax cuts for the rich as a Christmastime “lump of coal” for the middle class.

GOP Congress to America's Middle Class: “Bah Humbug”

Washington, DC - Republicans in Washington have again put special interests and wealthy elites ahead of America's working families. Ignoring the challenges millions of middle class American families face with the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) this year and next, scandal plagued Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist has decided instead to focus on dividend and capital gains tax cuts that will primarily benefit only those Americans making more than $1 million a year.

Even at the level of political strategy, this framing is likely to backfire, since it sets up taxes as a burden that everyone needs relief from. (How will this affect future efforts to
defend various taxes, including the estate tax?) Tax cuts here are the prize for which various sectors of society are competing.

While the guiding metaphor in the piece as a whole (government as Santa) is cute and timely, it downplays the very idea of governance. Instead, the authors might promote the idea that the proposed tax cuts for the wealthy will inevitably be a blow against the kinds of programs and institutions that most Americans rely on (even if the very wealthy might sometimes find ways of doing without them).

A rewrite along the following lines could turn the tired and counter-productive tax-cut contest into a simple but thought-provoking critique of shifting resources from the public to the private sector.

GOP Congress to America's Middle Class: “You’re On Your Own”

Washington, DC - Republicans in Washington have again put commitments to special interests and wealthy elites ahead of their responsibility to maintain the public structures that American prosperity and quality of life depend on. Ignoring the inevitable effects on everything from student loans to medicare to homeland security, scandal plagued Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist has decided instead to focus on dividend and capital gains tax cuts that will primarily benefit those Americans making more than $1 million a year.

The point about the impacts of the AMT on middleclass tax payers would then be demoted to a secondary, ironic point contrasting with the tax cuts for the rich.

We hope that each of these examples helps communicators see ways in which the Public Structures model offers a new, more concrete and constructive way of talking about government and about the issues of particular interest to them.

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1 The process of developing simplifying models involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refining of hypotheses. One such method, TalkBack Testing, involves a variety of techniques, from one-on-one interviews to written questionnaires to “chains” of subjects engaged in an exercise something like the child’s game of Telephone. In each case, subjects are presented with a brief explanatory text (roughly 100 words) that focuses on some poorly understood aspect of government and/or its role. Measures of the effectiveness of the simplifying model include subjects’ ability to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory idea.