



Dēmos



# LEVERAGING THE IDEA OF PUBLIC STRUCTURES AS FOUNDATIONS OF THE ECONOMY

Produced by the Topos Partnership for  
Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector

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## ABOUT TOPOS

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Founded by veteran communications strategists Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, 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.

[www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com)



## ABOUT DĚMOS

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**DĚmos** is a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization. Headquartered in New York City, DĚmos works with advocates and policymakers around the country in pursuit of four overarching goals: a more equitable economy; a vibrant and inclusive democracy; an empowered public sector that works for the common good; and responsible U.S. engagement in an interdependent world.

**Public Works: The DĚmos Center for the Public Sector** was initiated by DĚmos as a deliberate attempt to address America's lack of trust in, understanding of and support for the essential roles of government. Grounded in thorough research and refined through extensive field-work with state organizations and national constituencies across the country, the Public Works approach to this problem has yielded enhanced understanding of how we can create a more receptive public audience for constructive conversations about government.

DĚmos was founded in 2000.

Miles S. Rapoport, President

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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This analysis is based on a three year investigation by Topos of American understandings of government's role in the economy. An Exploratory phase in 2007 included an analysis of expert and advocate communications, a review of public opinion data, and a series of in-depth interviews (cognitive elicitations) with average Americans. The Strategy Development phase conducted in 2007–2008 included Talkback testing of explanatory messages, focus groups, and a survey. In order to verify and update the recommendations after the dramatic turn in the economy in late 2008, a new round of research was conducted in March–July 2009 including new reviews of recent public opinion research, plus more individual interviews and TalkBack testing of messages.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“Public structures” has proven to be an effective organizing idea for more constructive conversations about the role of government in American life. The concept was first developed by the principals of the Topos Partnership in research they conducted for Public Works in 2005,<sup>1</sup> and since then, it has been field-tested by Public Works with advocates, elected officials, public sector managers, and public policy organizations around the country.

When the idea of public structures is conveyed, Americans focus on the public institutions, systems and infrastructure that we all rely on—from the court system to public schools to highways and regulated utilities. They quickly move to a perspective that foregrounds government’s fundamental role in creating the quality of life we enjoy in the United States. Conversations organized around the idea of public structures—especially in contrast with Americans’ default focus on “bickering politicians,” “inefficient bureaucracy,” etc.—are engaged and reasonable, and a far cry from the typically dismissive ones that ignore most of the rationale for government.

As part of a new round of research commissioned by Public Works to create more productive public dialog about public policy and economic outcomes, Topos has returned to the field to test the more specific idea that public structures are crucial foundations of *the economy*. And, they have looked more closely both at understandings of the concept of public structures, and at the examples that are most (or least) helpful for conveying their economic value.

This research finds that the concept of public structures has great potential to create a more constructive public conversation about the economy and government’s fundamental role in it. Talking about public structures, and organizing a discussion around them, goes a long way towards making the case that policy plays a fundamental role in shaping and strengthening the economy. More specifically:

- The concept is a clear one. An assessment of people’s understandings of what “public structures” are, after hearing a brief description and a small set of examples, finds that:

- » Research participants were able to come up with many additional, appropriate examples;
- » These prominently included *systems and institutions*—not just physical structures; and
- » They were able to offer clear and fitting descriptions that typically included the idea that public structures are important for our collective welfare.

- The idea that public structures play a key role in the economy is easily understood and accepted by Americans across the political spectrum.
- When people consider the role of public structures, it helps them take a fuller view of *what an economy is and how it functions*—as opposed to very narrow default views that focus only on prices and job security, for instance.
- Certain examples are particularly helpful for making the point, including: school systems/ community colleges, highways/roads, airports, postal system, and FDIC insurance. Each of these fills a clearly understood need vis-à-vis the economy.
- Other examples, particularly those relating to *regulation*, are much more problematic, for a variety of reasons.

## BACKGROUND

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This brief reports on part of a three-year investigation, involving a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research spanning a period of dramatic change in the economic landscape. Between 2007 and 2009, Topos, at the request of Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector, has conducted an extensive investigation into Americans’ understandings of the economy, and identified communications strategies designed to engage the public in a more constructive conversation about the ways in which government can and does shape the economy.

A guiding assumption for the entire project is that the public debate over economic policy is constrained by Americans’ views and understandings of government’s role—including fundamental and counterproductive

perceptions and assumptions to which people easily revert by default (even if they “know better” in some sense). The goal is to develop tools and approaches that can help the public overcome those default perspectives and achieve a more constructive perspective that enables them to participate more fully in policy debates and decisions.

Previous rounds of this effort have established that Americans are very receptive to the idea that *public structures* are important to the economy—i.e. public institutions and systems from courts to hydraulic dams to the U.S. Postal Service. Americans quickly appreciate ideas such as the following:

- Public structures are worth investing in (even if it means increasing our debt). They are foundational to our economic success.
- Public structures are important for creating a strong middle class.
- Public structures are an important part of what distinguishes ours from a developing (“third-world”) economy.

Establishing the importance of public structures goes a long way towards making the case that government and policy play a fundamental role in shaping the economy and making a strong economy possible.

An additional round of research has allowed us to delve deeper into the idea of public structures as critical supports for the economy, and productive ways of talking about this idea.

## RESEARCH

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The research and testing for this phase of work was based on input from a diverse pool of roughly 240 Americans from around the country.<sup>2</sup>

About 90 subjects participated in internet “experiments” testing the memorability of various public structures, for instance, and how easy it is for people to think about their relevance to the economy.

The research for this phase of work also included “Talk-Back” testing of seven different texts, with a diverse

set of almost 150 Americans from around the country. 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 that focuses on some poorly understood aspect of the topic. The effectiveness of the text is measured to determine whether it has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating about the issue.

In online TalkBack surveys, participants were each presented a single text (roughly 100 words) that approached the topic from one particular direction, such as the example below.

### Sample Talkback Text

Americans tend not to think about one critical ingredient to our traditional economic success, but economists<sup>3</sup> sometimes refer to them as “Public Structures.” These are systems or physical structures that that we all own and that are created for the public good. Here are two examples:

Community colleges available to everyone create pools of more qualified workers than there would be otherwise—reducing unemployment and so forth.

Credit regulations are structured to ensure that loans are made in ways that benefit all of us—for example so that businesses can get the loans they need to finance hiring.

Maintaining and investing in public structures is one of the critical ways to promote US prosperity, and experts even say they are one of the biggest differences between us and third-world countries.

Following exposure to the test paragraph, TalkBack subjects were asked to respond in various ways—including an instruction to repeat back the text as closely as possible. Subjects’ ability to remember and repeat the gist of the text is a key test of whether it is coherent enough to serve as an organizing idea, and of whether

it has the capacity to enter public discourse. The testing also looked at:

- Subjects’ ability to draw inferences beyond what they were specifically told;
- Their tendency to “stay on track,” rather than digressing to other topics; and
- Most obviously, their tendency to engage in productive thinking about the topic, and to avoid common counterproductive patterns of thinking.<sup>4</sup>

## A CLEAR CONCEPT

This recent round of testing has gone further than previous work to confirm that the idea of public structures can strike average Americans as a clear and natural concept—and is therefore a very useful organizing idea.

About sixty research participants were presented with a bare minimum of information about public structures, which introduced them to the idea of public structures and included an unannotated list of 17 examples (including airports, school systems, FDIC insurance, etc.).

### Sample Introduction to Public Structures

This survey is all about what economists and others call “public structures.” Public structures are the basic systems that we rely on every day that are owned by the public and created and managed by local, state, or federal governments.

Asked later how they would explain what public structures are, most were able to provide on-target explanations, virtually all of which focused on how public structures promote the common good.

## TalkBack Responses to the Public Structure Concept

I would say they are public institutions that uphold the economy and keep society running smoothly.

**33-year old Republican woman, Maine**

Things that the government runs that are supposed to benefit the majority of people.

**40-year old Independent woman, New Jersey**

Necessary. They are things we cannot do without, and thus should be kept public.

**41-year old Democratic man, Connecticut**

They’re systems that are put into place by the government to help the community.

**28-year old Independent woman, Ohio**

Objects that help people in many ways such as police, courts, power grids, water systems, colleges, post office. It’s a way government tries to serve people on a broader level to transport, keep people safe, and help those who need some help in order to maintain a fair way of living.

**24-year old Republican man, New York**

They are systems put into place to enable our society to function efficiently.

**36-year old Independent woman, Montana**

Things and people and places used for the good of the people, and to make life easier and better for the people.

**25-year old Democratic man, Ohio**

The fact that people are able to quickly grasp, accept, and explain the gist of this new concept is an important test of how effective a tool it can be for communicators discussing the government’s role in shaping the economy.

## A GENERATIVE CONCEPT

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Not only are people able to explain the basic idea of public structures, they are also able to come up with new and appropriate examples.

When the same research participants as above were asked to recall as many as possible from the list of 17 public structures, quite a few of them “recalled” examples that were *not* on the list, including:

Bridges	FDA	Sewers
Buses	Fire departments	Subways
City hall	Health care	Transportation
Emergency response	Infrastructure	Utilities
EPA	Libraries	Waterways
FAA	Parks	Welfare

One of the purposes of the recall test is to determine what the concept looks like in people’s minds, and these “false positives” (common in such studies) show that the concept is a broad one that encompasses a useful range of ideas and is clearly tapping into additional, useful knowledge and understanding.

## A CONCEPT THAT IS NOT REDUCIBLE TO “INFRASTRUCTURE”

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A legitimate concern about the idea of public structures is whether it will collapse into or be absorbed by the very familiar idea of *physical infrastructure*, such as bridges and roads—and leave out institutions and other systems that are organizational rather than physical, such as FDIC insurance, or community colleges.

One purpose of the term “public structures” is to create a broader category than infrastructure, but one that shares useful and essential characteristics with physical “structures:” intentionality, a public purpose, and the need to be “built” or created and/or maintained through government efforts.

This round of research was designed in part to probe whether or not “public structures” accomplishes this

goal without reverting to a more narrow understanding. The results were clear: While some prototyping effects do occur, especially in the absence of context or definition, once the concept is even minimally explained, public structures are not understood as being just *physical* structures, but also systems and institutions.

## A CLEARER PICTURE OF THE ECONOMY

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The “public structures” concept implicitly makes the case for the importance of policy and government involvement. Public structures don’t create and maintain themselves—they are shaped, designed, built and directed by public will as expressed by policy and funding. Even when “government” is not mentioned explicitly in testing, discussions often reflect research participants’ understanding that *government* builds and maintains public structures.

In addition to creating a clearer understanding of government as systems and structures, the public structures idea helps create a more helpful picture of what *the economy itself* is and how it works.

Previous rounds of research established that default thinking about how the economy works is dominated by the “Individual Actor” perspective. The economy is seen through a lens that focuses on individual workers, employers, consumers etc. going about their business. In addition to being limited in its scope, this perspective is largely grounded in moral rather than practical considerations—the economy changes, for instance, because people get greedier, lazier, etc.

The public structures perspective, by contrast, provides people with a very different and much richer picture of the economy, one that takes the emphasis off of (good or bad) *individuals*, and brings it closer in line with the more concrete, systems-centered view of experts and advocates.

When research participants make observations like the following, they are taking a perspective that is not only more compatible with an appreciation of government’s role, but much more informative in general than the default Individual Actor view of the economy.

## TalkBack Responses

Power grids are important to the economy because they provide critical energy to drive the economy which then drives the transportation, production, and selling of goods and services.

43-year old Democratic man, California

School systems are important because they educate the people who then filter into the economy and help evolve and drive the economy with skills, business, and entrepreneurship.

43-year old Democratic man, California

Social Security allows consumers to spend money confidently now, knowing that they will be taken care of when they are no longer able to work.

25-year old Republican man, Illinois

FDIC increases confidence in financial institutions, which in turns increases deposits and investments, which is good for the economy.

33-year old Democratic woman, Florida

Airports allow Americans to fly within the US—whether for business or pleasure. This encourages trade—in the case of tourism—and allows businesses to profit from often necessary face-to-face contact with clients or other offices. Business travel also results in local spending at the destination site—for example on hotels and food. Airports also allow foreign tourists to visit areas in the US and spend money in the communities they visit.

38-year old Independent man, Connecticut

## Choosing Examples

The research suggests that some public structures are more easily understood as supports for the economy than others.

When asked to discuss the importance of a number of public structures to the economy, research participants tended to choose some examples rather than others, and were able to give reasonable explanations for these. Specifically, they chose public structures like:

- School systems/community colleges;
- Highways/roads; and
- Airports.

These examples are both easy to recall from a long list of public structures, and easy to relate to economic success. The ease with which people recall and discuss the importance of community colleges as public structures is perhaps most surprising, but consistent with the general emphasis on education in American society and public discourse.

These “easy” examples have several features in common that other examples on the list of 17 public structures do not have—they are all familiar systems that provide for recognized, basic needs (education, transportation).

## Talk Back Testing Responses to Specific Examples

### *School Systems/Community Colleges:*

School systems are important to the economy because they are the training grounds whereby our young citizens are equipped to become members of our economic system.

45-year old Independent woman, Indiana

[Community Colleges:] When people get a college education, they are qualified to make more money, thus spend more money and pay more taxes. The community college also employs many people.

55-year old Democratic man, New York

### *Highways/roads:*

Highways are important to the economy because of the amount of infrastructure that they [involve] (i.e., resources, people, material, etc.) that drive and stimulate the economy.

43-year old Democratic man, California

### *Airports:*

Air travel is important to an entire region. Areas that are ... maintaining economic growth need air travel to bring more business to the area.

46-year old Independent man, Illinois

On the other hand, in order to provide a fuller picture of the role of public structures, communicators can move beyond the very most straightforward examples. The *postal system* and *FDIC insurance* were two other examples that research subjects easily related to the economy.

**Postal System:**

Even in the Internet age, it's imperative to the local economy that items can be easily/quickly shipped and received.

28-year old Republican woman, Texas

**FDIC:**

Without the confidence of knowing our deposits are protected, who would want to leave their money in the banking system? If the banks do not have access to your money to fund other projects such as building, home loans etc, that too would be a disaster to our precarious economy.

52-year old Democratic woman, Texas

FDIC increases confidence in financial institutions, which in turns increases deposits and investments, which is good for the economy.

33-year old Democratic woman, Florida

These examples (the second of which obviously has special relevance and salience in the current context) help extend the “economics 101” aspect of the public structures perspective. When people grasp that the economy depends in a variety of ways on a range of public structures, they are more prepared to see the critical role that government must play.

## HOW PUBLIC STRUCTURES HELP

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Besides pointing to individual examples of public structures and how they support the economy, it is helpful for communicators to keep in mind the *variety of ways* in which public structures support the economy. For instance:

- They allow things and ideas to move around (airports, highways, communications grids, postal system);
- They provide basic necessities (water systems, power grids); and
- They prepare people to be productive (public schools, community colleges).

Each of the above user-friendly statements can help average Americans form a broader picture of the role of public structures and can be particularly useful in communicating about certain kinds of government policy or action. Again, these concepts help to reinforce intentionality, “how things work,” and the public purposes behind government’s role in the economy—essential elements in an improved public discourse about economic policy.

### A Caveat: Problematic Examples

One note of caution: The research revealed that the discussion of some public structures that may play an economic role can trigger counterproductive, default patterns of thinking. Social Security and Medicare are important public structures that help individuals survive economically. Police, dams and levees protect them in other important ways. But while research subjects definitely appreciate the importance of these structures, these examples can cause problems in the context of a broader economic conversation. Each of them tends to trigger a narrow focus on government’s “*safety net*” role and to focus attention on *individuals and the “little picture.”* Additionally, people tend to view these roles as reactive—not proactive. This narrow focus makes it difficult for people to consider the fundamental and proactive policy-making role of government.

### Talkback Responses

Medicare allows older people to afford the medical expenses that come with getting older. Social Security if it does what it's supposed to do could be a lifeline for people when they get too old to work but still need a monthly income.

44-year old Democratic woman, Nebraska

Without police the economy would be affected because everyone would be scared to even go out of their houses! People would probably resort more and more to stealing because there would be nobody to stop them.

28-year old Republican woman, Arizona

### Regulations

Regulations are some of the trickiest kinds of public structures to bring into economic conversations. When Americans think about government's role in the economy, regulation is one of their strong default focuses. Unfortunately, this focus seems to go along with relatively limiting views of government as Referee (regulations make sure that Individual Actors play fairly) or as Protector/Rescuer (regulations keep us safe, safety nets prevent suffering).

### Talkback Responses

*What is the government's role in [economic innovations that end up changing our lives and our economy]?*

I think the Government's role is making sure that these new inventions are safe (hopefully). We have agencies, for example the FDA, which are supposed to protect the public from harm, but it seems that inevitably people are harmed.

35-year old Democratic woman, New Jersey

The government ultimately regulates these new inventions and products.

40-year old Democratic woman, Michigan

I think that the government is here only to keep consumers safe and that's the only role they should play.

25-year old Republican woman, Arizona

While these are legitimate roles of government and of regulation, the research establishes that an emphasis on these roles tends to reinforce a limited and reactive role for government, obscuring the more fundamental, proactive role that policy plays in shaping the economy.

There is certainly a laissez-faire ideology that supports and reinforces this limited and purely reactive role for government, but it is also clear that even supporters of regulations can tend to view them through these relatively limiting lenses.

### Doubly Abstract

Yet another reason that conversations about regulation are challenging is that it is simply harder to think about regulations than other public structures. They are a degree more abstract even than (nonphysical) *systems*, such as school systems, court systems or air traffic control systems. They are restrictions or requirements for how other systems and structures get used.

In testing, subjects who were asked to think of *credit regulations* as a public structure had difficulty wrestling with the idea or even repeating the term—which was variously rendered as *credit financing*, *credit scores*, *credit unions*, *credit cards/loans*, *credit institutions*, *business loans* and *crediting systems*, among others.

### A Promising Direction

One potentially promising direction is to describe (some) regulations—such as traffic regulations, FCC regulations, banking regulations—as structures that create “order” and “organization,” as in the following tested language.

This approach foregrounds a proactive and intentional role for regulations, as opposed to framing them as merely reactive enforcements. To a certain extent, people are able to see regulations in this way.

These quotes and others like them illustrate that regulations can be seen as public structures with an important overall role in shaping and strengthening the economy.

Economists say one of the keys to the US's traditional economic success is what they call "Public Structures." These include physical structures we need to get things done, from roads to airports to communications grids. They also include "organizing structures" that create an orderly way of doing things, such as:

- traffic regulations;
- FCC regulations that organize the airwaves;
- air traffic control; and
- banking regulations that ensure the proper flow of credit.

People tend to think about the physical structures but forget about the organizing structures that regulate and create order. Both kinds of public structures are an important part of having an effective economy, and are part of what distinguish ours from a third-world economy.

### Talkback Responses

*Please repeat...*

People forget about the organizational aspect of the public structures and the important part it plays in the economy . . . we have regulations [that] are needed to keep the system working properly and contribute to its success.

**47-year old Republican woman, Pennsylvania**

People forget that there are regulatory structures needed for the economic structures to run smoothly.

**55-year old Democratic woman, Iowa**

### Reverting to the Default

On the other hand, when the same group of subjects is subsequently asked to respond to the idea that government should "stay out of the way and not regulate business or other activities," their answers mainly cluster into two categories. Some *agree* that there should be less regulation (including a number of Democrats). Others counter that regulation is important *basically for moral reasons*.

### Talkback Responses

The government tries to involve themselves into too many of the lives of others. It's up to the businesses to make their own decisions not based on what the government might think about it.

**26-year old Democratic woman, Michigan**

I think we need the government to do some regulating such as the Better Business Bureau, but I do agree there is a point that the government should step back.

**52-year old Republican woman, Colorado**

I would rather have the government to set the rules and make the industry players follow . . . [Because] the private sector's only concern is about their revenue, they intentionally ignore the benefit of the customers.

**40-year old Independent woman, California**

As quotes like these illustrate, a focus on regulation can tip the conversation towards issues of fair play etc., even for people who had been primed to think of regulations as offering organization, structure and order.

The bottom line at this stage of the investigation is that it is unclear how to *focus* primarily on regulations without triggering relatively limiting views of the government's role in the economy. But, a discussion of regulations *in the broader context of public structures*, and specifically as ways of creating organization and order, offers a more promising way of framing them. This itself is, of course, additional evidence for the value of working to establish the broader category of public structures as a primary step in reframing public discourse and understanding about the economy.

# CONCLUSION

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As previous rounds of research have demonstrated, the idea of public structures clearly has great potential to create a more constructive public conversation about the economy and government’s fundamental role in it.

This phase of research has explored the nature of this conversation further, by focusing on how different examples and approaches affect people’s thinking and specifically the value of talking about public structures as foundations of the economy.

Certain examples of public structures are more natural and effective than others, but there are a range of examples, physical and otherwise, that are clear and “cognitively accessible” to people, and that they can use to understand and reason about the economy.

Perhaps most promisingly, when people are offered a range of examples *their vision of the economy as a whole* is improved, helping shift their focus away from individual actors, and toward the variety of ways in which policies and systems are essential to economic activity and outcomes.

In short, simply *asking people to think about the economic relevance of public structures* goes a long way towards offering them a smarter, bigger-picture perspective on

the economy—making them more equipped to participate in important discussions about economic policy for instance. The public structures perspective heads off the narrow and politically-charged views that so easily dominate thinking and discussion, and create the space for a more practical and pragmatic consideration of this challenging topic.

Even regulations, a particularly sticky topic for a variety of reasons, can be brought into a useful conversation about public structures and the economy—though this phase of research has not yielded an ideal way of focusing primarily on regulations and their role. The idea that *regulations bring structure and order* is a promising way of reframing their value away from less constructive default views.

This focused investigation into the power and flexibility of *public structures* as a tool for reshaping public understanding about the economy strongly reinforces and builds on what we had learned in previous rounds of research. Americans are very receptive to the idea that *public structures* are important to the economy, that they are worth investing in, that they are essential for creating and supporting a strong middle class and that our economic success as a nation is directly linked to the systems and structures we have created.

## ENDNOTES

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1. This research was conducted by Cultural Logic, commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute on behalf of Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector. For a summary of the findings, please see <http://demos.org/publicworks/buildingsupport.cfm>.
2. TalkBack participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, education level, ethnicity, political orientation and occupation. They were recruited from a vetted national panel of over 5000 subjects.
3. Note that for purposes of testing, texts often attribute language and ideas to experts, to find out what would happen if the experts did express themselves in this way.
4. For more on these common and counterproductive ways of thinking about the economy see *Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief* at [www.demos.org/publicworks](http://www.demos.org/publicworks).





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