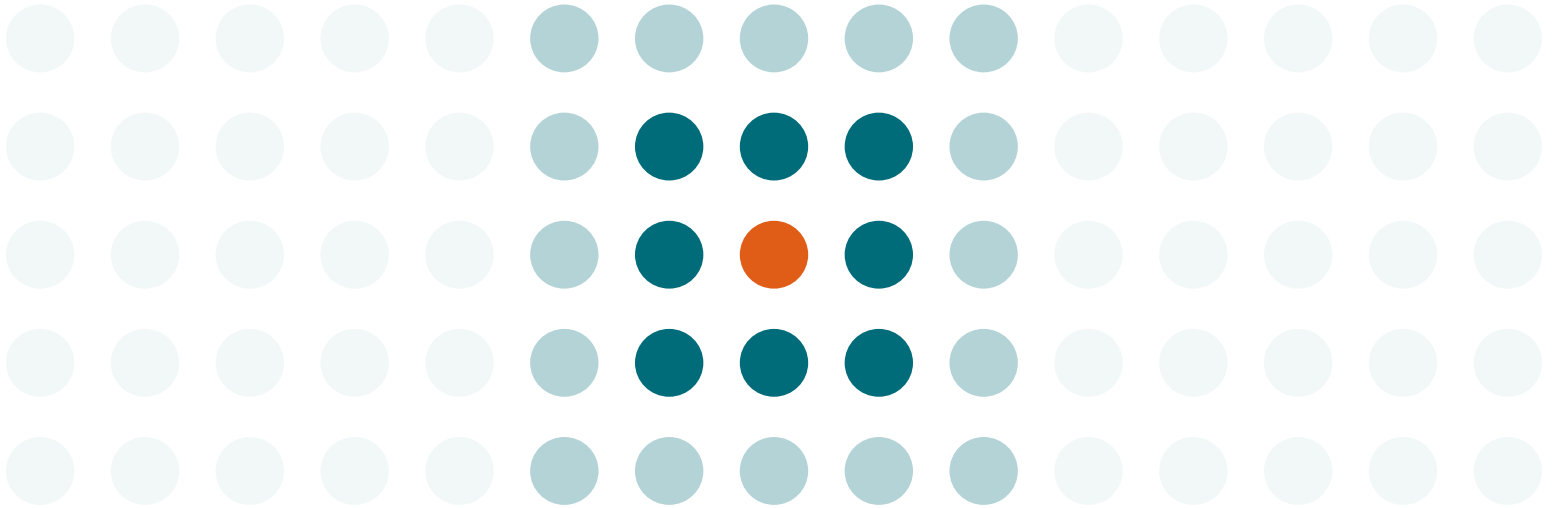




CENTER *for* ADVANCES
in PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



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Reframing “Framing”

by Will Friedman, Ph.D.

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) is at the forefront of efforts to research, develop and disseminate new insights and best practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

CAPE takes a leading role in a field dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems. CAPE is housed within Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research and public engagement organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

For nearly three decades, Public Agenda has been working in communities to help citizens understand complex problems and create momentum for change by building common ground, managing differences and creating new partnerships. The Center serves the field by advancing three distinct but interrelated strands of work:

- The Public Engagement **Research Project** conducts and disseminates studies that clarify the dynamics and impacts of specific public engagement practices. Among the questions it explores are: What are the short-and-long term impacts of public deliberation on citizens, communities, leadership and public policies? What are the impacts of framing public issues for deliberation in contrast to framing them for purposes of persuasion—and what are the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic participation? Why do deliberative democratic habits and practices take root in some communities more than others? And how can deliberation practices best go to scale, and be applied beyond the level of individual communities?
- The **Digital Engagement Project** experiments with and explores new internet-based tools and their application to engaging citizens in public deliberation and problem-solving. Guiding questions include: Can the internet only be used to link together like-minded people, or are there effective ways to produce greater “boundary-crossing” online, bringing diverse citizens together to better understand their differences? Can blogging contribute to deliberative public engagement, or only to partisan electoral or interest group politics? Is deliberation feasible within online communities?
- The **Theory-Building Project** promotes greater interplay between researchers and practitioners to improve the field's understanding of how public deliberation works and how it can work better. Principal areas and inquiry are: How does the public come to judgment? How does public deliberation relate to political and social change?

Major support for the Center is provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**, the **Rockefeller Brothers Fund** and the **Kettering Foundation**.

For more information on CAPE and Public Agenda's public engagement work, contact **Alison Kadlec**, CAPE's associate director, at 212-686-6610 x 40 or akadlec@publicagenda.org. Also, visit the public engagement section of our website at http://publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_home.cfm.

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He who determines what politics is about runs the country because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power.

— E.E. Schattsneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, 1960, p. 68

Is the U.S. presence in Iraq a necessary step in a “war on terror,” a misguided step in a “war of choice,” or a Machiavellian step in a “blood for oil” scenario? Is Social Security a failed system in need of replacement or a successful one in need of normal maintenance? Is the public school system the best hope for democracy or a state monopoly immune to reform?

That controlling the terms of the public debate is a matter of critical importance to power, policy and politics is, of course, no recent discovery. Political rhetoric is an ancient art and has always been concerned with this fundamental truth. What has changed in recent years is the importance of having an impact on the general public as much as on elites, the social science that is being applied to the endeavor, and the exponentially more powerful vehicles of transmission that modern media afford its practitioners. This entire

enterprise is studied and practiced these days under the rubric of “framing.”

Broadly speaking, framing refers to how information and messages—such as media stories, political arguments and policy positions—are defined, constructed and presented in order to have certain impacts rather than others. Which aspects of a situation are made most salient so as to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”?¹ What narratives do we construct to explain complex events—and what are their effects on policy and public opinion?² What context do we place around information—and how do these change the way people make decisions³ and attribute responsibility for events?⁴ What metaphors do we use to convey our values—and how do these resonate with various audiences and thereby help define the terms of the debate?⁵ In short, the presentation of information, facts and arguments is not neutral. Different presentations can have very different impacts.

That this is about much more than an academic exercise is evident in that first Republicans and the Right, and now Democrats and the Left, have come to view framing as an essential strategy in winning public support for policies and votes. One reason for this conclusion is that the Republican party and conservative movements have invested mightily for several decades in aggressively framing public debates to their advantage, and a good deal of their ascendancy appears

¹ Entman, R. (1993) “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication*, 43 (4).

² Gamson, W. and K. Lasch (1983) “The Political Culture of Social Welfare Policy.” In S. Spiro (ed.) *Evaluating the Welfare State*, Academic Press, New York.

³ Tversky, A. and D. Kahneman (1990) “Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions.” In K. Cook and M. Levi (eds.), *The Limits of Rationality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁴ Iyengar, S. (1991) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁵ Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont.



to many to stem from the success they've had in doing so. The Democratic party and left-leaning organizations, strongly influenced by the work of the social scientist George Lakoff, are now attempting to catch up and do the same. Thus has “framing” become the killer app of new millennium American politics?

While framing has received significant mainstream attention of late⁶, what is not being discussed is the *limited context* in which framing is conceived. For the current infatuation with framing is concerned virtually exclusively with the power politics of parties and interest groups, and the winning or losing of their respective battles. But what if we asked instead about the relationship of framing to fostering citizenship and enabling democratic deliberation and dialogue? What if we were to reframe framing to focus less on how it can help one side or another win the political game and more on what it means, and can mean, for strengthening the democratic process?

Framing-to-Persuade vs. Framing-for-Deliberation

This attempt at a democratic-process approach to framing begins by distinguishing two major categories: *partisan framing-to-persuade* (the usual use of the term today) and *nonpartisan framing-for-deliberation*. The first 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 involves clarifying the range of positions surrounding an issue so that citizens can better decide what they want to do.

Framing-for-deliberation sometimes happens naturally, when rich public debates evolve in such a way that they help citizens sort through competing frames, arguments and

policies. An example was the 1991 congressional debate on the Gulf War, in which representatives from both sides of the aisle engaged in unusually frank and concrete talk. That was, however, an exception. Typically, the give and take of official pronouncements and media coverage provide citizens with a rather poor sampling and explanation of the range of options available to address a public problem. Instead, partisan posturing and political spectacle prevail.⁷

Nonpartisan civic organizations dedicated to improving the public debate, such as Public Agenda, the Kettering Foundation, Study Circles, America Speaks and Viewpoint Learning, do their best to step into this breach to frame issues for deliberation as an aid to citizens who might wish to seriously engage them. This can mean, for example, creating nonpartisan guides to the policy debate that begin with the public's values and ways of looking at an issue, rather than that of experts and special interests, and provide an overview of the range of approaches and solutions that exist and the tradeoffs among them. By way of example, the following page offers an excerpt of Public Agenda's deliberative framing on abortion.⁸

⁶ E.g., Bai, M. “The Framing Wars,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 17, 2005.

⁷ E.g., W. L. Bennett and D. L. Paletz, eds. (1994), *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Fallows, J. (1996) *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*, New York: Vintage Books.

⁸ Numerous other examples may be found on Public Agenda's website (www.publicagenda.org) under [Issue Guides](#) and [Public Engagement/Resource Center](#).

Abortion: Discussion Guide

The broad choices we present are designed to be discussion starters, not a political program. They aren't the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, and you may have your own ideas we haven't considered. But each choice offers a distinctive diagnosis of the issue, and each leads to a distinctive prescription. Public Agenda does not advocate one approach over another, but simply seeks to clarify alternatives and promote discussion on the issues.

As the abortion example makes clear, such deliberative framing is aimed at helping people make up their minds among competing arguments, not persuading them of a single argument.

The Perspectives in Brief

PERSPECTIVE #1

Opposing Abortion

By ushering in an era of abortion on demand, the Supreme Court's Roe decision cheapened human life. The unborn child, which is no less human than its mother, has an inalienable right to life. The sanctity of human life is a moral claim that cannot be violated or superceded by other claims. For this reason, abortion cannot be condoned as an individual decision or as a matter of public policy. Abortion must be prohibited or at least sharply restricted.

PERSPECTIVE #2

Supporting Abortion Rights

The principles on which the Roe v. Wade decision was based – an individual's freedom of choice, as well as freedom from government intrusion into personal matters – need to be reaffirmed. The fetus is not yet a person and its rights do not outweigh the mother's right to choose. Decisions about such a personal matter as whether to continue a pregnancy must be left to the individual who is most directly involved, the pregnant woman.

PERSPECTIVE #3

Respecting Differences

Laws regarding abortion must reflect a concern for two different values. Because we value the human potential of the unborn, we must try to minimize the number of abortions performed. At the same time, public measures must be taken to prevent the tragic dilemma posed by unwanted pregnancy. As members of a pluralistic society, we are obliged to acknowledge that individuals differ about the status of the fetus. For this reason, and because outlawing abortion would be impracticable, thus undermining respect for the law, abortion should be permitted early in pregnancy. After that, it should be sharply restricted.



But Framing-to-Persuade is not Bad— or at Least it Doesn't Have to be

To be clear, my argument is not that framing-for-deliberation is good while framing-to-persuade is bad. It is, rather, that both are needed. Framing-to-persuade reflects the natural give and take of democracy. But without a complementary process of framing-for-deliberation, it is extremely difficult for citizens to sort through the onslaught of competing persuasive frames cascading upon them from advocacy campaigns and media outlets of every sort and stripe. The default position for many is to filter out all frames save those they already agree with, or else to avoid pretty much anything to do with public issues altogether out of a general sense of exasperation—hardly a boon to the democratic process in either case.

Framing-for-deliberation, as noted above, helps citizens engage a range of advocacy frames that are competing for their allegiance without being overwhelmed by their sheer number and volume. In this sense it acts as a nonpartisan civic information management system. But if there were no advocacy frames (if there were no framing-to-persuade) there would be no grist for the mill of deliberation and no need for deliberative (as opposed to persuasive) framing.

But to say that framing-to-persuade is natural and necessary is not to say that all forms of it are of equal value. Some persuasive framing can stimulate and creatively provoke the public debate and some can more or less destroy it. So there is a further distinction we need to make if we are to reframe framing in such a way that it supports, rather than undermines, the democratic process.

Honest vs. Dishonest Framing-to-Persuade

If distinguishing framing-to-persuade and framing-for-deliberation is one step toward a democratic-process approach to the concept, a further distinction is also useful, between honest and dishonest framing-to-persuade. The first is sincere rhetorical advocacy. It says, “I believe this because” and it means it. It attempts to do this as skillfully and persuasively as possible, but it stops short of dissembling and crass manipulation. I’ve already mentioned the example of the congressional debate about the first Gulf War in ’91. The Lincoln-Douglas debates offer another important, almost archetypal, exemplar in American history.

In contrast to honest framing-to-persuade is the dishonest, insincere and manipulative variety. The typical over-the-top election-season attack ad is a perfect example. Of course, the distinction between honest and dishonest framing-to-persuade will always be, in the real world, a relative one. There can be elements of manipulation in honest argument and kernels of truth in attack ads. Thus, while there are obvious examples of dishonest framing that no reasonable person with a modicum of objectivity will take seriously, in more subtle cases the distinction between honest and dishonest framing can be difficult to adjudicate. But just because it is difficult does not mean it should not be attempted.⁹

⁹ More news organizations seem to be fact-checking political ads and public arguments these days, as does [FactCheck.org](https://www.factcheck.org/) of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

Equal Opportunity to Enter the Fray

So far, this analysis of a democratic process approach to framing calls for better ways to discourage dishonest framing-to-persuade and encourage the honest kind, while also creating a better balance in the public sphere between framing-to-persuade and framing-for-deliberation. At least one more factor needs attention, the adequacy of opportunity for all parties to enter the public debate and place their own perspectives—their own “frames”—in the marketplace of ideas. Here is where money and power enter the discussion, with their capacity to promote some frames while marginalizing others to wither on the vine. When, for instance, the federal government can secretly spend hundreds of millions of public dollars (as recent press reports contend) on stealth PR campaigns to promote its foreign policy frames, or pay journalists to dishonestly plant stories in support of its educational policies, basic questions of equal opportunity to engage the policy debate come into focus. A democratic process approach to framing must contend with these dynamics, and promote a level playing field in the give and take of our public discourse.

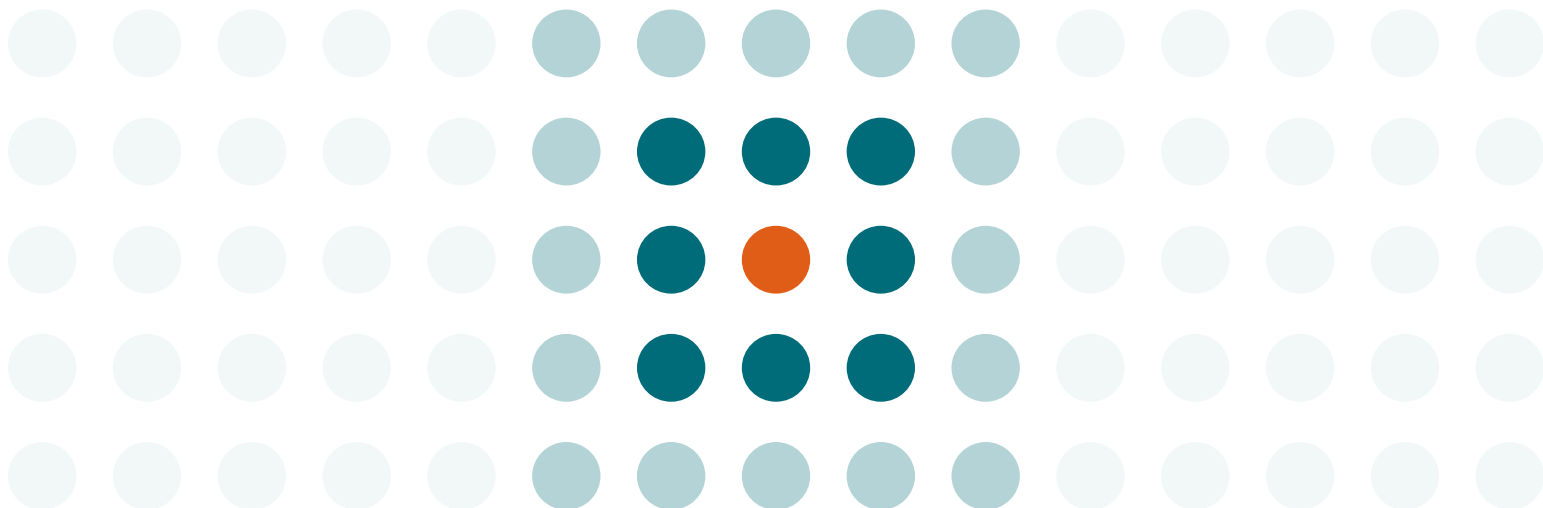
Framing and the Democratic Capacities of Citizens

It seems apparent that an overly large proportion of the framing aimed at the citizenry these days is framing-to-persuade of the dishonest variety, concerned with winning for its own sake, and in which obfuscation, if not downright lying, is commonplace. It seems apparent as well that some actors are able to have undue influence on the public agenda, not because of the power of their ideas, but rather because of the power of their positions and the access to resources at their disposal. The likely impact, of course, is to stunt and undermine the capacity of citizens. Instead of creating the conditions that help citizens sort through real public choices, the prevalence of dishonest framing-to-persuade and power disparities with respect to entering the public debate are likely to foster instead ever more cynicism, apathy, mistrust and confusion.

If the above is what the public tends to get, what the public and polity needs is a combination of robust, diverse honest framing-to-persuade coupled with a good dose of framing-for-deliberation. It is the combination of these two less frequently seen types of framing that makes it more possible for citizens to sort through a variety of competing arguments and solutions so they can figure out what’s most important to them and where they stand on issues. These kinds of framing stimulate rather than diminish the democratic capacities of citizens, and better enable them to engage and participate in the public debates of the day.

Notice that this is not a simplistic call to tone down the rhetoric and assume bipartisan solutions are always best. Nor, for that matter, does it assume they are always worst. It is, rather, a project in support of healthy, productive public debate and dialogue. It thus attempts to steer clear of the twin excesses of controversy for its own sake and compromise at all costs, of shrill, manufactured argumentativeness on the one hand and thoughtless, bland compromise on the other. It recognizes that there really are valid competing values and analyses in the world (competing frames) and that there always will be. Therefore the issue is neither to avoid nor to indulge in controversy but to find ways to sort through and come to terms with it as a people. Reframing framing in terms of the democratic process rather than partisan gamesmanship can bring into focus where we agree as well as where we truly (as opposed to reflexively) disagree. By doing so, we will be better able to see our way clear to solutions to our public problems that most can agree upon, live with and contribute to, solutions that promise to be as productive for our nation as they are hard-won. ❧





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Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion research and civic engagement organization. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion polls, balanced citizen education materials and ground-breaking community-based engagement initiatives. Its mission is to close the gaps between leaders and the public.

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