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Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending

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The issue of government spending provides an interesting context for testing issue-framing effects in American public opinion. Competing partisan elites clearly portray the spending issue in different ways: Republicans tend to focus on broad, general appeals, while Democrats aim at more specific forms of programmatic expenditures. Their differing arguments undoubtedly arise because the varied issue frames generate different kinds of responses. This study uses data from the 1992 CPS National Election Study to examine the preceding hypothesis. The results from the empirical analysis show that public opinion on government spending does, in fact, vary markedly with the presentation of the issue. This framing effect is powerful enough to induce individual-level opinion change. And, framing effects arise because varying presentations of the government-spending issue activate different sets of influences on citizens' issue attitudes. These findings have broad implications concerning both the magnitude of framing effects and the explicitly political nature of the issue-framing process.

This article examines issue-framing effects in American public opinion. A single social problem can be characterized and discussed in several different ways. The specific terms used to “create” a political issue out of a social problem have a strong effect on the nature and degree of popular agreement with the various sides of that issue. An obvious implication is that politicians will attempt to define, or “frame,” issues in ways that maximize support for their own positions.

The issue of government spending provides an interesting context for testing these ideas about issue framing. Republicans and Democrats clearly portray the use of public expenditures in different ways. Republicans focus on broad, general appeals (e.g., “government spending must be cut!”), while Democrats aim at more specific forms of programmatic outlays (e.g., “It is important to fund medical care for the elderly!”). Their differing arguments undoubtedly arise because the varied issue frames—in this case, the general presentation versus the more specific portrayal of government spending—generate different kinds of responses.

In this study, I will employ public opinion data from the 1992 CPS National Election Study to examine the preceding hypothesis, along with its causes and consequences. Public opinion on government spending does, in fact, vary markedly with the presentation of the issue. And framing effects arise because varying presentations of the government-spending issue activate different sets of influences on citizens' attitudes.

These findings contribute to scholarly understanding of issue framing in several ways. First, they demonstrate that significant framing effects exist outside the laboratory. The effects occur in settings that approximate the everyday world of political discourse, on an issue that is central to the predominant lines of partisan cleavage in contemporary American politics. Second, the analysis shows that framing does not merely produce *different* distributions of public opinion; instead, varying issue presentations can ac-

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tually *change* citizen responses to the issue. And finally, this analysis confirms the explicitly *political* nature of the issue-framing process by providing useful information about the nature and effectiveness of elite appeals to popular sentiment.

Background

As with many other concepts in the field of public opinion, the term “issue framing” has been used to refer to a variety of things. But the basic definition of an “issue-framing effect” is straightforward: framing effects occur when different presentations of an issue generate different reactions among those who are exposed to that issue.

Issue Framing as a Political Tool

Issue framing is an explicitly *political* phenomenon. Issue frames typically originate with political leaders; the mass media serve as the “conduits” through which their messages flow. A number of social scientists clearly recognize the political nature of the issue-framing process (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). Nevertheless, many (perhaps most) previous analyses of framing effects have approached the latter from a perspective of formal decision making (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Kahneman and Tversky 1984, 1987), individual-level information processing (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991), or media influence (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Iyengar 1991; Gamson 1992; Entman 1993).

It is highly rational for elites to pursue strategies based upon issue framing. The logic is as follows: favorable public opinion—in the form of popular support for policy positions—is an important resource that political leaders can use for achieving their ultimate political objectives, such as winning elections (e.g., Downs 1957; Fried 1997; Herbst 1998). But issues arise from complex problems that are separate and remote from the direct experiences of most citizens (Cobb and Elder 1983). Therefore, information about these problems must be communicated to and at least partially interpreted for the public, before an issue can truly be said to exist in the first place. Political elites usually have quite a bit of latitude in defining policy issues for the mass public. Therefore, they do so in ways that shine the best possible light on their own preferred courses of action.

The ability to frame issues—that is, define the way that policy controversies will be presented to the public—is undoubtedly one of the most important “tools” that

political elites have at their disposal (e.g., Edelman 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Reliance on one issue frame rather than another does not, in itself, require any outlay of tangible resources. However, it does influence the distribution of public responses to that issue (Schneider and Ingram 1990). Thus, issue framing as a political strategy involves minimal costs, and it has the potential to provide sizable benefits (Schön and Rein 1994).

General versus Specific issue Frames

In the present study, I will examine the consequences of *general* versus *specific* issue frames on public opinion toward a single issue. A *general issue frame* is an interpretation that focuses on the disputed governmental activity itself. Little attention is paid to the underlying causes or consequences of any policy initiatives that may result from the resolution of the issue. An example of a general issue frame is a statement like “The Federal government should take steps to protect the environment.”

A *specific issue frame* differs in that it explicitly links governmental activities with targets in society. Statements of this type not only promote certain policy initiatives; they also identify the reasons that such steps are necessary, along with the beneficiaries (or victims) of governmental action. An example of a specific issue frame might be “The federal government should protect the environment, in order to reduce air/water pollution and to protect people whose lives and property are threatened by toxic waste dumps.”

Varying the frame of an issue between general and specific presentations should affect the salience of different psychological components within the opinion formation process. Issue statements that are framed in general terms provide very little specific information about the policy activities in question. At the same time, the most prominent stimulus in a general issue frame is often the government itself as the entity engaging in the policy activity. So, citizen responses to the issue should be conditioned by their own feelings about the government. A sizable body of research indicates that public reactions toward “the government” are often quite negative, at least when the stimulus is presented in broad terms (e.g., Free and Cantril 1967; Hill 1992; Cantril and Cantril 1999; Lock, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1999). As a result, we can hypothesize that general issue frames tend to generate opposition to (or, at least, fail to generate support for) governmental policies that are characterized in those kinds of terms.

In contrast, a specific issue frame facilitates connections between governmental policy and particular segments of American society. Therefore, reactions to the

issue are affected, at least in part, by citizens' feelings about the issue's "targets" (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Nelson and Kinder 1996). A specific issue frame could even induce self-interest effects among people who benefit from certain forms of governmental action. These kinds of effects should produce predictable results: on the one hand, Americans are generally sympathetic toward needy groups in society—that is, those who are likely to be policy targets (Gilens 1999); on the other hand, some people may recognize that they stand to receive direct benefits from certain policies (Sears and Funk 1990). In either case, specific issue frames should lead to broader popular support for governmental policies.

The Issue of Government Spending

If issue framing is, indeed, a widely used political tool, then it is important to demonstrate that political competitors tend to characterize issues in different terms. This study will focus on a single issue—government spending. There is clear evidence that the government-spending issue is framed very differently by Republicans and conservatives on one side and by Democrats and liberals on the other. Scholars (e.g., Sears and Citrin 1985; Feldman and Zaller 1992), pollsters (e.g., Cantril and Cantril 1999), political activists (e.g., Matalin, Carville, and Knobler 1994), and journalists (e.g., Dionne 1991) have all pointed out that the former tend to discuss the issue in broad, general terms, while the latter emphasize specific programs and affected constituencies.

These partisan/ideological differences in the framing of the government-spending issue emerge repeatedly in American politics (e.g., Pomper and Lederman 1980), and they have been successful in affecting the general content of American public opinion. Different interpretations of government spending comprise an integral component of general partisan images within the electorate (Trilling 1976). Indeed, these varying perceptions of the parties' respective stands on government spending comprise an unambiguous example of "issue ownership" (Petrocik 1996): on the one hand, Republicans maintain a clear advantage in public esteem resulting from their commitment to reduce spending levels; on the other hand, the Democratic party is widely viewed as the one more likely to advance programs for helping disadvantaged groups within society.

It is particularly important to emphasize that differing frames of the government-spending issue occupied a central position in the candidates' rhetoric and debate during the 1992 presidential election campaign, since that is the time period to be covered by the empirical analysis, below. Fortunately, this is a fairly easy task: for

one thing, the reliance on differing issue frames was described in very explicit terms by political scientists who were attached to the respective presidential campaigns (Petrocik 1997; Popkin 1997). Furthermore, a content analysis of various campaign-relevant documents—Bush's 1992 State of the Union Address (*Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, January 28 1992), the Clinton campaign's strategic plan (Clinton and Gore 1992), the party platforms (Democratic National Committee 1992; Republican National Committee 1992), and the candidates' frequently delivered stump speeches (e.g., Mufson 1992; Rosenbaum 1992; Kessler and Rothmyer 1992)—definitely reveals the ongoing use of the different frames. Consistent with more general partisan tendencies, George Bush stressed the need to limit federal spending; he also repeatedly branded his opponents as "tax and spend" Democrats. Bill Clinton maintained the traditional Democratic focus, by emphasizing governmental spending as an "investment in America," with particular attention on education, job training, rejuvenating urban areas, and rebuilding infrastructure.

Along with the partisan framing differences, the focus on government spending in this study is significant precisely because it is such a salient issue in modern American politics. Other research into framing effects has tended to focus on issues with characteristics that place them apart from everyday political competition. These include: epidemiological questions with no partisan content whatsoever (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1981); social problems that have a single, dominant, media-based frame, like explanations for poverty (Iyengar 1991); local referendums with no national implications (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991); civil liberties concerns that are usually peripheral to the content of both American public opinion and partisan politics, regardless of their relevance to democratic theory (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997); and racial issues which are noteworthy, at least partially, because of the unusually difficult value dilemmas they pose for American culture (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996).

In contrast to such "special" issues, government spending is one of the central components of the partisan alignment that has dominated politics in the United States since the New Deal period (e.g., Ladd and Hadley 1978; Sundquist 1983); questions about the government's ability and/or willingness to fund programs cut to the heart of the basic distinction between liberal and conservative ideologies (McClosky and Zaller 1984). If it is possible to uncover framing effects on such an "everyday" policy concern, then it would help establish the general importance of the issue-framing process as a fundamental component of political action and partisan conflict.

Data and Measures

The data for this analysis will be drawn from the 1992 CPS National Election Study.¹ The latter contains several questions that are specifically intended to measure citizens' views about government spending. Fortunately, the items are worded in ways that correspond to general and specific frames of this single issue. As argued in the previous section, varied presentations of government spending occupied a central position within the rhetoric of the 1992 Presidential campaign. Accordingly, the NES questions can be used to "mimic" the public debate that actually took place over matters of government spending (Kinder and Sanders 1990).

The use of the 1992 National Election Study in this analysis is particularly advantageous, for at least two reasons. First, the NES data are drawn from a large, national sample of the American electorate. This should minimize any questions of external validity or generalizability in the empirical results.² Second, all of the NES respondents are confronted with *both* frames of the spending issue. This stands in direct contrast to the varied treatment groups or split-ballot designs employed in all previous research on issue framing. The within-subjects or repeated-measures nature of the present research design allows us to address a new and extremely important question about issue-framing effects: Can varied issue presentations *change* individual citizens' reactions to that issue?

The general frame of the government-spending issue is operationalized in a straightforward manner, using a seven-point scale that has become a standard item in the NES interview schedules. This question asks respondents to place themselves on a continuum between the following two extreme positions: "Government should provide many fewer services, reduce spending a lot" and "Government should provide many more services, increase

spending a lot." Note that the response alternatives only mention governmental actions—spending and providing services—rather than any beneficiaries of those actions.³ Therefore, this item conforms very nicely to a general issue frame, as defined earlier.

Operationalizing the specific issue frame is a more complicated process. The 1992 NES interview schedule included a battery of questions asking respondents whether federal spending should be decreased, kept about the same, or increased in each of sixteen different policy areas. The policies mentioned in these questions are: food stamps; welfare programs; AIDS research; financial aid for college students; programs that assist blacks; solving the problem of the homeless; aid to countries of the former Soviet Union; Social Security; science and technology; child care; dealing with crime; improving and protecting the environment; government assistance to the unemployed; poor people; public schools; and aid to big cities.

These specific mentions of particular programs obviously represent more narrowly framed presentations of the spending issue. However, it is essential to determine what these policy-specific spending items are really measuring. Do the sixteen responses tap into substantively different attitudes? Or are all of the separate spending responses just different empirical manifestations of a single underlying characteristic? In other words, is there any common structure guiding the separate responses to the policy-specific spending items?

In order to answer the preceding questions, I perform a cumulative scaling analysis of the sixteen items. This approach has a very strong advantage over other possible strategies for dealing with the multiple, policy-specific spending items (e.g., treating each one separately; combining all sixteen into a single additive index). The scaling analysis seeks a representation of the spending responses that closely corresponds to the ways that people really do think about the issues involved in policy-specific government spending. It does not produce a variable that is based upon ad hoc decisions or an a priori structure specified by the researcher. The scale

¹It is important to emphasize that the results from this analysis are not isolated to this one particular time point. In fact, virtually identical results are obtained when the analysis is replicated with any of the National Election Study data files from 1980 (the first year in which the program-specific spending items were included) on. A more complete report on the temporal continuity of these findings is available from the author upon request.

²Previous studies of framing effects have tended to rely upon much more limited data sources, such as nonrandomly chosen subject pools (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Iyengar 1991), student samples (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997), random samples from a local area (e.g., Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991), or the relatively small national samples available in the NES Pilot Studies (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1990; Nelson and Kinder 1996). On the other hand, Kinder and Sanders (1996) do employ large-scale national samples (from the 1988 NES and the 1990 General Social Survey) for some of their framing experiments.

³The introduction to the survey question does mention two policy areas: health and education. This is unfortunate, but I do not believe that it has much effect on the results. These policy examples were not repeated when the interviewer mentioned the two endpoints of the seven-point scale, and they were not listed on the card that was handed to the survey respondents. Therefore, this item can still be interpreted as a general and nonspecific presentation of the spending issue. Furthermore, if the mention of health and education in the question has any effect at all, it should work *against* the framing hypothesis by minimizing differences between responses to the general and specific presentation of the spending issue.

scores assigned to the respondents can be used as the measure of individual reactions to the specific frame of the government-spending issue. Just as in the general issue frame, higher values of this variable indicate stronger support for government spending and vice versa.

Details about the scaling analysis are presented in the appendix. The results indicate that seven of the sixteen policy-specific spending items form a clear cumulative scale. They are: solving the problem of the homeless; poor people; child care; assistance to the unemployed; assisting blacks; food stamps; and welfare programs. The substantive interpretation of the scale is determined by the nature of the scalable items. Here, there is a rather obvious pattern. At least six of the seven items in the scale are explicitly intended to benefit disadvantaged groups within the population.⁴ Thus, there is a coherent structure underlying public thinking about government spending, centering around social welfare policies and programs.

The remaining nine, nonscaleable items all pertain to spending in policy areas that are, to varying degrees, substantively different from social welfare concerns. For example, areas like AIDS research, science and technology, and protecting the environment all focus on research and development issues. Similarly, aid to the former Soviet Union is a foreign policy question. Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that people respond to spending in these areas differently from the ways that they think about welfare spending. But what is interesting is that the American public apparently distinguishes between benefits to clearly defined sets of disadvantaged people (e.g., the homeless, blacks, and so on) and benefits that get spread out more evenly throughout society, such as education programs, Social Security, crime prevention, and aid to big cities. Apparently, the former comprise "welfare spending" while the latter do not. This clearly suggests that the social construction of problems like poverty, race relations, unemployment, and homelessness strongly influences the ways that people think about the attendant policy issues.

Before proceeding to an analysis of framing effects, it is necessary to establish that the seven-point spending question and the cumulative scale of policy-specific

spending options really do represent different frames of the same issue. In order to address this question, I performed another scaling analysis, in which a trichotomized version of the general-spending question is included along with the sixteen policy-specific spending items. In this supplemental analysis, the general spending question forms a coherent scale together with the same seven welfare-related items that make up the original cumulative scale discussed above; it does not form a cumulative pattern of responses with any of the nonwelfare items excluded from the original scale.⁵ Thus, there is a common underlying structure which spans the two measures of spending attitudes. This is very strong evidence that people apparently think about government spending in similar ways, even though they may articulate different preferences under the two issue frames.

Table 1 provides some further information that is relevant to this question. The table shows the correlations between the seven-point spending versus services question and the cumulative scale of spending preferences on the one hand and the sixteen program-specific spending items on the other. First, note the relatively strong correlation between the seven-point item and the cumulative scale: Pearson's r is 0.48. Individual responses on these two variables are closely related to each other, exactly as they should be if these two variables represented alternative presentations of the same issue. And, consider a second, related feature of the table: the relatively robust correlations between the separate but scalable program-specific spending preferences, and the single, general spending-versus-services variable. These seven correlation coefficients have a mean value of 0.32. The information in Table 1 suggests that the general frame of the government-spending issue actually activates public thinking about welfare spending, even if the latter is not specifically mentioned to those giving the responses (Jacoby 1994).⁶

Both the supplemental scaling analysis and the correlations in Table 1 show that there is a great deal of con-

⁴ The inclusion of child-care spending in a scale that is otherwise clearly oriented toward welfare issues may seem a bit anomalous, but further consideration suggests that it is not. Child care is often mentioned as a central component of the problems facing women, particularly those with middle- to lower-level incomes, heading single-parent families. Thus, the social construction of the problems surrounding child-care financing is such that the latter is apparently conceived as a welfare problem by many people within the mass public.

⁵ Full results of this supplemental Mokken scaling analysis are available from the author.

⁶ The distinctiveness of the nine nonscaleable spending items actually comprises a third salient feature of Table 1. Although there are a few understandable exceptions, public preferences for spending on the nonwelfare programs are just not related very strongly to either general ideas about spending (the mean correlation coefficient with the seven-point question is 0.18) or to public attitudes about more narrowly defined types of welfare spending (the mean correlation with the cumulative scale is 0.244). These kinds of results are highly consistent with prior research that has been conducted on the nature of public opinion toward government spending (e.g., Jacoby 1994). Stated simply, preferences about spending on the nonwelfare programs represent different psychological and political orientations on the part of the survey respondents.

TABLE 1 Correlations Between Program-Specific Spending Questions, the General Spending Question, and the Cumulative Scale of Spending Preferences.

Program-Specific Spending Question:	General Issue Frame: Seven-Point Spending Versus Services Question	Specific Issue Frame: Mokken Scale of Spending Preferences
<i>Scalable Programs:</i>		
Food Stamps	0.289	0.694
Welfare	0.328	0.701
Programs to Help Blacks	0.263	0.632
Programs to Help the Homeless	0.334	0.590
Child Care	0.319	0.614
Unemployment Programs	0.312	0.672
Programs to Help Poor People	0.390	0.711
<i>Nonscalable Programs:</i>		
Social Security	0.293	0.311
Science and Technology	0.018	0.002
AIDS Research	0.220	0.316
Fighting Crime	0.134	0.155
Protecting the Environment	0.211	0.300
Aid for College Students	0.220	0.286
Aid to the former USSR	-0.028	0.089
Public Schools	0.310	0.323
Aid to Big Cities	0.251	0.419
Cumulative Scale of Preferences	0.480	1.000

Note: Table entries are Pearson correlation coefficients. The number of observations varies between 1801 and 2190.

Source: 1992 CPS National Election Study.

sistency in the responses across the two variables. This, in turn, indicates that the seven-point question and the seven-item cumulative scale can, indeed, be viewed as different presentations of the same issue. The former is a general frame, while the latter is a specific frame, and these variables will be treated as such for the remainder of the analysis.⁷ The remaining nine, nonscaleable items will not receive further consideration in this study.⁸

⁷ There are other possible interpretations of the difference across the two issue frames. For example, the presentation that I call the "general frame" explicitly poses a spending-services tradeoff, while the items comprising the "specific frame" do not. Unfortunately, the NES data do not provide any means of testing which of these alternative interpretations provides the best characterization of the difference between the frames. While I still contend that the general-specific distinction is the most relevant type of variation, that is not really the main point: Differences in the presentation of government spending—whatever the specific nature of these presentations—generate systematic variations in the way the public responds to this issue.

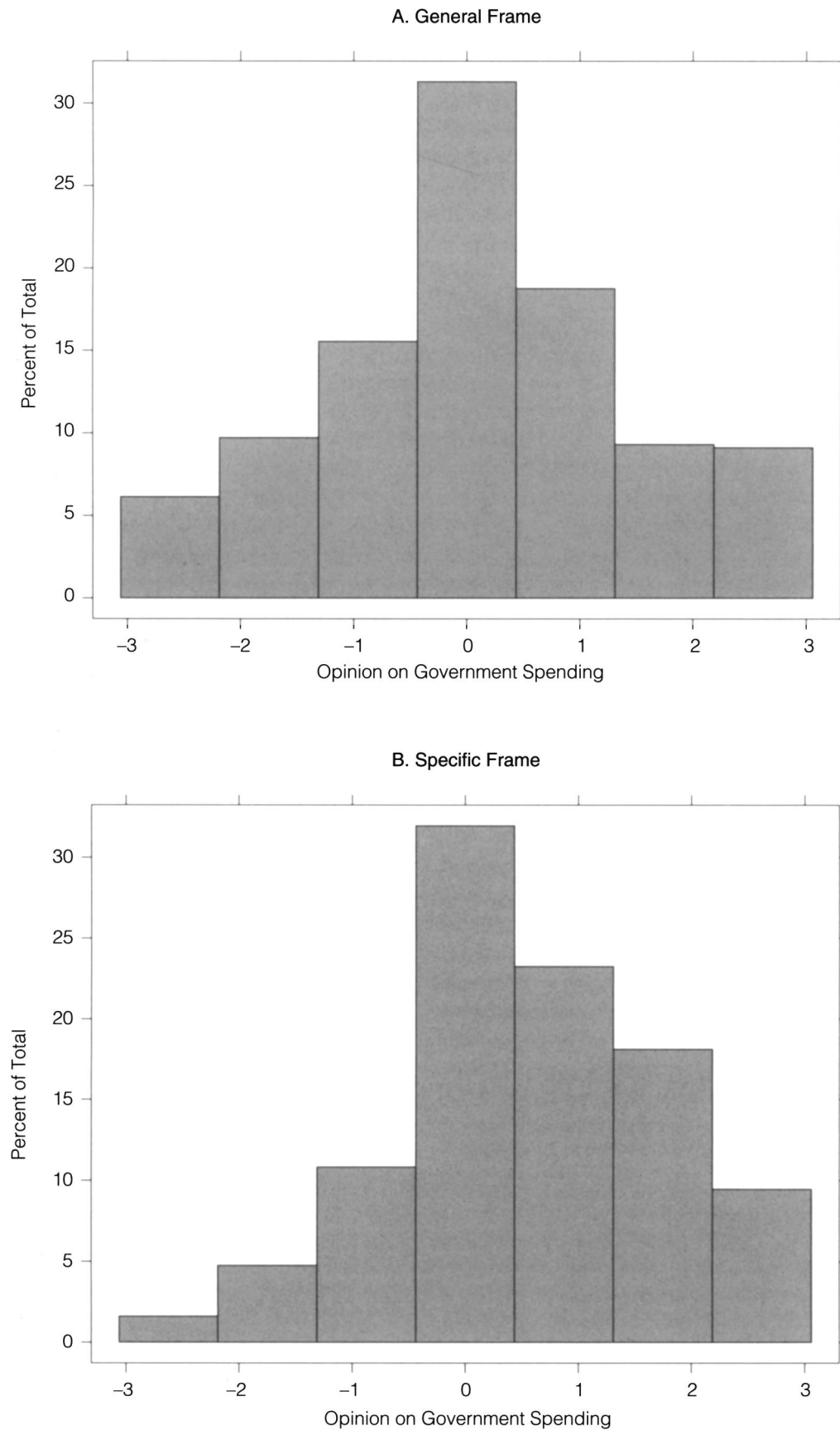
⁸ In a sense, placing these nine program-specific items aside means ignoring information that supports the hypothesis of this study. Further analysis clearly shows that people react to these items differently from the ways that they respond to either the general spending item or to the program-specific spending scale; this could be interpreted as another type of framing effect. Nevertheless, I am still excluding these items from the analysis, for several

Does the General/Specific Issue Frame Affect Public Opinion?

Framing effects should lead to different distributions of public opinion when the precise statement of the governmental spending issue is varied between a general and a specific presentation. This hypothesis can be examined very easily by comparing the response distributions for the seven-point question and the cumulative scale. In order to allow comparisons of summary statistics across the distributions, both variables are transformed so they range from -3 (maximal preference for decreasing spending) to +3 (maximum support for increasing spending).

reasons. First, there are theoretical grounds: there is evidence that the public just does not think of spending on these other kinds of policies as "government spending" (Jacoby 1994). If so, then any differences in public reactions to these nonwelfare stimuli would be due to changing the issue itself, rather than to differing frames of a single issue. Second, there are potential measurement error problems, stemming from the fact that these items are all simple, three-point scales; this would adversely affect the comparability to either the seven-point variable or the cumulative scale of spending attitudes. And finally, there are pragmatic concerns, in that consideration of the program-specific questions would add a great deal of length to an already-long analysis.

FIGURE 1 Distribution of Public Attitudes Toward Government Spending Under Different Issue Frames



Note: In both variables, smaller values indicate preference for decreasing spending, larger values indicate preference for increasing spending. Data source is 1992 CPS National Election Study.

TABLE 2 Response Distributions for Different Frames of Government Spending Issue

	General Issue Frame: Seven-Point Spending Versus Services Question	Specific Issue Frame: Cumulative Scale of Spending Preferences
Mean	0.114*	0.632*
Standard Deviation	1.571	1.322
N	2017	2189
Percent Favoring Net Decrease in Spending	31.4	25.7
Percent Favoring No Net Change in Current Levels of Spending	31.3	11.6
Percent Favoring Net Increase in Spending	37.2	62.7

*The absolute value of the *t* statistic for the difference between the two means (assuming paired observations across the two variables) is 12.790 (*df* = 1799). This difference is clearly statistically significant, at any reasonable level of probability.

Note: Both variables are scored on scales that range from -3 (maximum decrease in spending) to +3 (maximum increase in spending).

Source: 1992 CPS National Election Study.

Figure 1 and Table 2 provide the evidence for this part of the analysis. All of it leads to a single, unambiguous, substantive conclusion: framing effects do exist in public attitudes toward government spending. First, consider the histograms shown in Figure 1. The top panel shows responses to the general presentation of the spending issue. Here, the distribution is unimodal and nearly symmetric about the neutral midpoint. The bottom panel shows responses obtained from the specific version of the spending issue. The distribution is still unimodal but it is now markedly asymmetric, with far more respondents falling on the upper (i.e., increase spending) side of the scale than the lower (i.e., decrease spending) side. Thus, issue framing definitely affects the overall distribution of public opinion on government spending.

Next, consider the summary statistics for the responses on the two variables which are shown in the upper part of Table 2. The means are 0.11 for the general issue frame and 0.63 for the specific issue frame. This shows that there is greater public support for government spending when the issue is presented in specific terms. The difference in the values is not of trivial magnitude: the means are distinct from each other, even when sampling variability is taken into account.⁹

⁹The 95 percent confidence intervals for the separate mean values extend from 0.045 to 0.182 for the variable representing the general issue frame, and from 0.577 to 0.686 for the scale measuring

The lower part of the table presents the information with even greater clarity. Here, we see that the percentages favoring any degree of increased spending nearly doubles in size, from 37.2 percent in the general frame of the issue, up to 62.7 percent in the specific frame. Once again, this difference is far too large to be attributable to statistical fluctuations or sampling errors.¹⁰ Mentioning specific kinds of programmatic beneficiaries from governmental expenditures increases greatly the magnitude of popular support for that spending within the American public.

These results definitely indicate the existence of issue-framing effects. The manner in which the problem of government spending is presented to citizens has a clear impact on the subsequent distribution of public opinion with respect to that issue. Of course, this basic finding is not really new. It is well known that the wording of questions on public-opinion surveys influences the ways that

the specific issue frame. Note, however, that these confidence intervals assume the data used to calculate the two means are independent. This is highly unlikely, since the same people are responding to both issue frames within the same survey interview. Therefore, a paired-observation difference of means test is more appropriate. The results of such a test are discussed in footnote 12.

¹⁰A difference of proportions test for these percentages (assuming independent samples) produces a *t*-value of -17.03. The probability of observing a sample difference this large if the population proportions supporting spending were identical under the two frames is effectively zero.

people respond to those questions (e.g., Schuman and Presser 1981). The variability seems to be particularly pronounced when people are asked about the appropriate levels of governmental support for various welfare programs (e.g., Smith 1987; Rasinski 1989). But previous studies have treated this tendency largely as a question-wording effect with methodological, rather than substantive, importance.

The results presented here show that the variability in expressed opinions is both pervasive throughout the American electorate and highly systematic in nature.¹¹ The framing effects revealed in this analysis do not merely show that varying issue presentations produce *different* levels of *aggregate* public support for government spending. Instead, alternative frames can actually induce *individual* people to *change* their responses to the spending issue. These opinion shifts have a directional bias, and their magnitude is sufficient to easily achieve statistical significance.¹²

The evidence shows unambiguously that the specific formulation of the issue—the one that mentions specific recipients of federal outlays—*moves* public opinion toward greater support for government spending. This, in turn, suggests that issue framing has an extremely powerful impact on the ways that citizens react toward the stimuli of the political world. The latter conclusion has particular importance, precisely because the two frames of the government-spending issue are routinely used by different partisan actors. Thus, issue framing has imme-

¹¹ The observed movement in opinion is definitely *not* due to shallow, question-wording effects among people who do not possess meaningful attitudes on the government-spending issue. If so, then opinion changes should be most pronounced among individuals who are least interested, involved, or attentive to the political world. That is just not the case. Further analysis reveals that political attentiveness and/or sophistication has virtually no impact whatsoever on individual propensities to change their opinions across the different versions of the issue. Hence, framing effects are due to the alteration of the issue presentation itself and not to the characteristics of the survey respondents. A more complete report on this topic is available from the author upon request.

¹² The mean difference in individual scores across the two variables (specific frame minus general frame) is 0.450. A paired-observations difference of means test produces a *t*-value of 12.790. The probability of observing a difference this large under the null hypothesis of no-population difference is effectively zero. Looking at the problem a bit differently, support for increased spending versus nonsupport (i.e., support for maintaining or decreasing spending) can be treated as a Bernoulli variable. Doing this reveals that 30.9 percent of the respondents *moved* from nonsupport of increased spending under the general frame of the issue to support for increased spending under the specific frame. In contrast, only 6.9 percent moved from spending support under the general frame to nonsupport under the specific frame. A paired-observations difference of means test for this Bernoulli variable produces a *t*-value of -17.59; once again, this test statistic easily surpasses all reasonable criteria for statistical significance.

diate political consequences: elites do present this issue in ways that, *ceteris paribus*, maximize support for their own policy objectives.

How Do Framing Effects Work?

Issue-framing effects operate by differentially influencing the causal factors that underlie overt responses to an issue (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1990). In other words, a particular interpretation of a social or political problem (i.e., an issue frame) activates certain types of thinking among the people who are exposed to that interpretation. Differently framed presentations of a single issue may vary the salience and accessibility of the concerns that individuals bring to bear on their responses to that issue (Zaller and Feldman 1992), or they may simply affect the importance of the separate elements within a person's belief system and their immediate relevance to a particular issue (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997).

In either case, the implications for the government-spending issue are straightforward: citizen responses to the general issue frame should be most directly affected by attitudes toward the government itself; the specific issue frame should activate concerns that are more directly related to the explicitly mentioned beneficiaries of spending. The particular "mix" of these two kinds of considerations should vary systematically across the two frames of the government-spending issue. Therefore, it is important to examine separately the influences on public reactions to the general and specific issue frames. Accordingly, the two dependent variables in this part of the analysis are the individual scores on the separate measures of attitudes toward government spending; the seven-point variable for the general frame and the cumulative scale for the specific frame.

The independent variables for this analysis can be divided into four sets: first, there are general feelings about government and society. Attitudes toward the government should affect individual reactions toward spending, precisely because the government is the *source* of the expenditures. This effect is expected to be most pronounced in the general issue frame where—in the absence of any specific spending "targets"—the government is actually the most prominent stimulus presented to the mass audience. Therefore, the analysis will include feeling thermometer ratings for "the federal government in Washington."

Citizens' retrospective evaluations about the state of the national economy will be used as another general influence on spending attitudes. The 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign made economic assessments (e.g., "It's the

economy, stupid!”) a salient focus in their public rhetoric (e.g., Germond and Witcover 1993); this may have generated a sort of priming effect, enhancing the relevance of economic performance to other political attitudes. More generally, sociotropic judgments are a prime source of the “low information rationality” (e.g., Popkin 1991) that citizens may use to formulate their responses to the relatively vague content of the general issue frame. After all, many citizens employ economic conditions as a tangible indicator of the effectiveness of past governmental activities (e.g., Fiorina 1981); therefore, it is entirely reasonable that they use the same standard to evaluate subsequent policy steps, like proposals about governmental spending. The economic judgment variable is measured by a scale created from responses to five questions about inflation, unemployment, and economic conditions in the recent past; larger values of this variable correspond to increasingly negative perceptions of the national economy.¹³

The second set of independent variables measure citizens’ feelings about particularly visible beneficiaries of government spending. Reactions toward specific forms of spending should be affected by attitudes concerning the targets of that spending (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Nelson and Kinder 1996). Symbolic racism is measured using a summary scale, based upon individual responses to four separate questions about the status of blacks in American society.¹⁴ General attitudes toward people on welfare and toward poor people are measured by feeling thermometer ratings for those two groups.

The third set of independent variables consists of relatively narrow, personal, factors which may activate self-interest effects. The latter usually have little, if any, impact on issue attitudes. However, the specific frame of

the spending issue may be an exception to this rule, since it highlights clear and substantial benefits that will accrue to certain segments of the population (Sears and Funk 1990). The self-interest factors include several demographic characteristics: family income (measured in thousands of dollars); race (a dummy variable for African-American respondents); gender (a dummy variable for females); age (a dummy variable for respondents who are older than 60); and employment status (a dummy variable for those not currently employed). The NES data also contain information on another potentially relevant background variable, the degree to which each respondent’s immediate family relies upon public income supplements or assistance (operationalized as the number of types of assistance the family receives).¹⁵

Finally, the fourth set of independent variables involves symbolic predispositions. Previous research shows that party identification and ideological self-placement both have pervasive effects on the formation of issue attitudes (e.g., Sears et al. 1980); they should perform a similar function in the present context as well. These symbolic orientations are measured with the standard seven-point measures included in the NES interview schedules; the variables are coded so that larger values indicate more Republican identifications and conservative self-placements, respectively.

This part of the analysis employs *multivariate* (as opposed to “multiple”) regression to measure the independent variables’ effects on spending attitudes under the two different frames of the issue. In other words, several dependent variables (two, in this case, corresponding to spending attitudes under the respective issue frames) are expressed as linear functions of a common set of independent variables. This approach is somewhat unusual in political science, but it is necessary in the present context because the objective is to make comparisons of effects *across* the two equations. Within each equation, the coefficient estimates and related statistics (e.g., standard errors and R^2) are identical to those obtained from the usual OLS approach to single-equation estimation. Therefore, interpretation will be no more difficult than with traditional regression analyses.¹⁶

¹³ Respondents were asked to make five judgments about whether economic conditions were getting better or worse. Specifically, they were asked about: inflation, unemployment, the nation’s economy over the past year, the nation’s economy over the preceding four years, and the nation’s economy over the previous few months. Responses to these questions were recorded on a five-point scale, from “much better” to “much worse.” A summated rating scale is used to construct the sociotropic judgment variable, and it has a reliability coefficient of 0.71 (Cronbach’s alpha).

¹⁴ The specific statements are: “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” “Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.” “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they would be just as well off as whites.” “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” Responses to these statements are recorded on a five-point scale from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly.” The second and fourth items are reflected, and a summated rating scale is used to combine the responses and create the single measure of symbolic racism. This scale has a reliability of 0.75 (Cronbach’s alpha).

¹⁵ The specific forms of assistance are: Social Security, food stamps, Medicare, unemployment compensation, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, veterans benefits, retirement pensions for federal employees, disability payments, and workman’s compensation. The variable was created by summing the number of assistance types the respondent reported that he/she or someone in the immediate family received.

¹⁶ Multivariate regression is covered in most texts on multivariate statistical methods. The treatment in Duntzman (1984) is particularly useful because the technique is presented as a straightforward generalization of the traditional multiple-regression model.

TABLE 3 Determinants of Expressed Opinions Toward Government Spending Across the General and Specific Issue Frames

Independent Variables	General Issue Frame	Specific Issue Frame	MANOVA Probability value for Difference between Coefficients
<i>General Feelings about Government:</i>			
Thermometer Rating of the Federal Government	0.007* (0.002)	0.003* (0.001)	0.044*
Evaluations of the National Economy	0.324* (0.066)	0.184* (0.050)	0.043*
<i>Group-Related Evaluations:</i>			
Symbolic Racism	-0.085* (0.043)	-0.297* (0.032)	0.000*
Thermometer Rating of Welfare Recipients	0.004* (0.002)	0.015* (0.002)	0.000*
Thermometer Rating of Poor People	0.002 (0.002)	0.008* (0.002)	0.028*
<i>Personal Background Characteristics:</i>			
Respondent Race (Black)	0.200 (0.142)	0.180* (0.108)	0.896
Respondent Age (Greater than 60)	-0.395* (0.114)	-0.290* (0.086)	0.381
Respondent Gender (Female)	0.289* (0.076)	0.200* (0.058)	0.269
Family Income	-0.008* (0.002)	-0.003* (0.001)	0.004*
Respondent Unemployed	0.089 (0.162)	0.232* (0.123)	0.060
Reliance on Public Assistance	0.032 (0.041)	0.110* (0.031)	0.075
<i>Symbolic Predispositions:</i>			
Party Identification	-0.099* (0.022)	-0.123* (0.017)	0.318
Ideological Self-Placement	-0.192* (0.031)	-0.133* (0.023)	0.071
Intercept	-0.301 (0.380)	0.200 (0.288)	0.211
R ²	0.249	0.456	
Number of Observations	1243	1243	

*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Figures in parentheses are standard errors.

The empirical results from the multivariate regression are shown in Table 3. The leftmost column of the table contains the coefficient estimates obtained in the equation with the seven-point measure as the dependent variable—that is, the general frame of the spending issue. The next column shows the coefficients for the equation-predicting responses on the cumulative scale; hence, it shows the determinants of opinions on the specific issue

frame. The right-hand column gives the observed probability values for tests of the null hypothesis that corresponding coefficients are identical across the two equations.¹⁷ Smaller values of this probability support the

¹⁷Each of these probability values are obtained from a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) *F*-test that the difference between the corresponding coefficients across the two equations is zero. A more general version of this same test is used to examine whether

alternative hypothesis that the effects of a given variable differ across the two equations. Those probabilities that fall below the traditional rejection criterion (0.05) are marked with an asterisk.

The results strongly support the general hypothesis that issue framing affects the determinants of issue attitudes. A multivariate test of the hypothesis that all coefficients are identical across the two equations is easily rejected, at any reasonable level of statistical significance. Prior expectations about specific variables' influences are largely supported by the evidence.

Let us begin by considering the impacts of the general feelings about government and the economy. Both of these variables exhibit markedly different effects across the equations. Moving from the general to the specific issue frame, the impact of attitudes toward the federal government is cut in half; the regression coefficients fall from 0.007 to 0.003. Similarly, the effect of sociotropic judgments changes from 0.325 in the general frame to 0.184 in the specific presentation of the spending issue—once again, the decrease is nearly half the size of the original effect. Note also that both of these changes are statistically significant. Precisely as hypothesized, the general issue frame encourages people to base their responses to the issue on their feelings about the government itself and evaluations of societal economic conditions. These appear to be very reasonable judgmental heuristics for citizens who are confronted with the broad appeals and lack of “hard” information that is inherent in a general issue frame.

Next, let us turn to the second set of independent variables, those measuring attitudes toward several of the groups that serve as potential targets of government-spending programs. All three of these variables show important (and statistically significant) changes in their effects across the two issue frames: their impact is always much larger under the specific issue frame, compared to the general presentation of government spending. The difference is most pronounced for symbolic racism, with a regression coefficient that becomes more than three times larger (-0.085 in equation for the general frame and -0.297 in the specific frame). Similarly, the effect of attitudes toward people on welfare more than triples in size, from 0.004 up to 0.015. The coefficient for attitudes toward poor people shows a fourfold increase, from a nonsignificant value of 0.002 up to 0.008. Racist feelings decrease support for government spending, while positive

all of the coefficients are identical across the two equations (or equivalently, that the observed differences are entirely due to sampling error). Along with the Duntzman (1984) text mentioned earlier, Bray and Maxwell (1985) provide a basic introduction to MANOVA.

evaluations of welfare recipients and the poor both tend to increase it. These *changes* in the magnitude of the group-related influences provide very strong, independent confirmation for Nelson and Kinder's (1996) observation that framing effects can operate by priming group-based concerns in the attitude-formation process.

Several of the self-interest variables show sizable changes in impact across the two issue frames. For example, consider the effects of family income. The coefficient on the income variable decreases from -0.008 to -0.003 across the two frames, and this difference is statistically reliable. At first glance, this result may seem a bit surprising. Intuitively, self-interest effects should be greater in the specific frame, since that presentation of the issue emphasizes the particular beneficiaries of government spending. Nevertheless, other research has demonstrated that humanitarian sympathy for the poor extends across the boundaries of social class (e.g., McClosky and Zaller 1984; Lewis and Schneider 1985; Gilens 1999). Hence, the negative relationship between income and opposition to government spending may be moderated when that spending is clearly targeted to help underprivileged groups.

Two other self-interest variables do show the expected increases in their effects, moving from the general to the specific issue frame. The impact of employment status changes from an incorrectly signed, but nonsignificant -0.089 up to 0.232 (a value that is significantly larger than zero). This change in the direction and magnitude of the coefficient is very large, although the *difference* between the two just barely falls short of statistical significance. The coefficient for the public assistance variable also jumps upward across the two issue frames, from 0.032 in the general presentation to 0.110 in the specific version. The former coefficient is nonsignificant, while the latter is significantly greater than zero. Once again, however, the difference between the two is not statistically significant. Nevertheless, a general pattern is clear: unemployed people and other recipients of governmental assistance are more likely to support government spending when explicitly reminded that they are, themselves, direct beneficiaries of that spending (e.g., Cook and Barrett 1992). In such cases, the clarity of the connection between personal circumstances and public programs is so great that it cannot be missed. As a result, strong self-interest effects—which are relatively unusual in American public opinion—do emerge in the formation of government spending attitudes, at least when the issue is framed in a way that openly encourages this kind of thinking.

The remaining independent variables exhibit generally consistent effects across the two different frames of

the issue. Older people always favor decreasing government spending, while African-Americans and women consistently favor increases. These results are quite consistent with other research. As a group, the elderly often exhibit a conservatism on domestic issues even when such an orientation works against their own self-interest (Rhodebeck 1993). African-Americans are distinctive in their strong liberal stands on the kinds of welfare-related concerns that are subsumed within the government-spending issue (e.g., Tate 1993; Tuch and Sigelman 1997). Similarly, the gender gap in popular support for the welfare state has been the focus of much attention in recent years (Duncan 1984). For present purposes, it is probably sufficient to note that all of these variables have significant impacts on the development of citizens' spending attitudes, but since their coefficients do not change very much across the two equations, age, race, and gender do not really contribute to *framing* effects with respect to this issue.

Finally, the symbolic predispositions—party identification and ideology—have strong, statistically significant effects across both equations. In the general issue frame, their coefficients are -0.100 and -0.192 , respectively; in the specific frame they are -0.123 and -0.133 . Regardless how the issue is presented, Democrats and liberals favor government spending, while Republicans and conservatives oppose it.¹⁸ This result is fully consistent with not only symbolic politics theory (e.g., Sears 1993), but also heuristic-based models of mass political orientations (e.g., Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Both of these perspectives hold that variables like party identification and ideological self-placement are pervasive influences on individual issue attitudes. In fact, the findings reported here strengthen their theoretical status by demonstrating that partisan and ideological influences are largely impervious to issue-framing effects.

¹⁸Note that ideology has a smaller coefficient under the specific issue frame. Furthermore, the difference from its counterpart in the general frame almost achieves statistical significance—the probability value is quite small, at 0.071. Closer investigation shows that the change in impact is almost entirely due to liberals. That is, conservatives oppose spending under both issue frames. Liberals support spending under the general frame, but a liberal self-placement has no impact whatsoever in the specific frame. This asymmetry probably results from the attitudinal ambivalence that liberals experience on social welfare issues (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Apparently, this effect is heightened when liberals are explicitly reminded about segments of the population that have not shared fully in the individualism and self-determination that permeates American political culture. While this ideological asymmetry is interesting, it is not of sufficient magnitude to justify the complications that would result from including it in the multivariate regression analysis.

The multivariate-regression results confirm that the issue-framing process is *not* merely based upon the shallow, insubstantial nature of individual issue attitudes (Sniderman and Theriault 1999). Instead, framing effects occur because citizens make reasonable responses to the overt content of a policy question, such as the appropriate level of government spending. When the presentation of the issue is varied, people heed certain considerations more strongly and de-emphasize others while formulating their reactions. The net result is *individual-level* opinion change. The general argument in this study has been that political actors employ issue frames as tools for achieving their own objectives. If that is the case, then the empirical results presented here demonstrate unambiguously that issue-framing effects can have immediate and far-reaching political consequences, by changing the apparent content of American public opinion in systematic ways.

Conclusions

Issue-framing effects do, in fact, exist in the everyday world of American politics. Previous analyses of framing have either been carried out in relatively artificial experimental settings, or they have required people to make specific choices on decision problems that have been carefully laid out and defined for them. In the present study, the stimuli presented to the survey respondents correspond much more closely with the contents of the actual political environment that confronts them in real life.

The Nature of Issue-framing Effects

The results from this analysis show that sizable framing effects can be produced with little effort. This is important because the real-world issue appeals that are aimed at the mass public are limited in duration and detail. Nevertheless, most prior analyses by political scientists have ignored such practical limitations on the framing process. Instead, they have examined complex psychological phenomena, like causal attributions for social problems (Iyengar 1991), acceptance of justifications for varying types of public policies (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991), and the relevance of competing social values to a political controversy (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). But these kinds of effects can only occur when people pay attention to media stories about the problems and policies under investigation. This requires a certain degree of effort and motivation on the part of the individuals who are affected.

Here, respondents are presented with several straightforward statements, on which they simply indicate support or opposition for government spending. And yet, there is still discernible variability in the ways that people react toward differently worded presentations of a common topic. So, framing effects can be generated simply by varying the presentation of an issue, rather than the more complex and indirect process of manipulating cognitions about the underlying social problems or the policy consequences of the issue.

This study also demonstrates that framing effects are extremely powerful—probably more so than previously recognized. All of the previous work on this topic has shown that differently-framed stimuli correspond to different kinds of responses, among different subsets of people. The findings reported above go far beyond this: Differing frames produce widespread *changes* in the ways that people respond to a single issue, with systematically lower support for government spending in the general presentation and greater support in the specific frame.

Thus, issue-framing effects appear at the individual level; they do not merely affect the aggregate contours of public opinion. This is particularly important because modern, media-based political campaigns aim their appeals at a common audience (e.g., Just et al. 1996). Hence, partisan leaders must continually attempt to *attract* citizens to their respective candidates. The issue-framing process—with its attendant ability to move public opinion—facilitates such efforts. Indeed, the ongoing “competition” between varying presentations of social problems and issues may well be one of the most important dynamics underlying modern political conflict.

While the results from this analysis attest to the nature and powerful consequences of issue framing, they also raise several intriguing questions: How does one go about framing an issue for successful political action? Is it possible to characterize the “competition” between different issue frames in a systematic manner? How can political scientists generate valid measures of the external issue stimuli confronting the mass electorate, along with their consequences for the content of public opinion? Future research efforts will have to address questions like these in order to fully explicate the political aspects of the issue-framing process.

Issue Framing and Electoral Politics

This study provides important insights about contemporary American electoral politics, by explaining *why* Republicans and Democrats tend to frame the government-spending issue differently. Republican spokesper-

sons argue for decreased spending in very general terms because this is the presentation of the issue that results in lower levels of support for spending among the mass public. In contrast, Democratic elites use very specific programs and target constituencies in their political rhetoric—the issue frame that clearly increases popular endorsement of government spending. Political leaders emphasize different issue frames precisely because they generate immediate rewards, in terms of popular support for their respective positions. And this, in turn, provides a policy-based rationale for citizens to choose the respective parties’ candidates in the voting booth.

The political strategy of using issue frames to garner popular support is not without its own difficulties. For example, while the general presentation of government spending usually benefits Republicans and conservatives (due to negative evaluations about the Federal government), it also invokes sociotropic evaluations within the mass public. The content of these economic judgments was decidedly negative in 1992, so they worked against incumbent Republican president George Bush (Hetherington 1996). For Democrats, a similar problem arises: the specific frame of the spending issue activates symbolic racism, along with more sympathetic reactions toward needy groups, and this encourages more negative reactions toward government spending.

While precise comparisons are admittedly problematic, the former effect seems to be more pronounced than the latter. So the government-spending issue produced a net advantage (or, at least, failed to produce a disadvantage) for the Democrats during the 1992 election. This is noteworthy, in part, because it contradicts traditional “ownership” of the spending issue within the Republican party (Petrocik 1996). It also demonstrates the effectiveness of the framing process, itself, through the Democrats’ apparently successful attempt to link spending with social groups—the issue that they “own.”

Public Opinion and Political Elites

At a more general level, the empirical results from this study add to the growing body of research which demonstrates that public opinion is *not* merely an aggregate characteristic of the mass public. Instead, public opinion results from the *interaction* between the public and political elites, with the latter often providing the initial stimuli—that is, the specific characterization of an issue—to which citizens react (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996).

The elite foundation of public opinion is usually viewed in negative terms (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992), either as the overt manipulation of citizen preferences

(Ginsberg 1986) or as a reflection of the shallow, superficial quality of individual issue attitudes (Zaller 1992). The present study suggests a different interpretation for this kind of phenomenon: citizens react to the substantive content of issue appeals. Therefore, political elites do the same thing that any other reasonable person would do: they provide their “audience”—the mass public—with the kind of information that supports their own preferred position. They do not accomplish this by outright lies (at least, usually); rather, political leaders differentially interpret the causes, nature, and consequences of social problems, a process that is usually facilitated by the very complexity of the problems themselves. This is the essence of the issue-framing process.

One could, perhaps, characterize issue framing as elite manipulation of citizen preferences. However, it is not an unusual or extraordinary component of the ways that public officials and the mass media interact with the general public. Instead, issue framing is an inevitable fact of everyday political life.

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Appendix

Mokken Scaling Analysis of Policy-Specific Spending Items

The purpose of the scaling analysis is to determine how well the responses to the policy-specific spending questions conform to a cumulative (or “Guttman,” as it is sometimes known) structure. To the extent that this model does fit the data, it implies that there is a continuum ranging from a preference for decreasing spending in all programs to increasing it in all programs. Individuals are arrayed along this continuum according to their own preferences: essentially, each person supports government spending up to a point, but no farther than that. This point varies from one person to the next, and their relative positions are estimated as part of the cumulative scaling analysis. In this manner, the scale itself will provide empirical measurement of the survey respondents’ opinions about government spending, when the latter is presented using a specific issue frame.

The cumulative scaling analysis will also provide useful information about variability across policy areas. That is, there are some programs where large segments of the public believe spending should be increased, including many people who are not particularly supportive of government spending in absolute terms. Other programs are only supported by those few individuals who are, in general, most

supportive of governmental spending. Thus, the cumulative scale will help show how citizens perceive the policy alternatives that are available to them in the political world.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize that the cumulative scaling strategy has not been chosen arbitrarily. There are at least two other scaling models that could be employed. However, the substantive implications of these alternative approaches do not seem to be as reasonable as those underlying the cumulative model. First, the *summated rating* (or “Likert”) model implies that people respond to the separate program-specific spending items on the basis of their underlying attitude toward spending, without regard to the differences among the policies. Any observed differences in an individual’s responses to the various spending items would be attributed strictly to random measurement errors. However, this does not correspond to the systematic distinctions that survey respondents clearly make among different beneficiaries of governmental spending.

Second, the *proximity* (or “unfolding”) model assumes that each person has some optimal level of governmental spending, and that preferences fall off as policies deviate from this ideal point in either direction (i.e. toward more or less spending). But this would imply more detailed knowledge and active political thinking than that which actually exists within the mass public. Furthermore, attempts to apply proximity-based techniques to the policy-specific spending preferences generate scales that do not produce any improvement in fit between the scaling model and the empirical data. Thus, the cumulative scaling model is most appropriate for the present research context, on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

The Mokken approach is used to perform the cumulative scaling analysis (Mokken 1970; Molenaar 1982). This is a useful strategy because it is based upon a probabilistic model (unlike the traditional Guttman method); it is non-parametric in its assumptions about the relationship between empirical responses and the underlying continuum (unlike more stringent item response theory models, like Rasch scaling), and it can be used on polychotomous items, like the three-category spending questions (Sijtsma, Debets, and Molenaar 1990). Thus, the Mokken approach is well-suited for the kind of survey data contained in the 1992 NES.

The scalability criterion for a Mokken scale is based upon the number of observed scaling errors (that is, empirical responses that are inconsistent with the hypothesized cumulative structure) relative to the number of scaling errors that would be expected under a null model of statistically independent responses across the separate items. The smaller the ratio of observed to expected errors, the greater the extent to which the data conform to the cumulative model. In order to facilitate interpretation, the ratio is sub-

tracted from one; this produces a goodness of fit measure called Loevinger's H coefficient (Mokken 1970; Mokken and Lewis 1982).

The immediate objective of the scaling routine is to find the largest subset of the spending items that conform closely enough to the hypothesized cumulative structure (Jacoby 1991). The analysis proceeds in a stepwise manner: Start with a pool of potentially scalable items (the sixteen policy-specific spending questions, in this case). Find the pair of items that form the two-item scale with the highest possible H statistic. Then, find the item that, when added to the first two, produces the three-item scale with the highest possible H statistic, and so on. Continue adding items, until the H statistic falls below a specified minimum value (0.40, in this case). In principle, the Mokken scaling analysis could be carried out by inspecting the marginal frequencies and cross-tabulations between the potentially scalable items. However, the search process and the computations are extremely tedious. Therefore, the present analysis is carried out using MSP (an acronym for Mokken Scaling for Polychotomies), a special-purpose software package available from *iec* ProGAMMA (Molenaar et al. 1994).

The Mokken analysis produces a seven-item scale with an H value of 0.44; Mokken (1970; Mokken and Lewis 1982) describes a fit statistic of this magnitude as a "moderate scale." By comparison, an H value greater than 0.50 constitutes a "strong scale." So the observed value indicates a very reasonable correspondence between the scaling model and the empirical data. Furthermore, the scale has a reliability of 0.80. This indicates that 80 percent of the variance in observed scale scores is shared with the true but unobserved distribution of locations along the latent continuum of attitudes toward government spending.

The distribution of individual respondents along the scale is examined in the text. But, consider the scaled order of the various spending alternatives, which is shown in Table A1. The alternatives that are located closer to the "Decrease spending on all programs" pole of the scale are those that are acceptable to larger proportions of the respondents. As one moves down the scale, the spending alternatives are supported by fewer and fewer people, until we reach the "Increase spending on all programs" pole, an option that is not advocated by very many of the survey respondents. Clearly, people distinguish systematically between different kinds of public assistance programs. They are relatively likely to support maintaining or increasing spending on programs for the poor, the homeless, child care, and for dealing with unemployment. In contrast, public support for spending on programs to assist blacks, food stamps, and welfare is not nearly as pronounced.

The ordering of the scale alternatives shown in Table A1 corresponds to widely held stereotypes about the legitimacy

TABLE A1 Scaled Order of Program-Specific Spending Alternatives

Scale Position	Government Spending Alternative
0	Decrease spending, all programs
1	Maintain current spending, programs to help the homeless
2	Maintain current spending, programs to help the poor
3	Maintain current spending, child care
4	Maintain current spending, unemployment programs
5	Maintain current spending, programs to help blacks
6	Increase spending, programs to help the homeless
7	Maintain current spending, Food Stamps
8	Maintain current spending, Welfare
9	Increase spending, Programs to help the poor
10	Increase spending, child care
11	Increase spending, unemployment programs
12	Increase spending, programs to help blacks
13	Increase spending, Food stamps
14	Increase spending, Welfare
15	Increase spending, all programs

Source: Mokken scaling analysis of data from the 1992 CPS National Election Study.

of various beneficiaries of governmental programs. Thus, the plight of the homeless, as well as concerns about poor people and children seem to arouse sympathy and compassion (at least as gauged by the public willingness to fund programs that help these kinds of people). In contrast, negative public stereotypes about "welfare recipients," people who rely on food stamps, and members of racial minorities engender few positive feelings, and probably some degree of hostility (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). The public is willing to support spending on programs for disadvantaged segments of American society, so long as they are aimed at the kinds of recipients who are perceived to be legitimate and deserving recipients of public aid. This result corresponds very closely to virtually all of the prior research on public opinion toward government spending (e.g., Eismeier 1982; Sanders 1988; Jacoby 1994).¹⁹

¹⁹Some confirmatory evidence for this point can also be gleaned from the 1992 NES data, themselves. In the post-election survey, respondents were asked to rate three of the groups in the Mokken scale on feeling thermometers: people on welfare; poor people; and blacks. The mean thermometer ratings for these groups were 51.01, 70.55, and 65.27, respectively. These figures correspond to the order in which these groups occur in the empirical cumulative scale. That is, people are more willing to accept maintaining or increasing spending for the poor (the group with the "warmest" mean thermometer rating) than for blacks (the next warmest mean rating), and for blacks rather than for people on welfare (who received the "coldest" mean value of the three rated groups).

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