Issue Frames and Group-Centrism in American Public Opinion

Thomas E. Nelson
The Ohio State University
Donald R. Kinder
University of Michigan

Public opinion on government policy is group-centric: that is, strongly influenced by the attitudes citizens possess toward the social groups perceived as the beneficiaries of the policy. Though commonplace, this mode of political thinking is not inevitable. In four experiments, we show that group-centrism hinges in part on how issues are framed in public debate. When issues are framed in ways that draw attention to a policy's beneficiaries, group-centrism increases; when issues are framed in ways that deflect attention away from the beneficiaries, group-centrism declines. We conclude by drawing out the implications of these findings for the concept of frame, considered both as a rhetorical weapon in elites' hands and as a cognitive structure in citizens' minds.

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting public opinion is tricky business, not least because issues are diverse and opinions are complicated. Interests, principles, partisan attachments, ideological convictions, and more all figure into the views that citizens express toward matters of public life. These objects of political thought likewise vary, from dull to vivid, practical to emotional, and substantive to symbolic (Converse and Markus 1979; Sears et al. 1980). As if this state of affairs were not sufficiently complex, public opinion also depends importantly on the political context; the political environment helps determine the balance of forces that make up popular thinking about public issues. In particular, we argue that the framing of issues—by partisan elites and mass media organizations—shapes public understanding of the roots of contemporary problems and the merits of alternative solutions.

Mindful of the aforementioned complexity, we nevertheless wish to single out for special consideration one important source of opinion: the beliefs and feelings citizens hold toward social groups. Public opinion on matters of government policy is group-centric: shaped in powerful ways by the attitudes citizens possess toward

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the social groups they see as the principal beneficiaries (or victims) of the policy. We maintain that group-centrism is indeed fundamental to public opinion on a variety of issues, but also that the power of group-centrism in part hinges on how such issues are framed.

The claim of group-centrism amplifies a point buried away in Converse's (1964) celebrated analysis of belief systems in mass publics. Converse's essay is remembered best for its effective demolition of the proposition that citizens derive their views on topical political matters from abstract ideological principles. But Converse also suggested that if ideological abstractions were beyond the reach of most citizens, they might instead organize their political thinking around what he called "visible social groupings." Preoccupied as they are with the affairs of private life, citizens seek simple ways to comprehend matters of public policy, insofar as they consider them at all. They might do so, Converse suggested, by converting questions on policy into a judgment on the moral qualifications of the groups involved (Converse 1964, 234–38; see also Conover 1988).

As a mode of political thinking, group-centrism corresponds well with both the reality and rhetoric of American social policy. Many policies are in fact designed with certain groups in mind, and they are often justified and criticized on those grounds in public debate (Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol 1988). In pluralist societies like the United States where politics is often defined by social divisions—regional, racial, religious, ethnic, class, and more (Burnham 1974)—a group-centric political calculus seems a natural solution to the obligations of democratic citizenship. In psychological language, group-centrism functions as an efficient heuristic that conveniently reduces the complexity of policy politics to a simple judgmental standard (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

Americans do indeed seem to operate roughly in this way. Support for affirmative action among whites reflects sympathy for the plight of blacks (Kinder and Sanders 1990, N.d.; Kluegel and Smith 1983; although see Sniderman and Piazza 1993); opposition to welfare programs derives in part from hostility to the poor (Feldman 1983; Kluegel and Smith 1986); and political tolerance, the willingness to extend constitutional protection to disagreeable speech and assembly, hinges on the reputation of the groups intent on carrying out these activities (Kuklinski et al. 1991; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). Group sentiment is not the only thing going on in these cases, but it is always present and of all the various ingredients that go into opinion, it is often the most powerful. Taking this basic result for granted, our primary purpose here is to show that what seems to be a natural mode of political thinking is in fact neither inevitable nor immutable: that group-centrism depends on how issues are framed in elite debate.

Group-centric opinion requires that citizens see for themselves a connection between government policy, on the one hand, and some visible social grouping, on the other. The connection might be mainly tangible, as in the redistribution of particular benefits, or mainly symbolic, as when policies bestow recognition and
legitimacy upon one group as against another. In neither case can we assume that all citizens will make the connection. To get the group-centric opinion calculus off the ground, citizens must, as Converse (1964) pointed out, “be endowed with some cognitions of the group as an entity and with some interstitial ‘linking’ information indicating why a given party or policy is relevant to the group. Neither of these forms of information can be taken for granted” (236–37).

Public issues are multifaceted; they are always, as Verba and his colleagues (1987, 94) put it, “many issues at once.” Some citizens may see a proposal for national health care as help for the working poor; others will interpret it primarily as an unwelcome intrusion of government upon private affairs; still others will see it mainly as a solution to their own family’s health care needs. Group-centrism is a prominent feature of the first interpretation but is virtually absent from the other two. Our purpose here is to explore whether or not group-centrism will play a more prominent role in public thinking about policy issues when the “linkages” between groups and policies are made more explicit through deliberate framing of the issue.

As we define it, framing is an essential feature of public discourse on matters of political import. Every public issue is contested in a symbolic arena, where advocates attempt to impose their own meaning on the issue (Gamson 1992; Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989). This contest takes place among elites but with the general public clearly in mind, and it becomes available to citizens through a variety of channels: through the reporting of daily events in television news programs, newspapers, and radio; through editorial columns, political talk shows, cartoons, newsletters, and the like; and most directly through press conferences, debates, advertisements, speeches, and so on (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990). In all these ways, citizens are bombarded with suggestions about how issues should be understood. These suggestions come in coherent packages, and at the heart of each package is a frame: “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143).

Frames are more than simply positions or arguments about an issue. Frames are constructions of the issue: they spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about, and may go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done (Entman 1993). Frames may be directly stated or indirectly suggested through myriad verbal and visual symbolic devices: slogans such as “abortion stops a beating heart,” historical analogies like Vietnam and World War II, stereotypic caricatures such as welfare mothers and deadbeat dads, and visual

1 On uses of frame in addition to Gamson’s, see especially Minsky’s (1975) development of an architecture for cognition; Goffman’s (1974) account of how individuals impute meaning to their raw social experience; and Kahneman and Tversky’s (1984) striking experimental demonstrations that, contrary to expected utility theory, decisions can be systematically and decisively influenced by altering how options are framed.
images and icons like the American flag or Willie Horton. These devices help to convey the central idea of the frame, and if selected carefully, lend it emotional weight and memorability.

Gamson and colleagues (e.g., Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989) have documented extensively the assortment of frames defining such prominent public controversies as affirmative action, welfare, and nuclear power. To document a taxonomy of frames for each issue, Gamson and colleagues first went to primary sources of elite political thought: opinions of Supreme Court Justices in pivotal cases, *amicus curiae* briefs, speeches and statements delivered by prominent public officials, and views expressed in partisan political journals. Having identified the most important issue frames in these sources, Gamson and colleagues then charted the “public career” of each frame by tracing its changing prominence over the years in national news magazines, network news programs, editorial cartoons, and syndicated opinion columns. In many cases, abrupt changes in the framing of policy issues can be traced to specific events; for example, coverage of nuclear power shifted from a largely favorable “technological progress” frame to an alarming “runaway technology” frame following the Three Mile Island disaster (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). In other cases, frame alterations are introduced by political elites eager to reshape public debate in terms that favor their cause.

Framing is a ubiquitous feature of political discourse, but it is something else as well. Because frames permeate public discussions of politics, they in effect teach ordinary citizens how to think about and understand complex social policy problems. When frames suggest what the essence of an issue is, they provide a kind of mental recipe for preparing an opinion. Citizens are almost always in possession of a variety of considerations that might all plausibly bear on any particular issue. Many of these considerations may contradict one another, leaving citizens often confused and conflicted about where to stand (Chong 1993; Hochschild 1981). Frames help to resolve this confusion by declaring which of the many considerations is relevant and important, and which should be given less attention. Elites wage a war of frames because they know that if *their* frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about a particular problem, then the battle for public opinion has been won (Manheim 1991; Skocpol 1994).

From this altogether general claim about framing, we derive the following specific hypothesis: that the importance of group sentiment in public opinion depends on how issues are framed in elite debate. We test this hypothesis in a series of four experiments that present issues to citizens framed in alternative ways that mimic elite debate. Each takes up a single social policy: government programs to assist the poor (Experiment I); federal spending on the fight against AIDS (II); giving preference to qualified blacks in hiring and promotion (III); and affirmative action policies at the workplace and in college and university admissions (IV). Each of these policies lends itself to group-centric thinking. By their nature, each invites citizens to reach an opinion primarily by drawing on their thoughts and feelings toward the group in question, and the evidence is abundant that citizens do just that.
(on aid to the poor, see Feagin 1975; Feldman 1983; Feldman and Zaller 1992; and Kluegel 1987; on AIDS, see Herek and Glunt 1988; Price and Hsu 1992; Stipp and Kerr 1989; and on affirmative action, see Jacobson 1985; Kinder and Sanders 1990, N.d.; and Kluegel and Smith 1983, 1986). This feature makes the four cases we analyze challenging for the proposition we mean to advance here. Group-centrism is so embedded in these issues that it may prove difficult to alter. Perhaps, but we contend that there is nothing inevitable or invariable about group-centric political thinking. If the larger public indeed looks to elites for guidance on the difficult issues of the day, then the prominence of group-centrism in American public opinion should depend partly on elite framing.

OVERVIEW OF EXPERIMENTS

The first three experiments were carried out as part of the 1989 National Election Study (NES), which took interviews over the telephone between July 6, 1989, and August 1, 1989, with 614 Americans of voting-age. For each of three issues—assistance to the poor, federal spending to fight AIDS, and preferences for blacks in hiring and promotion—we created two frames, equally plausible but alternative ways of formulating the issue. One version articulated and perhaps thereby encouraged a group-centric approach to the issue; the alternative version framed the question differently, in a way that neglected the group consequences of the policy.

We constructed these alternative question frames carefully, hoping to mimic the rival frames prevailing in contemporary elite discourse. By reenacting public discourse within a controlled experiment, we hope to learn about how changes in public opinion are induced by changes in the setting beyond the survey, in the everyday process of public discussion (Kinder and Sanders 1990). Our aim was to operate within the actual rhetorical boundaries of each issue culture by presenting popular frames rather than esoteric or obscure ones. To identify such frames, we relied on Gamson’s work; where that offered us no guidance (in the case of public debate on AIDS policy), we substituted our own observations of media coverage. Having identified or developed a pair of plausible alternative frames for each issue, one of which emphasized group-centrism and one of which did not, we then translated these frames into alternative question wordings, which then became part of the 1989 NES. For each of the issues, NES respondents were randomly assigned to

2 Respondents who completed both the preelection and postelection interviews in 1988 and who provided their telephone numbers were eligible for selection for the 1989 NES. Respondents were randomly drawn from this target population, with oversampling inversely proportional to level of political information (based on measures included in the 1988 NES), to yield a final sample that would more adequately represent the American adult population. A sample of 855 respondents was originally drawn, of whom 72% participated in the 1989 study (n = 614). For more details on sampling design and interview content, see the study codebook, available from the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan (Center for Political Studies 1989a, 1989b).
one of the two frame conditions, and then asked for their views on the same policy, framed in alternative ways.

There are, of course, many ways for frames to draw respondents’ attention to a group. Had we merely wanted to emphasize the group per se, we could have constructed questions that simply repeated the group label over and over. But because we wished to remain as faithful as possible to the actual rhetorical battle surrounding these issues, our group-focused frames draw attention to the group in a particular way: by insinuating that group members are morally deficient and in some way responsible for their own predicament (Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Iyengar 1991).3

Our analysis in each case is organized around the proposition that the power of group attitudes to influence opinion on social policy depends upon how the policy is framed. With this proposition in mind, we specified a model that relates opinion to a set of antecedents, group attitudes among them. In equation form:

\[
\text{Opinion} = a_0 + a_1 \text{Group Attitudes} + a_2 \cdot Z
\]

where \(Z\) is a vector of \(k - 1\) opinion antecedents, which vary from one issue to the next, and which include interests (e.g., whether citizens see a material threat or benefit from the policy), principles (e.g., general opposition to government intervention), social values (e.g., egalitarianism), and social background characteristics (e.g., education).

To measure the right-hand side variables in equation (1), we took advantage of the fact that respondents to the 1989 NES had participated the year before in the 1988 National Election Study. Our measures of group attitudes (described in more detail as we come to each experiment), interests, values, and principles are drawn for the most part from the 1988 survey, and are based on multiple-item scales. For convenience, we transformed all variables onto the 0 - 1 interval. Equation (1) was estimated using OLS regression, separately for respondents in the two framing conditions. We anticipated that framing would alter the strength of the relationship between opinions and their antecedents, which would be reflected in differences in the magnitude of the unstandardized regression coefficients across conditions. Specifically for the group-centrism hypothesis, we expected that \(a_1\), the coefficient representing the impact of group attitudes on policy opinion, would be

3Choosing an alternative “nongroup” frame for each experiment presented a different challenge. Since frames are rarely neutral, one strategy we might have followed would be to select a frame on the side of the issue opposite the group frame; for example, balancing an anti-affirmative action group frame with a pro-affirmative action nongroup frame. But since our primary interest was in showing the effects of framing on group-centrism, and not in persuading our respondents to adopt more or less positive attitudes toward the issues, we endeavored to hold the partisan direction of the frame constant. Therefore, in each of these first three experiments, we contrasted a negative group frame with an equally negative nongroup frame. The specific content of this nongroup frame naturally varied with the issue.
substantially larger when the policy had been framed in such a way as to emphasize the social group at the center of the controversy.4

Our fourth experiment was undertaken at the laboratories of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan, with college students serving as study participants. Like the first three, it takes up an issue that should naturally invoke group-centrism (affirmative action policies at the workplace and in school admissions). And as in the first three experiments, here we are interested in seeing what difference alternative frames make for the underpinnings of opinion. Experiment IV goes beyond the first three in one respect, however, and that is to investigate the potency of visual frames. Symbolic approaches to public opinion and communication emphasize the special power of visual images to shape public thinking (see, for example, Edelman 1964; Gamson 1992; Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen 1980). Graphic and arresting pictures—of menacing criminals, butchered seals, or presidents in heroic pose—are standard features of political communication. Since we did not wish to restrict our analysis to verbal frames, this fourth experiment was conducted to see if analogous results might be obtained using a purely visual presentation.

EXPERIMENT I: GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE TO THE POOR

In their analysis of elite discourse on American welfare policy, Gamson and Lasch (1983) identified what they referred to as the freeloader frame. From this point of view, welfare is a gift to indolent ne’er-do-wells who don’t work because the government pays them not to. Welfare policy, by extension, is a kind of devil’s compact between gullible and extravagant politicians and idle poor people who would rather stay home and collect checks at taxpayers’ expense than find a job. By focusing so flagrantly on the moral shortcomings of the beneficiaries of government assistance, the freeloader frame invites group-centrism. This suits our purpose well. Hence one version of the government assistance to the poor question included in the 1989 NES represents the freeloader frame.

Because no other oppositional frames were discussed by Gamson and Lasch (1983), we were left to our own observations of contemporary political culture for an alternative to the freeloader frame. One that escaped Gamson and Lasch’s analysis is a depiction of aid to the poor as an excessive demand on limited government resources. This is a frame closely associated in contemporary national politics with the anti-big government agenda of recent Republican administrations. Although Ronald Reagan made use of negative stereotypes of welfare recipients (or exemplars, in Gamson’s formulation) in promoting his program, he also emphasized

4We are not interested here in whether alternative frames produce net shifts in opinion, and for the most part, they did not. The only exception occurred in Experiment I, where respondents were more opposed to government assistance to the poor when it had been described as a program the poor don’t really need than when it had been framed as a contributor to the national debt ($t = 2.26$, $p = .025$).
the spiraling financial costs of government social programs, including aid to the poor, and their contribution to the national debt and the threat they thereby posed to the national economy. Reagan’s heir, George Bush continued to articulate an anti–big government philosophy throughout his 1988 campaign for president, stressing the economic devastation supposedly wrought by excessive social spending. As an alternative to the freeloader frame, we therefore chose to represent the view that more welfare spending was impossible because of the large federal budget deficit. The specific wording of the two alternatives is displayed below with the difference between them highlighted.

**Freeloader Frame**

Our next question deals with government programs to assist the poor. Some people say that government spending on such programs for the poor needs to be increased, to help those who, through no fault of their own, simply cannot earn enough to take care of themselves and their children. Others say that government spending on such programs for the poor should be decreased, because they give away money to people who don’t really need the help. If you had a say in making up the Federal budget this year, would you like to see spending on programs that assist the poor increased, decreased, or stay the same?

**Budget Deficit Frame**

Our next question deals with government programs to assist the poor. Some people say that government spending on such programs for the poor needs to be increased, to help those who, through no fault of their own, simply cannot earn enough to take care of themselves and their children. Others say that government spending on such programs for the poor should be decreased, because given the huge budget deficit, we simply can’t afford it. If you had a say in making up the Federal budget this year, would you like to see spending on programs that assist the poor increased, decreased, or stay the same?

To measure group attitudes, we averaged respondents’ replies to three questions: evaluations of the poor (using a 0–100 “feeling thermometer” scale); evaluations of welfare recipients on an identical scale; and explanations for poverty, distinguishing primarily between attributing poverty to the poor themselves or to circumstances beyond their control. Following the literature in public opinion, we included in the estimating equation a handful of other potentially important determinants of opinion on government assistance to the poor: egalitarianism; support for social services in the areas of health, education, and jobs; support for an active government role in business and the economy; and education.

In the midst of his 1984 reelection bid, Reagan offered his weekly radio audience this vision of the upcoming election: “In 1984, we face an historic choice. Will we heed the pessimists’ agenda of higher taxes, more bureaucracy, and a bigger welfare state leading us right back to runaway inflation and economic decay, or will we continue on our road toward a true opportunity society of economic growth, more jobs, lower tax rates and rising take-home pay?”

The reader will note our careful avoidance of the word “welfare” in both question forms. A number of studies (e.g., T. W. Smith 1987) have pointed to the special revulsion the American public feels toward “welfare recipients” versus “the poor.”

In the 1988 NES codebook, the feeling thermometer variables are labeled v610 (the poor) and v607 (welfare recipients). The attribution item appeared in the Pilot Study survey; its code is v7369.

Details on these measures—specific items, coding, scale reliabilities, and such—are available upon request.
Before we can see whether, as we expect, the freeloader frame actually produced more group-centrism in opinion, we must first establish that respondents randomly assigned to the two conditions are in fact otherwise comparable. Toward that end, we undertook a series of comparisons, examining the two groups on a full roster of standard demographic and political variables. The results are reassuring on the point that the two groups really are comparable, that the only feature that sets them apart is the experimentally induced one: some citizens were asked for their opinions on government assistance to the poor and encouraged to think about such assistance as a giveaway to people who don’t really need the help; meanwhile, others were asked for their views on the same policy and encouraged to think about such assistance in light of the huge federal budget deficit.9

Table 1 summarizes the results for this first experiment. It shows the expected relationship between opinions on support for the poor and the hypothesized antecedents of those opinions. Respondents who support an activist government, who are better-educated, and who value equality expressed greater support for spending on the poor. Table 1 also makes clear that support for government assistance to the poor is powerfully related to attitudes toward poor people, and that this is true in both frames. But the relationship is stronger when the issue is framed in such a way as to highlight the suspect moral character of the poor, by a magnitude of 52%. The deficit frame, by contrast, strengthened the impact of respondent attitudes toward government intervention on support for spending on the poor. The focus on government spending articulated in the deficit frame apparently evoked respondent attitudes toward “big government” to a greater degree than did the freeloader frame.

9The story on randomization is a bit more complicated than we have suggested. For reasons that need not concern us here, the 1989 NES survey was actually divided into four forms of roughly equal numbers. Some of our analyses compare Forms A and B versus C and D; others compare A and C versus B and D. (See the 1989 American National Election Pilot Study Codebook for details.) As a general matter, respondents assigned to the four forms were indeed comparable: we found no differences on age, gender, education, race, income, political information (all these variables came from the 1988 NES interview with 1989 NES study respondents). One clear difference did emerge, however: Form C includes too many Democrats. Combining strong, weak, and leaning identifiers, the Form C group was 56% Democratic; in the other three groups, the comparable percentage was 46% (A), 48% (B), and 48% (D). This difference is annoying not only because it is statistically and substantively significant but because partisanship is of course central to other key political variables. Sure enough, Form C respondents were also more critical of President Reagan’s performance (p < .01); sure enough, had the 1988 presidential election been confined to Form C respondents, Dukakis would have won in a landslide (57% of Form C respondents reported voting for Dukakis, compared to 43% to 48% in the other three groups). The importance of this difference for our analysis is mitigated by the fact that none of our comparisons rests on Form C respondents alone. All our comparisons combine the four conditions into two: some compare Forms A and B versus C and D; others compare A and C versus B and D. This diminishes the importance of Form C respondents’ unusual affinity for the Democrats, but we must keep the difference in mind. Perhaps most reassuringly, when we added partisanship as a control variable in subsequent analysis, it made no material difference to our results.
### Table 1

**Regression Model Predicting Support for Spending on the Poor by Framing Condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Framing Condition</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
<th>White Respondents Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group Frame</td>
<td>Non-Group Frame</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes toward the poor</strong></td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.12&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Egalitarianism</strong></td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social services</strong></td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention</strong></td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>288</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Differences and associated standard errors and significance levels were calculated by reestimating the pooled model, including a dummy variable for framing condition and terms representing the interactions between each predictor and framing condition.

<sup>1</sup>$p < .11$; <sup>*</sup>$p < .10$; <sup>**</sup>$p < .05$

To test the reliability of the framing effect, the regression was re-run for the entire sample, adding a dummy variable representing experimental (framing) condition and cross-product terms representing the *interactions* between framing condition and the predictors of opinion toward poor support. In essence, these cross-product terms tell us if the differences between framing conditions in the partial
regression coefficients are statistically significant. The coefficients for these interaction terms appear in the final column of table 1. As it turns out, the critical interaction between attitudes toward the poor and framing interaction does not quite reach statistical significance ($p < .11$). Upon further investigation, an important role for respondent race in these relationships was uncovered. The critical interaction was positive and significant for white respondents, as expected ($b = .17$, $p < .05$). For nonwhites, this coefficient was negative ($b = -.60$), indicating that attitudes toward the poor were actually less important in the group frame condition for nonwhites. While this striking reversal defies easy explanation, it does suggest that framing strategies that appeal to negative social stereotypes will not be universally effective.

**EXPERIMENT II: GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON AIDS**

The central issue for the AIDS question was essentially the same as for the question concerning aid for the poor: How much money should government spend to fight this problem? Once again, we developed a group-centric frame (which we labeled *blame the victim*) that stressed the moral shortcomings and personal culpability of AIDS victims. This frame implied that spending on AIDS should not be increased because AIDS sufferers were personally responsible for contracting their illness; that they “should have been more careful in the first place.”\(^{10}\) The alternative frame (*cancer research*) argued that increased spending was undesirable because more worthwhile programs (cancer research, specifically) would have to be sacrificed:

**Blame the Victim Frame**

Our next question deals with the disease AIDS. Some Americans believe that AIDS is a very serious threat to public health, that too many people have already died from AIDS, and that the government in Washington should spend more money trying to stop the spread of AIDS and taking care of those people who already suffer from the disease. Other Americans believe that most people who get AIDS—primarily homosexual men and intravenous drug users—should have been more careful in the first place. If you had a say in making up the Federal budget this year, would you like to see spending increased, decreased, or stay the same for the fight against AIDS?

**Cancer Research Frame**

Our next question deals with the disease AIDS. Some Americans believe that AIDS is a very serious threat to public health, that too many people have already died from AIDS, and that the government in Washington should spend more money trying to stop the spread of AIDS and taking care of those people who already suffer from the disease. Other Americans believe that the government has more important things to spend money on, like cancer research. If you had a say in making up the Federal budget this year, would you like to see spending increased, decreased, or stay the same for the fight against AIDS?

\(^{10}\)For a “real world” media example of this frame, consider the column by sportswriter Dave Anderson, who wrote in reaction to Magic Johnson’s disclosure that he had tested positive for HIV, that “anyone with a sense of heterosexual responsibility isn’t likely to get the AIDS virus” (*New York Times*, 14 November 1991).
The close association between AIDS and two highly stigmatized groups (gay men and drug users), would seem to make AIDS policy a natural target for group-centrism. Because the NES surveys included no questions on intravenous drug users, our measure of group attitudes is restricted entirely to gays. It is based on two items: general evaluation of homosexuals (measured on the 0–100 feeling thermometer) and support for laws protecting gays against discrimination. Our equation also included respondents’ age, education level, and political party identification.

Results of the analysis are displayed in table 2. The relationship between support for spending on AIDS and the hypothesized antecedents is largely as expected: younger respondents and those who identified themselves as Democrats were more likely to support spending to fight AIDS. Education’s impact on support for AIDS spending was sensitive to framing: better-educated respondents supported AIDS spending under the cancer research frame, but opposed it (slightly) under the group frame (interaction: $p < .05$). Once again, group-centrism was a powerful force in shaping opinion toward this issue: negative attitudes toward gays were associated with opposition toward AIDS spending. As expected, however, this relationship was strengthened by blame-the-victim framing. Indeed, the impact of attitudes toward gays on opinions toward AIDS spending was twice as large under the blame-the-victim frame ($p < .05$).

**EXPERIMENT III: PREFERENTIAL HIRING OF BLACKS**

Affirmative action, like the previous two items, clearly implicates a specific social group—African Americans, in this case. Unlike the previous two items, public discussion about affirmative action seldom refers to its costs. Instead, debate centers on whether or not this policy is effective in achieving its goals and is fair to all parties concerned (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). To formulate survey questions that mimic the often contentious debate on affirmative action ongoing among rival elites, we drew on Gamson and Modigliani’s (1987) analysis of the rise and fall of alternative frames during the past 15 years.

According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987), supporters of affirmative action have typically defended their position throughout this period by referring to the need for remedial action. Under this frame, race-conscious programs are required today to offset the continuing effects of America’s history of racial discrimination. On the other side of the issue, opponents of affirmative action began by arguing that affirmative action constitutes unfair advantage. This frame questions whether rewards should be allocated on the basis of race and expresses the particular concern that blacks are being handed advantages that they have not earned and do not deserve. Unfair advantage has gradually given way among opponents of affirmative action to reverse discrimination. Like unfair advantage, reverse discrimination ques-

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11 v627 and v853, respectively, in the 1988 NES Codebook.
TABLE 2

REGRESSION MODEL PREDICTING SUPPORT FOR SPENDING ON AIDS
BY FRAMING CONDITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Framing Condition</th>
<th></th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group Frame</td>
<td>Non-Group Frame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward gays</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.04)</td>
<td>(.04)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>286</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Differences and associated standard errors and significance levels were calculated by reestimating the pooled model, including a dummy variable for framing condition and terms representing the interactions between each predictor and framing condition.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$

...
raises questions about the character of blacks mainly through the suggestion that this group doesn’t *deserve* the special treatment that affirmative action entails. Although subtler than the previous two framing manipulations, we nevertheless expected this frame to encourage group-centrism, while the reverse discrimination frame should discourage group-centrism, as it takes the spotlight off blacks and focuses it on the dangers affirmative action poses to white Americans.

In this case we measured group sentiment by drawing on questions developed primarily in the literature on symbolic or modern racism (e.g., Kinder and Sears 1981; McConohay 1986). These questions share a tone of moral resentment: that blacks have been handed advantages; that government has caved in, showering blacks with special favors that they have not earned; that hard work, self-discipline, and sacrifice no longer seem to count for much. Our equation also includes measures of general support for social services, support for government intervention in business and the economy, the perception that affirmative action poses a threat to whites’ economic well-being, and self-reported political ideology (liberal, moderate, or conservative). For obvious reasons, we include only white respondents in this analysis.

The results appear in table 3. Respondents who support spending on social services endorsed affirmative action, while those who perceived affirmative action as a threat to whites opposed it. The relationship between opinion on government intervention and affirmative action opinion was sensitive to framing: support for intervention predicted support for affirmative action in the reverse discrimination frame, but predicted opposition to affirmative action in the group frame (interaction: \( p < .10 \)).

Group-centrism is clearly evident here, as opinions on affirmative action were closely tied to attitudes toward blacks among respondents in both conditions. As expected, prejudice was more closely linked to opinion on affirmative action in the undeserved advantage frame. Although the increase in the size of the regression coefficient was fairly substantial (48%), the interaction did not reach conventional statistical significance levels (\( p < .12 \)).

**Experiment IV: Affirmative Action and the Power of Visual Frames**

Until now, our framing manipulations have consisted of purely verbal constructions. Yet in the arsenal of everyday political communication, visual symbols are a powerful weapon. In Experiment IV, we examine the power of visual frames to

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12 In the terminology of the 1988 NES Codebook, the variables are: v961, v962, v963, v964, and the difference between v625 and v613.

13 Multicollinearity, frequently a problem for interaction analysis, is especially acute for the pooled affirmative action model. When the cross-product term representing the interaction between attitudes toward blacks and framing condition is regressed on the remaining predictors in the pooled model, the multiple \( r \) exceeds .95. Multicollinearity of this magnitude can substantially inflate the standard error of the partial regression coefficient, reducing the statistical power of the corresponding \( t \) test (Fox 1991).

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shape political thinking. As in our first three experiments, respondents were exposed to one or another frame. Here the issue in question was affirmative action in employment and education. As before, we wished to see if alternative frames can alter the potency of group sentiment for public opinion. The main difference is that in Experiment IV, we used photographs to represent different visual frames. We presented images of blacks that were either, in one experimental condition, consistent with the prevailing negative cultural stereotype of blacks as lazy and dangerous (Bobo and Kluegel 1991); or in a second condition, inconsistent with this stereotype. In a control condition, we presented no images of blacks at all.

One expectation for our results, associated most closely with the work of Allport (1954), is that any image of blacks, bad or good, would “prime” or “cue” racial attitudes, thereby enhancing group-centrism (see also Bruner 1957; Devine 1989). Thus, we would expect a difference in the importance of whites’ attitudes toward blacks between the two experimental groups and the control group but would expect no differences between the two experimental groups themselves. An alternative view, consistent with the results of the previous experiments, would hold that negative stereotypic images, which silently insinuate that blacks are morally suspect and therefore responsible for whatever unhappy fate might befall them, should

### Table 3

**Regression Model Predicting Support for Affirmative Action by Framing Condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Framing Condition</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group Frame</td>
<td>Non-Group Frame</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward blacks</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.22†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.04)</td>
<td>(.04)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>226</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Differences and associated standard errors and significance levels were calculated by reestimating the pooled model, including a dummy variable for framing condition and terms representing the interactions between each predictor and framing condition.

†$p < .12$; *$p < .10$; **$p < .05$
especially encourage group-centrism. The positive, counterstereotypic images, by contrast, might be interpreted as anomalies or exceptional "subtypes" (Rothbart and John 1993; Weber and Crocker 1983), thereby circumventing the hostile beliefs and feelings associated with the dominant stereotype.

Participants in Experiment IV were 84 University of Michigan undergraduates, paid $5 for their participation. All were nonblack. Framing images consisted of photographs culled from popular newsmagazines such as Time and Newsweek. The photographs were copied onto slide film, with identifying information removed. Altogether subjects saw a series of 10 photographs. Of these, 4 constituted the experimental manipulation; their content varied across the three conditions. The remaining 6 photographs were filler, constant for all subjects. In the stereotypic visual frame condition, the photographs portrayed a variety of familiar innercity problems. One showed a young black man smoking crack cocaine; another a group of black men handcuffed at an arrest scene; still another a black panhandler; and the fourth a young black gang leader. Key photographs in the counterstereotypic condition presented uplifting images of studious, industrious, and family-oriented blacks. One showed a black couple with their young daughter; the second a black man in his graduation robe; the third a bespectacled black man confronting a stack of paperwork; and the last a well-dressed black male standing in front of a college classroom building. Subjects in the control condition saw images of whites engaged in a variety of routine activities (e.g., gardening). The six filler photographs, constant across all conditions, consisted in part of images of college students drinking. These latter images, coupled with several items on the questionnaire concerning campus alcohol policy, were included to conceal our real interest in racial issues.

After ushering subjects into the laboratory, the primary experimenter informed them that because of a subject shortage, they would be asked to participate in a second experiment, unrelated to the principal experiment in which they had enlisted. All subjects agreed. A confederate then entered, posing as the second experimenter. She told the subjects that she was conducting pretests of materials for possible inclusion in an updated version of the Thematic Apperception Test, a standard projective psychological instrument for assessing motivation. She then showed the 10 slides. Subjects made three judgments for each slide: (1) a short description of the activities depicted in the photo, (2) a short description of the thoughts and feelings of the subjects of the photos, and (3) a rating of how interesting they found the picture. We asked subjects for these judgments to lend credibility to our cover story and to encourage them to attend to the content of the photographs.

After the confederate had collected her materials and departed, the primary experimenter returned and explained that his study involved a general survey of student attitudes on issues of local and national import. The questionnaire contained a wide variety of items, including two questions on affirmative action: one regarding employment, the other college and university admissions. Responses to these items were averaged (Pearson's $r = .67$).
Attitudes toward affirmative action were regressed on subjects’ attitudes toward blacks, egalitarianism, perception of group threat, and political party identification. Table 4 presents the results by framing condition. Racial imagery dramatically altered the balance of forces affecting opinion on affirmative action. Viewers of stereotypic racial images expressed opinions that were strongly tied to racial prejudice, while viewers of counterstereotypic images were less influenced by racial attitudes, and control group subjects were not affected by racial attitudes at all. The latter two groups of subjects expressed opinions on affirmative action that were more closely tied to egalitarian values and, especially for control subjects, party identification.

To test the reliability of these effects, two comparisons were made. First, the stereotypic framing condition was compared with both other conditions combined; next, the stereotypic condition was compared with the counterstereotypic framing condition alone. The first comparison yielded a significant prejudice by framing condition interaction (p = .03), revealing that stereotypic racial imagery increased the impact of racial attitudes, relative to the other two conditions combined. When the stereotypic and counterstereotypic conditions were compared, the interaction between prejudice and framing condition was marginally significant (p < .09). These results suggest that, while racial images of any sort may enhance the effect of racial attitudes on affirmative action support, negative, stereotypic images especially encourage group-centrism by linking attitudes toward the group (blacks) with attitudes toward the policy (affirmative action).

CONCLUSION

Group-centrism runs through American public opinion. Americans’ views on poverty policy, on federal spending on AIDS, and on affirmative action in employment and educational settings reflect to an important degree their assessment of social groups. Are the poor responsible for their own troubles? Do gays make us angry or uncomfortable? Are blacks entitled to special assistance? Americans reach political decisions on matters of policy as if they had first determined the moral qualifications of the intended beneficiaries. The resources of government—material benefits and symbolic recognition—should go to those who deserve it.

The empirical results we have presented here add further support to the claim of group-centrism, even while they qualify it. On the one hand, we found plenty of evidence that group sentiment is a primary ingredient in public opinion, even when the issue is framed in such a way as to discourage that way of thinking. On the other, we also found that the importance of group sentiment in public opinion depends significantly on how the issue is framed. This result showed up in each of our four experiments, across a variety of social issues, and for semantic and visual frames. Although the impact of our manipulations varied from one issue to the

14Once again, there were no significant differences in net support for affirmative action across the three conditions.
### Table 4
REGRESSION MODEL PREDICTING SUPPORT FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BY FRAMING CONDITION, VISUAL FRAMING EXPERIMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framing Condition</th>
<th>1. Stereotypic</th>
<th>2. Counterstereotypic</th>
<th>3. Control</th>
<th>Difference: 1 vs. 2 &amp; 3</th>
<th>Difference: 1 vs. 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward blacks</td>
<td>.80 (.20)</td>
<td>.34 (.27)</td>
<td>−.03 (.37)</td>
<td>.62** (.28)</td>
<td>.46* (.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
<td>.33 (.20)</td>
<td>.49 (.23)</td>
<td>.62 (.47)</td>
<td>−.14 (.28)</td>
<td>−.16 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>.25 (.14)</td>
<td>.16 (.19)</td>
<td>.09 (.29)</td>
<td>.03 (.28)</td>
<td>.10 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>−.06 (.14)</td>
<td>.13 (.17)</td>
<td>.57 (.20)</td>
<td>−.37* (.19)</td>
<td>−.19 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Differences and associated standard errors and significance levels were calculated by reestimating the pooled model, including a dummy variable for framing condition and terms representing the interactions between each predictor and framing condition.

$p < .10; **p < .05$

The results in concert reveal a clear and consistent pattern: when issues are framed in ways that draw attention to the moral qualifications of the intended beneficiaries, the power of group sentiment increases; when framed in ways that deflect attention away from the beneficiaries, the power of group sentiment declines. Group-centrism is pervasive, but it is not an immutable fact of public opinion. The power of group sentiment hinges importantly on the political setting; on how, we would like to say, elites choose to define public issues.

The Psychology of Framing Effects

Our results suggest that issue framing can have demonstrable effects on public opinion, but there is much to be learned about the psychological mechanisms by which such effects are realized. Some readers by now have undoubtedly seen the parallel between our results and studies of priming and accessibility effects currently in vogue in public opinion research (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Schwarz and Sudman 1992; Strack and Martin 1987; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). A common feature of these otherwise diverse analyses is a portrait of the individual as a limited-capacity information processor (Fiske and Taylor 1991). While there may be numerous considerations that one could bear in mind when
responding to an inquiry about affirmative action, welfare, or some other issue, only the subset of considerations that are cognitively accessible at the time the attitude is expressed will be taken into account. Considerations that happen to be primed tend to dominate opinion by virtue of their enhanced accessibility (Higgins, Bargh, and Lombardi 1985).

While frames could act like primes, we suspect there is more to the effects described here than frame-induced changes in the accessibility of group sentiments. We suggest that frames alter the *weight or importance* attributed to certain considerations (such as group attitudes) while making other, equally accessible ideas, seem less consequential (Snyder and Kendzierski 1982; van der Pligt and Eiser 1984). All of this could be accomplished without affecting the accessibility of these concepts in memory (see also Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley N.d.; Nelson and Kinder 1991).

Some analysts emphasize ambivalence as a fundamental feature of contemporary American public opinion (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Hochschild 1981, 1993; Lane 1962; Rosenberg 1988). Such ambivalence arises less from ignorance than from inability or unwillingness to commit absolutely and unequivocally to a single position. From this perspective, the expression of opinion inevitably requires negotiation among competing, often inconsistent, considerations (Chong 1993; Liberman and Chaiken 1991). Frames provide direction for temporarily resolving the uncertainty in opinion born of ambivalence by dispensing guidance about the relevance and importance of these clashing considerations.

We believe that frames are not just convenient tools for the analysis of elite debate, but that they also constitute the cognitive structures by which thinking on matters of policy is organized within the minds of individual citizens. In making this claim, we are suggesting that frames amount to a specialized political form of schemata. Investigations of political cognition (e.g., Lodge and Hamill 1986) have shown that the organization of political concepts in the mind may indeed be schematic, with conceptual nodes and associations arrayed in a hierarchical structure (but see Kuklinski, Luskin, and Bolland 1991). The concepts themselves are typically described, or at least operationalized, as simple declarative statements. We advocate broadening the schema concept to include the symbolic elements described in Gamson’s framing theory. Visual images, icons, analogies, slogans, and catchphrases all occupy important positions in a frame’s architecture. There is no reason to believe that such elements are not also present within the individual’s own belief system. These symbols connect the issue with deeper values, principles, beliefs, and emotions that the individual may not even consciously recognize as directly relevant. The concept of frame, we believe, provides a richness of detail about the nature of *political* thought and communication that most general treatments of schemata lack.

By the results of our experiments, group-centered frames appear to be important, and they are certainly popular in everyday political discourse. But we are far
from knowing everything about them. For one thing, we have spoken of "group-centered" frames and "group-centric" opinions without elaborating much on the obvious variety within each of these categories. Throughout the present set of experiments we have highlighted frames that, in one way or another, assail the moral character and integrity of the issue's focal group. Clearly, alternative frames could be developed that might appeal to specific components of group attitudes, such as one's emotional reactions to the outgroup (Esses, Haddock, and Zanna 1993). Furthermore, frames may utilize any of a number of symbolic tactics (slogans, metaphors) through any number of media (visual, verbal). Our experiments to date have used only a sample of these varied elements. Also absent from our studies so far are those issues that might implicate relatively advantaged social groups. Issues such as capital gains tax reductions, environmental regulation, and health care reform all implicate relatively well-off groups (investors, big business, physicians). Attitudes toward advantaged groups may play an important role in opinion too, but we have not yet investigated this possibility. Finally, while we have portrayed framing as a central aspect of the "conversation" between elites and citizens in a democracy (Kinder and Herzog 1993), we have said little about how elite qualities and characteristics may determine their power to establish the terms of political debate through framing. In our research so far, the sources of these frames have been nameless and faceless; future work should examine how source qualities such as authority and credibility intervene in the framing process.

In the end, framing is interesting only insofar as it enhances our understanding of public opinion processes outside surveys, in the hurly-burly of the real political world. Invented by elites and carried by mass media, frames influence public opinion by circumscribing the considerations citizens take seriously. Arguments or images that spotlight social groups may activate stereotypes and prejudices. Group sentiments then become the dominant guideposts for the evaluation of public policy, crowding out other, perhaps more worthy considerations, such as the cost and effectiveness of the proposed policy or the principles the policy might advance. When elites reduce complex issues to referenda on the moral standings of social groups, group-centrism will likely remain a fact of American political life.

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Thomas E. Nelson is assistant professor of political science, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.

Donald R. Kinder is professor of political science, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.