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Abstract
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FRAMING PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF GAY CIVIL UNIONS

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Abstract Although the framing of public opinion has often been conceptualized as a collective and social process, experimental studies of framing have typically examined only individual, psychological responses to alternative message frames. In this research we employ for the first time group conversations as the unit of analysis (following Gamson 1992) in an experimental study of framing effects. Two hundred and thirty-five American citizens in 50 groups (17 homogeneously conservative groups, 15 homogeneously liberal groups, and 18 heterogeneous groups) discussed whether or not gay and lesbian partnerships should be legally recognized. Groups were randomly assigned to one of two framing conditions (a "homosexual marriage/special rights" frame or a "civil union/equal rights" frame). Results indicated framing effects that were, in all cases, contingent on the ideological leanings of the group. The "marriage" frame tended to polarize group discussions along ideological lines. Both liberal and conservative groups appeared to find their opponents' frame more provocative, responding to them with a larger number of statements and expressing greater ambivalence than when reacting to more hospitable frames.

Political conversation is a central feature of democratic life (Barber 1984; Dewey 1927; Tarde [1899] 1989). In talking through their ideas, people are able to sort out various considerations and to learn, in the process, what they think about shared concerns (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Kuhn 1991).

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Widespread information diffusion and citizen discussion gives rise to public opinion, "which, when organized, is democracy" (Cooley 1909, p. 85).

Numerous analysts have drawn attention to the ways that citizen discussion unfolds in a complex relationship with news media discourse (see, for example, Bryce's [1888] recounting of the phases of opinion formation). It is not necessarily the case that the news media entirely dictate public opinion—the whole notion of democracy rests on the view that the public sphere is at least semi-sovereign in its operation—but the news media are credited with triggering and widening political discussion among citizens (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999). The news media also shape the terms of debate, largely establishing the "universe of discourse" for citizen discussion (Blumer 1946, p. 191). As Tarde ([1899] 1989, p. 82) put it early on, "even those who fail [to read the newspaper] are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts" (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999, p. 380).

This idea—that the news media establish the terms of public debate—has become widely accepted and studied in the form of framing research. A frame is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, p. 143). Framing of public opinion has been conceptualized as a collective and social process in which meanings are constructed actively through public debate, and in which ordinary citizens make use of media discourse, personal experience, and "folk wisdom" in negotiating meaning (Gamson 1988). Despite this social constructionist model, experimental studies of framing have typically examined only individual, psychological responses to alternative message frames (see Scheufele 1999 for a recent review). In this study we employ for the first time group conversations as the unit of analysis in an experimental study of framing effects. Like other experimental studies of framing, we observe differences in public response to alternate issue frames—in this case either a "traditional morality" or an "equality" frame as it applies to the question of whether gay or lesbian partnerships should be legally recognized. Unlike other studies, however, and in keeping with Gamson and Modigliani's (1987) methodological recommendations, we observe not isolated individual responses but rather group-level, discursive reactions to each frame.

Framing Research: A Bifurcated Endeavor

The idea of framing has been widely applied in political communication and is subject to varying definitions (Price and Tewksbury 1997), but its origins can be traced to a general perspective we may term "social constructivism" (Scheufele 1999). In the constructionist model, media audiences are viewed as active in interpreting and discussing public events, but they rely on the mass media to provide common frames of reference that guide interpretation and discussion. Closely aligned with the concept of a schema, a frame is a package

of associated ideas that helps to guide attention, comprehension, storage, and retrieval of information. Frames evolve out of collective efforts to make sense of problems, and they help people "locate, perceive, identify, and label" their experience (Goffman 1974, p. 21). In the political world, multiple frames emerge naturally in the course of public debate. People on different sides of an issue understand it differently, focus on different aspects of the problem, and actively promote their perspective in arguing for favored courses of action. A major proponent of the constructionist approach to framing has been Gamson (1988, 1992), who contends that citizens actively use their own experience and interpersonal discussion, not just media frames, to negotiate socially the meaning of political issues.

Several reviews of framing research (e.g., Entman 1993; Pan and Kosicki 1993; Scheufele, 1999) note that it has followed a bifurcated path. One line of research emphasizes a *sociological* conception of framing, applying it to the production of news discourse and conversations among focus-group participants. This research sets about the task of examining various media frames as they are applied to particular issues (e.g., Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989; Gitlin 1980; Pan and Kosicki 1993; Tuchman 1978). A second line of study emphasizes a *psychological* conception of framing and focuses on individual patterns of information processing and opinion formation. This type of research tends to be experimental in nature, focusing on some particular aspect of news coverage (for instance, the adoption of a "human interest" frame or a "strategy" frame in reporting the news) and tracing the influence of alternatively framed news stories on individual cognitions and attitudes (e.g., Brewer 2002; Cappella and Jamieson 1996, 1997; Druckman 2001; Iyengar 1987, 1991; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997.) Experiments have commonly manipulated frames through experimentally prepared news stories or through survey questions worded to highlight certain issue frames (e.g., Jacoby 2000; Kinder and Sanders 1990). In either case, the manipulations are found to bias subjects' information processing, often resulting in consequential differences in issue judgments and opinions.

There is, then, a disjuncture in the study of framing processes. Sociological work, hewing rather closely to the constructionist model, views frames as emerging from a series of social and cooperative practices. In contrast, psychologically oriented studies of framing examine only isolated, cognitive responses to media messages. Although the experimental literature commonly cites Gamson's work and borrows his definitions, it fails to take seriously his contention that citizens actively use experiential and interpersonal resources to negotiate the meaning of issues. Experiments typically allow only for the most limited forms of socially negotiated meaning—equating it essentially with individual variations in message comprehension. Indeed, the experimental research often implicitly construes audience members as passively subject to invidious influence, in the form of having their decisions unknowingly

"framed" by alternative experimental messages (only one of which they typically encounter in a given study). A few studies have begun to explore the limits of framing effects, focusing on the ways people can spontaneously activate considerations outside of a frame imposed by reporting (Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997), or make use of source credibility judgments to reject frames (Druckman 2001). Some studies have examined responses to mixed-message sets, including opposing frames (Brewer 2002; Druckman and Nelson 2002). But the unit of analysis invariably remains the individual, and the process of interest remains a cognitive response to a frame manipulation rather than the social construction of meaning. No experiments to date have explored how citizens construct frames in interaction with one another, for example, in group discussions (as advocated by Gamson 1988, 1992).[1]

A Constructionist Methodology

Perhaps the fullest explication of the constructionist model of framing processes remains that of Gamson (1988, 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989). In this model, "media discourse and public opinion are treated as two parallel systems of constructing meaning" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, p. 1). Thus, what is commonly referred to as "public discourse" over any issue has two aspects: (1) an array of interpretive packages of metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, and moral appeals presented by the media in its coverage; and (2) meanings negotiated by citizens as they interact with the press and engage with their fellow citizens. Together, these make up the "issue culture" surrounding matters of public debate. The process is seen as a "symbolic contest" over competing interpretive packages, one played out both in media discourse and citizen discourse (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, p. 2). Audiences are dependent on media discourse for many of their understandings; but they use it actively—assisted by their own experience, common wisdom, and other resources in their "tool kits"—to construct meaning. Frames enjoy success or failure depending on resonances with popular thinking, active elite sponsorship, and media practices that might favor some frames over others. Frames develop in a dialectic fashion, as contesting parties articulate counter-frames to meet their opponents' preferred interpretations. Some of these find fertile ground in public discussion and thinking, while others do not. Public discourse is thus a "set of discourses that interact in complex ways" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, p. 2).

1. Druckman and Nelson (2003) report a framing study in which subjects were exposed to either unilateral or competing frames on campaign finance reform and were then surveyed after having been engaged (or not) in discussing the issue in small groups. However, the study does not examine the group discussions per se; rather, it deploys the customary analysis of individual, attitudinal responses to the framing manipulation, focusing on whether discussion prior to answering survey questions moderates the impact of the message frames.

What sort of research methods does the constructionist model suggest? To study media discourse, Gamson and Modigliani trace the "careers" of various frames through analysis of news, political cartoons, elite pronouncements, and the like (e.g., Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989). For analysis of public opinion, they find conventional survey-questionnaire methods to be problematic. Questionnaire responses "obscure ambivalence and disguise the presence of schemata that produce no clear-cut position"; they also blur the distinction between those without any working schema and those "with schemata that do not fit comfortably in a pro or anti category" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, pp. 35–36). Depth interviewing might offer some more refined sense of public reasoning (as in the work of Graber 1984 or Lane 1962), but even these techniques do not capture the process of negotiation itself. Gamson thus advocates focus-group methodologies, which stand to make "underlying schemata visible in some fashion" by allowing "a glimpse of the thinking process involved" (1992, p. 20). In his research into collective action and political mobilization, for example, Gamson (1992) not only examined media discourse over a series of issues, but also studied 36 "peer group conversations," each involving roughly five participants who discussed the issues in an informal group setting. Although Gamson used political cartoons and other materials to help stimulate conversations, he did not conduct any experimental manipulations to examine the influence of frames on citizen discussion. Thus, causal connections between media frames and public opinion, of the sort typically examined in psychological studies and posited as central to the larger process of framing (Pan and Kosicki 1993) remained outside the scope of inquiry.

The present study, the first of its kind, is a randomized framing experiment using interacting groups as our units of analysis. As in other experimental studies of framing, our participants were asked to consider an issue—whether or not gay and lesbian partnerships should be legally recognized—after receiving one of two randomly assigned framing manipulations. On the other hand, following Gamson and Modigliani's "constructionist" methodology, we observe not isolated individual responses to the frames but instead group-level, discursive reactions. As in Gamson's (1992) research, our groups averaged about five participants each (fewer than in conventional focus groups), and the discussions were only lightly moderated. Whereas Gamson drew from a purposive sample of local "working-class" people to form his 36 groups, we instead drew from a probability sample of the U.S. population to form 50 groups that interacted online. Because evidence suggests that much political conversation occurs among like-minded people, we formed three types of groups: homogeneously *conservative* groups, homogeneously *liberal* groups, and *heterogeneous* groups with participants from across the political spectrum. This feature of the design permitted us to examine the extent to which our issue-frames—which had decidedly conservative and liberal overtones—resonated differently among groups of varying political leanings.

Framing Gay Civil Unions

Issues surrounding gay rights have been controversial for several decades and have received increasing attention in the U.S. media. During the 2000 presidential election campaign, when this study was undertaken, the question of whether gay and lesbian partnerships should be accorded the same legal status as heterosexual marriages received rather extensive coverage. Vermont, which had passed a law permitting such civil unions, became the site of heated controversy as an anti–civil union movement (dubbed "Take Back Vermont") gained force in the fall and moved to center stage in the state's gubernatorial campaign. Eventually, the issue found its way onto the national agenda and was addressed by both candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush in the presidential debates. Following Bush's election to the presidency, controversies over gay civil unions continued, with the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling in 2003 that same-sex couples were legally entitled to marriage rights under that state's constitution. The U.S. Congress began debating a constitutional ban on gay marriage, an action that President Bush indicated he supported.

As with many gay rights issues, media discourse over the legal standing of gay partnerships has been framed largely in terms of two core values: morality and equality (Brewer, 2002, 2003; Bull and Gallagher 2001; Rimmerman, Wald, and Wilcox 2000). Concerns over "equal rights" are commonly invoked by gay activists. Although they would like to obtain full marital status for same-sex partnerships, popular objections to treating such partnerships as marriages (which have religious as well as legal standing) have led many to advocate instead for "civil unions," which are viewed as more feasible politically.[2] By contrast, foes frame the matter in terms of traditional moral values, highlighting the threat such unions would pose to the long-standing social and religious institutions of marriage and family. Both frames were prominent in news coverage during the presidential campaign in the fall of 2000. A review of the LexisNexis news database indicates that, in the two months leading up to the November election, "homosexual marriage," the phrase most closely associated with the morality frame, was invoked considerably more often (with 29 occurrences) than the "gay civil unions" phrase more commonly adopted at the time by supporters (with 18 occurrences). Eight news articles made use of both phrases.[3]

The dialectical nature of symbolic contest is readily evident in the discourse over gay civil unions. While opponents of gay rights emphasize morals and family values, supporters counter that "hatred is not a family value"

2. Surveys do generally find somewhat more public support for same-sex "civil unions" than for "marriages" (e.g., Gallup Poll 2004; Pew Research Center 2003; Public Agenda 2005).

3. The search terms "gay civil unions" and "homosexual marriage" were used in a full-text search of the LexisNexis General News/Major Papers database (which contains major national and regional American newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Seattle Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *USA Today*). The search was limited to articles appearing from September 1 to November 7, 2000.

(Brewer 2002, p. 306). And in response to calls for equality for gay couples, social conservatives often cast their position as one that favors "equal rights, not special rights," suggesting that gay rights advocates seek special treatment not granted to unmarried heterosexual couples (e.g., see Bull and Gallagher 2001, chap. 4).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

How do these alternatives—the "civil union/equal rights" frame and the "homosexual marriage/special rights" frame—shape the ways citizens think and talk about the issue? Although there are clear pro/con orientations implicit in both frames, with the former lending support and the latter opposition, we would do well to note that a "frame typically implies a range of positions, rather than any single one, allowing for a degree of controversy among those who share a common frame" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, p. 3). Brewer (2002), for instance, found from an analysis of open-ended survey questions that respondents invoked both morality *and* equality concerns when asked about gay rights, even after exposure to news stories intended to frame their responses one way or the other. Thus, we would not expect uniform positive or negative responses to the proposition that gay partnerships should be given legal standing based solely on the adoption of one or the other frame; instead, we would expect to find general tendencies of groups to argue, predominantly pro or con, in keeping with the general frame. We hypothesize that:

> H1: Groups responding to the proposition framed in terms of "homosexual marriage" and "special rights" will generate discourses that show more opposition, in their opinionated statements and arguments, than those generated when the proposition is framed in terms of gay "civil unions" and "equal rights."

> H2: Group discourses will not be uniform in adopting a given frame. Even when a given frame has been privileged by manipulation, alternative frames will nevertheless be invoked.

These two basic propositions need to be elaborated, however, in view of the variable degrees of resonance each frame will enjoy with different citizens. As Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue, frames work psychologically by interacting with citizens' existing knowledge stores. Framing is a knowledge-activation effect, which operates through construct applicability (Higgins 1996). Instead of imparting new information, a frame directs attention to certain aspects of an issue, heightening the likelihood that citizens will render those salient beliefs and considerations that are applicable to the issue at hand and thus indirectly shape judgments. Psychological framing effects are theoretically amplified by the automatic *spreading activation* of memory from one construct to another with which it is semantically related (for example, activation of "special rights" may heighten the odds that ideas such as "inequity,"

"privilege," or "affirmative action" will also be stimulated). In the group context, the relevant knowledge store is a collective fund of ideas held by assembled group members—what psychologists have termed a "transactive memory system" (Hollingshead 1998; Wegner 1995)—and the spreading activation of constructs across the group takes place not only psychologically but also interpersonally, through discussion (see also recent research in organizational behavior on "shared cognition" and "team mental models"—e.g., Cannon-Bowers and Salas 2001; Mohammed and Dumville 2001). The ideological makeup of the groups should profoundly affect the availability of constructs in the transactive memory system, such that conservative groups will tend toward more negatively loaded constructs, while liberal groups possess shared ideas that, if not positively valenced, will at least be less negatively inclined toward gay civil unions. Naturally, then, we would expect the ideological makeup of the group to shape powerfully the nature of the opinions and arguments voiced in discussion. Furthermore, alternative frames should interact with these existing, shared mental models, such that homogeneously conservative groups will be particularly responsive to the "homosexual marriage" and "special rights" frame, while homogeneously liberal groups will be particularly responsive to the "civil unions" and "equal rights" frame.

Specifically, we expect the following as a function of the ideological makeup of the groups:

> H3: Homogeneously conservative groups will generate discourses that show more opposition, in their opinionated statements and arguments, than those generated by homogeneously liberal groups. Heterogeneous groups will generate the most balanced discussions.

> H4: Issue frames and ideological group composition will interact. Homogeneously conservative groups will be particularly responsive to the "homosexual marriage" and "special rights" frame, showing the largest negative effects of that frame on opinionated statements and arguments, while homogeneously liberal groups will be particularly responsive to the "civil unions" and "equal rights" frame, showing the largest positive effects of that frame on opinionated statements and arguments.

Method

Data come from the Electronic Dialogue project, a yearlong panel project conducted during the 2000 U.S. presidential election. The project involved a multiwave, multigroup panel design, lasting roughly one year. All data gathering was conducted over the World Wide Web. The core of the project consisted of 60 groups of citizens who engaged in a series of monthly, real-time electronic discussions about issues facing the country and the unfolding presidential campaign.

PARTICIPANTS

The project did not rely on a convenience sample of Internet users, as is common in Web-based studies. Respondents instead came from a sample of American citizens aged 18 and older, drawn from a nationally representative panel of survey respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks, Inc. of Menlo Park, California. The Knowledge Networks panel includes a large number of households (in the tens of thousands) that have been selected through random digit dialing (RDD) and have agreed to accept free WebTV equipment and service in exchange for completing periodic surveys online. Details of the sampling and the overall design of the Electronic Dialogue project are presented in appendix A. Briefly, the project invited a random subset of respondents (N = 915) to attend eight online group deliberations, roughly once a month, beginning in April and continuing through December. Participants were assigned to one of 60 online discussion groups for the entire project (in other words, the participants did not switch groups throughout the project), and the monthly discussions focused on issues relevant to the campaign. Topics included which issues respondents thought were of importance to the country; which ought to be the focus of attention in the campaign; specific issues and policy proposals (in areas of education, crime and public safety, taxes, and foreign affairs); characteristics of the candidates; campaign advertising; and the role of the media. Participants were identified in the discussions by their first names and last initials. They were not notified in advance about the specific topics scheduled for discussion each month, and they did not interact outside of the online group meetings.

The present analysis focuses only on the seventh round of online discussions, held from October 30 through November 5, 2000, days before the election. Participants in these November discussions debated, in addition to other matters, whether partnerships of same-sex couples should be legally recognized. Debates over this particular issue ran roughly 10–11 minutes, following a prompt issued by the online moderators.

Twenty-nine percent of eligible participants attended the November discussions, in groups averaging five participants apiece.[4] Due to technical problems—server connection timeouts during the log-in procedures—six groups scheduled on the same day were not able to conduct any conversations as planned, and four groups ended up with only one person in attendance. This left a total of 50 group discussions, involving 235 total participants, for the analysis.

The analyzed sample is certainly much more diverse and broadly representative of the adult American population than many typical experimental samples (e.g., of college undergraduates or local-area adults). Still, because the analyzed sample represents only a small subset of project participants, all

4. Generally, 30 to 40 percent of eligible participants attended most discussion events over the course of the project. Just over 70 percent attended at least one online event, while about 40 percent attended four or more events (see appendix A).

of whom were engaged in a large and demanding multiwave study, concerns about the representative character of the sample naturally arise. Analyses indicate that the small experimental sample remains fairly representative of the full Electronic Dialogue sample, which matches a comparison RDD sample reasonably well (see appendix A for details). The full project sample tends to slightly overrepresent males and to underrepresent those with less than a high school education, nonwhites, and those with low interest in politics. Due to selective attendance and panel attrition, the smaller experimental sample is in turn somewhat older, with a higher proportion of males and more politically interested participants than the full sample. On the other hand, there appears to be no selection bias in the distribution of opinions on recognition of same-sex partnerships or general attitudes toward gays and lesbians in the experimental sample. (See the appendix table for descriptive data; appendix B presents the wording of survey questions).

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

The study employed a 2 × 3 experimental design. One factor—the *frame* condition—employed two levels corresponding to each of two alternate scripts ("civil union" frame and "homosexual marriage" frame) that were randomly assigned to half of the 50 groups. The second factor—the *group type* condition—had three levels corresponding to liberal, conservative, or heterogeneous groups, respectively.

Group Type Manipulation. At the outset of the project, all those who agreed to participate in Electronic Dialogue discussions were assigned to one of three types of groups: One-third were assigned to homogeneously liberal groups composed of self-identified liberals and Democratic Party identifiers; one-third to homogeneously conservative groups made up of self-identified conservatives and Republican Party identifiers; and one-third to politically heterogeneous groups constituted of members drawn from across the entire political spectrum (see details in appendix A). With the loss of 10 groups owing to technical server problems and reduced attendance, the present study included 17 conservative groups, 18 heterogeneous groups, and 15 liberal groups. Manipulation checks showed clear differences, as planned, in the direction and variance in political leanings across the three group types. A combined party-ideology index, ranging from –5 = strongly conservative to + 5 = strongly liberal, shows highly significant differences in group composition ($F_{2, 235} = 151.93$, $p < .001$; conservative $M = –3.25$, SD = 1.55; heterogeneous $M = –.42$, SD = 3.13; and liberal $M = 2.72$, SD = 1.60; appendix B presents the wording of survey questions).

Discussion Frame Manipulation. Independent of group composition, each of the 50 discussion groups was randomly assigned to one of two script versions, which varied in the nature of the prompts that moderators entered into the "discussion space" to start the conversation on the issue (at roughly

20 minutes into the discussion). In the *civil unions* version of the discussion script, administered to 24 groups, the moderator's comments were as follows:

> Another social issue that has come up in several of the debates has been the issue of civil unions for gay couples. Some believe that people who are gay or lesbian should be able to have their partnerships recognized legally, while others think that recognizing these unions undermines an important institution in our society. What do you think about this issue?
>
> [approximately 5 minutes later] Some have characterized recognizing civil unions of this kind as a matter of extending equal rights. Do you think of this issue as a matter of equal rights?

An alternate *homosexual marriage* version of the discussion, administered to the remaining 26 discussion groups, used the following moderator comments:

> Another social issue that has come up in several of the debates has been the issue of marriage for homosexuals. Some believe that homosexuals should be able to have their marriages recognized legally, while others think that recognizing homosexual marriage undermines an important institution in our society. What do you think about this issue?
>
> [approximately 5 minutes later] Some have characterized recognizing homosexual marriages as a matter of granting special rights. Do you think of this issue as a matter of special rights?

The two prompts were designed not in an attempt to offer strictly parallel alternatives, but instead to highlight the preferred public rhetoric, at the time, of supporters and opponents. Still, both prompts follow a customary balanced question format ("Some believe . . . while others think . . ."), and both offer respondents a mix of considerations. "Gay" is the label choice for liberals, while "homosexual" has conservative overtones; however, conservatives might find civil unions less objectionable than marriage, while gay activists would actually prefer marriage to the weaker status of a civil union, a concept advocated principally in view of its political viability.

Manipulation checks indicated that the randomization to experimental framing condition was successful. For example, there were no significant differences between the two frame conditions in group size (t = .855, n.s.), political leanings (t = –.453, n.s.), or the number of times participants had attended previous events (five times on average, t = 1.089, n.s.).

MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

In the discussions of gay civil unions, close to 1,000 statements were entered into the online debate. The full text of all online discussions was recorded and subsequently examined through both a content analysis and a qualitative assessment. In general, "talking" within the groups was distributed fairly

evenly among participants. On average, group members contributed over three statements each, and in over three-quarters of the groups, every member contributed to the discussion.

Qualitative Assessments. The group discussions were reviewed with an eye toward identifying themes that reflected morality, religious authority, family values, and concern about "right and wrong" (all reflective of a *morality* frame and presumably resonant with the "homosexual marriage/special rights" prompt). Similarly, the discussions were evaluated for references to equality, access to health and tax benefits, fairness, and tolerance (reflective of an *equality* frame and presumably resonant with the "civil unions/equal rights" prompt).

Quantitative Assessments. The content analysis gathered measures of (1) the number of *valenced statements* each participant made about civil unions (that is, statements that were positive or negative in valence, but that did not give any reasons for these feelings); (2) the number of *arguments* each participant made about the civil unions (that is, statements that gave some form of reason for a pro or con evaluation of the societal advantages or disadvantages of gay marriage). Thus, an *argument* expressed both directionality (pro/con) and provided a reason, while a *valenced statement* expressed only directionality. The coding system was not intended to capture the potential truth-value of an argument, nor its complexity; it merely took account of whether some kind of reason was advanced.

Reliability of the coding was assessed using two independent coders on random subsamples of 200 statements at a time. Inconsistencies between coders were resolved by discussing the examples with the principal investigators and applying additional decision rules to the original coding scheme. For the final coding system, Cohen's kappa values for chance-corrected intercoder agreement were generally close to .80, with assessments of directionality proving slightly more reliable (κ values = .86) than assessments of argumentation (κ values between .74 and .76).

Valenced Statements. Statements that reflected a favorable disposition toward gay civil unions (and metonymically gays or homosexuals in general) were coded as a +1, whereas a statement that reflected any unfavorable disposition was coded –1. Statements that offered *both* a positive and a negative expression (e.g., "I like the idea of civil unions, but I'm worried about their effects") were coded as 0 (mixed or ambivalent). We constructed several measures of valenced statements, which were aggregated across each individual, to reflect their rate of expressing valenced utterances. One such measure was a simple count of the number of valenced statements each person made. Forty percent of participants made between three and four such statements. Only 16 of the 235 who attended (6.8 percent) did not express an opinion on the issue at all (M = 3.64, SD = 2.21). Another measure was a sum of all positively and negatively valenced statements, reflecting the overall direction of expressed individual support or opposition (range –8 to +5; M = –.93, SD = 2.38). These

individual-level measures were next aggregated to the group level, yielding several different variables: counts of the number of positive, negative, and mixed valence statements, respectively, as well as an averaged measure of the group's valence (with negative values representing unfavorability toward gays or civil unions and positive values representing favorability).

Arguments. Close to half (44 percent) of all statements contained pro or con arguments. Coded arguments were again aggregated across each individual, yielding two variables: number of arguments supporting gay civil unions and number of opposing arguments, each of which ranged from 0 to 6. About 30 percent of participants voiced one or two pro arguments, and about 40 percent of participants voiced one or two con arguments. These individual-level measures were next aggregated across individuals within the 50 groups, yielding two separate group-level variables: sum of pro arguments and sum of con arguments.

Results

GENERAL PATTERNS OF GROUP TALK

Despite tremendous thematic variety evident in the discussion transcripts, qualitative assessments revealed several general patterns. These included (1) widespread invocation of both religious and moral considerations; (2) less prevalent, but consistent, citation of the need for equality before the law; (3) use of several common catchphrases and metaphors; (4) appeals grounded in personal experience; and (5) explicit recognition of alternative frames. Here we provide just a few examples from the transcripts of ways that participants talked about and justified their views concerning civil unions for gay couples. Actual names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality, and typing errors have been lightly edited to assist readability. Otherwise, participants' comments are presented as recorded, including time stamps to indicate when each statement was posted in the discussion space.

Moral and Religious Themes. A large share of the citizens' discussions underscored the moral dimensions of traditional family values, and people commonly invoked the Bible and mentioned God. Many discussions—concentrated most clearly in conservative groups, but present as well in heterogeneous and liberal groups—expressed views that gay civil unions are sinful and morally wrong; that they undermine societal standards as well as biblical standards; and that they are unnatural (in contrast with marriages between husbands and wives). For example, one conservative group (#49, which received the "homosexual marriage" frame), responded as follows:

> [18:30] <Meghan> I think homosexuals are sick.
>
> [18:32] <Dave> I know I'm politically incorrect but the Bible speaks out against homosexual activity and I do think it goes against society standards.

[18:32] <Sam> I think it is a sin, only confusion can come from it.

[18:33] <Dave> Plus, if homosexuals are allowed to marry will they be required to pay the marriage penalty tax?

[18:33] <Beth > I think it's difficult. I have no problem with homosexuals, I'm very much on the fence as to whether it's right or wrong.

[18:34] <Frances >The Bible reads plainly that man and man, woman and woman cannot marry.

Although Beth voiced a mixed opinion on the matter, this group otherwise expressed unanimous objection to legalizing gay civil unions. Biblical prohibitions of homosexuality were cited (by Dave and Frances); it was termed both sinful (by Sam) and equated with disease (by Meghan). This sort of language was drawn upon repeatedly, with the words "God," "Bible," "wrong," and "moral" occurring with considerable frequency in the discussion transcripts (24, 21, 29, and 23 times respectively). Sometimes coupled with religious and moral concerns were comments having to do with the unnatural character of same-sex relationships. Later in this same discussion (at 18:37), for instance, Dave asserted that "homosexuals can't bond for and [an] extended period as can husband and wife." Many others argued that homosexual partnerships should not be placed on an equal footing with married couples because the former could not reproduce.

Although the vast majority of those adopting the morality frame used it to oppose civil unions, a small number of participants employed it in support. For example, LuAnn (talking in a liberal group, #14, which received the "civil union" frame) argued:

[21:36] <LuAnn> Love is Love. A gay couple can have the same problems as a hetero couple. A gay couple can stay together or split just like a hetero couple, the only person they'll have to answer to is GOD in the end.

The morality frame tended to appear in citizen dialogue regardless of which version of the initial prompt was used. Consider, for example, the response of one heterogeneous group (#27) to the "civil union" version:

[23:33] <Jason> Just remember Sodom and Gomorrah.

[23:33] <William> Marriage no. Domestic partnership, I suppose. But marriage is by definition between a man and a woman. It is both secular and religious. You can not change the definition of what it is anymore than redefining white as black.

[23:34] <Jason> That's true William.

[23:34] <Mary> I agree with William.

[23:34] <Alex> To me, personally, this is one of the knottiest problems in society today. I, too, think of the "laws of nature" but I recognize gays have talents and rights. I do not, however, believe in "marriage."

Although the prompt made no mention of marriage per se, it becomes a major concern of this group, and also results in an immediate reference to biblical imagery (the commonly invoked destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for sins against God). Similarly, before the follow-up question dealing with "equal rights" or "special rights" was entered by the moderator into the conversations, a large number of the groups spontaneously generated one or the other, or both of these concerns.

Equality and Rights. The above conversation also illustrates, in Alex's final expression of ambivalence, the common concern over *rights*. An "equality" frame was less clearly identifiable in the discussions than the "morality" frame, but there is no question that a large number of the groups—particularly liberal groups—expressed concerns over equal treatment of conventionally married couples and those in long-term, same-sex partnerships. These comments were no less moral in tone, but they largely eschewed explicitly religious terminology, focused on equality before the law regardless of sexual preference, and cited what is viewed as arbitrariness in defining one version of the family as the norm in a society that manifests myriad variations in household structure. Take the following liberal group (#37), responding to the "homosexual marriage" version of the initial question:

> [23:31] <Will> Homosexuals are citizens of the United States, they should have the same rights as all other citizens. Legalize it and move on.
>
> [23:32] <Joe> We're probably moving closer to legalizing it, which is fine by me.
>
> [23:32] <Jack> It comes down to an issue of semantics. The term marriage is reserved for heterosexuals. People feel threatened when marriage is applied to gay relationships. Semantics aside, I think equal rights should apply to gay relationships no matter what you call it.
>
> [23:33] <Bob> I'm sorry that is one thing I can't agree with at all, and I don't think I'm bigoted, I just don't agree with it.
>
> [23:33] <Jane> Homosexuals should have legalized marriages. So big deal if it doesn't seem normal to everyone else. They are people and fall in love like heterosexuals.
>
> [23:34] <Mike> Why do so many things favor "marriage"?
>
> [23:35] <Jane> What do you mean Mike[?]
>
> [23:35] <Moderator> Some have characterized recognizing homosexual marriages as a matter of granting special rights. Do you think of this issue as a matter of special rights?
>
> [23:36] <Will> What is a "normal" family anymore? Mom, Dad, and kids? Single mom and kids? Grandma and kids? Two dads? Four moms? There is no normal anymore.
>
> [23:36] <Mike> Tax laws/benefits, health insurance discounts, . . .

[23:37] <Ed> Same situation existed during biblical times.

[23:37] <Will> Why would giving homosexuals the same rights as everybody else be giving them special rights—it's right wing politics.

To Jack, regardless of what gay relationships are called, those in them deserve equal treatment under the law. Despite fairly broad group consensus supporting this view, one member (Bob) did dissent, without explanation. As Mike elaborates, various presumed advantages of marital status, in taxation and access to health care, are seen as unfair. Such concerns were voiced in a number of discussions. References to "benefits" occurred 26 times; "tax" appears 19 times, and "health" 15 times in the group interactions.

Catchphrases. Distinctive phrases surfaced multiple times in the discussions. For example, consider the response of a heterogeneous group (#60) to the "civil unions" version of the initial question:

[21:30] <Charlene> That makes me want to vomit!

[21:30] <Michael> Nothing is the same as when we were kids.

[21:30] <Helen> No, the good guys always won and kissed their horse, not like the overt sexual scenes and murder in films today.

[21:31] <Charlene> As the saying goes, God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!

[21:31] <Frank> Charlene you have a partner in that thought!!

[21:31] <Charlene> Thank you Frank.

[21:33] <Michael> I don't have an answer, but leaving them alone might be best.

[21:33] <Charlene> I do not understand a government that will promote sodomites (call them what they are) and then kill babies.

Here we find both an allusion to the movie-world simplicity of "good guys" in westerns (from Helen), followed by Charlene's comment that "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." This phrase was used to express disapproval of gay partnerships in four different groups (with a fifth offering a slight movie twist on the same slogan: "It's Harry and Sally, not Harry and Harry").

Drawing from Personal Experience. As participants debated the issue, a number of drew from personal experience—or, at least, purported experience—in arguing their positions. One example comes from a liberal group (#24) responding to the "equal rights" question:

[21:38] <George> I really dislike the label "special rights" that so many people place on the gay attempt to simply maintain the same rights as everyone else.

[21:39] <James> These rights are not equal. My son works for United Airlines. They recognize a civil union of six months and provide benefits to such a union. If my son lived with a woman for six months they would not recognize this union and provide the same benefits.

[21:39] <Charles> George, I agree.

[21:40] <Charles> We don't have to model our laws after United Airlines, though.

[21:40] <George> Then United is wrong! But don't most companies that offer gay couples benefits also offer unmarried heterosexual people the same? IBM, Microsoft, etc.?

Although no mention was made in the prompt of "special rights," George—a supporter of civil unions—recognizes that frame in his comment and rejects it. James, seeking to defend the notion of "special rights," offers his son's company as a supporting example. The range of personal experiences brought to bear on the issue, across the full set of groups, was considerable:

[19:33] <Bonnie> My sister and 84 yr old mother live together . . . . why shouldn't they have the same "right" so Mom could be on her insurance? (Conservative group #8, "homosexual marriage" frame)

[20:39] <Bob> I dated a girl for 15 years without marriage, and was just like marriage. (Heterogeneous group #30, "homosexual marriage" frame)

[23:35] <Emily> There's so much more at stake than just the legalizing of the partnerships. There's the whole subject of teaching alternative lifestyles. A friend's son came home from school last week talking about what he learned—he's in Kindergarten. (Heterogeneous group 27, "civil union" frame)

[16:37] <Jane> Right . . . what does sex have to do with benefits . . . . I have friends that have lived together 15 yrs and should not have to marry just for benefits. (Liberal group #19, "homosexual marriage" frame)

Juggling Alternative Frames. As illustrated by several of these exchanges, the issue elicited diverse reactions. Although the explicit give-and-take between opposing frames was most apparent in heterogeneous groups, many of the ideologically homogeneous groups also engaged in lively debate. Participants who voiced the biblical view on same-sex relationship consequently had a chance to hear why others thought that legal standing was desirable, and vice versa. Consider, for instance, this exchange within a heterogeneous group (#34) responding to the "civil unions" prompt:

[22:31] <Diana> I agree with Bush completely on this one. A marriage is a union between a man and a woman, not two men or two women.

[22:31] <Bea> Legally I think it is okay.

[22:32] <Jim> I am TOTALLY AGAINST any legal union between anyone other than one man and one woman!! That is the fundamental foundation of the family which is the fundamental foundation of society. Besides, God says it's wrong.

[22:33] <Diana> Amen, Jim. That's what my Bible says.

[22:34] <Susan> What's wrong with a legal contract that recognizes commitment?

> [22:34] <Bea> If they live together and share income and expenses, I think it is okay for them to have some of the legal advantages.
>
> [22:35] <Diana> If you mean as in a marriage license, I'm sorry, but I don't agree. I also don't agree that children should be brought up in that type of union.
>
> [22:36] <Jim> Does that mean that two siblings should have the same rights as a married couple if they are living together, what about roommates if they sign a contract?
>
> [22:36] <Susan> Diana, I'd argue that it's most important that children be raised by parents who love them, regardless of sexuality.

Diana and Jim adopted a traditional morality frame, staking out strong opposition to civil unions, while Bea and Susan repeatedly emphasize the legal (as opposed to moral) equivalence of gay partnerships and heterosexual marriage. These four participants quickly formed two-person alliances with very different perspectives on the matter. Nevertheless, they did not talk past each other; rather they considered or attempted to rebut the opposition. For instance, Jim challenged Bea to define the essential component of marriage as something other than shared expenses. Susan, on the other hand, picked up Diana's objection to raising children in "that type of union," and counterargued with a moral stand of her own (love, not sexuality, is the key to raising children).

There was, then, as hypothesized, considerable variability in the frames invoked, along with some apparent differences across group types. The qualitative analysis tended to find, as expected, considerably greater opposition (justified on moral grounds) in the conservative groups and higher levels of support (justified on grounds of equality) in the liberal groups. To what extent were these differences statistically significant? And what effect did the frame manipulation—civil unions for gay couples or marriage for homosexuals—have on expressions of support or opposition to it in actual conversations? In the next section, we report results of the quantitative analyses of the discussions.[5]

CONTINGENT EFFECTS OF GROUP TYPE AND FRAME

Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of the various group-expression measures, by frame and group type. Note that the *N* in the second column represents the number of *groups*, rather than individuals. The first measure, the average number of statements produced by a group during the discussion, indicates that groups generated on average about 16 statements (Grand $M = 15.94$). The next two columns represent average counts of arguments (pro and con), and the last four columns represent counts of positively valenced, negatively valenced, or mixed valence statements, along with an aggregate "direction" measure summarizing the balance of positive and negative statements.

5. All analyses are unweighted.

Table 1. Mean Levels of Group Expression, by Frame and Group Type

		Group-Level Expression						
			Arguments		Valenced Statements			
Frame Manipulation	*N*	Statement Count	Pro	Con	Direction	Positive	Negative	Mixed
Civil Unions for Gay Couples								
Conservative	8	21.75	3.00	5.38	–6.75	3.38	10.13	8.25
		(11.27)	(2.83)	(2.67)	(5.31)	(2.13)	(4.73)	(7.70)
Heterogeneous	9	16.00	2.33	6.11	–7.33	2.22	9.56	4.22
		(7.65)	(2.55)	(4.11)	(6.36)	(3.07)	(5.13)	(3.67)
Liberal	7	11.14	2.43	1.86	–0.43	3.29	3.71	4.14
		(4.30)	(1.51)	(1.46)	(3.31)	(2.75)	(1.70)	(2.19)
Total	24	16.50	2.58	4.63	–5.13	2.92	8.04	5.54
		(9.07)	(2.32)	(3.46)	(5.92)	(2.64)	(4.98)	(5.27)
Marriage for Homosexuals								
Conservative	9	15.56	1.00	6.22	–7.89	1.22	9.11	5.22
		(5.32)	(1.32)	(2.95)	(4.91)	(1.30)	(3.95)	(2.59)
Heterogeneous	9	14.78	2.78	3.22	–2.11	3.56	5.67	5.56
		(6.85)	(2.54)	(2.44)	(4.28)	(2.07)	(4.27)	(2.55)
Liberal	8	16.00	4.38	1.38	1.25	5.25	4.00	6.75
		(4.00)	(1.41)	(1.30)	(6.48)	(3.37)	(3.93)	(3.20)
Total	26	15.42	2.65	3.69	–3.08	3.27	6.35	5.81
		(5.37)	(2.26)	(3.04)	(6.32)	(2.81)	(4.45)	(2.74)
Grand Total	50	15.94	2.62	4.14	–4.06	3.10	7.16	5.68
		(7.32)	(2.27)	(3.25)	(6.16)	(2.70)	(4.74)	(4.11)

NOTE.—Table entries are means; standard deviations are shown in parentheses. *N* denotes the number of groups in that condition.

As these various counts are somewhat interdependent, a multivariate ANOVA (analysis of variance) was conducted. The analysis indicated significant overall effects of group type (GLM multivariate tests for group type, Wilks's Lambda $F_{10,50} = 2.262$, $p < .022$; Roy's Largest Root $F_{5,50} = 4.742$, $p < .002$), and no overall main effect of the framing manipulation (Wilks's Lambda $F_{5,50} = 0.441$, $p < .817$). However, the effect of the frame was contingent on group type. In other words, the effect of the frame—"civil unions" or "homosexual marriage"—varied with the ideological leanings of the groups (or, put differently, ideological differences were enhanced or suppressed by the frame manipulation).

Number of Statements. While the groups on average generated 16 statements, this number varied considerably across group type in response to the "civil union" frame ($M = 21.75$, 16.00, and 11.14 for conservative, heterogeneous, and liberal groups, respectively). The "marriage for homosexuals" frame, meanwhile, elicited closer to an equal number of statements from the conservative (15.56), heterogeneous (14.78) and liberal groups (16.00) alike. Analysis of variance indicated a marginally significant interaction of group type and frame, $p < .10$. (F-statistics for all univariate ANOVAs are presented in table 2.)

Arguments. Across all group types, the balance of arguments tended to oppose gay civil unions (with an average group generating 2.6 arguments supporting and 4.1 arguments opposing legalization). There were, however, clear differences between the conservative, heterogeneous, and liberal groups, as well as some indication of contingent framing effects. Group type and frame clearly interacted in affecting the number of supporting arguments ($p < .05$;

Table 2. ANOVA Results for Effects of Frame and Group Type on Expression

		Group-Level Expression						
			Arguments		Valenced Statements			
	df	Statement Count	Pro	Con	Direction	Positive	Negative	Mixed
Model	5	1.79	2.22#	5.16***	4.60**	2.46*	3.91**	1.20
Group Type	2	2.16	1.72	9.88***	8.77***	2.52#	7.75***	0.94
Frame	1	0.18	0.05	1.18	1.65	0.28	1.69	0.07
Group Type × Frame	2	2.45#	3.49*	2.11	1.60	3.19*	1.10	2.16
R^2	—	.17	.20	.37	.34	.22	.31	.12

NOTE.—Except where noted, table entries are F values (2,50).
# $p < .1$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

see table 2 for univariate ANOVA results). A graphic representation of these interactive effects is shown in figure 1. While the "civil union" frame had little effect on the generation of supportive arguments across group types, the "marriage for homosexuals" frame triggered pro argumentation at a rate about four times greater in liberal groups than in conservative groups. Arguments opposed to legalizing gay partnerships, on the other hand, were strongly affected by the composition of groups, regardless of frame ($p < .001$).

Valenced Statements. The overall feeling of the groups toward civil unions or gays in general is perhaps best captured by the direction measure (column 4 of table 1). Here again we find very pronounced differences between conservative, heterogeneous, and liberal groups ($p < .001$) with no main effect of, or interaction with, the framing manipulation. Negatively valenced statements show the same pattern. Conservative groups consistently made more negative statements than did liberal groups, with heterogeneous groups falling in between.

The framing manipulation did interact with group type, however, in affecting positive statements ($p < .05$). An inspection of the means in table 1 indicates a pattern in positively valenced statements similar to that for pro argumentation: The differential in positive valence between liberal and conservative group response was greater in response to the "homosexual marriage" frame (more than a 4 to 1 liberal to conservative ratio) than in response to the "civil union" frame (an even 1 to 1 ratio).

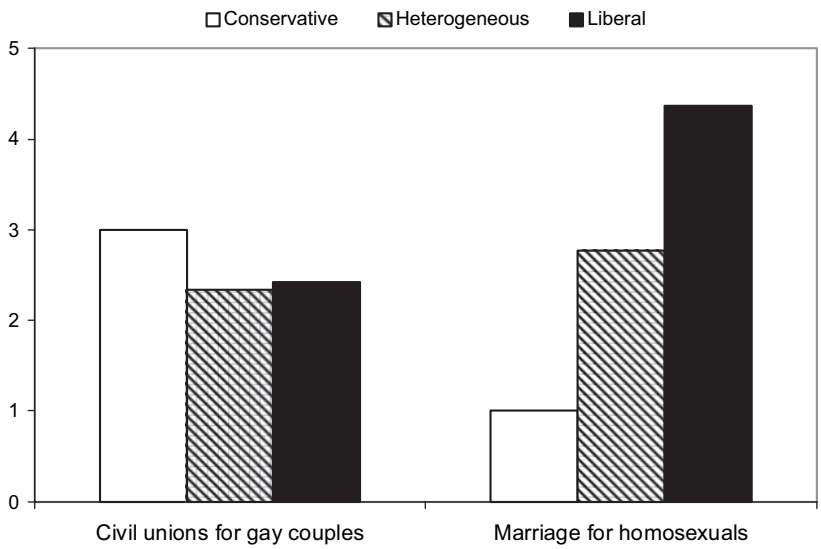

Figure 1. Mean group-level pro arguments, by frame and group type.

Discussion

Taken together, our findings suggest that the framing manipulation did influence the ways that groups discussed the prospect of legalizing gay partnerships. However, in all cases these effects were contingent on the ideological makeup of the groups. Our first hypothesis, which predicted main effects of the frames on group discourse, was not supported. Qualitative analysis suggested but did not clearly confirm that frame adoption varied as a simple function of the two question prompts employed, while the quantitative analysis detected no significant main effects of the manipulation.

Our expectation that group discourses would be far from uniform in adopting a given frame fared well. Qualitative assessments of the group conversations showed many instances in which, even when a given frame was privileged by manipulation, alternative frames were nevertheless greatly in evidence. Similarly, our measures of pro/con argumentation and valenced statements illustrated substantial within-group disagreement. Heterogeneous groups were, naturally, particularly variable in their responses. However, even when the groups were ideologically homogeneous and strongly "assisted" in their predispositions by hospitable frames, the discourses nonetheless evidenced variable responses. Homogeneously conservative groups responding to a "homosexual marriage/special rights" frame, for instance, did produce *some* arguments (one, on average, per group) in support of granting legal standing to gay partnerships, as well as *some* favorable statements about such unions or about gays in general (again, one such statement per group). Homogeneously liberal groups were even more ambivalent.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

These and other patterns in our results have a variety of implications; however, before elaborating on these we would do well to note several key features of the study and limitations they may impose. First and most generally, the group-level "constructionist" approach adopted here (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson 1992) complicates identifying individual causal connections of the sort that individual-level framing experiments address so effectively. Our intention is certainly *not* to argue that the constructionist approach is somehow intrinsically superior, theoretically or methodologically, to studies that manipulate frames and observe isolated responses to them. Rather, we have tried to address a gap in the framing research: a disconnect between the sociological processes examined by Gamson and psychological experiments on framing, which often invoke Gamson's formulations without taking seriously his contention that citizens actively use media frames, along with other personal and experiential resources, to *negotiate* the meaning of political issues in interpersonal group settings. Our study is intended as a first step in trying to reconnect these two strands of framing research and to marry

the strengths of psychological experimentation with the strengths of more qualitative "focus group" methods.

More specifically, our study is limited by its deployment of online discussion methods within the rather unique context of the larger Electronic Dialogue project. Our groups communicated via computer rather than face-to-face, and with strangers sampled from around the country rather than with neighborhood peers. The discussions reported here involved participants who had interacted, on average, roughly five times previously over a variety of campaign-related topics and issues. These conditions clearly differ from "normal" political talk, as well as from the kinds of peer-group interactions observed by Gamson (1992) and from most focus-group research. Among the virtues of our methodological approach, aside from the use of randomized experimental manipulation, is that it takes advantage of the survey method to sample observations from, if not a pure probability sample, a considerably more diverse set of participants than focus-group studies, adding both scale—nearly twice the number of groups observed by Gamson (1992)—and a degree of national representativeness to the group-discussion method. Another key strength is that, by experimentally establishing the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group opinion environment while holding the degree of personal acquaintance constant, we can examine the impact of like-mindedness within a group, unconfounded with the myriad characteristics of personal networks with which it is otherwise almost hopelessly entangled.

These strengths aside, we are clearly unable to generalize to everyday conversations or "offline" political deliberations in face-to-face settings. Owing to its comparative poverty in terms of interpersonal cues and felt social "presence," computer-mediated communication generally appears to reduce social status differences and group hierarchies that emerge in face-to-face groups (Williams 1977). Online formats may be less than ideally suited to developing relationships and getting to know others (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984; Rice 1993). At the same time, Walther (1992) has argued, and offered evidence in support of his contention, that people quite successfully adapt computer-mediated communication to their social purposes. They consider themselves accountable to others in online groups, particularly if the context is supportive of civility and participants are given the opportunity, as they were here, to interact over time (Walther 1994; Walther and Parks 2002). Recent experimental comparisons show, for instance, that computer-based discussions—even though they generate much less verbal content overall than face-to-face meetings—produce more questions, greater participant self-disclosure, more intimate and direct questions, and fewer peripheral exchanges (Tidwell and Walther 2002). Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002) interpret their experimental data as indicating that strangers who interact online are, compared with those in face-to-face settings, "better able to present, and have accepted by others, aspects of their true or inner selves" (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002, p. 45).

In general, our transcripts (as illustrated by the representative excerpts presented in this article) show highly interactive exchanges among participants and suggest that the fundamental processes of group debate observed online were generally similar to what might have been expected of face-to-face meetings. However, available research suggests several important caveats. The online discussion methods employed here probably enabled our participants to experience frank political disagreement and debate over gay civil unions in a less intimidating setting than they would have experienced face-to-face, using communication technologies that probably facilitated more direct expression of personal viewpoints than would have been observed in, say, a more traditional focus-group setting.

IDEOLOGICAL RESONANCE

Despite such limitations to broad generalization, our findings nonetheless illustrate clearly the importance of *resonance* for frame adoption.The ideological predispositions of the groups were a strong and consistent influence on the content and tone of their discussions. As expected, conservative groups generated discourses that were substantially more opposed, in their opinionated statements and arguments, than those generated by liberal groups. Heterogeneous groups, again as predicted, generated the most balanced discussions. These ideological predispositions created environments that were differentially hospitable to the frames used to initiate discussion, as predicted. Yet, our expectation that conservative groups would prove most receptive to the "homosexual marriage/special rights" frame was not quite correct. Rather, it appears that the "marriage" frame was *polarizing* in its effect. Both liberal and conservative groups responded to it in similar measure, but in opposite directions. This pattern was most pronounced in the volume of supportive arguments and positively valenced statements. In both cases, the gulf between liberal and conservative groups widened when the "marriage" frame introduced the discussion.

PROVOCATION BY OPPONENTS' FRAMES

Another interesting pattern in the results deserves note: responses by ideologically homogeneous groups to an "opposing" frame. Means in table 1 suggest that conservative groups generated substantially more statements in response to the "civil unions" prompt than to the "homosexual marriage" prompt, and that the opposing frame ("civil unions") also resulted in a larger number of mixed-valence comments. In mirrorlike fashion, liberal groups produced substantially more statements in response to the "homosexual marriage" prompt than to the "civil unions" prompt (that is, to their opponents' frame) and again a larger number of mixed-valence comments. Though not conclusive, these patterns suggest that exposure to opponents' frames may be especially provocative, resulting both in heightened communicative response and in more complex (ambivalent) responses.

WHICH ASPECT OF THE MANIPULATION PRODUCED EFFECTS?

We should also note that the frame manipulation used here was two-part, with the initial prompt highlighting either "civil union" or "homosexual marriage" and the follow-up question highlighting either "equal rights" (in the "union" frame) or "special rights" (in the "marriage" frame). Observed effects might have stemmed from either one, or both, parts of our manipulation. To examine this question, we divided all 50 discussion transcripts at the point of the follow-up question and analyzed each half of the conversations separately. Results of this analysis (focusing just on the interaction of frame and group type) are presented in table 3.

These results suggest that the initial prompt, rather than follow-up question, was mainly responsible for the overall pattern of contingent effects. Whereas all of the significant interactions described above remain significant when only the first half of the transcripts were tested, several of the *F*-statistics fall below the significance threshold when only the latter half of the conversations were examined. This finding squares with our impressions, gleaned from qualitative study of the transcripts, that many groups—particularly conservative groups—spontaneously coupled a discussion of homosexual marriage with arguments about "special rights" and that supporters of legalizing gay partnerships tended to argue for them based on "equal rights" no matter what the frame.

LIMITS ON FRAMING EFFECTS

Many individual-level framing experiments have found that similar manipulations (either in survey questions or in mock news articles) produce substantial shifts in expressed opinions. Our results here, which focus on what Gamson (1992, p. 180) calls "effects *in use*," suggest much more moderate influences—filtered as they are through active discussion and group negotiation. Some researchers (Brewer 2002, 2003; Druckman and Nelson 2003) have recently drawn attention to the possibility that exposure to competing frames, interpersonal conversation, or both can substantially weaken framing effects. Our data offers convincing evidence supportive of this line of theorizing.

Worthy of note is the fact that our framing manipulation, while it did clearly affect the content and tone of the group discussions, did not produce any significant opinion change (based on a comparison of prediscussion to postdiscussion opinion measures).[6] Few would doubt that media discourse

6. Prior to discussion, respondents were asked how much they would "favor the federal government in Washington doing the following . . . [listed among other policies] encourage states to recognize gay or lesbian marriages." Seventy-two percent were opposed (nearly 50 percent strongly so), while only 28 percent were somewhat or strongly in favor. After the election, the percentage of supporters grew to just over 30 percent. But there were no significant differences in change of opinion discovered in comparisons of discussants to nondiscussants, between different discussion group types, or between those exposed to different frame conditions. Nor were any interactions significant. Of course, given the strongly negative feelings many Americans have toward gays—as reflected, for example, in the very chilly ratings typically given them on "feeling thermometer" survey measures—perhaps such opinions are somewhat harder to move via framing than others.

Table 3. Interactive Effects of Frame and Group Type across Two Halves of Discussion

	Group-Level Expression						
		Arguments		Valenced Statements			
	Statement Count	Pro	Con	Direction	Positive	Negative	Mixed
Total Section	2.45#	3.49*	2.11	1.60	3.19*	1.10	2.16
First Half: Gay Civil Unions/Homosexual Marriage	3.00#	2.44#	3.24*	2.07	3.34*	1.33	2.33
Second Half: Equal Rights/Special Rights	1.51	1.37	0.73	0.88	1.30	0.89	1.54

NOTE.—Table entries are F values (2,50).
# $p < .1$.
* $p < .05$.

exerts important influences on the fund of ideas, images, and arguments that ordinary citizens take up in their thinking and talking about public affairs. Yet that fund is not unitary. It is a complex *set* of frames and counter-frames, and it contends with many other influences, such as ordinary experience, that also shape public reactions. Our results underscore Gamson's (1992) argument that media discourse is just one among many resources that citizens may draw from their "tool kit" in working through public issues. Our participants illustrated, in their discussions of gay civil unions, several of the themes running through Gamson's work: that ordinary people are neither so passive, nor "so dumb," as they frequently appear in social science portraits (1992, p. 4).

In general, the findings highlight the value of applying a constructionist approach to the study of media-framing effects. Psychologically oriented studies of framing effects have examined only short-term, isolated responses to news messages and in so doing present only a partial view of the framing process—one that may incline toward overstating the capacity of media to direct public opinion. The present study charts a different course, examining socially negotiated responses among interacting groups of subjects following exposure to experimental frames. This course, we believe, particularly when coupled with individual-level studies, stands to offer a more robust evaluation of the interconnections between "news talk" and "public talk."

Appendix A

SAMPLING AND STUDY DESIGN

Initial Recruitment. The project recruited study participants from a survey panel maintained by Knowledge Networks, Inc. of Menlo Park, California. The panel includes a large number of households (in the tens of thousands) that have agreed to accept free WebTV equipment and service in exchange for completing periodic surveys online. The Knowledge Networks Panel Sample begins with a list-assisted RDD sample provided by a Survey Sampling, Inc. (SSI). Samples are acquired approximately once a month to ensure that they are drawn from up-to-date databases. Numbers in the SSI sample are then matched against a database of numbers known to be in the WebTV network. These numbers are then contacted, and households are asked to participate as members of the Knowledge Network panel. In exchange for completing surveys (approximately 40 minutes of cumulative survey time per household per month), panelists receive WebTV equipment and access free of charge. The recruitment process produces a sample of American households that closely approximates the population at large, with a very slight under-representation of minorities and the elderly. The response rate (RR3, according to the American Association for Public Opinion Research's (AAPOR) *Standard Definitions* [2004]) for the panel recruitment was 52 percent. Of these recruits, 57 percent connected their WebTVs and completed a panel profile survey. (J. Michael Dennis, Knowledge Networks, personal communication, March 16, 2005).

In February 2000 a random sample of American citizens aged 18 and older (N = 3,967) was drawn from the panel. The aim of the initial sample survey was to recruit participants into three groups for the Electronic Dialogue project: first, a main group of people who would participate in monthly, hour-long moderated discussions about the presidential election in small groups (target N = 900); second, a control group of people who would complete all monthly surveys associated with the project but would *not* engage in online discussions (target N = 100); and a third group of people who would complete only the project's initial baseline surveys in February and March 2000 and the final, post-project surveys one year later (target N = 500). The third group was intended as a control for panel effects and also as a potential "set-aside" pool of new recruits for use should attrition necessitate additions to either of the two panel groups. All members of the main discussion panel and the survey-only control panel were released from all obligations to complete other surveys for Knowledge Networks, aside from those issued as part of the Electronic Dialogue project. Assignment to the three groups (main discussion panel, survey-only control panel, and pre/post-project "set-aside" group) was randomized.

Just over half of those sampled for recruitment agreed to participate and completed consent forms, with overall acceptance rates roughly similar across the three groups of respondents. The final number of recruited project participants was 2,014 (AAPOR cooperation rate COOP2 = 51 percent). Of these, 1,076 were assigned to the main discussion panel, 168 to the survey-only control panel, and the remainder to the pre/post-project only group. Analysis of group characteristics (demographics, age, race, gender, political interest, ideology, and party leanings) confirmed that the randomization was successful.

The Baseline Surveys. Two baseline surveys were conducted, the first from February 8 to March 10 and the second from March 10 to March 23. All three groups (discussion, survey-only control, and set-aside) were contacted. The surveys included extensive measures of media use, interest in the presidential campaign, general political knowledge and knowledge of the campaign, political discussion, and a wide variety of political attitudes and opinions. There were 1,801 respondents who completed the first baseline (cooperation rate COOP2 = 89 percent) and 1,743 who completed the second (COOP2 = 87 percent). Both baselines were completed by 1,684 respondents, or 84 percent of those who completed consent forms. Cooperation rates were generally similar across the three main groups.

Sample Characteristics. The multiplication of response and cooperation rates at different stages of recruitment and data collection raises natural questions about the representative character of the Electronic Dialogue sample. Characteristics of the obtained baseline sample were consequently compared with those from a random digit dial telephone survey, using the same questions, conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center during the same days the Electronic Dialogue baseline surveys were in the field (AAPOR contact rate CON2 = 54 percent; cooperation rate COOP2 = 57 percent; response rate RR2= 30 percent). In general, as shown in the table A1, the samples are generally very similar. The Electronic Dialogue sample tends to slightly overrepresent males and to underrepresent those with less than a high school education, nonwhites, and—especially—those who have low levels of interest in politics. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that participants agreed to join a year-long project associated with the presidential election campaign—a substantially greater commitment than that generally associated with completing single, cross-sectional surveys (for more details, see Price and Cappella 2002).

The experimental analysis reported here is confined to a smaller subset of Electronic Dialogue respondents, those who attended a single round of online discussions in early November, which thereby introduces further possible sample distortions due to selective attendance and panel attrition (see "Experimental Sample Restrictions and Panel Effects" below).

Organization of the Small-Group Discussions. Beginning in April, participants in the main discussion group were invited to attend small-group discussions (5–10 person), one per month. Participants remained assigned to the same group over the course of the campaign. Anticipating far less than perfect attendance, and in order to insure adequate group size, a total of 60 groups were formed, with roughly 15 participants per group. Because groups were to meet live, in real-time, with membership straddling several time zones, a complete listing of participant availability (in the afternoons and evenings, seven days a week) and rank-ordered preference for meeting times was obtained from all respondents. Analysis of these data suggested that 16 time slots would accommodate over 60 percent of participants' first choices of meeting times and would meet virtually all availabilities (though for many participants not a top choice). Participants were offered these 16 possible time slots and were requested to choose *all* timeslots for which they would be available. Final groups, 60 in all, were then constituted.

Because of the theoretical interest in the impact of disagreement, composition of the discussion groups was manipulated in order to insure variance in levels of political agreement and opposition. Specifically, three experimental conditions were created: homogeneously liberal groups ($N = 20$); homogeneously conservative groups ($N = 20$); and heterogeneous groups consisting of members from across the political spectrum ($N = 20$). For this purpose, a 7-point party identification scale and a 5-point political ideology scale were combined into a single index, which ranged from –5 (strong Republicans/very conservative), through 0 (independents/ moderates/other centrists), to +5 (strong Democrats/very liberal). Conservative groups were drawn from the lower end of this continuum (the 20 groups averaged –3.09 on the index, with a standard deviation of 1.6); the liberal groups from the upper end (the 20 groups averaged 2.53 with an SD of 1.58); and heterogeneous groups were drawn from the entire continuum (the 20 groups averaged –.33 with an SD of 3.5, more than twice as large as the SD across homogeneous groups).

The Discussion Events. Most monthly discussion "events" consisted of three parts: a pre-discussion survey, online discussion, and a follow-up post-discussion survey. Participants in the main discussion panel ($N = 915$) were asked to do all three parts, whereas those in the control panel ($N = 139$) completed only the survey portions. Project participants did not interact with each other outside of the scheduled online group meetings.

Participants logged on to their "discussion rooms" at prearranged times, using their WebTV devices, television sets, and infrared keyboards. The full TV screen was used. Participants typed their comments and, when they hit the "enter" key on their keyboards, posted these comments to all other group members present in the room. All discussions were moderated by project assistants and were carefully coordinated and scripted to maintain consistency across groups. Prompts and questions were "dropped" by moderators into the discussions at prearranged times. The full text of all discussions, including time stamps for each comment, was automatically recorded. Discussions were lively and engaging, and participants contributed on average between 200 and 300 words per event.

The first event, with discussions held in mid-April, focused on getting acquainted and identifying issues of main concern to participants. The second, held in mid-May, focused on educational issues, and the third event, in mid-June, dealt with issues of crime and public safety. The fourth, held at the end of July and in early August, centered on participants' views of campaigning. The main campaign season involved three further discussions. Right after Labor Day in September, groups viewed and then talked about advertisements from each campaign. Following the first presidential and vice presidential debates in October, groups discussed the candidates' stands on health care and taxes, and how effective they thought each campaign had been to that point. In the week prior to the election, groups talked about a variety of other issues that had surfaced during the campaign. With the election results still in doubt, groups met again in early December to discuss the electoral process, how each candidate and the press were handling the disputes over the election, and the role of the Electoral College.

Given the pre-discussion and post-discussion surveys every month, the project amounted to a 28-wave panel study for the discussion group and a 19-wave panel study for the survey-only control group. Given this extraordinary level of burden, it is not surprising that cooperation rates were far from perfect. However, the majority of study participants did complete most surveys. Survey cooperation rates (COOP2) were generally similar for both the discussion and control groups, hovering at around 70 percent early in the project and declining over the course of time to about 60 percent at the project's end.

By far the most demanding elements of the project were the online discussions themselves. Rates of participation in these discussions ranged from about 40 percent at the outset and declined to roughly 30 percent toward the end, producing groups that averaged between 5 and 6 participants each. There was a fair degree of turnover in attendance from one event to the next. By the end of the eighth event in December, over 70 percent of the discussion group (663 respondents) had attended at least one of the online discussions, and roughly 40 percent (or 350) had attended half or more of the events.

End of Project Surveys. In January two end-of-project surveys were conducted. The first was fielded January 4–18 and the second from January 19 to February 1. These surveys again included extensive measures of media use, participation in the presidential campaign, discussion behavior over the course of the campaign and in its aftermath, and a wide variety of political attitudes and opinions. All three original study groups surveyed during the project baseline (those invited to discussions, the survey-only control group, and the set-asides) were contacted for reinterview at this time. Fifty-five percent completed the first survey, and 56 percent completed the second (COOP2).

Experimental Sample Restrictions and Panel Effects. Because we focus in this particular analysis on just those attending the seventh round of discussions held from October 30 to November 5, selective discussion attendance and panel attrition are natural concerns. Nevertheless, as shown in the right-hand column of the table A1, even when we limit the sample only to those respondents with valid observations participating in the experiment (N = 235), the restricted sample still matches both the full, baseline Electronic Dialoguesample and the independent RDD sample reasonably well. The sample does become somewhat toward older, male, and more politically interested respondents. On the other hand, as the bottom of table A1 illustrates, there are no differences between the full sample and the much smaller experimental sample in the distribution of opinions on recognition of same-sex partnerships or attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

Table A1. Sample Characteristics

	Comparison RDD Sample[a] (N = 2,527)	Electronic Dialogue Full Sample[b] (N = 1,684)	Experimental Sample[c] (N = 235)
Gender			
Male	47%	54%	57%
Age			
18–29	19%	19%	7%
30–44	33	34	25
45–59	27	28	30
60+	21	19	38
Region			
Northeast	19%	18%	21%
Midwest	20	21	19
South	37	34	34
West	24	27	26
Follow Politics			
Most of the time	33%	37%	47%
Some of the time	35	41	39
Only now and then	20	17	12
Hardly at all	12	4	2
Ideology			
Conservative	38%	32%	38%
Moderate	38	47	44
Liberal	24	21	18
Party			
Republican	42%	45%	50%
Independent and Don't Know	12	12	8
Democrat	46	43	42
Opinion on Federal Recognition of Same-Sex Partnerships			
Favor strongly	N.A.	11%	11%
Favor somewhat	N.A.	17	19
Oppose somewhat	N.A.	18	18
Oppose strongly	N.A.	53	52
Mean Rating of Gays on 0–100 Scale (SD in parentheses)			
March 2000	N.A.	36 (31)	35 (30)
January 2001	N.A.	40 (30)	40 (31)

[a] National, random digit dial telephone survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center during the same days the Electronic Dialogue baseline surveys were in the field. Response rate (AAPOR RR2) was 30 percent.

[b] Includes all respondents to both Electronic Dialogue baseline surveys in February and March 2000.

[c] Includes only Electronic Dialogue respondents who participated in seventh event and are included in present analysis.

Appendix B

SURVEY QUESTION WORDING

Party Affiliation
Do you generally think of yourself as a . . . Republican (= 1), Democrat (= 2), Independent (= 3), or something else (= 4)? [Order of Republican and Democrat randomized]

Asked of Republicans: Do you consider yourself . . . A strong Republican (= 1), Not a very strong Republican (= 2)?

Asked of Democrats: Do you consider yourself . . . A strong Democrat (= 1), Not a very strong Democrat (= 2)?

Asked of respondents with no party affiliation: Do you think of yourself as closer to . . . The Republican Party (= 1), The Democratic Party (= 2), or neither (= 3)?

Ideology
Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as . . . Very conservative (= 1), Conservative (= 2), Moderate (= 3), Liberal (= 4), or Very liberal (= 5)? [Order of responses randomized, either very conservative to very liberal, or very liberal to very conservative]

Feelings about homosexuals
For each of the following groups, please indicate if your opinion is favorable or unfavorable using a scale from 0 to 100. Zero means very *unfavorable*, and 100 means very *favorable*. Fifty means neither favorable nor unfavorable.
Groups [order randomized]:
Labor unions; Large corporations; the feminist movement; *Homosexuals*; Christian fundamentalists; the military; Whites; Blacks; Hispanics; Asians

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