

# **Primed and Suspect**

*How the Public Responds to Different Frames  
On Global Issues*

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**\*PRELIMINARY REPORT\***

The survey interviews were conducted in June/July 2000. This brief summary is offered to the GII working group as a preliminary review of findings. A richer analysis, including demographic patterns, will be provided after additional data analysis and a full consultation with the FrameWorks research team which participated in its design.

## **Background and Objectives**

In the 1999 review of existing public opinion data, “Public Attitudes Toward Foreign Affairs,” I outlined several findings, of which the following three are central:

- *Americans feel the weight of world leadership. They have no doubt the United States shoulders responsibility for the world’s problems and want to move to a position of shared responsibility and shared leadership.*
- *The public has little interest in news about other countries and generally holds unformed, malleable opinions on most international issues.*
- *Though Americans express little interest in international news, they care more about global problems than most polls indicate*

The review of existing data found a significant body of research to indicate where public opinion currently stands on foreign policy as well as a sizable body of work to indicate some of the barriers that keep Americans from being supportive of more active engagement globally. However, what was lacking was the type of research that outlines a strategy for changing public opinion. This survey was undertaken to begin to outline that strategy.

Central objectives for this research were to determine whether or not it is possible to:

- increase public willingness for an active role in world affairs,
- decrease the perception that the US is doing more than it should,
- elevate the importance of the GII issue agenda, and
- build a commitment to cooperation.

## **Method**

Through earlier papers and presentations, the GII working group has become very familiar with framing theory. Simply put, the relevance of framing to the GII is that communications frames act as a prism through which the public sees the United States’ role in the world. Changing the frame can redirect public attitudes toward interdependence.

This survey was designed to test quantitatively the effects of various frames on public opinion. The research team developed a series of priming experiments, by which we mean that we set out to determine the extent to which exposure to specific issues or frames subsequently influenced reasoning and attitudes about global interdependence. Survey respondents were exposed to a certain set of questions at the beginning of the survey, designed to “prime” a particular way of thinking. Then all interviewees were asked to respond to the same set of core questions about international affairs. By comparing the responses of those exposed to different priming experiments with the

responses of a control group, we can determine the effect of the priming experiment on public attitudes, therefore indicating the effects of a specific communications frame on public opinion.

The research team selected two issue frames and two metaphorical frames, as well as a frame designed to reflect the dominant view presented by media today. Within the two issue areas, respondents were further primed to see the issue as either a domestic or international issue. The domestic/international layer was added to test a hypothesis outlined by Celinda Lake in her presentation to the working group. She suggested that beginning with an issue domestically, and then moving international might be the best approach to build public support for international engagement.

A total of 2400 surveys were completed in the following divisions:

- Control (400 interviews total)
  - Domestic introduction (200)
  - International introduction (200)
- Environment (400 interviews total)
  - Domestic (200)
  - International (200)
- Infectious disease (400 interviews total)
  - Domestic (200)
  - International (200)
- Social norms metaphor (400 interviews)
- Partners metaphor (400 interviews)
- Dominant frame (400 interviews)

Each split or division consisted of a national sample of adults 18+, geographically proportionate to population. Demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, political party identification) were weighted when necessary to be consistent across splits. Most percentages in this document refer to a base sample size of 400 interviews, which results in a sampling error of no more than +/- 5%. For those instances with a base sample of 200, the sampling error is no more than +/- 7%. (Error decreases the more polarized opinion is on a question.) For the purposes of understanding nuances in framing, directional changes are included in the analysis, even if they are not at the statistically significant level.

The environment and infectious disease were selected by the research team as issues for experimentation, because research suggested they conjure a worldview that enhances America's appreciation of interdependence. They are issues about which Americans care, they are issues we share with other countries, and they are problems that cross borders. The priming experiments for the issue frames utilized a series of parallel questions that are typically asked on these issues, including:

- How much of a priority should it be?
- Should spending be expanded or cut back?

- How much impact can we have?

The Social Norms, Partner, and Dominant frames were brought to mind for respondents by exposing them to one of the following statements and asking for their level of agreement with the statement.

#### **Social Norms Metaphor (400 interviews in experiment)**

*Countries around the world are becoming increasingly dependent upon each other because they realize that most problems don't stop at borders. Through international laws and treaties, countries get together to agree upon a basic set of shared values and a code of behavior that all countries should respect and respond to. We stand together against those countries that violate basic standards of behavior through torture, terrorism and pollution. We encourage and support countries that are trying hard to do better. We share the vision of a better world for all people and we support its development by co-operating with countries throughout the world in setting standards we can all live up to, and in upholding those standards.*

The Social Norms statement was designed utilizing George Lakoff's metaphorical analysis of media coverage, speeches and editorials. For more detail concerning the support for this theory see "The Problem of Strategic Framing for the GII, Defining the Analytic Task," Lakoff, April 2000.

#### **Partner Metaphor (400 interviews in experiment)**

*Many people feel the U.S. shoulders more than its share of the burden of dealing with international problems, such as security issues, infectious diseases, and environmental threats. It would be more fair, and more effective, to manage these challenges by working jointly with other countries, than by the US working alone. By working as a team, the US and other countries can pool their talents and resources to get the job done in these and other areas. When countries work together, there are payoffs on all sides.*

(The Partner statement was designed utilizing Aubrun & Grady's analysis of opinion leaders and the public. For more detail concerning the support for this theory see "Promoting American Engagement," Aubrun & Grady, June 2000.)

#### **Dominant Frame (400 interviews in experiment)**

*The world is a dangerous place, which no country can control. It is also increasingly competitive. Leaders rise and fall; the country that is your friend one year is your competitor the next. Poverty, famine, and internal strife devastate some countries, while others prosper. There is little that any country can do to intervene, and the efforts of individuals are overwhelmed by the world's problems. While we try to offer some comfort to the victims of disasters, the main role for the United States in world affairs is to protect Americans and American interests at home and abroad.*

(The Dominant statement was based upon the Center for Media Affairs' analysis of existing media coverage of foreign affairs. The intention of using this frame was to understand the impact of the current frame on opinion compared to other ways of framing the issue.)

After a survey respondent was exposed to one of the priming experiments, they were asked the following questions:

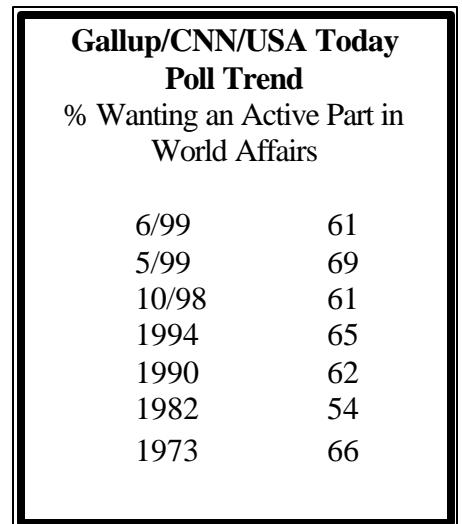
- Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs?
- Do you think the United States is doing more than it should, about the right amount, or less than it should in other parts of the world?
- Do you favor or oppose giving economic assistance to other countries?
- Which one of the following do you think is the most effective and useful source of help: religious organizations, the US government, the United Nations, private charities or aid organizations, or private companies?
- If you had to choose which countries should get US aid, which of these would you select as most important: countries that are important to US security, countries with the poorest economies, countries that the US needs as trading partners?
- Please rate each of the following for how important a priority you believe it should be, on a scale where zero means not a priority and 10 means an extremely important priority.
  - Promoting fair labor practices in countries where sweatshops and child labor exist
  - Combating world poverty and hunger
  - Protecting the global environment
  - Preventing global infectious diseases
  - Promoting equal education so girls in developing countries can obtain the same education as boys
  - Preventing human rights abuses
- When you think about the role for the United States in international affairs, which of the following statements is closer to your view.
  - America must remain strong both militarily and economically, so we should only concern ourselves with pursuing our national interests
  - OR
  - For both practical and moral reasons, the US should work cooperatively with other countries to improve economic, political, and social standards everywhere.

By analyzing the pattern of response to these questions within each experimental split and comparing response to a control split that received no frame, it is possible to begin to determine the impact of each frame on public attitudes.

## The Current State of Opinion

Before outlining how the different frames shift opinion, it is important to understand where the public currently stands on the core questions asked. This section outlines just the responses of the control group (which is the group uninfluenced by any framing effects).

As research has consistently demonstrated, the public believes the United States should have an active role in world affairs. This survey demonstrates that 67% want to have an active role in the world, and 54% feel strongly about an active role. This level of support in the GII survey is consistent with where the public stood on this question one year ago in Gallup's research. In fact, Gallup noted its highest response on this question in May 1999, with a fall-off by June.



Turning back to the results of the GII survey, the public overwhelmingly believes in the importance of cooperating with other countries (63%, 53% strongly) over just concerning ourselves with pursuing our national interests (31%, 25% strongly).

At the same time, a plurality (43%) believe the United States is doing more than it should in other parts of the world. One-third (35%) see about the right amount of involvement, while only 14% believe we are doing less than we should. Again, the belief that the United States is doing more than its fair share is absolutely consistent with existing public opinion data.

Even though respondents believe Americans are doing more than we should, two-thirds (63%) favor giving economic assistance to other countries, with one-third (33%) strongly favoring. Importantly, those who oppose are in strong opposition. While only 29% oppose economic assistance, nearly all of them are strongly opposed (21%).

The countries with the poorest economies are the favored candidates for US aid (47%), with only 29% rating countries important to national security as most important, and only 18% viewing countries we need as trading partners as most important.

Americans are mixed on which sponsor is the more effective and useful source of help: private charities (22%) and religious organizations (21%) narrowly top the U.S. government (19%) and the United Nations (18%). Private companies are chosen by the

fewest (11%). There is fairly strong variation in the response to this question depending upon the frame, indicating that people see different responsibility in different instances.

Finally, the public places the highest importance on the issue of global infectious disease (57% give it the highest rating of 10 on a 10 point scale). The second tier of issues includes the global environment (45%) and equal education for girls in developing countries (44%). Human rights abuse is rated as extremely important by 40% followed by world poverty and hunger (39%) and sweatshops and child labor (33%).

## The Frames

### Social Norms

Three quarters of the general public (78%) agree with the Social Norms statement, and a majority (58%) strongly agrees.

The Social Norms frame results in several desirable shifts in public opinion. Its most significant impact is its ability to lift the importance of every issue tested.

Looking just at the percentage rating the importance of an issue as a “10” (the highest rating), the social norms metaphor was able to increase the perceived importance of every issue. The importance of “preventing human rights abuses” was lifted by 11 points, “combating world poverty and hunger” by 10 points, “protecting the global environment” by 9 points, “promoting equal education so girls in developing countries can obtain the same education as boys” by 9 points, “promoting fair labor practices in countries where sweatshops and child labor exist” by 8 points, and “preventing global infectious diseases” by 5 points.

The Social Norms frame also slightly increases people’s strong support for the United States having an active role in the world (+3), and in the perception the United States is doing less than it should in other parts of the world (+4). At the same time, it shifts strong belief in cooperation (-5) to strong support for national interest (+4). It also reduces responsibility by slightly decreasing the US government (-3) and private charity (-2) as the most effective sources of help, and shifts people into undecided (+4). Lastly, it slightly increases the belief that trading partners are the best recipients for US aid (+3).

While the Social Norms’ frame seems to create several of the desired effects, attribution of responsibility for action moves in the wrong direction. One key task for the research team will be to determine how to bring responsibility into the frame.

Furthermore, the team will need to determine why this frame seems to both encourage an active role in the world and lessen belief in cooperation. One possibility is that setting standards of behavior as the measure of acceptance taps some Americans’ underlying

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sense that the United States can and should do what we want, and cooperation to address wrong behavior is unacceptable. Or, while public opinion data suggests that Americans want to share leadership, this definition of cooperation may go further than most Americans want, by implying the United States would be giving up leadership.

### Partner

Compared to the Social Norms metaphor, slightly more people agree with the Partner metaphor (79% agree, 61% strongly agree). However, the frame has fewer positive effects on the core interdependence questions.

On the positive side, the Partner frame increases support for an active role in the world (+5 in soft support), and shows a slight decrease in the proportion who strongly believe the United States should stay out of world affairs (-3).

However, it also increases the perception that the United States is doing more than it should (+7), and depresses strong support for economic assistance (-5) while elevating mild opposition to economic assistance (+5). It affects attribution of responsibility with a slight increase in the percentage seeing the United Nations as the most effective source of help (+4). It significantly increases the importance of trading partners as targets for US aid (+6). Most problematically, it depresses strong willingness to cooperate with other countries (-8).

Lastly, the Partner frame elevates the importance of human rights abuse (+6), but has only a minimal effect on the other social issues tested.

The intent of this statement was to use people's current assessment that the United States shoulders too much responsibility to bridge them to the determination that we should work cooperatively with other countries. Instead, it seems the restatement of the negative frame simply reinforces the belief the United States already does too much, and the solution offered was not strong enough to overpower the negative frame. A question for further investigation by the research team is whether this frame could be successful without the restatement of the negative frame.

Interestingly, the Partner frame seems to suggest a business model. One of the most significant shifts under the Partner frame is toward support of trading partners as targets for US aid.

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## Dominant News Frame

The statement reflecting the Dominant frame was designed to reflect the media's use of highly episodic and catastrophic coverage of foreign issues. Research suggests that this frame is likely to cause Americans to retreat from world affairs and believe no actor could make a difference. Interestingly, the public response to the Dominant frame does not have as many negative consequences as expected. This explains, in part, why surveys can continue to show public support for an active role in the world even within the current state of media coverage.

Two-thirds (65%) of survey respondents agree with this statement, but only 38% strongly agree and 22% disagree. This is the weakest level of agreement of the three statements tested.

The dominant frame results in some positive reactions. It increases strong support for economic assistance (+9), and slightly increases the perception that the United States is doing less than it should (+4). It shifts people slightly away from giving aid to those countries that are important to security (-4), and toward countries with the poorest economies (+3). It elevates the importance of most issues, with the greatest impact on poverty and hunger (+14), human rights abuse (+11), and equal education for girls (+8). It lifts, but to a lesser degree, sweatshops and child labor (+6), the global environment (+6) and global infectious disease (+5).

The dominant frame has a subtle tendency to push people to extremes, increasing both those who strongly want an active role (+3) and those who strongly want to stay out (+2). It slightly depresses the US government as an effective source of help (-4). While it would seem to call for closing the borders, it actually slightly decreases desire to focus on national interests alone (-5) while slightly increasing cooperation (+3 in soft cooperation).

The mayhem depicted in this frame may tap American's altruistic tendencies to reach out to help. The most negative effect it seems to have is in deflating public perception of the ability of the United States government to be an effective agent of change, but at the same time it increases American's willingness to try.

## Environment

The global environment is both a strong issue and a strong frame for global interdependence.

Most polls focusing on domestic issues show the environment to be a mid or lower level issue. On open-end questions about the biggest problems facing the country, only 2-3% typically mentions the environment. This poll demonstrates the same pattern on the

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domestic side. However, when thinking of the problems facing the world, the environment is volunteered more frequently.

Fully 42% believe the global environment should be a top priority compared to 33% who believe the domestic environment should be a top priority for the country. On the domestic side, people are most concerned about air quality (29%, compared to only 18% for the world environment). The world environment brings different problems to mind. The top concern is water pollution (25%, which receives a similar 24% level of support when people are thinking domestically). The issues that are given slightly more attention on the international side are global warming (+4), the ozone layer (+4), and endangered species (+2).

A majority would like to see funding to improve and protect the environment expanded (56% overall), particularly when they are thinking of the global environment (63%). A majority also believes it is possible to have a lot of impact on improving the domestic and global environment (59% and 57% respectively).

In addition to being an issue of public concern, the environment is a very strong frame for increasing a sense of interdependence. The environmental frame increases willingness to have an active role in the world (+6), particularly when discussed as the global environment (+9 in strong support for active role). It also increases the perception that the United States is doing less than it should (+6), again, particularly when discussed as the global environment (+9). The domestic frame has no impact on support for economic assistance, but under the global frame strong support for economic assistance increases (+15). Those hearing the global environmental frame shift to strong cooperation (+4), while those hearing the domestic frame shift toward strong national interest (+4).

The public is more likely to see private companies and the United States government as effective sources of help (+5 and +3 respectively), particularly among those who were initially thinking of the environment domestically (+8 and +4 respectively). Among those hearing the global environment frame, the role of religious organizations is dramatically decreased (-9), but no other actor increases in responsibility.

Interestingly, the environmental frame, particularly the global environmental frame, increases the importance of most other issues, except the environment itself:

	Net Change from Control		
	<u>Overall</u>	<u>Domestic</u>	<u>Global</u>
Human rights abuse	+9	+12	+6
Sweatshops and child labor	+5	+3	+7
Poverty and hunger	+5	+3	+7
Global infectious disease	+3	0	+6
Equal education for girls	0	-4	+5
Global environment	-1	-2	0

## Infectious Disease

Infectious disease is the most powerful international issue tested, but it is a problematic frame for global interdependence.

Forty percent believe that global infectious disease should be a top priority, compared to only 34% who see it as a top priority domestically. It is a problem that touches many Americans. One-third (31%) say they know someone with AIDS/HIV, tuberculosis (22%), hepatitis (34%), and malaria (14%). A majority (55%) would like spending for infectious disease expanded with similar levels of support domestically (54%) and internationally (57%). However, while fully 61% believe we can have a lot of impact on the problem, there is a much stronger feeling of efficacy domestically (66%) than internationally (56%).

Talking about infectious disease domestically may serve to cause people to want to draw back from the rest of the world, while talking about it internationally may create some opportunities for involvement. When thinking internationally, the infectious disease frame increases soft support for being active in the world (+6), and increases the belief that the United States is doing less than it should (+6). When thinking domestically, the infectious disease frame increases the desire to stay out of world affairs (+5), and particularly energizes those who feel strongly about staying out (+4). The frame decreases strong support for cooperation (-6), and on the domestic side, it increases strong support for protecting our national interests (+6).

Infectious disease pushes people toward the extremes on economic assistance, increasing both strong support (+6) as well as strong opposition (+5). However, it does strongly shift attribution of domestic responsibility to the US government (+7) while on the international side there is an increase in the percentage who simply do not know who should be responsible (+4). In addition to creating confusion about responsibility, infectious disease creates doubt about which kinds of countries should get support, shifting from countries important to national security (-4) to don't know (+4).

Problematically, the infectious disease frame does not help other issues, including itself:

	Net Change from Control		
	<u>Overall</u>	<u>Domestic</u>	<u>Global</u>
Human rights abuse	+4	+11	-4
Poverty and hunger	0	+4	-3
Sweatshops and child labor	-2	-3	-1
Equal education for girls	-3	0	-6
Global environment	-4	0	-7
Global infectious disease	-14	-9	-18

Infectious disease is such a powerful issue, that it is critical to determine how to use it effectively. There are distinct differences in how this frame works among those who know a person with an infectious disease and those who do not. A majority (54%) report they know at least one person with one of the infectious diseases listed. The patterns of response between those who have some experience with this problem and those who do not may help to explain why this powerful issue is not operating as a powerful frame for interdependence.

Those who know someone with one of the infectious diseases listed are more likely to support an active role in the world (+7), are more likely to believe the United States is doing less than it should (+8), and are far more likely to strongly believe in cooperation (+14). Those who do not know someone with one of the infectious diseases listed are actually slightly more likely to see infectious disease as a problem (+3). However, they are more likely to want to stay out of world affairs (+6), more strongly oppose economic aid (+7), and more strongly support focusing on our national interests (+15).

It may be that there are demographic or psychographic influences on whether or not a person knows someone with one of these diseases that also influences their view on international engagement. Or, it may be that lack of familiarity causes one to want to remove from the world, while those with experience know it is not possible to close the borders to disease. This will be a critical question for the research team. Indeed, the ability to target specific messages to key groups remains a challenge of further analysis for all the frames tested.

## **Next Steps**

- ❖ The analysis of data by demographic subgroups is not yet complete. This information will lend insight into the results of the framing experiments.
- ❖ The research team needs to digest the findings and create hypotheses for how to improve upon the effects noted here.
- ❖ These hypotheses can be tested in further media effects work.