



DO AMERICANS SUPPORT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY?

- THE ANSWER DEPENDS ON HOW THE QUESTION IS FRAMED

What Social Science Tells Us About Winning Support For Racial Justice Policies

From the first challenge to affirmative action with the passage of Proposition 209 in California in 1996 to the 2006 Proposal 2 in Michigan, Americans have been increasingly polarized over the issue of how to provide equal and fair opportunity to all.

Surveys, polls and other forms of statistical measurements are important tools that have driven and shaped communications strategies around messages that aim to win support for affirmative action and other race-conscious policies.

But these methods only tell us WHAT people think and WHERE they are at a given moment, i.e., they are important tools for gauging public positions on particular issues at a point in time.

They cannot, however, tell us HOW people think or HOW to move them. People's views about an issue can develop and change over time and unless we understand where people are in this process, survey results can frequently mislead if interpreted in a mechanical way. Surveys and polls can be useful when done over time to understand trends and shifts in public attitudes and opinions.

Cognitive frames are the unconscious thought processes, or core ideas or narratives that shape HOW people think and HOW people process information. Frames help us to create meaning and mediate our perceptions of reality. Studies show that if the data and research do not fit the frame, people tend to reject the research and data, not the frame. Good polling is informed by an understanding of the frames that people use.

Social science research suggests that there are four primary frames that impede people's support for race-conscious policies:

- Disparities do not exist
- Disparities exist because of cultural failings
- Disparities are natural (some group has to be at the bottom)
- Disparities exist, but equal opportunities mean policies can't take account of race to create opportunity

The Center for Social Inclusion is partnering with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity on the Diversity Advancement Project. It involves two phases through site tests.

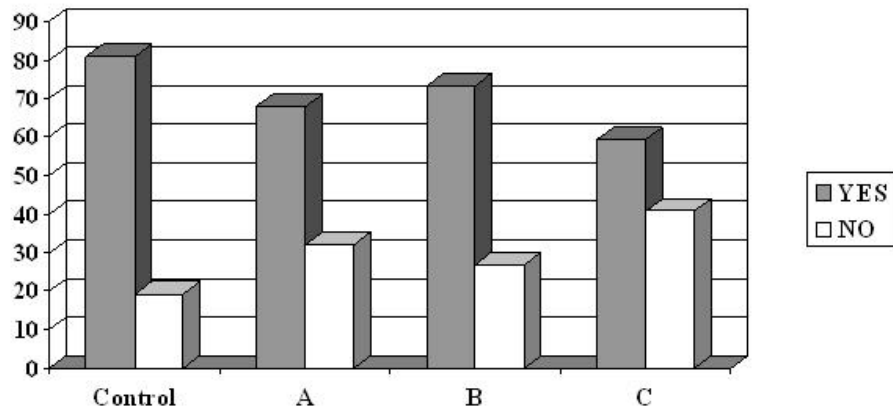
The first phase tests the impact of using frame-breaking arguments on increasing support for race conscious policies. Our first site test was in Detroit, Michigan which showed promising results, admittedly with a small sample size (120 respondents).



- It appears that we can be most effective at increasing support for race conscious policies when we challenge all four frames (those surveyed who received challenges to all frames increased support by as much as 18.6%).
- There appears to be significant support for keeping affirmative action and ending discrimination but our advocacy needs to go beyond highlighting disparities.
- We should consider linking advocacy for race-conscious policies to local issues that are salient across communities. Metro Detroiters (like many in Colorado) were clearly focused on education and jobs/economy.
- Linked or shared fates may be an effective frame for increasing support for race-conscious policies.

Impact of Survey Narratives on Support for Proposition 2*

Both Paragraphs Combined (Actual Ballot Initiative)



Control – No Messages

Advocacy A – Read about current Racial Disparities

Advocacy B – Disparities + Structural/Historical Analysis

Advocacy C – Disparities + Structural/Historical Analysis + Critique of Color-Blind Approach

*The results show the impact of the narratives on support as captured in the survey, NOT an impact on the *actual* vote.



The second phase builds on the findings of the first phase that race-explicit advocacy can shift support for race-conscious policies. It consists of a 6-8 week workshop that includes a multi-racial group of local opinion leaders to work collaboratively and problem-solve on a salient local issue that has implications for race-conscious policies. The hope for this process is to help people discard their colorblind/race-neutral frames and to catalyze a commitment by the group to continue to work through the problem after the process. The workshop also seeks to build a foundation for long-term change that will help prepare for and be connected to short-term battles.

For more information about the Diversity Advancement Project:

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