



Framing for Deliberation

A CAPE working paper

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Introduction

In this memo we share the preliminary results of research we are conducting to learn about the impacts of different types of issue framing on the capacity and willingness of diverse groups of individuals to engage in productive dialogue and deliberation about complex issues. The research builds on and tests ideas presented in Will Friedman's article "Reframing Framing," in which Friedman distinguishes between typical media framing that presents issues in dualistic ways (debate style) and efforts made by organizations like Public Agenda to frame issues in ways that clarify a range of positions and trade-offs involved in any proposed solution to a problem (what Public Agenda calls "Citizen Choicework").¹ Our current research is aimed at challenging the mainstream preoccupation with issue framing as the domain of power politics (e.g., partisan and interest group competition for citizen allegiance through persuasive framing), by exploring how different approaches to issue framing might impact people's ability to understand and grapple more or less effectively with difficult public problems.²

Instead of viewing framing as a competitive political mechanism which shapes citizen-consumer preferences for pre-packaged partisan positions on public problems, our research explores how framing an issue for deliberation might help citizens participate more productively in the democratic work of collaborative problem solving. In his article, Friedman argues that framing issues for deliberation, instead of persuasion, may serve as a valuable "non-partisan civic information management system" that can help ordinary citizens become more effective in navigating complex issues. In our current research we are interested in learning more about the democratic value of this civic information management system by examining the quality of discussions that result from different types of framing.

The overarching hypothesis we aim to test through this research can be summarized as follows: issues framed in ways that clarify a range of approaches to a public problem lead to more civically healthy conversations, (i.e. more civil, interesting and productive dialogue within diverse groups) than issues that are framed in the standard dualistic debate model that dominates typical media representations of public problems. In short, we hypothesize that framing issues for deliberation leads to better, more civically robust conversations than the conversations that follow from more typical forms of persuasion-oriented, debate-style issue framing.

In June of 2008, we conducted four focus groups with diverse groups of citizens in Englewood, New Jersey in which we tested our hypothesis by presenting two different types of framing around the issue of Social Security reform. In two of the groups, a naïve moderator (i.e., one who was unaware of our research interests and hypotheses) used written material that framed the issue for persuasion by

¹ The first type of issue framing, which Friedman calls "Framing to Persuade," involves defining an issue to one's advantage in the hopes of getting an audience to do what you want it to do. The latter, termed "Framing for Deliberation," involves clarifying the range of positions surrounding an issue so that citizens can better decide what *they* want to do.

² For an excellent overview of the most relevant literature, see *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., A. E. Grant (eds): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. See also, G. Lakoff (2008, 2002), R. Entman (1993), J. Druckman (2007, 2003).

presenting two debate-style arguments about the issue of Social Security reform in a manner consistent with typical media representations. In the other two groups, the same moderator used written material that framed the issue of Social Security reform for deliberation by presenting it in a Choicework format, with three different approaches to the problem along with several trade-offs involved in each of the approaches. In all four groups, the moderator followed a basic moderating guide in which he simply encouraged participants to react to the material they read and have a conversation about it. The researchers observed the focus groups from behind two-way mirrors and had transcripts as well as DVDs of the groups produced in order to study the resulting conversations.

In the remainder of this memo we present our observations from the initial focus group research and describe the new avenues of inquiry that have been opened by these initial observations. Given the small number of groups conducted thus far, the results of this research must be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive. Therefore, we present our findings as observations that are serving to help us refine the hypotheses that we will test in our next phase of research. While we go into greater depth below, our chief observations from these first focus groups include:

- 1) Deliberative framing led to discussions in which participants expressed greater curiosity and inquisitiveness than did participants in groups with persuasive frames, which were marked by considerably more venting.
- 2) Deliberatively framed groups made greater efforts at creative and collaborative problem solving and generated more solution ideas than did the persuasively framed groups, which tended more towards circular and repetitive discussions.
- 3) Deliberative framing also led group participants to greater and more frequent expression of empathy and understanding about the situations of others, which seemed to be short-circuited in the persuasion groups by cynicism and pessimism about institutions, human nature and solutions.
- 4) Despite the marked differences we observed, people found *both* group experiences to be satisfying ones. In all of the groups, participants seemed to like most that they had the opportunity to have conversations with people from different backgrounds and starting points.

In the remainder of this report, we expand on our initial observations and present new avenues of inquiry that emerged from this first phase of research and which are informing our research plans moving forward. We conclude by reflecting on the following question: what kind of information do citizens in a democracy need? By taking a slightly more expansive view of the relationship between debate and deliberation in this concluding section, we hope to underscore the importance of this research for those interested in defending a model of politics that treats citizens as partners in problem solving instead of mere spectators of public life and consumers of prepackaged political positions.

The Observations in Greater Detail & Avenues of Further Inquiry

Observation 1: Inquisitiveness vs. Venting

We observed that participants in the groups using the deliberatively framed materials tended to ask more questions and spend more time speculating about different aspects of the Social Security problem, while their counterparts in the persuasively framed groups tended to spend a more time venting about political corruption and greed. Participants in the deliberative groups also expressed distrust of leaders and grave concerns about government accountability, yet they seemed more able to move past their cynicism to ask questions about the nature of the issue and the different possible solutions. For example, it was more common in the deliberatively framed groups to hear questions such as,

Where did the problem with Social Security come from? I mean, is it just because there are more people retiring now...or is it because there was something wrong with how it was set up originally? —Male, deliberatively framed group 1

So, if we were to privatize [Social Security]...what kind of transition would there be to make this new system work for people who are at all different places from being young workers to those getting ready to retire? How would it work? That's what I'd like to know more about. —Female, deliberatively framed group 2

While participants in the deliberatively framed groups expressed more curiosity about the nature of the problem and the mechanics of the proposed solutions, the participants in the groups with materials aimed at persuasion (debate-style materials) tended to spend much more time venting with comments like,

It's all about mismanagement and these politicians that they look for their own pockets to put money in there somehow, some way. I don't know who's doing what to whom, but that's what's going on. —Female, persuasively framed group 2

Every government official, they try to make themselves look good. They'll sell their own grandma to make themselves look good. —Male, persuasively framed group 1

The government officials are just trying not to get caught stealing money, having sex with hookers, or getting caught on drugs and alcohol. Never mind attacking a real issue like this. That would be insane. —Male, persuasively framed group 2

It may seem somewhat odd to juxtapose inquisitiveness and cynicism as we do here, but we observed that when the conversation got bogged down in venting about corrupt and greedy leaders, something that was more frequent in the groups with debate-style persuasively framed materials, this seemed to circumvent people's curiosity about the nature of the Social Security problem. In short, it seemed as though venting about malfeasance furnished a kind of explanatory framework that made it more difficult for participants to explore other kinds of ideas about the cause and nature of the Social Security solvency problem.

Avenues for Further Inquiry:

Since mistrust of leaders and institutions is ubiquitous, we are interested in exploring whether or not people's sense of ownership of a problem has a mitigating effect on people's cynicism and/or creates more room for the sorts of habits of inquiry that deliberation requires. We suspect that deliberative framing may increase a person's sense of ownership of a problem, and we are interested in exploring this and learning more about how a sense of ownership might inspire curiosity and mitigate cynicism.

Observation 2: Creative Problem Solving vs. Repetition

We observed that the groups using the deliberatively framed materials were more solution-oriented in their discussions than their counterparts in the persuasively framed groups. Another way to describe what we observed is to say that in the deliberatively framed groups, participants were more likely to take the conversation in many different directions while participants in the persuasively framed groups tended to cover the same ground again and again. For example, in the deliberatively framed groups, it was more common for participants to have exchanges like the following one about different approaches to privatization:

I assume that you'd be able to have some choices on a retirement fund, since it's your own money that's going in there... Maybe privatization would work if they could figure out a way to help people learn how to pick the right funds and make the right investment choices.... —Male, deliberatively framed group 2

Yeah, what if they said, "Okay, we got the X, X, X, and X funds or options," and laid it out really clearly so that you could decide whether you want to split it up and put a couple different funds, or whatever the case may be....—Male, deliberatively framed group 1

Someone was saying it could be mandatory [to save,] so maybe it could be put into like a frozen account that you won't have access to take out, just to put it in from your paycheck or something like that.... —Female, deliberately framed group 1

In the groups with the persuasively framed debate-style materials, these sorts of solution-oriented, problem-solving exchanges were less common. Instead, these groups tended more toward to cover the same ground again and again, with some participants stating and restating the conclusions that they had come to through reading the debate-style materials. The following selection of quotes highlights just a few of many virtually identical comments made by participants in the persuasively framed groups.

I'm against privatizing Social Security...I'm against it, it's as simple as that. —Male, persuasively framed group 2

I don't trust Wall Street any more than I trust the government... All those guys just looking to make money for themselves and could care less about my little account. I don't think it would work, personally, but I don't trust the government to handle it either. —Female, persuasively framed group 2

I'd rather have control of it than have the government have control of it. That's just how I feel about it. —Male, persuasively framed group 1

As these quotes capture, the participants in the persuasively framed groups were more likely to express their positions in static terms, which helps explain why they tended to cover the same ground again and again: if one has landed once and for all on a position, there is less incentive to explore new ideas than if one feels that they are exploring a problem in the search for solutions. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the cynicism that was more prevalent in these groups also seemed to hamper people's willingness and ability to engage in creative, problem-solving discussions and instead appeared to bolster people's static positions.

On the other hand, in the deliberately framed groups in which people were presented with a range of approaches to the problem of Social Security reform, participants were more likely to view the issue as complex and multifaceted instead of black or white. While it is difficult to capture this in quotes, we also observed that the overall tone of the deliberately framed groups was much more collaborative insofar as people held themselves and interacted as though they were *working* on a problem together, rather than simply reacting to the material.

Avenues for Further Inquiry:

While we expected the conversations in the persuasively framed groups to be more contentious, something we don't feel we clearly observed in the first round of research, we did not expect that persuasively framed groups would be more repetitive and circular. We suspect that presenting a range of options creates a context in which people are required to do more work than if they are simply encountering two debate-oriented positions, and that the experience of working together inspires creative problem solving. We also suspect that circular, repetitive discussions can be expected to follow when conversations are framed in ways that make citizens feel like spectators of, rather than participants in, a decision-making process. We intend to explore this further in the next phase of research.

Observation 3: Empathy vs. Pessimism

In addition to being more inquisitive and solution-oriented, we observed that participants in the deliberately framed groups were more likely to express empathy and understanding about the situations of others, which seemed to be short-circuited in the persuasion groups by cynicism and pessimism about institutions, human nature and solutions. In the context of the subject of all the groups, Social Security reform, the differences we noticed between the two types of groups was clearest when it came to the way people talked about privatization of social security.

In the deliberately framed groups, even when there was widespread support for individual retirement accounts or even complete privatization of Social Security, comments like these were fairly common:

I'm lucky. My house is paid. You can't buy a house anymore, because it's too expensive. People can't even pay rent. It's so high...people that are working these menial jobs and only making a little bit of money, they're lucky they can put food on their table and pay their rent. They can't save. They can't even have a 401(k). We have to think about how all of this is going to affect them. —Female, deliberately framed group 1

The thing is, I just don't know if I would have been able to save and have a plan of raising three kids and everything if I was starting out today. It's much harder for people now... —Female, deliberately framed group 1

I'm not sure it's good for people to create their own retirement fund, because there are some people who really do not know how to handle money. And it's not just that they're stupid or whatever, you know, because in a way it could be any of us. And when they do retire, they end up losing everything, so they have nothing to retire on. —Male, deliberately framed group 2

In the groups in which the participants were using materials framed for persuasion, even as participants expressed different views of privatization of Social Security, it was more common to hear comments like these:

People just get dependent on it, like welfare. It's just an easy ride for them... Social Security or welfare or whatever, a lot of people treat it like it's a free ride. A lot of people are like that. —Female, persuasively framed group 1

I think it's good [to privatize Social Security]. Then there's certain people, like everybody else said, that does not have any control of their money...and they spend it on petty nonsense. Then they're still complaining that they have no money. Maybe some people can't manage their money correctly. Well, then that's too bad. —Male, persuasively framed group 2

There are so many people, like me, that don't trust in the government that if the individual did take care of it, it's kind of like, well, if you didn't save, then sorry. You have nobody else to blame but yourself. —Male, persuasively framed group 1

While this observation about empathy, like the other observations, requires further investigation to really tease out if deliberately framed groups in fact are conducive to greater expressions of empathy and understanding, it is reasonable to at least hypothesize that empathic disposition toward the world and people might go hand in hand with greater inquisitiveness about the nature of public problems as well as a greater willingness to engage in creative problem-solving. When venting and cynicism prevail, it is more difficult to imagine what incentives might exist for people to go to greater lengths to explore a problem and work on generating solutions.

Avenues for Further Inquiry:

This was perhaps the most unexpected of our initial observations and we are currently working to identify ways to further explore the relationship between empathy and productive problem solving. We believe that, unlike pity which is often characterized by a sense of separation from others, empathy or co-feeling depends on a person's ability to identify with the plight of another. We suspect that people are more inclined to engage in collaborative problem solving when they are able to identify with others (empathize), but we are not sure how it is the case that empathy might be inspired by deliberately framing issues. It is our intention to investigate this further moving forward.

Observation 4: Framing Aside, People Like to Talk & Listen within Diverse Groups

Interestingly, despite the differences between the groups framed for deliberation and those framed for persuasion, people found *both* group experiences to be satisfying ones. In all of the groups, participants seemed to like most that they had the opportunity to have conversations with people from different backgrounds and starting points, and that they got to hear different viewpoints from other participants.

In the persuasively framed groups, we heard comments like this,

I learned some different ideas and viewpoints. I think it helps that you have people in all different age brackets in here. —Female, persuasively framed group 1

Obviously, coming here made me think differently about different points of view and aspects of it. I liked hear what everyone had to say, especially the younger ones here. —Male, persuasively framed group 2

Similarly, participants in the deliberatively framed groups said things like this,

I was kind of interested to hear what—this group, we have all different ages, and different ages have different needs. You got these young ladies thinking about 30, 40 years from now, what they're going to do. I'm somewhere in the middle. Everybody has a different approach... since we're all in different places. It was interesting to hear all that. —Male, deliberatively framed group 1

While we need to test further to learn more about people's perceptions of the different experiences, what was clear from all of the groups was that participants found the experience of small group discussion a valuable one. Interestingly, people in both types of groups said that they found the experience inspired some sense of hope and optimism. The following exchange, from one of the deliberatively framed groups, captures this:

Male: They're not. They're just saying it's sinking. That's all they said. They keep telling you that it's sinking. That's it. They don't really (talk over).

Female: Yeah, they're not saying anything.

Female: But with this...us talking here there's an open idea. There's an opening for some other way of looking at this. There's some room for hope. It's hopeful.

Male: Yeah, makes you think that maybe it's not just all doom and gloom.

Near the end of one of the persuasively framed groups, as people were asked at the end of the conversation what the experience made them think about the issue, this exchange echoed another kind of optimism:

Male: You know, it affects the old and the young, so it needs to be—young people need to get more involved and old people working together, because it affects everybody.

Female: [Leaders should] get inputs from both young and old, from lots of different people.

Female: Maybe we should have more hand in—maybe we should be more in the government...

Avenues for Further Inquiry

We suspect that people in both groups may have found the experience equally satisfying, or at least similarly satisfying, at least in part because most people have never experienced truly deliberative discussion and have nothing with which to compare persuasive debate. As we move forward in the research we are going to explore this further by exposing single groups to both types of framing to learn if they find the resulting conversations equally satisfying.

Conclusion—What kinds of information do citizens in a democracy need? Debate vs. Deliberation

The purpose of debate is to win an argument through persuasion, and it is therefore premised on the assumption that there is a clear right answer that will be revealed through the force of the better argument. Because debate is fundamentally competitive, it is a combative mechanism for information distribution and is therefore better suited to a spectatorial model of public life in which citizens stand on the sidelines and watch “experts” battle two sides of an issue in an effort to win the public over to one side or the other. It is easy to see how a consumer model of citizenship might thrive under these circumstances, but it is really best for our democracy that citizens are reduced to spectators and consumers of prepackaged decisions? Is it not reasonable to expect that the soaring levels of dissatisfaction and disengagement that characterize public life today might be directly connected to this model of information distribution which both underscores the public’s exclusion from important public decision-making processes and exacerbates the widespread feeling among citizens that the public is always being manipulated by leaders and the media?

When we asked participants in the focus groups to share their views about media coverage of the Social Security issue, many said things like,

There’s always a political spin on it with the media or the news... They don’t give you enough information. —Female, deliberatively framed group 2

The media’s not about educating us, so even though I’m in that age bracket too [where I should be paying a lot of attention to this], I agree with Bob. What can I possibly do as an individual? —Male, persuasively framed group 1

It seems like anything the media has to say about Social Security is all negative. They just say it’s a failing system. It’s not going to be there. But you don’t hear about why there’s a problem. —Male, persuasively framed group 2

If you’re listening to FOX News, you’re hearing a conservative side. If you’re listening to CNN or one of those other guys, you’re hearing it more from the liberal side...and everybody thinks what they think is right and what everybody else thinks is wrong. I don’t know that there is a black and white, right and wrong. For me, personally, no I don’t think there’s enough information there for me to make a case either way. —Male, deliberatively framed group 2

In a society as complex as ours, public deliberation might be viewed as a therapeutic alternative to the consumer/spectator model of politics that seems to only amplify people’s sense of alienation from public life. While debates are entertaining to watch, and certainly serve a useful purpose in the American political landscape, deliberation operates on a very different set of principles about how citizens can and should be able to encounter and navigate complex political issues.

Whereas debate is competitive and spectatorial, public deliberation is collaborative and is focused on solving shared problems. As such, it assumes that many people have many pieces of the answer and is therefore fundamentally about listening to understand different points of view and new ideas, and discovering new options for addressing a problem.

Having issues framed for deliberation, rather than persuasion, is important because many of the issues we face in our communities and in our nation are highly complex and laden with different trade-offs that can be hard to uncover/unpack/get a handle on. Under these circumstances, how can we come up with solutions to problems that take this complexity into account simply by being subjected to different attempts at persuasion? This is where the principles of deliberation come in, by helping people consider a variety of solutions and approaches and then develop common ground around those approaches together. But it is important to understand that deliberation is not a goal, it is a strategy and tool for overcoming hostile dead-end partisan rhetoric, for ending deadlock, and for helping citizens and communities become vital partners in public problem solving. Because deliberation is a strategy and a tool, it isn't merely about *talking*. In successful deliberation, people work to make sense of a problem *and* come up with specific ideas and actions for moving ahead on solutions. Therefore, the work of public deliberation is a cornerstone of democracy and involves the critical skills of citizenship that allow citizens to make informed decisions about difficult problems.