

# *On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?*

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Public opinion often depends on which frames elites choose to use. For example, citizens' opinions about a Ku Klux Klan rally may depend on whether elites frame it as a free speech issue or a public safety issue. An important concern is that elites face few constraints to using frames to influence and manipulate citizens' opinions. Indeed, virtually no work has investigated the limits of framing effects. In this article, I explore these limits by focusing on one particular constraint—the credibility of the frame's source. I present two laboratory experiments that suggest that elites face a clear and systematic constraint to using frames to influence and manipulate public opinion.

**F**raming constitutes one of the most important concepts in the study of public opinion. Evidence from experiments, surveys, and political campaigns suggests that public opinion often depends on which frames elites choose to use. For example, citizens' opinions about a Ku Klux Klan rally may depend on whether elites frame it as a free speech issue or a public safety issue. As one prominent public opinion scholar puts it: the “essence of public opinion formation in general lies in the distillation or sorting out of frames of reference” (Chong 1993, 870).

An important concern about framing effects is that elites face few constraints to using frames to influence and manipulate citizens' opinions. Kinder and Herzog (1993, 363) explain: “Our worry about the nefarious possibilities of framing is just that they can become freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation” (also see, e.g., Sniderman and Theriault 1999, 31–32). This concern is certainly warranted, as virtually no work has examined *when* an elite *can* and *cannot* successfully engage in framing.<sup>1</sup> We have little idea about where the

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<sup>1</sup>An exception concerns conflicting results on the moderating effect of political information (compare, e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1990 and Sniderman and Theriault 1999 with Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Also see Sniderman and Theriault (1999) on how competition between frames moderates the effect of any one frame.

limits to framing effects lie. As Chong (1996, 222) explains, “Models of information transmission [i.e., framing models] imply that the ideological faction that expends sufficient resources on propaganda and manipulation, and that sends sufficiently loud signals can *always* prevail in defining the terms of debate . . . such models need to be balanced with further specification about what frames of reference the public is inclined or willing to accept” (also see Chong 2000, 130; emphasis added).

In this article, I delve into the question of when framing effects occur (i.e., when do citizens “accept” a frame?). I begin by discussing what a framing effect is, how framing effects differ from related phenomena (e.g., persuasion), and how and when framing effects might occur. I focus on one particular constraint—the credibility of the frame’s source. I then present two laboratory experiments that provide some of the first pieces of evidence about limits to framing effects. The central implication is that contrary to many portrayals, elites face systematic constraints to using frames to influence and manipulate public opinion.

In the course of presenting my results, I also offer corroborative evidence concerning the psychological process underlying framing effects. I should emphasize that my intent is *not* to suggest that framing effects are insignificant or irrelevant; indeed, it is because they are so important that understanding their limits can provide critical insight into public opinion formation.

## On Framing Effects

Before presenting the experiments, I address a series of questions to clarify important concepts and motivate the experiments (see also Druckman n.d.).

**WHAT IS A FRAMING EFFECT?** The most prominent social science definition is that a framing effect occurs when two “logically equivalent (but not *transparently* equivalent) statements of a problem lead decision makers to choose different options” (Rabin 1998, 36; also see Tversky and Kahneman 1981; emphasis in original). Political scientists and communication scholars typically use a relaxed version of this definition that better captures the nature of political discourse (see, e.g., Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143; Sniderman and Theriault 1999, 5–6). Specifically, a framing effect is said to occur when, in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker’s emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions.

Scholars have investigated two related aspects of such framing effects. Some examine how different frames cause individuals to base their opinions on different considerations with little attention to overall opinions (e.g., the focus is on how frames alter the importance of different considerations). For example, Kinder and Sanders (1990) show that a frame emphasizing how affirmative

action provides an undeserved advantage to African Americans causes Caucasians to oppose affirmative action due, in large part, to racial considerations (e.g., racial prejudice). When shown a reverse discrimination frame, Caucasians still oppose affirmative action; however, in this case, they base their decision on their direct interests (see Berinsky and Kinder 2000; Gross and D'Ambrosio 1999 for interesting related uses).

Others focus on how different frames alter overall opinions with less explicit attention to the underlying considerations. Sniderman and Theriault (1999) find, for example, that when government spending for the poor is framed as enhancing the chance that poor people can get ahead, individuals tend to support increased spending. On the other hand, when it is framed as resulting in higher taxes, individuals tend to oppose increased spending. In what follows, I investigate how frames affect both overall opinion and the importance of different considerations underlying overall opinion.

**HOW DO FRAMING EFFECTS WORK?** Many argue that framing effects work by passively altering the accessibility of different considerations (e.g., Chong 1993; Iyengar 1991, 130–36; Zaller 1992, 83–84). Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997, 237) explain that accessibility models “portray the individual as rather mindless, as automatically incorporating into the final attitude whatever ideas happen to pop into mind” (e.g., whatever ideas the frame suggests).<sup>2</sup>

In a series of important papers, however, Nelson and his colleagues present evidence suggesting that framing effects do not work by altering the accessibility of different considerations (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson and Kinder 1991; Nelson, Willey, and Oxley 1998). Rather, Nelson and his colleagues show that framing effects work through a psychological process in which individuals consciously and deliberately think about the relative importance of different considerations suggested by a frame (i.e., frames work by altering *belief importance*). For example, instead of basing their opinion about a Ku Klux Klan rally on whichever consideration—free speech or public safety—happens to be (automatically) accessible due to the frame, people consciously think about the relative importance of the considerations suggested by the frame.

**HOW DO FRAMING EFFECTS DIFFER FROM MEDIA PRIMING AND PERSUASION?** Framing effects differ from two other forms of mass communication, media priming and persuasion. Miller and Krosnick (1998, 25) explain that “framing and priming are substantively different effects—the former deals with how changes in the *content* of stories on a single issue affect attitudes toward a relevant public policy, the latter with how changes in the *number* of stories about an

<sup>2</sup>The accessibility presumption is based, in large part, on a sizable social psychological literature (for overviews, see Fazio 1995; Wyer and Srull 1989). This work, however, does not show that political communication works through accessibility.

issue affect the ingredients of presidential performance evaluations” (emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997, 223) state that framing “differs both theoretically and empirically from . . . *persuasion*” (also see Kinder 1998, 182; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Willey, and Oxley 1998; emphasis in original). Nelson and Oxley (1999, 1040–41) explain that persuasion works by altering belief content—that is, “persuasion . . . takes place when a communicator effectively revises the content of one’s beliefs about the attitude object, replacing or supplementing favorable thoughts with unfavorable ones, or vice-versa.” For example, persuasion occurs when a communicator convinces a recipient that the economic impact of a new housing development will be positive or negative (a change in *belief content*). In contrast, Nelson and Oxley (1999, 1041) explain that framing effects work by altering “the *importance* individuals attach to particular beliefs” (and this shift may or may not alter overall opinion; emphasis in original). For example, framing occurs when a communicator convinces a recipient that when thinking about a new housing development, economic concerns are more important to consider than environmental concerns, regardless of whether the economic impact is seen as positive or negative (a change in *belief importance*).

The distinction between belief content and belief importance makes framing a unique concept—one that is “really something new in the study of political communication” (Nelson and Oxley 1999, 1041; also see Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Measures of belief importance also capture how frames alter considerations that underlie overall opinion. In accordance with the previous discussion, then, the critical dependent variables in judging a framing effect include measures of overall opinion and measures of belief importance (see Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Nelson, Willey, and Oxley 1998).

**WHEN DO FRAMING EFFECTS OCCUR?** A common presumption is that elites enjoy considerable leeway in using frames to influence and manipulate citizens’ opinions. Sniderman and Theriault (1999, 31–32) summarize this perspective when they state: “According to the framing theory of public opinion, citizens are not capable of political judgment . . . They are instead puppets, voting thumbs up or down depending on how issues are framed, their strings being pulled by elites who frame issues to guarantee political outcomes” (also see, e.g., Chong 1996, 222; Entman 1993, 57; Farr 1993, 386; Jones 1994, 105; Kinder and Herzog 1993, 363; Riker 1986; Sniderman 2000; Zaller 1992, 95). This por-

<sup>3</sup>Psychologists typically use the term “priming” to refer explicitly to “a procedure that increases the accessibility of some category or construct in memory” (Sherman, Mackie, and Driscoll 1990, 405). Miller and Krosnick (2000) present evidence that media priming does not work through accessibility.

trayal is not surprising given the paucity of work on limits to framing effects. Virtually no work has sought to document the conditions under which framing does and does not work (however, see note 1). As a result, many see framing effects as evidence of elite manipulation.

I take a different perspective. Instead of viewing framing effects as evidence of unilateral elite manipulation, I suggest that framing effects may occur because citizens delegate to ostensibly credible elites to help them sort through many possible frames. In this portrayal, people turn to elites for guidance and they are thus selective about which frames they believe—they only believe frames that come from sources they perceive to be credible. In short, the existence of framing effects may not indicate that elites are engaging in “freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation,” but rather, they may reflect citizens seeking guidance from credible elites.

There are many ways to operationalize credibility (e.g., public approval, likability, shared ideology). Lupia (2000) suggests, however, that credibility requires two features: (1) the speaker’s target audience must believe that the speaker possesses knowledge about which considerations are actually relevant to the decision at hand, and (2) the speaker’s target audience must believe that the speaker can be trusted to reveal what he or she knows (also see Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Of course, numerous studies have shown that perceived source credibility plays an important role in determining the success of persuasion (e.g., Hovland and Weiss 1951–52; Petty and Wegener 1998, 344–45). More recently, Miller and Krosnick (2000) show that source trustworthiness moderates media priming. As explained, however, persuasion and media priming differ empirically and theoretically from framing (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 1996; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Previous work on framing effects has not examined the hypothesis that only sources that are perceived to be credible can engage in successful framing. (Previous work has not examined how source credibility moderates belief importance; evidence from the persuasion literature, for example, concerns belief content and thus is quite distinct from what is investigated here.)<sup>4</sup>

Examining the moderating effect of source credibility is particularly important because of widespread concern about the lack of constraints on elites who use frames to influence public opinion. Consistent with this concern, some have suggested that source credibility will not moderate framing effects (Barker,

<sup>4</sup>Nearly all experimental work on framing uses a frame from a highly credible source (e.g., ABC or NBC News; see Pew Research Center 1998). In survey studies, the frame is either provided by the surveyor or attributed to “others” or “some people.” In these cases, it is unclear exactly what the respondents believe about the frame’s source; however, attributions to the surveyor raise the possibility of demand effects (and, in general, respondents are given no reason to doubt the surveyor’s credibility; see Mixon 1972).

Carman, and Knight 1998, 10; Riker 1990, 49).<sup>5</sup> Recognizing the need to examine source credibility in the context of framing, Nelson and Kinder (1996, 1074) state: “We have portrayed framing as a central aspect of the ‘conversation’ between elites and citizens in a democracy . . . future work should examine how source qualities such as authority and credibility intervene in the framing process.” I next describe two experiments implemented to test the hypothesis that perceived source credibility is a prerequisite for successful framing.

## Experiments on Source Credibility and Framing

To test the prediction that framing requires an ostensibly credible source, I implemented two laboratory experiments. The main advantage of using laboratory experiments is that they facilitate the assessment of causal predictions (such as the one under investigation here) by neutralizing the effect of confounding variables. A laboratory experiment also allows me to control both the frames the participants are exposed to and the sources of those frames. The major concern about using laboratory experiments is the difficulty of generalization to non-laboratory settings. To enhance the external validity of the experiments, I took a number of steps including using frames drawn from previous framing work and political discourse, using actual well-known sources, and presenting the stimuli (i.e., the frames) in realistic settings so that they appeared genuine.

It also is worth noting that while I used student participants, there are good reasons to believe in the generalizability of the sample. First, based on a meta-analysis of 136 studies on a related type of framing effect, Kühberger (1998, 36) finds that the behavior of student participants does not significantly differ from the behavior of non-student participants (also see Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 570–71). Second, if there is a bias due to the sample, it is likely that the bias stacks the deck against the source credibility prediction. One of the main reasons student participants are problematic in attitude experiments is that they are easily influenced (Sears 1986, 522). Since rejection of the null hypothesis requires *no* influence in some (noncredible source) conditions, using easily influenced participants makes the test more challenging. Finally, the participants’ demographics suggest that the samples were relatively heterogeneous (see notes 6 and 16).

## Experiment 1

### *Participants, Design, and Procedure*

A total of 264 adults who were enrolled in undergraduate classes at one of two large public universities participated in some part of the experiment (this

<sup>5</sup>For example, Riker (1990, 49) suggests that one can engage in successful framing (or what he calls “heresthetics”) by “merely verbalizing” the frame. Barker, Carman, and Knight (1998, 10) suggest that framing might take place even though the “message sender” is not credible.

total includes participants in the pre-test and control group discussed below). Of these participants, 184 participated at a Western university, while the other 80 participated at a Midwestern university. In what follows, unless otherwise stated, I merge the results from the two samples since there is no statistically significant difference between the two.<sup>6</sup> All participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine public opinion.

The substantive focus of the experiment concerned spending on the poor. Each participant read a statement explaining that the U.S. Congress was considering two proposals that would alter the amount of federal assistance to the poor. One proposal would increase assistance to the poor while the other would decrease assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Participants received a description that framed the two proposals in terms of either government expenditures or humanitarianism. The government expenditures frame emphasizes that increased assistance would result in increased government spending while the humanitarian frame focuses on how increased assistance would ensure help for people who need it. I constructed the statements based, in large part, on Feldman and Zaller's (1992) analysis of people's open-ended discussions of the welfare state (also see Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1061–62; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Sniderman and Theriault 1999). Appendix A contains the framed statements.<sup>8</sup>

Testing my prediction also requires variation in perceptions of the frame source's credibility. One way to capture this variation would be to attribute the frames to a single source and measure the participants' perceptions of this source's credibility either before or after they read the statements. This approach, however, results in an endogeneity problem: in the case of prior evaluations, participants may follow the frame only because they just stated they find the source credible and they do not want to appear inconsistent; in the case of posterior evaluations, participants may judge the source as credible only if they agreed with the frame. In both cases, any evidence about the moderating effect of source credibility could be misleading.

<sup>6</sup> Across both groups, 49% of the participants were female and 51% were male. The participants' average 7-point party identification score was 4.3 (where 1 = strong Democrat and 7 = strong Republican), and their average 7-point ideology score was 4.6 (where 1 = strong liberal and 7 = strong conservative). A total of 54% of the participants were in their first two years of college and 46% were juniors or seniors. Fully 67% of the participants were Caucasian, 3% were African-American, 18% were Asian-American, 3% were Hispanic, and 9% were other.

<sup>7</sup> I do not use the term "welfare" because of "the special revulsion the American public feels toward 'welfare recipients' versus the 'poor'" (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1062). I also offer a choice between two proposals rather than a choice between one proposal and the status quo to avoid a status quo bias (see, e.g., Cobb and Kuklinski 1997, 90–91).

<sup>8</sup> In some framing experiments, the stimuli focus exclusively on one consideration (e.g., Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Sniderman and Theriault 1999), while in others the stimuli mention multiple considerations but emphasize one (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). My first experiment follows the former approach and my second experiment follows the latter. Also, note that the frames do not report the speaker's position on the issue.



I thus maintained exogenous control over the sources by randomly providing some participants with a statement attributed to a credible source and other participants with a statement attributed to a noncredible source. I chose these sources based on a pretest with 25 representative participants who did not take part in the subsequent framing experiment. Each pretest participant rated the extent to which seven different sources had knowledge about whether government expenditures or humanitarian considerations were more important (when thinking about the proposals) and the extent to which these sources could be trusted to reveal what they know (i.e., the two dimensions of credibility cited in my hypothesis). The pretest revealed that the source perceived to be most credible across both dimensions was Colin Powell, while the source perceived to be least credible was Jerry Springer.<sup>9</sup> These two sources have statistically distinct scores across both dimensions. I used these two sources in the experiment because they were clearly perceived as credible and noncredible. I chose not to use sources with intermediate levels of credibility because the purpose of the experiment was to examine if perceived source credibility moderates framing effects and not to identify the exact level of credibility needed. This is analogous to the approach used by others who examine source credibility in different contexts (e.g., Hovland and Weiss 1951–52; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

**CONDITIONS AND MEASURES.** Participants were told that they were receiving a recent statement from a public forum section on Colin Powell's/Jerry Springer's Web page (see Appendix A). The participants then randomly received one of the four statements—a Colin Powell humanitarian statement ( $n = 56$ ); a Colin Powell government expenditures statement ( $n = 51$ ); a Jerry Springer humanitarian statement ( $n = 56$ ); or a Jerry Springer government expenditures statement ( $n = 47$ ).<sup>10</sup> The statements appeared as if they were taken from the source's Web page.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Each participant rated each source's knowledge and trustworthiness on a 5-point scale (1 through 5), where higher scores indicate higher levels of knowledge and trust. Colin Powell received an average knowledge score of 3.68 (std. dev. = 1.32) and an average trust score of 3.41 (std. dev. = 1.10). Jerry Springer received an average knowledge score of 2.28 (std. dev. = 1.24) and an average trust score of 2.0 (std. dev. = 1.08). The other sources included in the pretest, along with their respective scores, were Ross Perot (knowledge = 3.12 mean, .88 standard deviation; trust = 2.96, .89), Bill Maher (knowledge = 3.12, .78; trust = 3.12, .78), Bob Dole (knowledge = 3.36, .99; trust = 2.88, 1.13), Geraldo Rivera (knowledge = 3.14, 1.39; trust = 2.95, 1.2), and Dennis Miller (knowledge = 2.47, 1.02; trust = 2.89, 1.05).

<sup>10</sup>Some respondents were assigned to a control group ( $n = 29$ ). Those in the control group were given a brief description of the proposals with no framed statement and no attribution to a source. While I note the control group result below, I do not focus on it since most previous work is concerned with the relative effect of alternative frames on opinion (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1990; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Tversky and Kahneman 1981; for discussion, see Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 578–79).

<sup>11</sup>Jerry Springer's Web page actually includes a section called "Talk Back" where he solicits opinions.



After reading the statement, participants were given a questionnaire and told that their responses would be anonymous. I focus on three questions (Nelson and Oxley 1999), all of which were answered on 7-point, fully labeled branching scales.<sup>12</sup> First, they were asked if they thought Congress should increase or decrease assistance to the poor. Higher scores indicate favoring increased assistance. This measures *overall opinion*.

Second, participants were asked to rate how important several ideas were for them when they thought about whether Congress should increase or decrease assistance to the poor. These ideas included: "the well-being of people who are poor," "people should fend for themselves," and "the amount of government expenditures." I included the "fend for themselves" consideration because it has been shown to be influential in shaping judgments about public assistance and is often the counter consideration to humanitarianism (e.g., Feldman and Zaller 1992). Higher scores indicate increased perceived importance. These measures of *belief importance* gauge the underlying considerations that drive overall opinion.

These first two measures constitute the critical dependent variables for evaluating the success of framing. The source credibility hypothesis predicts that compared to participants who read the Colin Powell expenditures article, participants who read the Colin Powell humanitarian article will exhibit significantly greater support for assistance, will rate "the well-being of people who are poor" as significantly more important, and will rate "people should fend for themselves" and "the amount of government expenditures" as significantly less important. There should be no significant differences among individuals who read Jerry Springer articles.

A third question asked participants to respond to two *belief content* measures. One asked participants if they thought the impact of increasing assistance would have a positive or negative effect on "the poor's well-being" while the other asked if they thought the impact of increasing assistance would have a positive or negative effect on "the government's budget" (Nelson and Oxley 1999). Higher scores indicate a more positive effect from increasing assistance. These belief content measures combined with the belief importance measures allow me to follow Nelson and Oxley (1999) by differentiating framing (e.g., belief importance) from persuasion (e.g., belief content). I expect that the frames will not work by altering belief content.

Note that all participants answered the overall assistance opinion question, and thus, the number of respondents for each condition is as reported above. Only the Midwestern participants answered the belief importance and belief content questions; the number of respondents for these questions, by condition, is as follows: Colin Powell humanitarian statement ( $n = 21$ ), Colin Powell government expenditures statement ( $n = 20$ ), Jerry Springer humanitarian

<sup>12</sup>See Krosnick and Berent (1993) on the reliability of such a scale. All of the results are virtually the same as those reported when only the first part of the branching scale is used.

statement ( $n = 22$ ), and Jerry Springer government expenditures statement ( $n = 17$ ).

## Results

In Table 1, I report the results for each of the three types of measures (overall opinion, belief importance, belief content) by condition. Statistically significant results are shaded and asterisks indicate the level of significance for comparisons between the shaded cells in each row. The results offer strong support for the source credibility hypothesis with respect to all three measures.

The results presented in the first row show that participants who read a Colin Powell humanitarian article exhibited significantly greater support for assistance than participants who read a Colin Powell expenditures article ( $t_{105} = 2.21, p = .015$ ).<sup>13</sup> They also show that participants who read a Jerry Springer humanitarian article were more apt to support assistance than participants who read a Jerry Springer expenditures article; however, the difference is nowhere near significant ( $t_{101} = .55, p = .29$ ). These results allow me to reject the null hypothesis that source credibility is not necessary for successful framing at least in terms of overall opinion.

The next three rows display the results from the importance rating measures. Consistent with the source credibility hypothesis, individuals who read the Colin Powell humanitarian article rated the poor's well-being as significantly more important and people fending for themselves as significantly less important than individuals who read the Colin Powell expenditures article (for the poor's well-being,  $t_{39} = 1.75, p = .04$ ; for fending for themselves,  $t_{39} = 1.51, p = .069$ ). The Colin Powell articles did not, however, affect the importance of government expenditures. This reflects the difficulty of predicting, *a priori*, which considerations will be most susceptible to framing effects, and it also is consistent with Nelson and Oxley (1999), who find that framing affects only some of the beliefs they include. The Jerry Springer articles did not have a significant effect on any of the importance ratings. Overall, these results provide strong support for the source credibility hypothesis.

The last two rows show that the Colin Powell articles did not significantly affect the belief content measures, thereby suggesting that the frames worked through a distinct process from persuasion. Individuals who read the Jerry Springer expenditures article thought that the impact of an increase in assistance would

<sup>13</sup> Because I have directional predictions, all reported  $p$ -values come from one-tailed tests (see Blalock 1979, 163; also see Nelson and Oxley 1999 for a similar approach). My general mode of analysis follows Blalock (1979, 347–48) who states: "The more knowledge we have for predicting the relative magnitudes and/or directions of differences, the more likely it is that separate difference-of-means tests will be appropriate." The results are similar to those reported when the data are treated as ordinal and non-parametric tests are used (e.g., Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests, ordered probits).

TABLE 1

## Overall Assistance Opinion, Belief Importance, and Belief Content Measures by Condition (Experiment 1)

Mean (standard deviation) for:	Colin Powell Expenditures Frame	Colin Powell Humanitarian Frame	Jerry Springer Expenditures Frame	Jerry Springer Humanitarian Frame
Overall opinion about assistance <sup>a</sup>	4.29 (2.05)	5.13** (1.84)	4.72 (1.60)	4.91 (1.81)
Importance of poor's well-being <sup>b</sup>	5.55 (1.93)	6.38** (0.97)	6.00 (0.93)	6.21 (1.02)
Importance of people fending for themselves <sup>b</sup>	5.50 (2.01)	4.43* (2.48)	4.53 (2.45)	4.75 (2.15)
Importance of gov. expenditures <sup>b</sup>	5.20 (1.61)	5.20 (2.09)	5.20 (1.82)	5.79 (1.47)
Impact of increase on poor's well-being <sup>c</sup>	4.95 (1.96)	5.20 (1.94)	5.13 (2.00)	5.25 (1.73)
Impact of increase on gov.'s budget <sup>c</sup>	2.95 (1.43)	3.45 (2.04)	4.27 (1.71)	2.83** (1.83)

Note: Table entries are mean 7-point scores. \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$ .

<sup>a</sup>Higher scores indicate favoring increased assistance.

<sup>b</sup>Higher scores indicate increased perceived importance.

<sup>c</sup>Higher scores indicate a more positive impact from increasing assistance.

have a significantly more positive effect on the government's budget than individuals who read the Jerry Springer humanitarian article ( $t_{37} = 2.44, p = .01$ ). This may be a negative persuasion effect in which individuals do the opposite of what is suggested by an untrustworthy source (Lupia 2000; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

**MEDIATIONAL ANALYSIS.** The results presented so far show that frames attributed to a credible source significantly affected participants' overall opinions about assistance, significantly affected the importance participants attributed to beliefs about the poor's well-being and the need to fend for oneself, and did not significantly affect the content of humanitarian or expenditures beliefs. In contrast, when attributed to a noncredible source, the same frames failed to affect overall opinion or belief importance.

I now turn to an analysis that both documents the mediational process through which framing works and demonstrates how source credibility moderates this process. In so doing, I use the same path analytic technique as Nelson and his colleagues (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Willey, and Oxley 1998). I carry out a separate path analysis for each source.<sup>14</sup> Figure 1 displays the results.

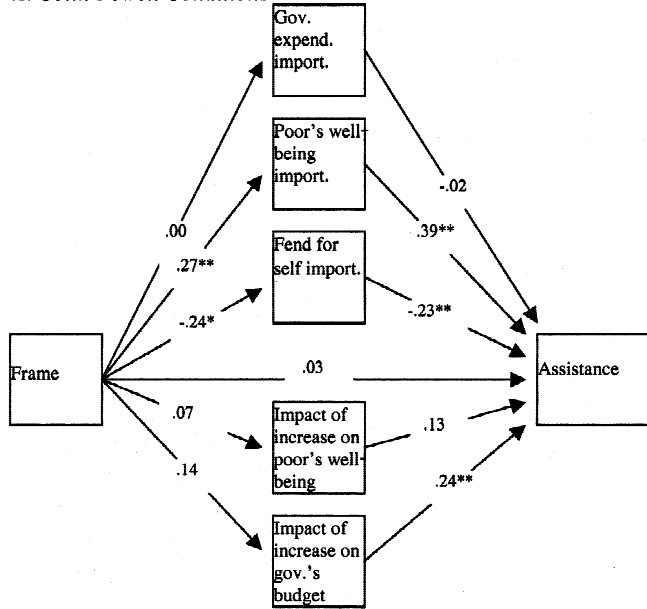
Figure 1a shows that for participants who read a Colin Powell article, overall assistance opinion was driven by the perceived importance of the poor's well-being, the perceived importance of fending for themselves, and the perceived impact of an increase on the government's budget (belief content measure). More important, the frames worked by altering the perceived importance of the poor's well-being and the perceived importance of fending for themselves. Once these effects were accounted for, the frames did not have a direct effect on overall assistance opinion. Moreover, the frames did not have a significant effect on the belief content measures. This is an important point because it demonstrates that framing worked through a process distinct (i.e., belief importance) from persuasion (i.e., belief content) (Nelson and Oxley 1999; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997).

Figure 1b shows that for participants who read a Jerry Springer article, overall assistance opinion was shaped by the perceived importance of the poor's well-being and the perceived impact of an increase on the government's budget. The frame significantly affected the perceived impact of an increase on the government's budget (e.g., negative persuasion), but it did not directly affect overall assistance opinion or the importance ratings. The exact frames that shaped opinions when attributed to a credible source had little effect when attributed to a noncredible source.

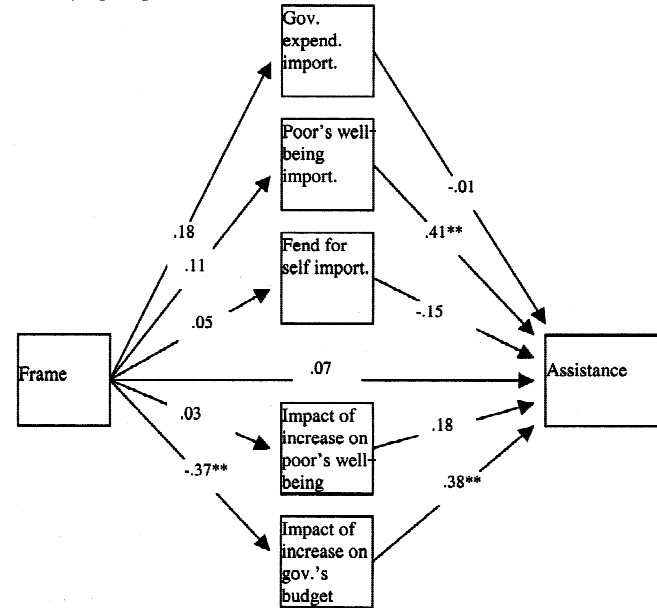
<sup>14</sup>For both analyses, I first regressed the belief importance and content measures on the experimental condition (i.e., the frame), and then regressed overall opinion on the experimental condition and importance and content measures.

FIGURE 1  
Experiment 1 Mediation Analysis

**A. Colin Powell Conditions**



**B. Jerry Springer Conditions**



*Note:* As in Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) and Nelson and Oxley (1999), coefficients are standardized ordinary least-squares (beta) coefficients. \*\* $p \leq .05$ ; \* $p \leq .1$ . Frame is coded so that 0 = Expenditures and 1 = Humanitarian. The importance items are coded so that higher values indicate increased perceived importance. The belief content items are coded so that higher values indicate a more positive effect. Assistance is coded so that higher values indicate increased assistance.

In sum, the results show that only an ostensibly credible source can use a frame to alter the perceived importance of different considerations that in turn affect overall opinion. While source credibility has long been shown to affect persuasion (and, more recently, media priming), this experiment constitutes the first demonstration of the role of source credibility in moderating framing via belief importance. The results suggest that perceived source credibility is a prerequisite for successful framing. Contrary to some common portrayals, elites face a clear constraint to successful framing.<sup>15</sup>

## Experiment 2

To demonstrate that the results from the first experiment are not idiosyncratic, I present results from another experiment. This experiment employed the same basic design; however, it used different speakers, a different issue, a different presentation, and different frames.

### *Participants, Design, and Procedure*

A total of 151 adults who had not taken part in the first experiment participated in some part of the second experiment. I solicited participants from a variety of undergraduate classes at a large Western public university to take part in a study on the impact of the Internet.<sup>16</sup>

The substantive focus of the experiment concerned tolerance for a Ku Klux Klan rally. Specifically, each participant read an article explaining that the Ku Klux Klan had requested a permit to conduct a rally on the San Diego State University (SDSU) campus.<sup>17</sup> Each article framed the Klan's request either as a free speech issue or as a public safety issue. The free speech frame suggests that the Klan rally represents an exercise in free speech and assembly—a fun-

<sup>15</sup>The control group's average overall opinion score is 4.72 (std. dev. = 1.79). None of the treatment conditions significantly differ from this control group average. This suggests that while different frames attributed to a credible source resulted in significantly different opinions, none of the frames had a significant effect on unadulterated (overall) opinion (as measured by the control group). Many framing experiments do not include such control group comparisons, and it is an interesting question whether the frames in these past experiments are strong enough to influence unadulterated opinion.

<sup>16</sup>A total of 57% of the participants were female, and 43% were male. The participants' average 7-point party identification score was 3.4 (where 1 = strong Democrat and 7 = strong Republican), and their average 7-point ideology score was 3.41 (where 1 = strong liberal and 7 = strong conservative). Some 58% of the participants were in their first two years of college and 42% were juniors or seniors.

<sup>17</sup>San Diego State University is a well-known Western school with an enrollment of over 28,000 students. The participants in the experiment were not from San Diego State University. This served to minimize participants' suspicion of why they had not previously heard about the permit request.

damental American value that most Americans support in the abstract (e.g., Kuklinski et al. 1991, 3). In contrast, the public safety frame focuses on the potential violence that could result from a confrontation between Klan members and counterdemonstrators who often attend Klan rallies.

In constructing the articles, I basically replicated Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997, Study 2). Appendix B displays the text of the free speech and public safety articles.<sup>18</sup> Notice that the articles do not make an explicit endorsement about whether or not the rally should be held. Also note that the articles are quite similar to recent articles that actually appeared in *The New York Times* (Weiser 1999a, 1999b; Kifner 1999).

To choose the sources of the frames, I conducted a pretest analogous to the one used in the first experiment. Pretest respondents (who did not participate in the subsequent framing experiment) evaluated the knowledge and trustworthiness of six sources in giving advice about whether free speech or public safety was a more important consideration when thinking about the rally ( $n = 38$ ). Based on the pretest, I selected *The New York Times* as the credible source and *The National Enquirer* as the noncredible source. These sources were clearly viewed as credible and noncredible, and they had statistically distinct scores across both dimensions.<sup>19</sup>

**CONDITIONS AND MEASURES.** Each experimental session took place in the university's Political Science Computer Laboratory. At the beginning of the experiment, I seated each participant at a computer terminal that showed a blank screen saver. I told participants that the study has two parts: (1) each participant reads a recent article from *The New York Times/The National Enquirer* World Wide Web page about a pending event at SDSU, and (2) after reading the article, each participant completes a short questionnaire.

<sup>18</sup>The main changes made to the Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997, 581) articles were to change the source of a quote within the article from a potentially credible law professor to "one observer;" to change the statement "In one confrontation last October in Chillicothe, Ohio" to "In a recent confrontation in Ann Arbor, Michigan" (where an actual confrontation took place a week before the experiment); and to change a few other details such as the dates of the potential rally. In addition to the differences between the texts of the two articles, a picture of the constitution accompanied the free speech article, while a picture of police breaking up a rally accompanied the public safety article (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 575).

<sup>19</sup>Each participant rated each source's knowledge and trustworthiness on a 5-point scale, where higher scores indicate higher levels of knowledge and trust. *The New York Times* received an average knowledge score of 3.42 (std. dev. = 1.20) and an average trust score of 3.68 (std. dev. = .99). *The National Enquirer* received an average knowledge score of 2.32 (std. dev. = 1.32) and an average trust score of 1.47 (std. dev. = .80). The other sources included in the pretest, along with their respective scores, were the major local newspaper (knowledge = 3.42 mean, 1.2 standard deviation; trust = 3.45, .86), the University's newspaper (knowledge = 3.11, 1.29; trust = 3.26, 1.08), Workers World News Service (knowledge = 3.03, 1.2; trust = 3.05, .96), and a student newspaper from a local high school (knowledge = 2.71, 1.06; trust = 2.95, 1.11).



Next, I deactivated the screen saver on each computer so that the participants could read the article. Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of the four articles describing the Klan's permit request for a rally at SDSU: (1) a *New York Times* article with a public safety frame ( $n = 18$ ); (2) a *New York Times* article with a free speech frame ( $n = 18$ ); (3) a *National Enquirer* article with a public safety frame ( $n = 17$ ); or (4) a *National Enquirer* article with a free speech frame ( $n = 17$ ).<sup>20</sup> The source of the article was made clear in the presentation. Following Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997, 575), the articles were presented on a Web page created to mimic the source's actual Web page. The source's Web logo appeared on the top of the page, the source's name appeared in the title bar, and the source's actual address appeared in the Web's location toolbar. These source labels constituted the only differences between *The New York Times* public safety (free speech) article and *The National Enquirer* public safety (free speech) article.

After reading the article, participants were given a questionnaire that included an overall opinion question and belief importance ratings (all of which were again answered on 7-point, fully labeled branching scales; belief content measures were not included). The overall opinion question asked if respondents thought San Diego State should or should not allow the Ku Klux Klan to hold a rally on campus. Higher scores indicate increased tolerance. The belief importance ratings asked participants to rate how important "opposing racism and prejudice," "campus safety and security," and "free speech" were for them when they thought about whether SDSU should allow the Klan rally. Higher scores indicate increased perceived importance.

The source credibility hypothesis suggests that participants who read *The New York Times* public safety article will be significantly less tolerant of the rally and will rate "campus safety and security" and "opposing racism and prejudice" as significantly more important and "free speech" as significantly less important than participants who read *The New York Times* free speech article. There should be no significant differences among participants who read *National Enquirer* articles.

## Results

In Table 2, I report the mean score for each measure; statistically significant results are again shaded with asterisks.

The first row shows that participants who read *The New York Times* public safety article were significantly less tolerant of the rally than participants who

<sup>20</sup> Some respondents also participated in one of three control groups. The baseline control group had participants read a brief description of the Klan's request for a rally that did not include a framed statement or an attribution to a source ( $n = 13$ ). In the other two control groups, participants read the same brief description, but also were encouraged to think about the Klan's request in either affective terms ( $n = 17$ ) or cognitive terms ( $n = 13$ ) (see Kuklinski et al. 1991).

TABLE 2

## Overall Tolerance Opinion and Belief Importance Measures by Condition (Experiment 2)

Mean (standard deviation) for:	New York Times Public Safety Frame	New York Times Free Speech Frame	National Enquirer Public Safety Frame	National Enquirer Free Speech Frame
Overall opinion about the rally <sup>a</sup>	2.56 (2.12)	4.22** (2.56)	3.35 (2.32)	3.29 (2.52)
Importance of opposing racism <sup>b</sup>	6.67 (0.97)	5.61** (1.88)	6.00 (2.06)	6.06 (1.56)
Importance of free speech <sup>b</sup>	6.06 (1.59)	6.61* (0.78)	5.59 (2.06)	5.94 (2.02)
Importance of campus safety <sup>b</sup>	6.28 (1.18)	6.61 (0.61)	6.47 (1.01)	6.12 (1.45)

*Note:* Table entries are mean 7-point scores. \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$ .

<sup>a</sup>Higher scores indicate increased tolerance.

<sup>b</sup>Higher scores indicate increased perceived importance.

read *The New York Times* free speech article ( $t_{34} = 2.13, p = .02$ ). In contrast, there is virtually no difference between the responses of the participants who read *The National Enquirer* public safety article and the responses of the participants who read *The National Enquirer* free speech article ( $t_{32} = .07, p = .47$ )

The second row shows that participants who read *The New York Times* public safety article rated opposing racism and prejudice (6.67) as significantly more important than participants who read *The New York Times* free speech article (5.61) ( $t_{34} = 2.11, p = .02$ ). Presumably, this effect occurs because, in this case, protection against racism and prejudice directly conflicts with the value of free speech, and, thus, a frame that minimizes (maximizes) free speech considerations increases (decreases) the salience of opposing racism and prejudice. Also, it may be that for many people, protecting public safety is strongly connected to protecting people against racism and prejudice. For example, in response to a recent Klan request for a rally in Manhattan, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was quick to cite concerns about both racism and public safety. He explained that organizations like the Klan “encourage anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, racism, and hatred.” He continued: “The Police Department has a public safety reason that’s very, very sound” (Weiser 1999a, 1999b).

The results also show that participants who read *The New York Times* public safety article rated free speech (6.06) as less important than participants who read *The New York Times* free speech article (6.61) ( $t_{34} = 1.33, p = .096$ ). There is no significant difference, however, among *The New York Times* respondents in terms of their rating of the importance of campus safety and security. The lack of significance of one of the belief importance items is similar to the first experiment and Nelson and Oxley (1999).<sup>21</sup>

Finally, consistent with the source credibility hypothesis, there are no statistically significant differences in any of the importance ratings among respondents who read a *National Enquirer* article.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these results offer

<sup>21</sup> The lack of significance seems to stem from two sources: (1) the fact that most, but not all, participants regardless of condition rated public safety as a very important consideration (and thus, a ranking procedure may have been more effective), and (2) some outlier participants who read *The New York Times* public safety article but who nonetheless strongly supported the right to rally and rated public safety considerations as very unimportant.

<sup>22</sup> Participants also answered open-ended questions that solicited their reaction to the article. Specifically, I asked participants: “What do you think of *The New York Times/The National Enquirer* article that you read? Was it easy to read? Will you access *The New York Times/The National Enquirer* Web page in the future?” In responding to these questions, participants often mentioned their perceptions of the article’s source. For example, those who read a *National Enquirer* article made statements such as “the source is untrustworthy in my mind,” “I do not place much faith in the stories,” and “I don’t think the *Enquirer* is a great source of information.” In contrast, individuals who read the same articles, but attributed to *The New York Times*, reported that “they are a reputable source of information,” “I find them fair in most instances,” and they are “informative.”

strong support for the claim that perceived source credibility is prerequisite for successful framing—in terms of both overall opinion and belief importance.<sup>23</sup>

**MEDIATIONAL ANALYSIS.** I again follow Nelson and his colleagues in carrying out a path analysis to examine the mediational process of framing. Figure 2 contains the results for each source. Figure 2a shows that the overall tolerance opinions of participants who read an article in *The New York Times* were shaped by participants' perceived importance of free speech and opposing racism. The frame of the article, in turn, significantly affected the importance of these two values. The frame does not have a significant effect on tolerance once controlling for the importance ratings, thereby suggesting that the frame worked largely through the importance ratings.

Figure 2b shows that for participants who read a *National Enquirer* article, overall tolerance opinion was shaped by the perceived importance of public safety and opposing racism. However, the frame affected neither the importance ratings nor the overall tolerance judgments.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the results from both experiments suggest that a credible source can use a frame to alter the perceived importance of different considerations, and this, in turn, can change overall opinion. In contrast, a perceived noncredible source cannot use a frame to affect opinions—either overall opinion or the perceived importance of different considerations (i.e., source credibility is a moderator while belief importance is a mediator). Framing works when the statements are attributed to a credible source; framing fails when the same statements are attributed to a noncredible source.<sup>25</sup>

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These and many other similar statements suggest that participants' reactions to the articles were influenced by their perceptions of the sources.

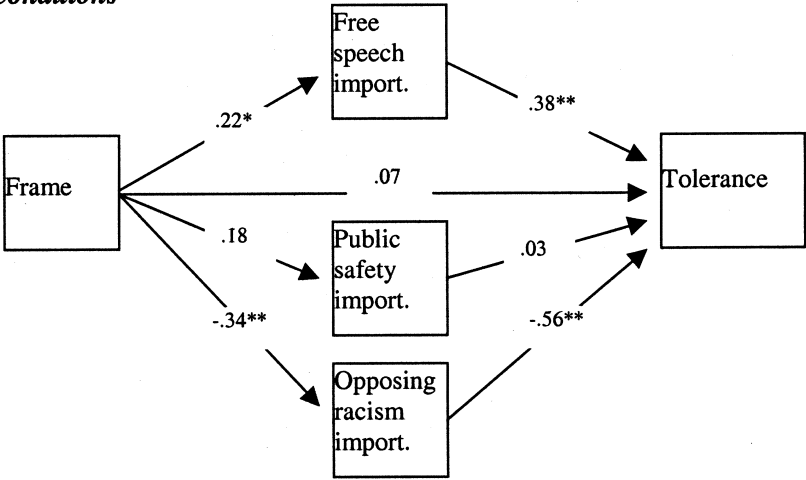
<sup>23</sup>A possible explanation for the results is that participants assigned to *The National Enquirer* conditions ignored the articles. The evidence for this is slight, however. As many as 82% of participants who read a *National Enquirer* article correctly recalled the frame of their article at the end of the experiment, thereby suggesting that the majority of these participants read the article. A total of 78% of participants who read a *New York Times* article correctly recalled the frame.

<sup>24</sup>The importance of public safety is a significant determinant of overall tolerance opinion for individuals who read a *National Enquirer* article but not for individuals who read a *New York Times* article. Also, the importance of free speech is a significant determinant of overall tolerance opinion for individuals who read a *New York Times* article but not for individuals who read a *National Enquirer* article, although it approaches statistical significance for these participants. This suggests a source (rather than a frame) effect in which simply being exposed to a *National Enquirer* article led participants to downgrade the importance of free speech at the expense of public safety considerations (perhaps, due to an adverse reaction to the *Enquirer's* "free speech").

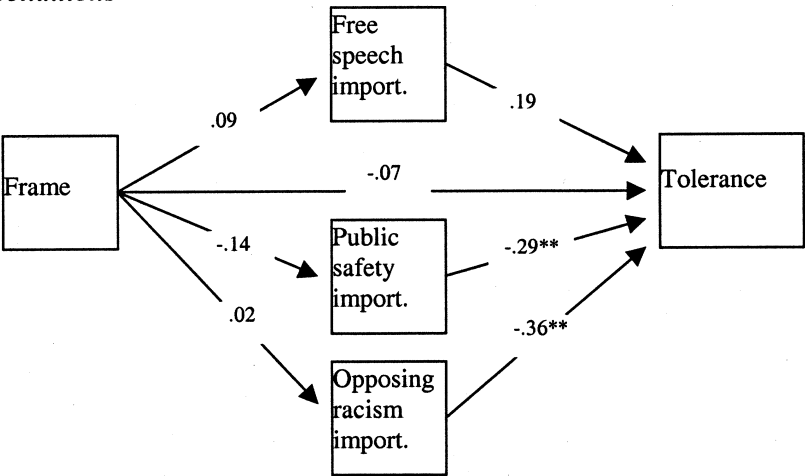
<sup>25</sup>The average overall opinion scores for the baseline, affect, and cognition control groups are 3.08 (std. dev. = 2.69), 3.06 (std. dev. = 2.36), and 3.27 (std. dev. = 2.46), respectively. As in the first experiment, none of these control groups are significantly different from the treatment conditions (at the .05 level).

FIGURE 2  
Experiment 2 Mediation Analysis

**A. New York Times  
Conditions**



**B. National Enquirer  
Conditions**



*Note:* As in Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) and Nelson and Oxley (1999), coefficients are standardized ordinary least-squares (beta) coefficients. \*\* $p \leq .05$ ; \* $p \leq .1$ . Frame is coded so that 0 = Public Safety and 1 = Free speech. The importance items are coded so that higher values indicate increased perceived importance. Tolerance is coded so that higher values indicate increased tolerance of the rally.

## Conclusion

Framing effects are often seen as evidence of elites unilaterally manipulating citizens who uncritically accept whichever frame they hear (e.g., Entman 1993, 57; Riker 1986). The evidence to date supports this assertion—nearly every time scholars look for a framing effect, they tend to find it. There has been an almost exclusive focus on successful framing attempts. The results presented here, however, demonstrate a clear and systematic limit to framing. Perceived source credibility appears to be a prerequisite for successful framing. Framing effects may occur, not because elites seek to manipulate citizens, but rather because citizens delegate to credible elites for guidance. In so doing, they choose which frames to follow in a systematic and sensible way. Far from being a sign of freewheeling manipulation, framing effects may be evidence of citizens seeking guidance from credible elites.

Future work can build on the results in a number of directions. I showed that source credibility moderates framing and belief importance mediates framing. As Nelson and Oxley (1999) point out, there are a number of ways to measure belief importance, and thus, alternative measures should be investigated (see, e.g., Alwin and Krosnick 1985; Jaccard et al. 1995). Other studies might consider using multiple competing sources with different levels of credibility. Survey studies of elite influence might consider complementing media exposure measures with media credibility measures. It also would be worthwhile to assess the accuracy with which people make credibility judgments. Indeed, it may be the case that despite their efforts to be selective, citizens are misled by elites because they misperceive elites' credibility (see, e.g., Kuklinski and Hurley 1994, 1996; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Finally, more work is needed to find other moderators of framing effects. In so doing, there needs to be a focus not only on successful framing attempts, but also on failed ones. I do not mean to downplay the importance of framing effects; indeed, framing constitutes one of the most significant concepts in the study of public opinion, and this is exactly why understanding its moderators can be fruitful.

More generally, the results presented here fit quite nicely with other recent research on political communication. Work on mass communication has cycled from maximal effects to minimal effects and, most recently, to what can be called indirect effects (i.e., agenda setting, priming, and framing). At first glance, these indirect effects bring back images of maximal effects (Miller and Krosnick 1996, 96). However, my results along with other recent research on mass communication effects offer a different portrait. Specifically, it seems that both framing and media priming work largely through deliberative processes where people seek guidance from sources they believe to be credible (also see Miller and Krosnick 2000; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). While this does not suggest a return to minimal effects, it does suggest that these indirect mass communication effects work in a relatively systematic and reasoned manner.

Appendix A

Statements from Experiment 1

*Humanitarian Frame*

On his Web page, [talk show host Jerry Springer/former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell] has a section called “Talk Back” where he solicits opinions on various issues and current events. Recently, he posed the following:

*In the next few weeks, the US Congress will likely accept one of two proposals that will alter the amount of federal assistance to the poor. One proposal is to increase assistance while the other is to decrease assistance. An increase in assistance to the poor would ensure help for many people who need it. A decrease in assistance would prevent people from receiving basic support. Do you think Congress should increase or decrease assistance to the poor?*

*Government Expenditures Frame*

On his Web page, [talk show host Jerry Springer/former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell] has a section called “Talk Back” where he solicits opinions on various issues and current events. Recently, he posed the following:

*In the next few weeks, the US Congress will likely accept one of two proposals that will alter the amount of federal assistance to the poor. One proposal is to increase assistance while the other is to decrease assistance. An increase in assistance to the poor would lead to an increase in government spending. A decrease in assistance would allow the government to cut excessive expenditures. Do you think Congress should increase or decrease assistance to the poor?*

Appendix B

Articles from Experiment 2

*Free Speech Frame*

Klan Tests University’s Commitment to Free Speech

How far is San Diego State University prepared to go to protect freedom of speech? The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to

*Public Safety Frame*

Possible Klan Rally Raises Safety Concerns

Can San Diego State University police prevent a riot if the KKK rally? The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to conduct a



conduct a speech and rally on the San Diego State University campus during the fall of 1998. Officials and administrators will decide whether to approve or deny the request in July.

Numerous courts have ruled that the U.S. Constitution ensures that the Klan has the right to speak and hold rallies on public grounds and that individuals have the right to hear the Klan's message if they are interested. Many of the Klan's appearances have been marked by violent clashes between Klan supporters and counterdemonstrators who show up to protest the Klan's racist activities. In a recent confrontation in Ann Arbor, Michigan, several bystanders were injured by rocks thrown by Klan supporters and protesters. Usually, a large police force is needed to control the crowds.

Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many San Diego State students, faculty, and staff worry about the rally but support the group's right to speak. One observer remarked: "The Klan has the right to speak, and people have the right to hear them if they want to. We may have some concerns about the rally, but the right to speak and hear what you want takes precedence over our fears about what could happen."

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Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many San Diego State students, faculty, and staff have expressed great concern about campus safety and security during a Klan rally. One observer remarked: "Freedom of speech is important, but so is the safety of the San Diego State community and the security of our campus. Considering the violence at past KKK rallies, I don't think the University has an obligation to allow this to go on. Safety must be our top priority."

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