Engaging the Extremes

How to reach out to the ends of the political spectrum to promote mutual understanding and improve the perception of fairness in public finance

BY BRIAN HARWARD, ALISON TAYLOR AND SHAYNE KAVANAGH

One of the driving forces behind movements to improve perceptions of fairness is to repair the lack of trust in government,[1] so understanding why mistrust exists is important.

Mistrust in the government is often attributable to:[2,3]

- a perception that government uses its power against citizens (by taxing and fining) while providing benefits to special interests;
- a feeling of disconnect from government;
- a sense that government services are ineffective or inadequate;
- perceptions that government routinely fails to address their needs, leading citizens to feel powerless, disaffected, and alienated.

The remedies to these problems are closely linked.[4] Governments can help improve conditions in the community and provide good services. They can also pursue strategies to engage the public, provide information about the good government does, and look for opportunities to improve government's reputation. This will increase trust and decrease cynicism. These strategies may convince citizens that the government supports their needs rather than neglecting or working against them. You can learn more about how to optimize these strategies in the GFOA report: "Transparency: A Means to Improving Citizen Trust in Government."[5]

Beyond the benefits of efforts to manage engagement and reputation, there are other factors important to understanding trust in government. First, despite the concern about decreasing trust in government, most people still have a reasonable amount of trust in their local governments.[6] This means there is only so much room to enhance trust, even if citizens express disagreement with government.[7] (Of course, with the events of recent years, it is reasonable to question how easily that level of trust can be maintained.)

Second, though corruption and incompetence in government are real, citizens form much of their opinion from firsthand experience. If programs are functioning well, most people are willing to express support for government, even if the design of the program does not fit the citizen's ideal (e.g., the program is too generous or is not generous enough).[8] Thus, if local governments can perform basic services competently, they should be able to maintain a fair level of trust with the public.[9]

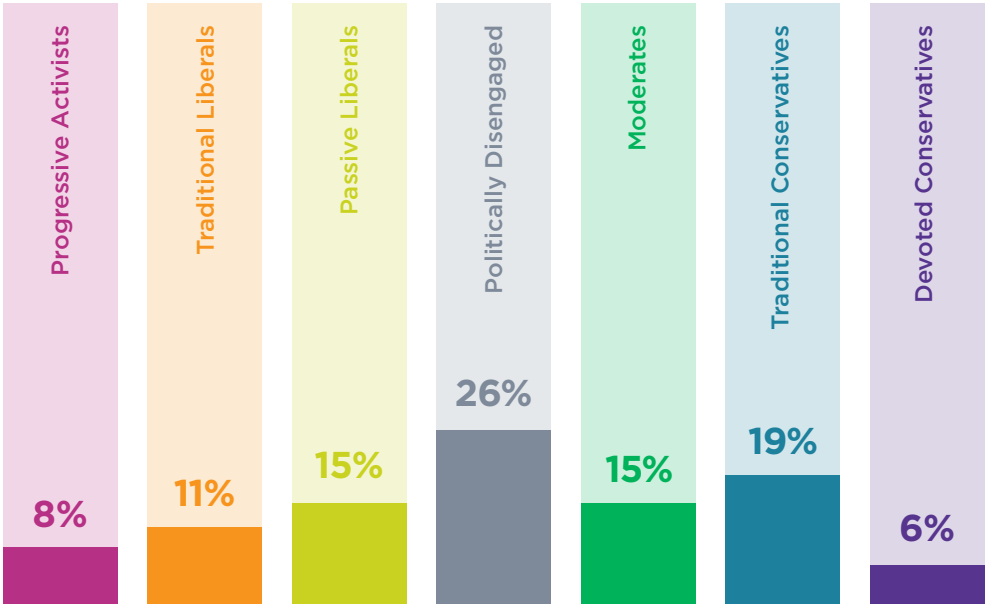
Third, and the main subject of this article, is that nothing a government can do is likely to change deep, moral convictions held by citizens. For example, people have convictions about government's role in redistributing wealth through taxing and spending, and government policy is unlikely to change that.[10,11] In Part 1[12] of our series on the behavioral science of justice and fairness, we introduced the concept of "procedural justice," which means that people with differences of opinion in how to govern are likely to accept decisions as long as they find the process used to reach decisions to be fair, especially if they are allowed to participate.[13,14] For many people, procedural justice may be enough to offset their concerns that a decision does not match their preferences. However, when the decision is seen to go against a person's moral convictions, procedural justice may not be sufficient. In Part 2,[15] we discussed "moral foundations theory" and its application to political beliefs. We discussed that liberals and conservatives emphasize different values. Appealing to those values is a way to overcome political disagreements.

This leads us to the topic of this article: distrust, opposition, and the political extremes. Though people at the political extremes are, by definition, a small minority, there are

Exploring the Behavioral Science of Justice and Fairness

Fairness is essential to a well-functioning pubic finance system. Fairness is recognized as essential by the GFOA's Code of Ethics and Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities. However, fairness is a multi-faceted and nuanced concept. This means fairness can be difficult to achieve. To help, GFOA has teamed up with **EthicalSystems.org** to explore the most important elements of fairness and provide practical strategies for enhancing fairness in public finance.

Check out all the papers and resources in this series at **gfoa.org/fairness**.



How Big Are the Extremes?[16]

According to a large survey of Americans, the ends of the political spectrum are inhabited by only about 15% of the population in total.

some reasons why it is important to engage them. First, they are citizens within a democratic system, so they have the same right to be heard and understood as anyone else. Second, people on the extremes are often more vocal than those with moderate views, so public officials may find themselves in conversation with people on the extremes more often than the size of the extremes would suggest. Third, extreme views are probably less common among government officials, so most officials don't have a firsthand understanding of these views.

We can think of people at the political extremes as being more sensitive to how government policy matches or does not match their moral values. Thus, understanding the moral concerns behind their opposition and distrust will be needed to have productive conversations or reach mutually agreeable resolutions. In the rest of this paper, we will examine how public officials might engage with the extremes, using libertarianism and progressive activism as examples. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive of all the views that can be found on the extremes nor to demean any views but rather to give examples of how to understand and engage these views. Also, you may notice that libertarianism is not found on the graphic on "How Big Are the Extremes?" callout. Libertarian ideas can overlay either "liberal" or "conservative" moral values. This means tough libertarianism is more associated with the political right. Libertarian concepts can also be found in left-wing political discourse.

Mistrust of Government: **Libertarianism**

Libertarianism is a political orientation that is usually negative toward government. Mistrust of government among libertarians is multilayered. They share some of the same sources of mistrust that apply to other people. For example, receiving a flawed property tax bill and having to navigate a long, complex, and potentially frustrating process to fix it would harm the government's reputation with any citizen. However, libertarians may also hold a moral belief like "taxation is theft." No matter how flawless the administration of the tax system is, the libertarian may find the use of coercion to enforce taxation as morally objectionable. At the very least, a libertarian will feel that the government should be limited and stay out of people's lives as much as is reasonable while supporting basic functions of government. This is grounded in a belief in nonaggression, or noninterference, in the affairs of others.[17]

Libertarians also think differently than typical conservatives and liberals. In general, libertarians display:[18]

1. prioritization of individual liberty over other moral principles;
2. a relatively cerebral versus emotional cognitive style;
3. lower interdependence and social relatedness (less emphasis on the importance of community).

When considering a problem, such as poor access to healthy food in some neighborhoods, libertarians report less empathy for the victims but a greater sense of trying to understand and diagnose the problem.

For example, libertarians will likely oppose programs that directly provide food or vouchers. They might see such a program as counterproductive, by creating dependence rather than independence. As solution-seekers, they will propose solutions that may be less immediate and less based on tax-and-spend redistribution. To address a lack of grocery stores, they might recommend cutting regulations that make running small groceries or mobile fruit stands difficult, or tax relief for local markets and restaurants, to create the opportunity for people to take responsibility, and giving the benefits to those working to solve the problem. In general, libertarians believe that lowering the cost of living and increasing the wealth of the poor (earned through opportunity) should be the government's aims.[19] Libertarians even go so far as to state that their approach would not only ease poverty but would promote flourishing.

Based on their moral perspective, there are several suggestions for engaging with libertarians.

- Frame arguments in terms they will appreciate, such as liberty, and that people will get rewards commensurate with the effort they put forth. For example, an effort to help improve a blighted area could emphasize streamlining regulations that govern the formation of new businesses.
- Ask for alternative solutions. Libertarians' cognitive style favors generating ideas. Accordingly, include libertarian thinkers in decision-making processes. For example, government officials may tend to overlook market-based solutions. Market-based solutions will not be the answer to all problems, but libertarian thinkers might help identify opportunities to make better use of such solutions.
- Be candid, and acknowledge that some wishes simply won't be met and some ideas not implemented, but there is still room to discuss how to move forward effectively. Procedural justice and transparency can help a great deal. For example, a libertarian might advocate for total privatization of some government services. There are many reasons why total privatization may not be possible or advisable, but the process can show that the idea was given fair consideration and, perhaps, that it even influenced the final decision. For instance, maybe government will make effective but limited use of private contractors for some services.

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Caring With Conviction: **Progressive Activists**

Those on the far left or "progressive activists" value care and fairness moral foundations, holding less sway in other calculations of morality.[20] This perspective is similar to mainstream liberals. So how do progressive activists differ? Research suggests three distinctions of people on the far ends of the political spectrum:[21]

- They are more definitive in their moral values or less willing to compromise on them. This means, for example, that they may advocate more extreme policy proposals to achieve their moral preferences.
- They are firmer in their convictions that their positions are correct and disagreements with them are more likely to be adversarial.
- They are more likely to perceive "us versus them" in policy debates.

To illustrate, let's take the example of policing. The idea of "abolishing" police is radical to most liberals, and surveys show that the idea is not widely supported by most liberals.[22] They know that many people won't agree to this, are fearful of societal chaos without a police force, and aren't open to the vision of a world without police. Liberals would be concerned about police abuses and unequal impacts of policing practices because of liberals' emphasis on caring for others. However, this isn't enough for them to throw out the system. Progressive activists may be more open to this sweeping change and less concerned about the agreement of others, advocating for the defunding of police because they are convinced that it is the correct move.[23]

Particularly important for a local government's financial planning and budgeting process is to understand the progressive activist's view on finances and economics. On one hand, progressive activists generally want individuals to have personal freedom in some spheres of life (e.g., identity, sexual behavior, reproductive rights, freedom of/from religion). However, they also will advocate for social programs and safety nets that ensure care for all at the expense of some individual economic freedom. Providing safety and granting freedom are seen as ways to care for someone in varying degrees. The key difference with libertarians is that many progressive activists are more open to using laws or restrictions on rights to achieve their policy goals, such as supporting higher taxes to fund a favored program. Another key difference is that progressive activists may place emphasis on group identity (e.g., politics, race, gender), so they might advocate for outcomes favoring their group.

This leads to some suggestions for engaging with progressive activists.

- Frame arguments to appeal to the moral foundation of caring for other people: How will a policy or program help vulnerable or disadvantaged populations? For example, something as seemingly mundane as infrastructure maintenance could be framed in terms of the reliance of low-income people on public infrastructures, like public parks or transit.
- Address how the policy or program in question impacts the group that the progressive activist identifies with. One option would be to gather data on the preferences of that group and share it as part of the decision-making process. Another option would be to engage people from that group as part of the conversation (i.e., who may not be progressive activists but are part of the race, gender, or another group the progressive activist identifies with). Finally, an option is to engage progressive activists directly on that question, which leads to our next point.

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- Progressive activists are adept empathizers. When a policy has unintended consequences for any part of the population, these empathizers are likely to recognize and care about those who are adversely affected. This could be a valuable contribution for progressive activists in decision-making processes.
- Progressive activists are open to ideas to achieve their preferred moral outcomes. So move the debate away from the moral foundation at question (agree to focus on care), and instead focus on options to achieve the care foundation. For example, if the goal is to improve public health in low-income areas, progressive activists could be engaged in finding an impactful way to achieve this for the budget available.
- In Part 1[24] of our series on fairness, we introduced the idea of interactive justice, which described how people feel they are treated. If people feel heard and respected, they are more likely to perceive fair treatment. Progressive activists may respond well to authentic expressions of recognition of the moral foundation of caring. Even if the public official does not emphasize the care foundation to the same degree, it should be possible to connect on fundamental concerns about the well-being of people who are less well off or vulnerable. So connect on the value first, then discuss the best way to live that value.

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[20] In Part 2 of our series on fairness, we introduced moral foundations theory, which posits that there are six essential moral values that all people share. However, the degree of emphasis people place on these foundations differ for people of different political persuasions.

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