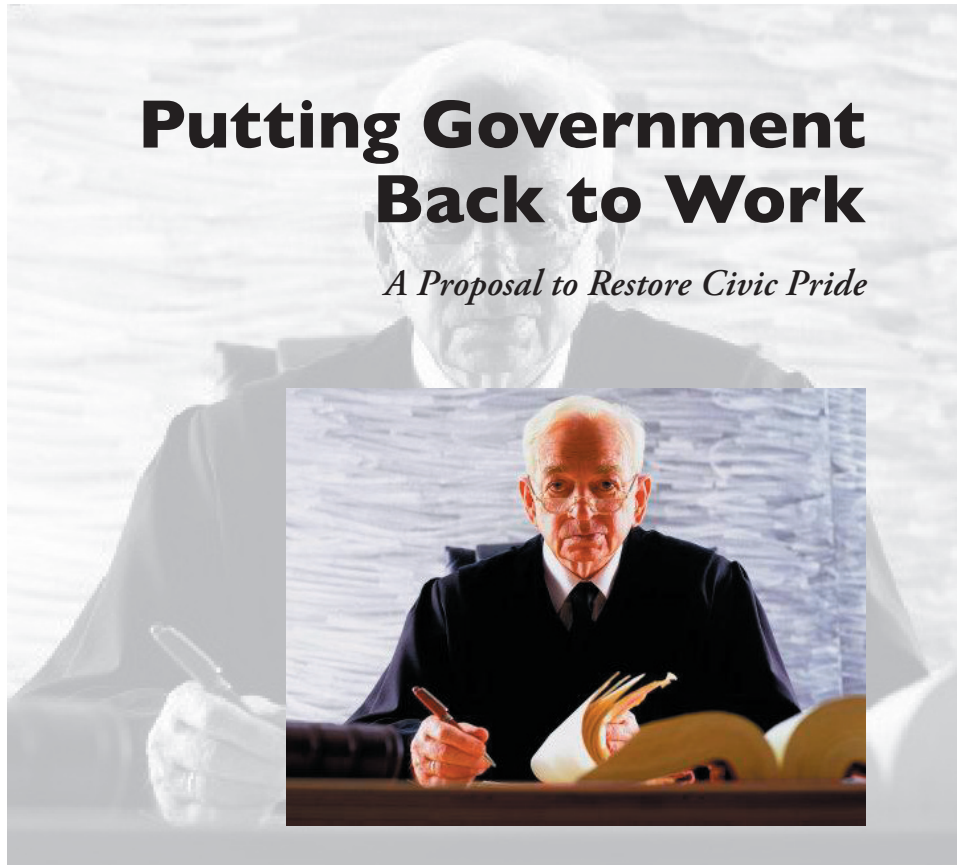


Putting Government Back to Work

A Proposal to Restore Civic Pride



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PROJECT SUMMARY

This document was created in the Fall of 2006 by The Breakthrough Institute, The Center for American Progress, and American Enviroics.

What went largely unquestioned in the debate following Hurricane Katrina was that government, on some level, failed. Progressives saw this consensus as fertile ground for showing Americans why the federal government is indispensable and how conservative cutbacks had endangered the lives of many. Yet we were concerned that Katrina had only deepened Americans' cynicism about government—after all, “government” had failed again. If that was the case, the dominant narrative in the left-leaning media, “Role of Government—Left,” was not only ineffective in reaching most Americans, but was alienating them and triggering the same old progressive-conservative debate over big versus small government.



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We wanted to create an initiative around government in order to test the idea that the familiar debate about “the role of government” might be a counterproductive one. Instead of trying to change the public’s view of the things that government “doesn’t do well,” we believed we could find broad support for substantial government action as long as those actions represent the kinds of things that people believe government should do and can do well. At the heart of this initiative is the idea that liberals can create a debate in which criticism of government no longer threatens their position, but in fact strengthens it.

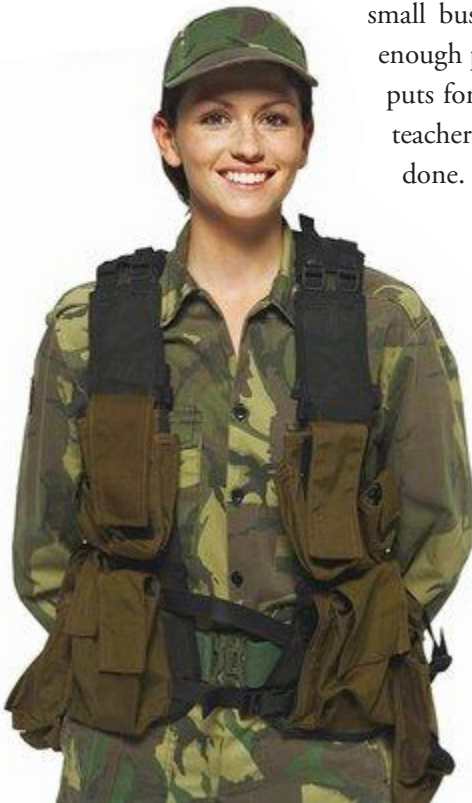
Our research into the Constituencies of Opportunity identified in the “Road Map for a Progressive Majority” supported this position. While Active Government was not a particularly core value in the worldviews of many of these constituencies, other values were, such as Work Ethic, Civic Engagement, and Duty. Therefore, instead of crafting our initiative around the value Active Government, we would focus on the other values in a debate about demanding efficiency and accountability from government.

“I don’t think the public sector is required to work as hard as the private sector. And they’re not required to be as accountable.”

—Focus group participant

Putting Government Back to Work is not an initiative about the size and role of government; rather, it is a

debate about whether we want a government that gets the job done or one that does not. To combat cronyism and improve effectiveness, the initiative calls for greater certification of qualification at every level of government and new rewards for performance. To reduce waste and corruption, the initiative calls for an end to no-bid contracts and for greater transparency into political contributions. To assist small businesses, it proposes cutting up government contracts into small enough pieces that small firms can compete with large corporations. It also puts forward a broad demand that all public employees—from soldiers to teachers to DMV workers—be given the resources they need to get the job done.



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Focus group testing confirmed our suspicion that the explicit role-of-government debate was no longer viable. But the participants' profound cynicism had a further significance: any debate about government will actually accrue support for our opponents. The reason for this has to do with the widely held view of what "government" is. Cognitively, the participants' category of "government" is a de facto category of "things that don't work." While they could be made to acknowledge that firefighters and teachers are technically part of the category, their prototype is comprised of "bureaucrats" and corrupt and uncaring politicians. Also revealing was the confirmation of our belief that—contrary to what many hoped—they would see Katrina not as an illustration of why we need government, but rather as an illustration of government's persistent tendency to fail.

The way our focus group participants reasoned about government thus has broad implications. Such entrenched cynicism calls for an indirect and gradual approach to changing minds about government. Pointing out what government does well and citing instances of the effects of government's absence will only backfire, as will head-on attempts to change the common concept of government through brute force by trying to assert that teachers should be as important a prototype as politicians.

This is not to say that participants opposed any role for government. To the contrary, they believe that government should set standards,

"I think when people think of government they are automatically thinking about politics and politicians. You don't think about the police departments are government. To me it seems like government works perhaps on the lowest levels."

—Focus group participant

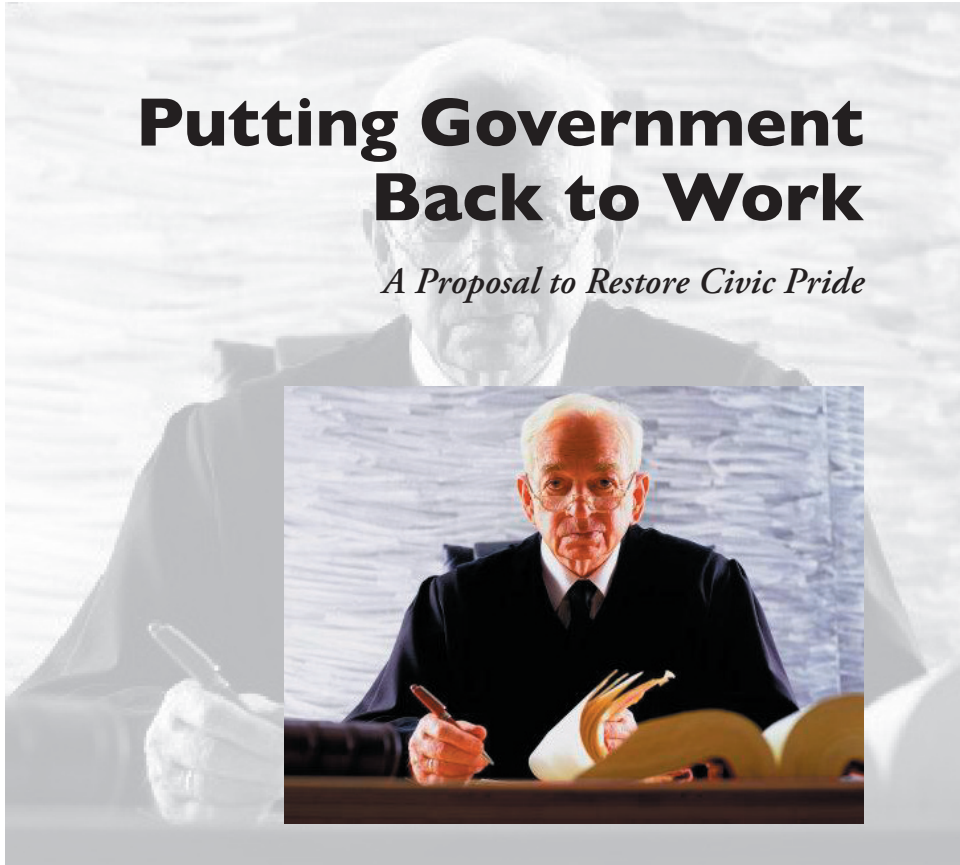
provide incentives, demand accountability, and play the role of ensuring that services are delivered. Whatever the project, people generally prefer that government not be the principal agent in executing it, but they are still in favor of an important role for government in ensuring that it gets done, minimizing the risk, providing support, demanding accountability, and punishing malfeasance.

The things that people think government is capable of doing share certain characteristics that are worth considering. Most importantly, they involve creating either/or, black/white boundaries and enforcing them. Either an insurance company provides the required list of essential health services or not; either a certain area is in a flood zone or not; either recipients of government assistance are meeting their criteria or not.

None of these points is surprising in light of the way people reason about government: Such a role for government focuses on requirements that are comparatively simple and comprehensible, as opposed to large complicated programs that trigger the now-entrenched conceptualization of government as a big, inefficient bureaucracy. Nor does it require people to decide what better represents “government”: firefighters or bureaucrats. By highlighting government in the role of demanding and delivering accountability regardless of the task, we can avoid these pitfalls in the current conception of “government” and thus build support for a renewed kind of government action.

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W H I T E P A P E R

In November 2005, the Nathan Cummings Foundation supported the Breakthrough Institute and the Center for American Progress (CAP) to conduct research and develop one or more Strategic Initiatives that would better prepare America for future disasters. Together, Breakthrough and CAP considered the idea of the Putting Government Back to Work Strategic Initiative. Instead of trying to change the public's view of the things that government "doesn't do well", we believed we could find broad support for substantial government action as long as those actions represent the kinds of things that people believe government should do and can do well.

COMPLETENESS OF THIS INITIATIVE



We are continuing to refine these initiatives with further research and testing, so the white papers that have come out of this project are in varying stages of development.

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Once upon a time our government worked. We had the best public school system in the world. We tamed rivers, planned cities, explored the stars, conquered ocean depths, and protected the public from natural disasters. Public employees took pride in their work; and, moreover, the public took pride in them. Firefighters, nurses, teachers, and scientists came to work every day and did what it took to get the job done—and sometimes even put their lives on the line.

Yet somewhere along the way, something happened. After Ronald Reagan’s famous declaration that “government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem,” a new wave of anti-government resentment was perhaps inevitable, as conservatives pushed the perception that government was inherently ill-suited to meet people’s needs. Faith in public services waned, and as a result we began to take public servants for granted. We gave them neither the proper tools nor the training nor the incentives to do their job well. And in the process, the very notion was lost of people and their government working collaboratively to solve a nation’s, or a community’s, problems.

Then came September 11 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which reminded us of the important role government has in protecting lives and strengthening society. Although these disasters did not lead to a sudden resurgence of confidence in government—after all, the firefighters who perished on September 11 were generally viewed as a collection of individuals who made heroic sacrifices, not as loyal members of an efficient and dedicated labor union representing government workers—they do provide a window of opportunity for a message that can resonate with the American people.

It's time to put government back to work. When government works well, it is a reflection of us, carrying out its duties with the same values we expect of our neighbors, family, and friends. Government should do its job in the same manner we would want the job done ourselves.

Just as we would hire a qualified electrician to wire our home, we also need competent professionals to staff our government. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made all too clear the human and economic cost of underinvestment, poor planning, and political cronyism. In exchange for rigorous qualification standards, public servants should be given the right tools and training in order to do their job. Investing in good government services—and the people who carry them out—is a down payment for stronger communities and a stronger America. Moreover, all people work harder and better when they know their work is valued and their contributions honored.



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To build the public's trust, government also must conduct its own operations in a transparent, dignified manner befitting the people it serves. Recent survey data indicates that many Americans associate government with electoral politics and campaigning, blurring the line between nonpartisan delivery of essential services and political posturing. This is perhaps not surprising given the symbiotic relationship between corporate lobbyists and elected officials in Washington, the growing reliance on parliamentary tricks to spend vast sums of public monies, and the rise of no-bid contracting in hurricane reconstruction and in the Middle East. All of these practices lead the American people to question why they should trust a government that seems to serve its own interests ahead of theirs.

Faith can be restored in the public sector. In order to achieve that, the government must be seen to work for the public good.

Putting Government Back to Work: The Plan

1. **Reduce cronyism.** As part of this sweeping effort to dramatically increase the quality, competence, and professionalism of government agencies and workers, this Act would require all political appointees to have relevant experience and qualifications, certified by an independent personnel agency, for the jobs for which they are nominated. The Act will mandate a government-wide study designed to reduce political appointments in agencies and replace them with professionals with expertise. The Act will include provisions that value the vital professionalizing role of public sector unions while improving incentives for performance, along with protections (similar to whistleblower protections) safeguarding workers from

overzealous partisan political appointees. This Act will apply across all sectors of government, not solely disaster relief, as politicization of government agencies has taken place in multiple agencies, including public health, science policy, and national security.

2. Shine light on money in politics. The legislative process must be reclaimed for the people. The first step in doing so must be to reduce the corrosive effect of money in politics (more than \$3 billion and rising). Many experts warily note that money will always find a way into the campaign system, yet few advocates have attempted to go after the very incentives that drive political donations in the first place—access to the legislative process. Reform measures to date have focused on the “back end” (donating to campaigns), losing sight of the reason corporate interests give in the first place (influencing legislation). Reshaping lobbying—not by limiting contributions, but by dramatically increasing public disclosure requirements for information on contributions—would significantly alter the operations of Congress and state legislatures and significantly increase confidence in the political system.

3. Allocate \$500 million for federal “Hoover Dam Grants” to be given to state and local governments that have noteworthy contracting successes. Hoover Dam, one of the greatest public-works projects in the history of the world, is not only remarkable for its size and breadth, but also for its tale of government



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efficiency. The Dam employed tens of thousands of workers, was completed years ahead of schedule, and saved billions (in today’s dollars) in taxpayer money. Similar government success stories happen on a much smaller scale in the construction of highways, schools, and hospitals in communities across America, but are rarely trumpeted or highlighted. Rewarding government officials for a job well done not only gives incentives for better government service, it reminds all of us of its importance.

4. End no-bid contracting. Contracting is an essential element of how the government functions, and as such should be open, transparent, and subject to competition in the marketplace. Sweetheart deals, connected lobbyists,

and no-bid contracts only serve to distort market forces and erode public trust that government is acting for the benefit of all taxpayers.



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