



Critiquing Without Undermining Government

If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists — to protect them and to promote their common welfare — all else is lost.

Barack Obama

INTRODUCTION



The dominant cultural common sense about government—that it is controlled by powerful elites, disconnected from the needs and priorities of the people, too big, intrusive, untrustworthy, and even oppressive—has resulted in Americans discounting government as a tool for the common good.

This fatalism is not a new problem, and elected leaders—Democrats and Republicans—are often the worst offenders when it comes to reinforcing negative impressions. Take, for example, an iconic ad by the 2010 “Joe Manchin for Senate” campaign, during which the Democratic candidate carries and shoots a gun while saying, among other things: “I’ll take on Washington and this administration to get the federal government off of our backs and out of our pockets.”¹ More recently, Richard Painter, running in the 2018 Minnesota Democratic primary for Senate, stood in front of a dumpster fire while talking about the “inferno raging in Washington.”²



1 Dead Aim - Joe Manchin for West Virginia 2010 TV Ad



2 Dumpster Fire - Richard Painter for US Senate 2018 TV Ad

INTRODUCTION



While candidates running for office make some of the most obvious and shocking anti-government statements, they are not alone. Progressive issue advocates also fuel anti-government views, if unintentionally.³

Imagine how strong our country would be if Congress spent their days working for the people who elected them instead of the people who buy them?

This is the federal government, with your tax dollars, keeping an individualized record of pregnant teenage girls' menstrual cycles, whether they've had a positive pregnancy test, what the government knows about how they believe the girls got pregnant, how they believe this individual girl got pregnant, and whether this girl has requested an abortion.

*Six months after the hurricane, **#PuertoRico** is still suffering: Unions are helping where the government has failed, delivering 54,000 water filters and donating personal time & money through **#OperationAgua***

To be clear, it is important to critique government, in constructive ways, and in fact progressives should own the reform agenda. Yet too often progressives critique in a way that broadly undermines the idea of the public sector as a means of achieving our goals, rather than building support for reform. How can people view public policy as part of the solution, if we keep emphasizing that government is the problem?

This brief document provides guidance for how progressives can critique in a way that holds the public sector accountable to the people without reinforcing skepticism about the essential value of public programs, institutions and protections.

³ Examples in this document are drawn from tweets, blogs and other communications from progressive advocates, media, organizations, etc.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

There are a variety of ways communicators inadvertently undermine government, or miss an opportunity to hold government to a higher standard.

PROBLEM: Communicators should resist blaming “government” as a whole for particular failures. Doing so can reinforce the impression that everything about government is ineffective, misguided, etc.

The government failed to offer any credible reason why transgender people should be barred from enlisting if they can meet the same rigorous standards that apply to everyone else. We’re happy the court saw through the government’s smokescreen #transban

I took an oath holding me to the ethics and values of the medical profession. I never imagined the government would step in to censor me from providing my patients with full information about their health care.

SOLUTION: Instead, critiques should be carefully associated with specific decisions, actors, and points of view. Recasting these statements accomplishes the same goals, but places responsibility with a specific person or entity and directs the critique to the offending actions.

Sample Revision: *Everyone, including transgender people should be able to enlist to protect our country if they meet the rigorous standards to join our military. Today, the Court held the Trump Administration and his divisiveness accountable to the people. #Transban not in our country’s best interest.*

Sample Revision: *took an oath holding me to the ethics and values of the medical profession. The Trump Administration’s proposed gag rule would censor me and other doctors, preventing us from telling our patients about all of their health care options, thereby jeopardizing our patient’s health and compromising the integrity of not only our health professionals, but our healthcare system.*

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

PROBLEM: Letting anger and frustration lead means that we miss opportunities to make a proactive case for positive action. Note the following quote that asserts the federal government CAN'T be a good partner.

*"I think we've seen that the federal government can't be a reliable partner in any kind of public health research" when it comes to gun violence, said a state senator. "We don't have a national policy, so we're going to have to do what we can at the state level."*⁴

SOLUTION: Instead, it would be stronger to make the case for public health research, emphasize state action, and, if a villain is needed, highlight extremists as the problem, not "government."

***Suggested Revision:** We need public health research about gun violence so we can make informed public policy. It's ridiculous that gun ideologues at the NRA have put up obstacles to gathering essential information. We'll continue to speak up for national public health research. In the meantime, we'll come together and move forward at the state level.*

⁴ Quote from "States are funding the gun violence research and the feds won't."

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

PROBLEM: Broad references to the shortcomings of “politicians” feed cynicism. Ballot measure campaigns, especially revenue campaigns, often run against government. It is a common tactic to feature accountability language such as, “protect my money from politicians.” One such example was Initiative 1098 for an income tax in Washington State. In these ads, politicians are essentially painted as corrupt politicians who are only looking out for their own interest.

*Looking for the truth about Initiative 1098. The fact is only individuals who make more than \$200,000 or couples making more than \$400,000 will pay an income tax. Almost 99% of Washingtonians will pay nothing at all. **1098 has strict accountability requiring independent audits. The politicians can't touch the education and healthcare trust fund and 1098 can't be changed without a vote of the people.***

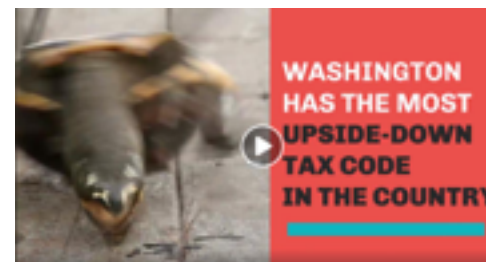
Vote 'Yes' on 1098. It's good for Washington.⁵

*Greed of wealthy bankers and CEOs caused the mess we're in. **We all know the politicians in Olympia won't solve our problems,** but we can. Initiative 1098 dedicates two billion dollars a year for education and health care that's **protected from the politicians.** 1098 is simple. The wealthy pay more, the rest of us pay less. Sixteen thousand kids have health care. Our kids have less crowded classrooms. Thousands of teachers stay in the classroom to give our kids the chance to succeed. Yes on 1098.⁶*

⁵ Looking for the Truth about I-1098? - 2010 Washington State TV Ad

⁶ Initiative 1098 is simple: The wealthy pay more, the rest of us pay less - 2010 Washington State TV Ad

SOLUTION: Initiative 1098 lost, and advocates in Washington state learned something about how to develop a powerful revenue message that doesn't run against government or legislators. Instead, they focus on the flaws in the tax code that hold the state back (not corrupt politicians who rig the tax code, for example). In this way, they critique the current system while emphasizing a solution.



Being Upside down is awful. We should know because Washington has the most upside down tax code in the country. Working people pay 18% or more of their income

in taxes while the richest pay 3% or less. Let's flip it around. A balanced tax code helps us move forward. Balance Our Tax Code

It's an easy choice: give the wealthiest 1% a special deal, or invest in the things that help all of us thrive by ending the tax break on capital gains. All In for Washington

If we clean up the tax code and get rid of wasteful tax breaks, we'll have more resources to invest in the foundations of thriving communities, like excellent schools, good infrastructure, and quality healthcare. All In for Washington.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

BEST PRACTICES: How to lift up government as a problem solver.

Lots of organizations and well-known progressives are providing great examples for how to critique while holding government accountable and positioning the public sector as a problem solver.

THE CHOICE FRAME: “Choice” or “Crossroads” is a simple framing approach that allows a critique of the current system while lifting up better solutions.

In New Mexico, Voices for Children sets up a choice or crossroads framework to show how different decisions will lead to better outcomes. (See graphic at right.)⁷

Democratic Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders sets up a choice frame to articulate a trade-off between tax breaks and resources to invest in our future.



@BernieSanders: We have got to get our priorities right. Instead of giving huge tax breaks to billionaires and profitable corporations, we must create the best public educational system in the world. Instead of major increases in military spending, we must invest in our kids.⁸

⁷ 2018 New Mexico Voices For Children Tweet

⁸ Twitter @BernieSanders 1:00 PM - 27 Feb 2019

SOLUTIONS-ORIENTATION: Orienting the conversation around a solution, what the public sector needs to do to fix a problem, is also a constructive way to hold government to a higher standard. An editorial by members of the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments doesn't shy away from the severity of the health problem they see in New York State, but focuses on what needs to be done and calls on the Governor to act.

Vehicle tailpipe emissions contribute to health problems across the state. According to the American Lung Association, eight of the most populous counties, including Erie, Westchester and Chautauqua, earned an “F” grade for ground-level ozone, which often results in a disproportionate health burden on low-income and communities of color. Patients with chronic diseases as well as the elderly, infants, children and pregnant women also experience the worst effects.

A recent analysis by the Union of Concerned Scientists found that by investing in clean vehicles and clean vehicle fuels alone, New York State could avoid more than \$6 billion in cumulative health costs and more than \$41 billion in environmental damages by 2050. A feasible, modest reduction (10 percent) in pollutant concentrations could prevent more than 300 premature deaths, 200 hospital admissions and 600 emergency department visits.

... The obvious next step is for the governor to take decisive action to reduce emissions from the transportation sector and improve health outcomes for millions of New Yorkers.

ABOUT TOPOS



See topospartnership.com for more information on communicating effectively to reclaim our government for the common good.

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

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