



**Revisiting Frames that Garner Support for Rural America**

**A FrameWorks Research Report**

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

By  
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## Preface

Since 2003, the FrameWorks Institute has been supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to conduct a series of studies on how Americans think about rural issues; these are published at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/rural.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/rural.html). Specifically, this research aims to help rural policy experts, rural leaders, and advocates explain to the public and policymakers how rural areas are affected by policy decisions and what can be done to improve that decision-making. This latest report in that series presents an experimental design that amplifies results from previous FrameWorks research on this topic. In particular, we re-examine the values that have emerged from past FrameWorks research, on this and other topics, and explore the results of quantitative tests designed to ascertain the efficacy of these items in shaping support for rural attitudes and policies by a representative sample of study participants.

Our prior research has shown that America seems to harbor a variety of conflicting attitudes toward its more rural parts. On the one hand, rural America can be seen as a valuable storehouse of nostalgia for traditional values, including hard work and pristine landscapes. At the same time, it can be perceived as boring and out of step with progress. In situations like this, where people toggle easily between habitual patterns of thinking, messages about policies to promote rural well-being can have unpredictable effects; those seeking to encourage enlightened thought and practical policies need to carefully study the impact of their words.

## Framing

We borrow the notion of “framing” to describe the way information can foster understanding. While it is beyond the scope of this report to recap this vast literature, we can recount three widely used definitions of frames and framing (see also, Kinder, 2007; Reese et al., 2001):

*“Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.”*  
(Gitlin, 1980, p. 6)

*“[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”*  
(Entman, 1993, p. 52)

*“[f]rames activate knowledge, stimulate stocks of cultural morals and values, and create contexts.”*  
(Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 47)

Put another way, frames trigger the “cultural models,” or conceptual devices, that people

use to organize information in order to give meaning to the world around them. In one classic study, for instance, alternative descriptions of the same problem result in widely disparate judgments about the solution. In this seminal framing experiment, Kahneman (1982) and his colleagues manipulated the description of a medical decision. After randomly assigning participants to two groups, the first group read the following:

Imagine the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the program are as follows: If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and two-thirds probability that no people would be saved.

Another group, otherwise identically cared for, read a different description:

Imagine the United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the program are as follows: If program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that no one will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die.

According to the laws of probability (which boil down to multiplication and division), these descriptions present the same choice. To double-check, program A will save 200 people, while we should expect B will also save 200 (one-third times 600) people; mathematically, 400 (600 minus 200) will die. In the second, C will kill 400 people, while we should expect D will kill 400 people; thus, mathematically, 200 will live. Thus, this experiment artfully manipulates the framing of the choice. Which programs did participants choose? Undergrads randomly assigned to the first description favored A to B by 72 to 28 percent. In contrast, undergrads treated to the second description favored D to C by 78 to 22 percent. Indeed, it is hard to find a stronger example of framing effects.

Nevertheless, as many observers have pointed out, there is tremendous ambiguity, overlap, and general confusion about the nature and impact of frames. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 39) note that framing “has been used in different ways in several different disciplines to mean different things with different outcomes” (see Chong & Druckman, 2007, for a good review of the literature on framing theory). Nevertheless, our interest in frames is built around the idea that people’s attitudes and opinions can be affected by exposure to a frame or its elements (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Iyengar, 1991).

The conventional belief is that framing effects on public opinion stem from the psychological process known as accessibility (Entman, 1993). That is, contextual cues in the frame activate particular mental representations, which stay “on top of the mental

bin” (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998), thus becoming more accessible in memory at the time of judgment. In turn, these accessible representations form the basis for subsequent judgments (Wyer & Srull, 1989). To study framing in an experimental setting entails three steps. First, one must delineate a list of potential frames given a particular topic. Second, experimental participants must be exposed to the frames, and, third, participants’ reactions must be observed. Testing for framing effects, then, concerns how incoming messages influence judgment. Framing effects, then, lay in the comparison of observations across the frames or relative to a control condition (where reactions to a topic are measured without any exposure).

This study examines values as part of the frame. Values are the ideals that provide the organizing principles on which people reach decisions (Rokeach, 1973). For instance, an adherent of equality would probably reach different conclusions in an area than someone who espoused merit. The key for us is that people are not ideologically consistent when it comes to specific issues. In contrast to the “rational choice model” that assumes that people always use one predominant value – self-interest – as the lens for their actions, value systems are more dynamic and flexible than one might expect (Converse, 1964). This is why framing is so important. The values contained within frames compete for application to any given situation (for a review see Nelson & Willey, 2003). When one frame with its one value “wins,” people tap into familiar patterns of higher-level reasoning that guide subsequent responses.

These competitions give different values a chance to be expressed in the conceptual models guiding people’s thought. It is not the case that the same value always wins, either on an individual or societal level. This fact makes the contest unpredictable in the absence of specific research. For example, in FrameWorks research on Global Warming, the value of Ingenuity increased support for public policy solutions. The same value of Ingenuity, however, tested poorly in previous research on rural America. In this case, informants concluded that rural Americans were sufficiently ingenious or self-sufficient to devise their own solutions to social problems and hence didn’t require programs and policies to support them. Like all important public decisions, we would expect values to play an important role in guiding decisions about rural policy. In this study, we test a range of values that have the potential to motivate reasoning; the specific values used in this design are detailed in the next section.

### Revisiting and Extending Rural Frames

For several years, beginning in 2003, the FrameWorks Institute was supported by grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to investigate public attitudes to rural America and to policies designed to improve conditions in rural areas. The range of methods deployed included cognitive interviews, focus groups, simplifying models research and a national survey, reflecting the state of FrameWorks’ research methods at that time. The results were published as part of the How to Talk Rural Issues Toolkit (FrameWorks Institute, 2006) available at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/cdtoolkits.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/cdtoolkits.html). In 2009, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation became interested in the intersection of research it was supporting at FrameWorks to examine public attitudes to race with this earlier body of work on

attitudes to rural issues. FrameWorks was supported to apply some of the new recommendations emerging from the project on race to rural issues and to examine these results in light of the earlier findings. This also afforded FrameWorks an opportunity to take advantage of greatly improved methods in experimental design that are now part of its methodological approach.

Additionally, it allowed FrameWorks to align the older rural work with some of the Foundation's newer interests, including its concern for vulnerable children. Thus, a survey instrument was composed to:

- (1) verify the findings on the impact of values frames from the previous rural poll.
- (2) expand the frame effects test to include issues of race and class.
- (3) align this research with WKKF's current mission.

The experimental design that resulted reflects this combination of interests. First, it includes a series of values frames that emerged from the race research:

- ⌚ Opportunity for All, or the idea that everyone deserves an equal chance at the benefits life has to offer.
- ⌚ Ingenuity/Solutions, or the idea that evaluating and trying new things will make everyone better off.
- ⌚ Prevention, or the idea that doing something about problems now will keep them from growing into bigger problems in the future.

For each of these values, a specifically rural treatment was composed to allow us to test the effects of applying these values to a specific rural context and then to judge the impact on an array of policies and attitudes. Quite simply, we were interested in whether the same values we had identified as relevant to race could also help people understand that there were disparities in access and resources in rural areas. Such an outcome could greatly improve the ability of progressive policy advocates to adopt a more inclusive frame than was currently the practice.

More specifically, the Ingenuity value had additional interest in that it had been proposed by other researchers as a potential strategy for raising support for rural issues.<sup>i</sup> By portraying rural areas as places of innovation, it was argued, Americans would be able to overcome their associations with rural backwardness. The Prevention value emerged as the most effective in communicating disparities in FrameWorks' own research.<sup>ii</sup> We speculated that the same argument might be used to advance an argument against letting rural areas become further impaired. However, given the fact that most Americans viewed rural areas as already in decline, there was some concern that this value might be deemed irrelevant to the situation currently facing rural America. The Opportunity for All value was most consistent with the value that emerged from the earlier rural research – Interdependence – and was seen by FrameWorks' researchers to harbor the most potential for moving rural policies. In both cases – Interdependence and Opportunity for All – similarities among all Americans were stressed, and the idea that what benefits one benefits all formed the focus of these treatments.<sup>iii</sup>

Second, several instantiations of the value of Fairness were introduced to assess the impact of this values on these same policies and attitudes. This value had emerged from the previous research as a promising way to frame rural policies<sup>iv</sup> and had been observed by FrameWorks' field-building team as a common practice in rural advocates' communications. Thus, a traditional social justice appeal was crafted. Then, the language that had been used in the previous survey – what we referred to as “Fairness Across Places,” as it emphasized the inequitable distribution of resources – was developed in three versions: one more generally applied to American communities, one specific to rural communities, and the last specific to African American communities. The experiment was designed to test whether rural policies might garner more support from those subjects exposed to the value of Fairness Across Places a) without specific reference to rural; b) with specific reference to rural communities, or c) referencing African Americans. It should be noted that these values treatments differed from the earlier research in that they were entirely parallel in construction; that is, the variation from one treatment to another was a matter of 10 words or less. This, we believe, greatly enhanced the validity of the findings.

We analyze the effects of these values treatments on three discrete policy batteries. The first (Rural Policies) is a set of rural policies that reflect policies being advocated by the Foundation's rural grantees and other rural activists. They range from incentives for farmers' markets to improvements in education and health care access. The second (Child and Youth) closely parallels the current programmatic focus of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. It includes policies on child nutrition, early care and education and policies to promote achievement in low-income youth. In a more general sense, it can be thought of as a child- and youth-oriented battery. The third battery (Health and Health Services) measures support for expanded access for poor and minority families, pregnant women and children.

## Methods

The 2,162 experimental participants in the study came from an Internet panel maintained by YouGov Polimetrix. The respondents were matched on gender, age, race, education, and party identification and weighted to correspond to known marginals for the population of registered voters in the United States from the 2006 American Community Survey.

## Dependent Measures

Three different question batteries provided the three main dependent observations used to chart respondents' reactions to the framing stimuli (exact wordings are presented in the appendix). To present a summary measure for each battery, a principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on the questions in each. Statisticians use PCA to “squash” multiple questions into a single measure for analysis. The main advantage of using PCA is that we can look to the one combined measure instead of trying to pay attention to all the items within a battery. The three PCAs revealed that each battery's questions loaded on a single factor that statisticians call the central tendency or principal

component of the responses. Specifically, the seven early childhood development questions combine into a single scale that accounts for 72 percent of the variance in respondents' answers to all seven questions. The single scale for the 11 rural questions accounted for 60 percent of the variance of all the questions, and the single scale for the six health services questions accounted for 69 percent of the variance. These three scales have a minimum of roughly -2 and a maximum of 1.5 where high numbers correspond to responses that are consistent with the expert opinion we consulted. In other words, a set of responses completely consistent with expert opinion would be scored at 1.5, while a set of responses at odds with expert opinion would receive a -2.

## Results

The average score on the rural questions after exposure to each frame is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Average Responses to ECD, Rural and Health Scales by Condition.

	Early Childhood Development	Rural	Health and Health Services
Treatment Control	-0.051	-0.021	-0.093
Opportunity for All: Rural	0.209**	0.136*	0.17**
Ingenuity/Solutions First: Rural	-0.022	0.019	0.022
Prevention: Rural	0.004	-0.03	-0.029
Fairness/Social Justice: Rural	0.066	0.091	0.006
Fairness Across Places: American communities	-0.07	-0.072	-0.054
Fairness Across Places: Rural communities	-0.103	-0.074	0.024
Fairness Across Places: African American communities	-0.018	-0.043	-0.003

Asterisks indicate levels of statistical significance \*\*  $P < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

The results are quite clear; the Opportunity for All frame outperforms the others at moving attitudes on all three scales. On the early childhood development scale, that frame moved attitudes a quarter of a point on the 5-point scale or about 5 percent of the scale length; that is roughly equal to a move from 50 percent to 55 percent. Similar results appear in the other two scales, rural and health. All of these results are significant at the .01 level, meaning that there is less than one chance in 100 that this pattern of results can be attributed to chance variation. Equally important, none of the other observed effects reached statistical significance, meaning that for all the other frames we cannot reliably distinguish the frame's effect from zero, which is no effect at all. In fact, most of the signs on the Fairness Across Places frames were negative, meaning that they moved attitudes in the wrong direction.

## Discussion

The finding in this experiment is as simple and straightforward as possible in such studies. Anyone wishing to move attitudes toward more progressive views should concentrate exclusively on using the Opportunity for All value in discussions of policies that affect rural America. As expected, the Opportunity for All values frame performed best on rural policies, just as the Interdependence value had in earlier research. Based on our race research, we expected Opportunity for All to perform well on the Health and Child Batteries. This proved to be the case. Opportunity for All, applied specifically to rural communities, raised support across all three batteries.

This finding represents a contrast to FrameWorks' earlier work on rural issues where the Fairness Across Places frame had the strongest impact in terms of moving respondents toward more progressive values<sup>v</sup>. We expected the American and Rural versions of the Fairness Across Places value to outperform the Social Justice and Fairness/African American treatments. In fact, we expected Fairness Across Places in its Rural version to contend with Opportunity for All. This did not prove the case. None of the Fairness frames demonstrated statistical significance, and many moved in the wrong direction.

This finding raises some caution about the value of Fairness in its three versions. The reason for this shift in the frame that is the most effective is not clear from these data; however we speculate that it stems from a shift in national discourse from the Bush era to the Obama era. As the idea of Interdependence – or the notion that we are “all in it together” – has clearly gained transcendence coming out of the 2008 electoral campaign, it may indeed have become “easier to think” than it was in 2003 when we began our research. By the same token, conflicts between competing groups have been to some degree overtaken by this more collective frame. If this is indeed the case, then we would expect the Opportunity for All frame to outperform the Fairness Across Places frame, as indeed it did. Whether our interpretation of contributing causes is valid requires additional qualitative and quantitative research, as public perceptions of rural issues fluctuate within larger frame contests over time.

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## Appendix Exact Wordings of Treatments and Questions

### Treatments

**Opportunity for All (Rural).** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that rural communities still face many barriers to opportunity. They have more declining school budgets, restrictive lending practices and fewer health professionals. The American Dream has always relied on creating an environment where everyone has an opportunity to achieve including rural people. According to this view, we need to devote more attention to ensuring that every community – including rural communities – provides an opportunity to succeed for all its residents. This will result in a better quality of life and future prosperity for the nation as a whole. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to improving conditions in rural communities.

**Ingenuity/Solutions First.** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that we as a society are not devoting enough attention to effective policies and programs that benefit rural communities. They maintain that effective solutions do exist. Progress can be made if programs are routinely evaluated and the good ones brought to scale in rural communities. According to this view, smart states have significantly improved conditions in some rural communities. They have done this by raising teacher quality, creating lending policies for buying homes, and increasing the number of health professionals. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to creating better solutions to problems affecting rural communities.

**Prevention (Rural).** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that preventing problems in rural communities is important because they will eventually become everyone's problems. Preventing declining school budgets, restrictive lending practices and a scarcity of health professionals in rural communities will prevent worse problems in the future. According to this view, we can prevent further damage to our nation by devoting more resources to addressing these problems in rural communities before they become more serious. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to preventing problems affecting rural communities.

**Fairness/Social Justice (Rural).** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that many problems rural people confront are the result of discriminatory practices that continue to unfairly target rural people. Whether overtly or more subtly, rural people are treated differently when it comes to such things as getting ahead in the classroom, applying for a home loan or being able to see a doctor. According to this view, we need to renew our commitment to a just society if we are to achieve real equality. We can do this by devoting more resources to policies that uncover discrimination and address fairness in our society. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets in a manner that is fairer to rural people.

**Fairness Across Places: American communities.** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that America will only prosper when all American communities have a fair chance to achieve. The reality is that some American communities are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. This happens because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs and opportunities for a good education, have not benefited all communities. We need to make sure that those parts of the country that are at a disadvantage get their fair share. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets in a manner that is fairer to American communities.

**Fairness Across Places: Rural communities.** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that America will only prosper when all American communities have a fair chance to achieve. The reality is that rural communities are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. This happens because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs and opportunities for a good education, have not benefited rural communities. We need to make sure that those parts of the country that are at a disadvantage get their fair share – including rural communities. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets in a manner that is fairer to rural communities.

**Fairness Across Places: African American communities.** Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that America will only prosper when all American communities have a fair chance to achieve. The reality is that African American communities are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. This happens because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs and opportunities for a good education, have not benefited African American communities. We need to make sure that those parts of the country that are at a disadvantage get their fair share – including African American communities. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets in a manner that is fairer to African American communities.

## **DEPENDENT MEASURES**

### **EARLY CHILD/ECD BATTERY (7 QUESTIONS)**

Develop and fund programs that create a transition into school for poor children ages 3 to 6.

Make high-quality early care and education programs more broadly available and affordable for lower-income families through subsidies and sliding fee scales.

Increase K-12 school funding to rural school districts so that children in rural areas are provided with quality educational environments comparable to those children have in more densely populated areas.

Provide more fresh fruits and vegetables to schools by expanding federal fresh fruit and vegetable programs as well as by working through commodity food programs.

Fund community-based programs that encourage youth in low-income neighborhoods to serve as community leaders and social change agents.

Increase funding for initiatives at colleges and universities that increase opportunities for minority students to enter and complete their college degrees.

The Child Nutrition Act should be revised so that it updates and improves nutrition standards for schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

### **RURAL BATTERY (10 QUESTIONS)**

Provide rural families with greater access to health care by funding local health clinics in remote communities.

Provide funds to address environmental problems in rural areas, including pollution from industrial farms, mining and forestry.

Initiate federal programs that would favor the link between farmers' markets and schools and hospitals.

Use state and national funds rather than local funds to expand the curriculum available to students in rural areas through online classroom learning.

Support professional development for teachers in rural areas to modify instruction for low-income students and English language learners.

Prohibit private Internet providers from dropping rural areas to cut costs and ensure that online information services are available and affordable to rural residents.

Provide tax incentives to help residents of rural areas grow successful small businesses to offset the loss of manufacturing jobs.

Expand the number of visas available to international medical graduates who locate in rural areas.

Provide low or reduced interest loans and technical assistance to buy land and technical assistance in the development of viable farm businesses.

Provide transportation, mental health services and respite care for family caregivers in rural areas who provide long-term care for older and disabled family members.

### **HEALTH AND HEALTH SERVICES BATTERY (6 QUESTIONS)**

Require paid sick days be provided to all workers so they are not forced to choose between losing a day of work or not caring for themselves or a sick child.

Provide health care for all pregnant women and women in childbearing years.

Make these child health care services available for all children: well-child visits, oral health care, neonatal screening and follow-up, and vision and hearing screening.

Develop family resource centers in communities to encourage social networking, provide parenting education and make referrals for social services.

Lately there has been a lot of discussion about health care in this country. One view holds that there are problems in the system because some people can't get reliable, quality health care due in large part to their race or ethnicity. How much do you agree or disagree with this view?

Do you think it is harder for African Americans than whites, for example, to get the health care they need when they are sick?

***About FrameWorks Institute:*** The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>i</sup> Talking Rural Issues: A FrameWorks MessageMemo

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_Rural/rural\\_message\\_memo.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_Rural/rural_message_memo.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Talking About Disparities Toolkit <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/race/>

<sup>iii</sup> The earlier Interdependence value was worded as follows: “In this country, we believe that what affects Americans in one part of the nation affects us all and that we will only succeed when all parts of the nation are in good shape. We have a unique opportunity to move ahead as a country through creating good jobs and economic opportunity, improving education, reforming health care, and strengthening communities. Indicators of well-being suggest that small towns and rural places are breaking down and the effect is spreading to the well-being of the nation as a whole. This is happening because the efforts that enhance a community’s well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs, and opportunities for a good education, have disproportionately benefited metropolitan areas, which results in cutting rural places off from opportunities. We can prevent further damage by working together to reconnect the skills and resources that exist in the nation’s heartland, which will then reverberate throughout the nation. Connecting the Country to the Rest of the Country, page 29.

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_Rural/rural\\_priming\\_survey.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_Rural/rural_priming_survey.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Talking Rural Issues: A FrameWorks MessageMemo

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_Rural/rural\\_message\\_memo.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_Rural/rural_message_memo.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Talking Rural Issues: A FrameWorks MessageMemo

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_Rural/rural\\_message\\_memo.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_Rural/rural_message_memo.pdf)