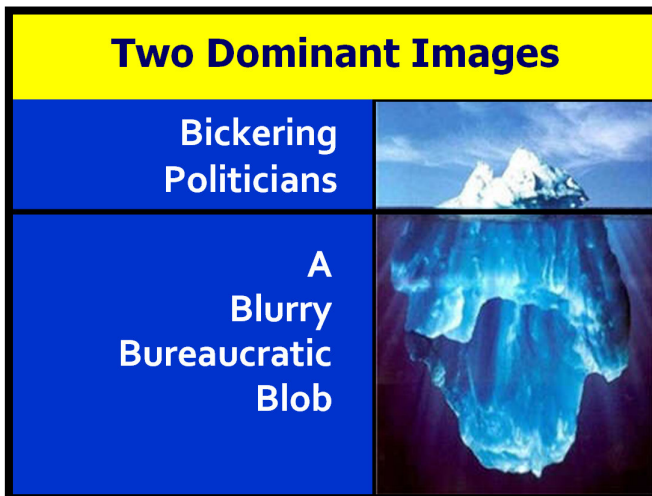


Dominant public perceptions of government undermine efforts to engage citizens in the day-to-day work of the public sector and the many challenges, decisions and competing priorities that face our public systems. However, it is possible to create a more productive conversation about government and its unique role by consciously tapping into alternative and more supportive public attitudes.

The Challenge

- Most people only dimly understand government and how it works.
- Two dominant, negative images (one vivid and another blurry) distort thinking.
- A “consumer” stance towards government has suppressed “citizen-thinking.”



- **Government as Political Theater** - mere partisan squabbling, a spectator sport, “nothing to do with me.”
- **The Blurry Bureaucratic Blob** - wasteful and inefficient, distinctions between what is public and what is private (and why) are fuzzy at best
- **Government as Vending Machine** – a “consumer stance” narrows the view of government to a “what’s in it for me, can’t we get it cheaper” perspective. This narrow transactional analysis does not support the civic approach needed to address many public issues.

Implications:

- Once triggered, these dominant perceptions short-circuit more pragmatic considerations of government and its role.
- Any policy or program initiative that requires an active governmental role is inherently suspect.
- Debates about public programs and how to pay for them are poisoned before they begin.

The Antidotes



- **Mission and Purpose** – the unique and fundamental value of government, the common good and public purposes for which it exists.
- **Concrete and Vivid Images** of the public systems and structures that undergird our quality of life and the functioning of our communities.



- **Citizen-Manager Thinking** – “We” are the stewards and managers of the public systems and structures that we have created and benefit from; responsible management and stewardship are essential.

Making the Case:

- Elevate discussions about public sector priorities to the unique values and mission of government.
- Help people remember the decades of investment in the many and varied public systems and structures that help to create community wellbeing.
- Beware of triggering Consumer Thinking that reduces any consideration of government action to “what is it going to cost me?” We need people asking “what do we need to get done for the good of our communities?”
- Find practical ways to make governmental functions more inviting, transparent and responsive to citizen involvement.

For an overview of the research and our work in the field see <http://demos.org/publicworks>

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