



ITEP Interview With Patrick Bresette: How to Talk About Taxes

April 13, 2007

With April 15 – the day Americans traditionally file their tax returns – fast approaching, you are almost certain to see an uptick in the number of news stories about taxes and government spending. It’s almost as certain that both will be portrayed in a negative light.

What can be done to change the way the public views taxes and to foster an appreciation for the notion that “taxes are the price we pay for a civilized society”? For answers to these and other questions, we turned to Patrick Bresette, the Associate Program Director of Public Works: the Dçmos Center for the Public Sector. Public Works is dedicated to changing public discourse about the role of government in America in order to create and maintain a public sector that is competent, adequately funded and dedicated to public purposes. One of Public Works’ latest projects – the “How to Talk about Government” project – seeks to understand Americans’ perceptions of government and how those perceptions can be used to improve the way we communicate about government.

Our interview with Patrick follows.

ITEP: What are some of the lessons that you have learned to date from the “How to Talk about Government” project?

Bresette: Our research into how Americans think about government has revealed both serious hurdles to be addressed and positive directions to be pursued. The good news first: despite a thirty year decline in faith and trust in government there is still a latent belief in the necessary and important role that government must play in our society. Unfortunately, this perception is deeply buried beneath widespread cynicism and “top of mind” images of government as nothing more than bickering politicians and a bloated and wasteful bureaucracy. Additionally, Americans have come to view government as just another “point of purchase.” Through this “consumer” lens the public sector is assessed only through a “what’s-in-it-for-me” analysis.

Dealing with these problematic perceptions requires that advocates for public sector solutions to pressing problems must:

- avoid triggering images of government as nothing more than partisan politics,
- find ways to offer concrete and vivid images of government that help define its important role; and
- stay away from “selling” government services as just another consumer benefit.

ITEP: How do you think those lessons could be applied to efforts to improve the adequacy, equity, and efficiency of federal, state, and local tax systems?

Bresette: Debates about tax policy are obviously a crucible for public attitudes toward government.

We believe that our research offers some guidance for talking to the public about tax policy in support of positive changes to tax systems and structures.

- Place taxes in the context of the long term maintenance and stewardship of the things we all depend to avoid short-term, “what’s in it for me” analyses.
- Emphasize how taxes are a means for getting things done together. We must all agree to contribute or many important projects will not happen.
- Talk about what government does in more concrete, structural and dynamic terms.
- Don’t reinforce bad frames: tax burden, tax relief, tax holiday, hard-earned tax dollars, etc.

ITEP: Tax Day – usually April 15 – is rapidly approaching, which means that there likely will be additional coverage of tax issues by most news outlets. What sort of opportunities do you think this presents for people and organizations that are concerned about a vibrant public sector and fair taxes? Are there dangers? What advice do you have for those seeking to preempt or to rebut the typically negative coverage of these issues associated with Tax Day?

Bresette: This is obviously a period where heightened attention to taxes offers both opportunities and perils. Building on the points made above, I think this is a great chance to help the public remember the purpose and benefits of taxes. Unfortunately, much of the media coverage will draw your readers into debates focused only on whether taxes are too high or too complex.

Navigating this minefield will require some thoughtfulness and discipline. Here are a couple of suggestions:

Take every opportunity to reframe the debate about taxes in terms of their function rather than whether or not they are a burden. Your readers might want to take a look at an interesting piece by Ruth Rosen that tries to do this:

<http://www.longviewinstitute.org/research/rosen/talkingtaxes>

Avoid being drawn into a political or partisan analysis of taxes. Stake out a pragmatic and reasonable tone that focuses on taxes as a tool we use to get things done.

Assessments of taxes should be based on whether they help us create and maintain the quality of life we all want (adequacy); on whether they are designed in a way that has all elements of society contributing (fairness); and, whether the system is structured and operated in a rational way (accountability and efficacy).

Take a look at a typical question your readers might receive and two possible answers:

“Americans are interested in paying taxes that are as low as possible. Do you believe that solutions to our pressing problems will require tax increases?”

Less effective: “No-one is in favor of taxes for their own sake, but we can’t expect government to do a good job unless it has the resources it needs to get the job done.”

Analysis: Starts by accepting negative view of taxes. Puts spotlight on government-as-actor rather than the activities/products of government.

More effective: “The real question is: what public structures do we need to have in place in order to have the prosperity and quality of life we all expect? Does that include transportation and communication systems? A legal system for resolving disputes? Agencies that watch over our food supply, air and water? And what level of funding do we need in order to create and maintain these structures?”

Analysis: Forefronts the activities and products of government, using language that evokes concrete images of the responsibilities and duties of the public sector. Ties taxes to recognized needs, rather than discussing them in isolation, or in relation to individual freedom. Builds on the roles of government that Americans appreciate and expect.

ITEP: Do you feel as though progress is being made? In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, are people beginning to understand the role of taxes and government? Are they beginning to understand the importance of tax dollars?

Bresette: I don’t think we are witnessing a wholesale reappraisal of taxes by Americans. But I do think that a number of events are beginning to connect important dots in the public mind. Before it became dominated by a more partisan and political analysis, the Katrina disaster did have many Americans questioning how the systems and structures we all rely upon in such events had become so weakened. From levees to disaster response, questions were being asked about under-funding, mismanagement and questionable priorities. Other issues -- from a growing national deficit, economic uncertainty, health care pressures, climate change and perhaps more awareness of income inequality -- may be shifting attention to the necessary role of the public sector and whether or not our current tax policies are adequate to the challenges ahead.

