

Value-Based Frames and Opinion Polarization: The Case of the Free Speech Issue

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Abstract

How do voters react to strong, value-based issue frames that are not explicitly labeled as partisan, but are easily recognized as such? We argue that individuals are influenced by such frames only if the implicated values are associated with their own party. Invoking values associated with the out-party does not move opinions and can even provoke a backlash. The political result of such disparate framing effects should be opinion polarization across party lines, even if mean opinions are moved in the expected direction. We test this conjecture in three original survey experiments focusing on free speech as a political issue. Results demonstrate that frames against the principle of free expression indeed move opinions only when the implicated values align with recognizable partisan rhetoric (social justice for Democrats and patriotism for Republicans) and thus polarize opinion across party lines. We discuss implications of these results for research on framing and political polarization.

In August 2016, football player Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the pre-game performance of the U.S. national anthem as a protest against police brutality, and mistreatment of African Americans and people of color. Many on the political right called the protest unpatriotic or disrespectful. For instance, in 2017 then-President Trump tweeted: “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to *disrespect our Great American Flag* (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem” (emphasis added).¹

Six months later, right-wing activist Milo Yiannopoulos was set to speak at University of California, Berkeley, until protests led the university to cancel the event. Protesters carried “*Hate Speech is Not Free Speech*” signs hours before the event (emphasis added), making the argument that Yiannopoulos’ event would be harmful to marginalized groups on campus.² Both Kaepernick’s kneeling and Yiannopoulos’ speaking engagement sparked debates around free expression, albeit in service of vastly different values.

These two stories provide examples of framing: opponents of Kaepernick and Yiannopoulos amplified different value dimensions of the debate with a goal to shift opinions (Chong and Druckman 2007b). Opposition to free expression through references to disrespecting the country or endangering marginalized groups are both relatively strong frames as they appeal to considerations that are highly salient and relevant for the issue at hand. At the same time, the two frames are recognizably partisan. Trump’s adoption of the patriotism frame against Kaepernick’s kneeling protest effectively turned it into a conservative Republican argument.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>

² <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/students-protest-at-uc-berkeley-milo-yiannopoulos-talk-971231/>

Those who opposed Yiannopoulos' appearance at Berkeley used the social justice rhetoric firmly associated with the progressive wing of the modern Democratic Party.

It is well established in the framing literature that partisan sources of frames have profound impact on their effectiveness, as people are more likely to follow frames attributed to the parties with which they identify (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). What happens, though, when frames, especially strong ones, are not openly labelled as coming from a political party, but are nonetheless easily recognized as partisan?

In this paper, we argue that some frames are so closely associated with political parties that they are perceived by the public as partisan, even when not explicitly described as such. We expect that such strong but recognizably partisan frames only move the in-party supporters. The same frames should either have no effect on out-party members or even produce backlash among them. Finally, it is possible that strong value-laden frames lead to intra-party opinion polarization, as even people *within* the Democratic and Republican coalitions may exhibit different reactions to arguments associated with the parties' progressive and pro-Trump wings, respectively.

We test these conjectures in three survey-experimental studies that explore how strong and recognizably partisan frames can both shift and polarize opinions on the free speech issue in the United States. Using two value-based frames often used against the principle of free expression, social justice and patriotism, we demonstrate that such framing indeed shifts opinions in the public as a whole. At the same time, these effects are almost exclusively partisan: The social justice frame shifts opinions only among Democrats. The effect of the patriotism frame among Republicans is weaker and inconsistent across the three studies. We also find some evidence of backlash against frames associated with the out-party and polarization of opinions

within parties in response to value-laden frames. As a result, strong but politically controversial frames increase inter-party opinion polarization on the free speech issue—and even have potential to provoke intra-party polarization. Our findings have important implications for research on framing and political polarization, as well as for understanding of the free speech debate in the United States.

Framing and the Free Speech Issue

Not all frames have equal capacity to shift opinions, and the framing literature has identified two key aspects of frames' effectiveness. One is strength defined as frame's ability to activate considerations that are both available to the target audience and applicable to the issue at hand (Chong and Druckman 2007a). A particularly important class of strong frames are those that appeal to competing social values (Barker 2005), likely due to the salience and relevance of values for many political issues. The other important factor shaping frame effectiveness is their source: individuals are more likely to follow frames promoted by the party with which they identify (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). Existing studies focus on frames that are explicitly labelled as coming from parties—however, such labels may not always be necessary since values associated with parties are often known to the public, especially in polarized political environments. It is also unclear whether strong value-based frames retain their effectiveness when, in the eyes of voters, they belong to the out-party rhetorical arsenal.

Here, we propose and test an original proposition regarding the heterogeneous effects of strong frames that activate value-based reasoning. We suggest that, when frames are not explicitly labeled as partisan, but are easily recognized as such, they provoke differential reactions from in- and out-party supporters. This conjecture is rooted in two well-established results in political science literature. One concerns the value bases of partisan politics: supporters

of different parties differ across a host of essential psychological variables that include moral intuitions (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), cognitive styles (Jost et al. 2003), and personality traits (Mondak and Halperin 2008). We also build on the affective polarization literature in American politics (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018), and the phenomenon of negative partisanship in particular (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2021).

In this political environment, one can expect U.S. partisans to exhibit divergent reactions to strong value-laden frames: first, because different values unequally resonate with partisans' psychological predispositions and, second, because partisans reject even strong frames as soon as they come from the opposite camp. The consequence of these divergent reactions to frames is inter-party polarization of opinions—which is compatible with opinion shift in the electorate as a whole if this shift is driven by supporters of only one party. Moreover, as long as the levels of ideological commitment and negative partisanship vary *within* parties (Groenendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov 2020), strong value-based frames can provoke intra-party polarization in opinions, especially if they are associated with parties' extreme wings.

To test these expectations, we focus on free speech as a political issue. We have selected this issue for three reasons. First, opinions on free expression are inherently political: individuals are also more supportive of political protests when the protesters share their political affiliations (Edwards and Arnon 2021), and support for free speech often follows ideological affinity with the speaker rather than principles (Fahey, Roberts, and Utych 2022). Second, opinions on free speech and protest are subject to change under the influence of frames. For instance, a seminal study of framing effects has demonstrated how presenting a Ku Klux Klan rally as a free speech issue rather than a threat to public disorder increases tolerance for the KKK as well as endorsement of free expression principles more generally (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

Third, the free speech debate has recently been politicized even further due to several prominent controversies, such as those discussed in the paper’s introduction. Throughout this debate, Democrats and Republicans have offered distinct arguments, rooted in values endorsed by the parties’ support bases, in favor of limiting freedom of expression for the opposite side. As a result, it is possible to develop strong value-based frames that closely follow real-life public discourse on the free speech issue and, thus, are recognizably partisan. Doing so allows us to test how such frames can polarize opinions across party lines—while simultaneously shifting mean levels of support for free expression.

Research Design

We tested our expectations in three online survey-experimental studies. Respondents were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Studies 1 and 2) and Lucid (Study 3) platforms. Information about studies’ timing, recruitment platforms, sample sizes, and respondent demographics are presented in Table 1. In Studies 1 and 2 partisanship was self-reported, whereas in Study 3 partisanship data was supplied by the Lucid panel.

Table 1. The three studies

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Time	November 2017	November 2018	July 2021
Sample size	388	964	1,487
Demographics			
Median age category	25–34	35–44	35–44
Male-to-female ratio	54:46	46:54	49:51
College-educated	46.1%	53.2%	42.2%
Median income	\$40,000 - \$49,999	\$50,000 - \$59,999	\$35,000 - \$39,999
Non-Hispanic white	75.5%	80.5%	69.1%
D:I:R ratio	48:32:20	39:27:34	46:26:28

Note. D:I:R = Democrats-to-independents-to-Republicans.

In all three studies, respondents were asked about their agreement with a battery of four statements concerning free speech (see Table 2). There were three randomly assigned versions of

the battery. The first version, the control or “no frame” condition, consisted of statements that did not introduce any additional considerations. Versions two and three proposed competing frames against the principle of free expression, namely social justice and patriotism (Study 1 included only the control and the social justice frame conditions). For the analysis, the items were recoded so that greater values indicated higher degrees of support for free expression.

Table 2. Survey items on support for free speech by frame

Frames and items

Preamble (similar across conditions):

Free speech issues are often in the news these days. Below, you will see several statements that people sometimes make in the discussion about free speech. For each, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.

No frame

1. Suppression of free speech is unacceptable.
2. An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive.
3. Free speech is a basic constitutional right.
4. There are values more important than free speech.

Social justice frame

1. Suppression of free speech is unacceptable, even when motivated by desire to protect minorities.
2. An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive because it is often used against the most vulnerable groups.
3. Free speech is a basic constitutional right and it cannot be restricted by references to “hate speech,” which is not a legally defined concept.
4. There are values more important than free speech, such as diversity and social equality.

Patriotism frame

1. Suppression of free speech is unacceptable, even when motivated by desire to protect the U.S. flag and the national anthem.
2. An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive because it is often used to promote divisions within American society.
3. Free speech is a basic constitutional right and it cannot be restricted by references to “respect for the country,” which is not a legally defined concept.
4. There are values more important than free speech, such as patriotism and national unity.

Note. Item order randomized in the survey. Responses given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree.”

Results

First, we document the effects of framing on support for free speech across the three studies (see Figure 1). We estimate these effects in the full samples as well as separately for Democrats and Republicans (including leaners). The social justice frame significantly decreases mean support for free speech in all three studies when compared with the control condition. In line with our expectations, the negative effect of the social justice frame on free speech support in all three studies is produced almost exclusively by Democrats. The social justice frame slightly increases support for free speech among Republicans, but not significantly so in Study 1 and Study 2. In Study 3, the effect among Republicans is negative but not significant.

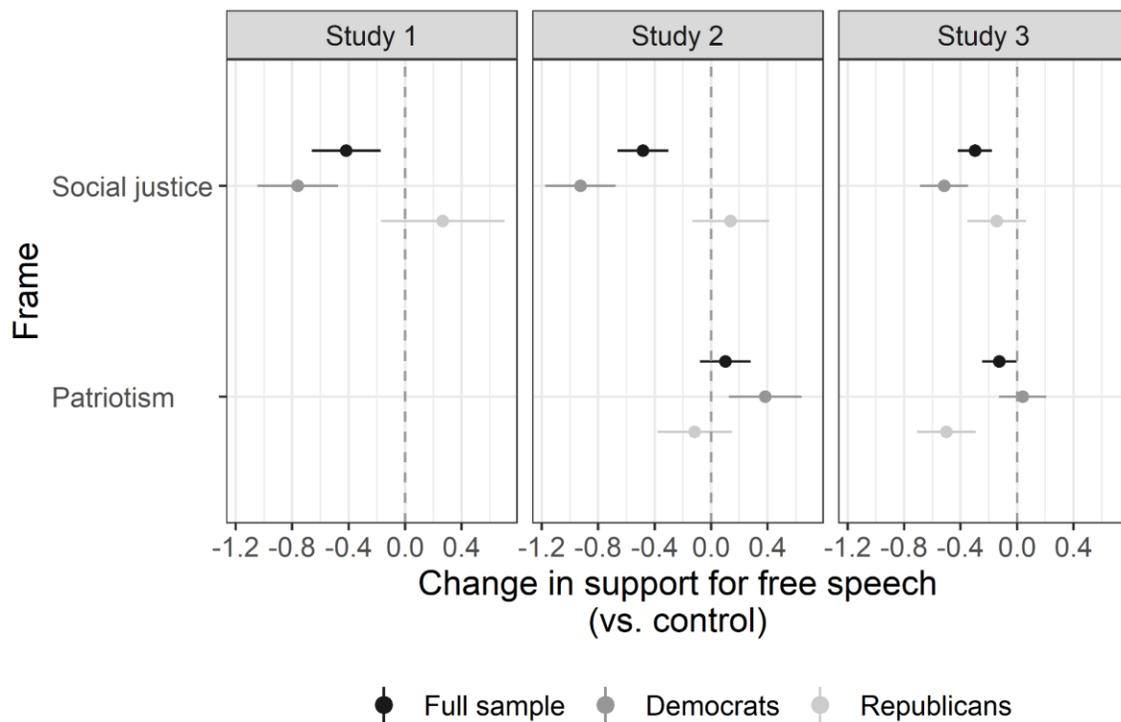


Figure 1. Estimated effects of the two frames on support for free speech across the three studies
Note. Study 1 did not include the patriotism frame.

Overall, whenever the patriotism frame does have effects, it works by moving opinions of Republicans, whereas Democrats are either not moved or demonstrate backlash against this

frame. The patriotism frame does not have a significant average effect on support for free speech in Study 2. In Study 3, the patriotism frame moves opinions in the expected direction by significantly decreasing support for the principle of free expression in the full sample. At the same time, we find differences between partisans in terms of reactions to the patriotism frame. In Study 2, support for free speech among Democrats is significantly boosted under the patriotism frame. This effect in Study 3 has the same direction—but it's very small and not significant. The backlash among Democrats is likely provoked by the association of the patriotism frame with the Republican Party and Donald Trump, in particular. The effect of the patriotism frame for Republicans is not statistically significant and almost zero in magnitude in Study 2. In Study 3, we find a strong and significant negative effect of the patriotism frame among Republicans—that is equal to the effect of the social justice frame among Democrats in the same study.

An immediate consequence of divergent reactions to ideological frames among supporters of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party is inter-party polarization on the free speech issue. If the frames move Democrats' and Republicans' opinions in different directions, or even in the same direction but with different magnitudes, distance between the two party's mean opinions should grow. Figure 2 documents these inter-party polarization effects by showing significantly increased absolute differences in support for free speech between average Democrat and average Republican in all three studies, whenever either social justice or patriotism frame is introduced.

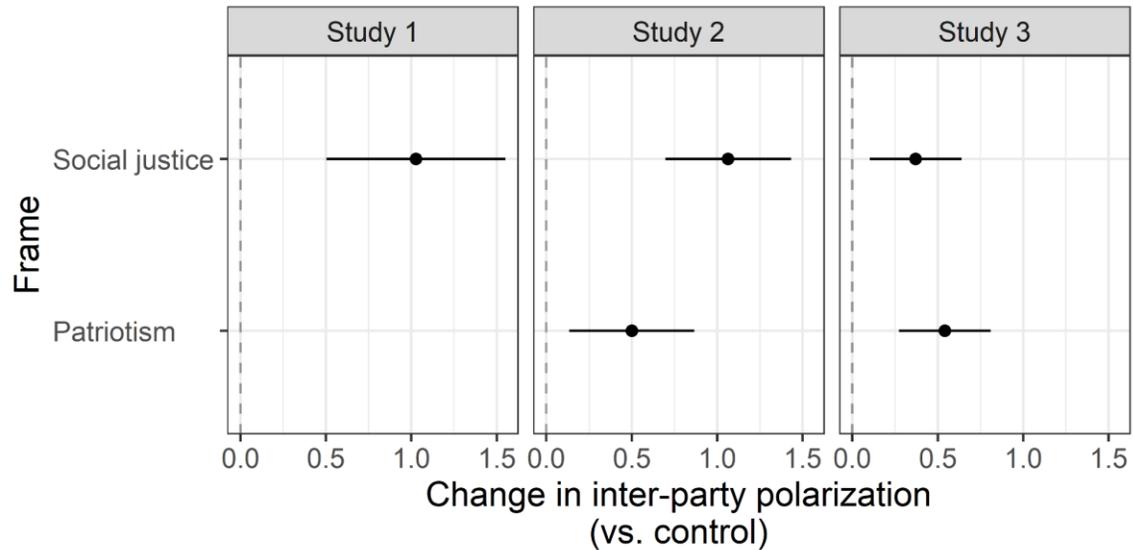


Figure 2. Estimated effects of the two frames on inter-party polarization over support for free speech across the three studies
Note. Study 1 did not include the patriotism frame.

Framing also has some effects on polarization of respondents' opinions about free speech *within* parties, measured using the standard deviation statistic. Estimated standard deviations by condition in all three studies are presented in Table 3, accompanied by Levene's tests for variance equality. Introduction of counter-frames almost uniformly increases intra-party dispersion of opinions on the free speech issue, with Republicans under the patriotism condition in Study 3 being the only exception. In three out of six cases (two parties across three studies), these differences in standard deviation are significant according to Levene's tests. In the case of Republicans in Study 1, the difference in variances is likely not significant only because of a small sample size. Overall, we find some evidence that the introduction of strong frames into the free speech debate may lead to opinion polarization *within* the partisan coalitions, in addition to polarization *between* parties.

Table 3. Intra-party polarization by framing condition across three studies

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Democrats			
Standard deviation			
Control	0.97	0.91	0.82
Social justice	1.28	1.24	0.94
Patriotism		1.19	0.94
Levene's test	5.32*	6.38**	1.33
	(1, 232)	(2, 437)	(2, 720)
Republicans			
Standard deviation			
Control	1.02	0.84	1.00
Social justice	1.14	1.29	1.09
Patriotism		1.21	0.98
Levene's test	3.04	16.25***	1.80
	(1, 98)	(2, 394)	(2, 485)

Note. Study 1 did not include the patriotism frame. Tests' degrees of freedom in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

As a manipulation check, we estimate how much time respondents spend to answer the question battery about free speech in Study 2 and Study 3 (see Figure 3). Results show that, in both studies, under the social justice frame and the patriotism frame respondents spend significantly more time to make up their minds than in the control condition. These effects suggest that introduction of alternative frames increases effortful thinking. Respondents have to spend more time as they weigh the principles evoked in the survey statements against each other.

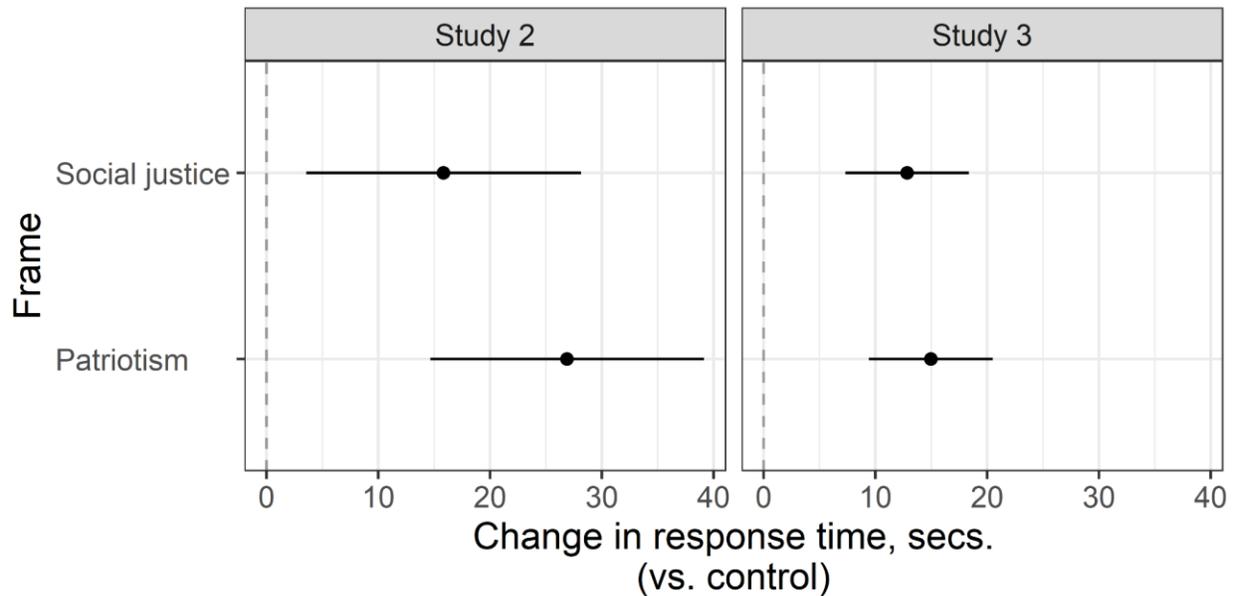


Figure 3. Estimated effects of the two frames on response times in Study 1 and Study 2
Note. Response times were not recorded in Study 1.

Conclusion

We have started this paper by proposing that many strong value-based issue frames are readily recognized by the public as partisan, even when they are not labeled as such. We expect that such frames provoke divergent responses among partisans and, as a result, polarize issue opinions across party lines. This should be the case even when, at the aggregate level, framing produces significant opinion shifts in the public as a whole.

To test this conjecture, we have carried out three original survey experiments focusing on free speech as a political issue. We have found that the two value frames against the principle of free expression, social justice and patriotism, shift opinions within the public in the expected direction. Disaggregating the results by partisanship, though, has shown that Democrats are responsive to the social justice framing, while results for Republicans and the patriotism frame are mixed. Partisans' divergent reactions to frames lead to inter-party opinion polarization on the

free speech issue in both social justice and patriotism conditions in all three studies. We also find some evidence that these frames can polarize opinions on free speech *within* parties.

These findings have important implications for the interplay between framing and political polarization. Previous research has demonstrated that, in polarized political environments, citizens are more likely to rely on partisan frames in their evaluations of political issues (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). We show that value-laden frames, like emotional ones (Clifford 2019), can polarize mass opinions even further—thus potentially creating a cycle of elite and mass polarization. When the goal is mobilization rather than persuasion, political elites can frame political issues in terms of values that their support bases are likely to rally around, but members of the opposite coalition may outright reject. Such dynamics of political communication aggravates political divisions through exposure to the opposite camp’s rhetoric, radicalizing both sides of the partisan conflict.

Future research can build upon and develop our findings in two important respects. First, we test the polarizing effects of frames using only one political issue in a single country. We expect that our findings generalize beyond debates over free expression in the United States, but estimating similar effects for other issues in other political contexts can be a promising direction for future research. Second, we are unable to definitely attribute the differences in reaction to value-based frames across party lines. They could be produced by partisan differences in endorsement of implicated values or simply through rejection of frames associated with the out-party. Future studies can adjudicate between these two explanations by incorporating better measures of value predispositions and partisan identity.

Overall, our results demonstrate how the uneven effects of strong value-laden frames in the already polarized American public can exacerbate polarization. Frames that invoke strong

value-based reasoning in political debates may not have the desired effect when the implicated values are perceived as partisan. Importantly, framing effects and value reasoning are not inherently polarizing, but finding and employing issue frames emphasizing social values that unify rather than divide the public is increasingly difficult in modern U.S. politics. We find that this is true even for political issues that have once been considered the consensus points in the American public, such as freedom of expression.

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