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Gun Policy, Opinion, Tragedy, and Blame Attribution: The Conditional Influence of Issue Frames

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Political events and policy discussion set parameters for debate and help to determine how an issue comes to be defined. Though existing research has examined the effects of alternative representations of political issues on public opinion, less attention has been given to highly salient issues, such as gun policy, and the potential effect of framing on causal attributions of blame for tragic events. This study expands the framing research to include opinion on policies concerning guns as well as the attributions of blame following the school shooting in Littleton, Colorado. We test several hypotheses using data from two field polls—one examining support for concealed handgun laws and the other examining blame attribution following the shootings at Columbine High School. We find that alternative gun frames influence opinion about concealed handgun laws as well as attributions of blame for Columbine. However, the effect is conditional, hinging on the nature of respondents' predisposition and existing knowledge. We consider these findings within the context of the policy-making process.

"The aftermath of that shooting . . . has had an even more profound impact on the country than all the school shootings last year did. And you can see it by what is happening in the Congress now."

—President Clinton referring to the impact of the Littleton, Colorado, school shootings on the gun policy debate (Sobieraj 1999)

"I have to tell you, it's amazing to us, there's a whole lot of us going "Wow" . . . After all these school shootings we thought maybe we could get a discussion going, introduce some ideas, but this is tremendous."

—Janet Parshall of the Family Research Council after the House passed three religious amendments meant to reduce school violence following the Littleton shootings (Rosin 1999)

Recent years have witnessed a troubling series of mass shootings. In April 1999, an exceptional case occurred in Littleton, Colorado, when two high school seniors opened fire in their high school, killing thirteen before taking their own lives. This tragedy, combined with several others, powerfully illustrates the force of exogenous events on issue salience, agenda setting, and policy formulation

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(Jones 1994; Kingdon 1995; Riker 1986). After the Columbine High shootings, the percentage of the public citing crime/violence and gun control as the most important issue confronting government increased dramatically (Saad 1999).

Clearly, such focusing events as Columbine help frame issues involving guns. Immediately following mass shootings, various interests advance interpretations of events that promote their policy goals, emphasizing, for example, threats to public safety, second amendment rights, and the causal antecedents ultimately responsible for the tragedy (Patterson 1998; Spitzer 1998). Yet, curiously, there has been no research examining the influence of alternative issue frames on public opinion about gun policy. Though prior work has explored several issues (Chong 1996; Cobb and Kuklinski 1997; Kinder and Sanders 1990; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson and Oxley 1999), a host of others remain unexamined.

Researchers have also neglected the potential effect of issue frames on the public's attributions of blame for tragic events. By highlighting limitations in current policy, focusing events may influence the attribution of blame for disasters, tragedies, or simple failures, and can be key to legislative success (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995; Portz 1996). Our interpretation of events aids development of causal theories about why the event occurred and, subsequently, what type of government action might prevent its reoccurrence (Gibson and Gouws 1999; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Thus, this study does not simply add another case to a growing literature on issue framing, but rather demonstrates how alternative presentations of issues involving guns may influence opinion about related policy proposals and causal attributions associated with tragic events.

We begin with a theoretical discussion of issue framing and introduce two experimental surveys conducted in spring 1999. Our empirical findings show that alternative gun frames do in fact influence opinion about gun policy and attributions of blame for the Columbine tragedy. However, respondents who possess partisan orientations opposed to the direction of the frame exhibit significant resistance, as do the most politically knowledgeable. The effect of alternative gun frames is thus a contingent one, hinging critically on the nature of respondents' predispositions and existing knowledge. We consider these findings within the context of issue framing theory and emphasize the importance of framing in the context of the policy-making process.

Issue Framing in Policy Debates

Issue framing refers to how conditions or events in society come to be understood by the public and political elites (Gamson 1992). Since political issues are often complex, they are subject to alternative interpretations. Political debate and eventual resolution therefore depend on which interpretation dominates (Schattschneider 1960). Multifaceted issues are collapsed into accessible forms, providing order and meaning to the often distant and bewildering land-

scape of political affairs (Kinder and Berinsky 1999). Framing, as Entman (1993, 52) observed “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” For example, we may understand AIDS as a public health issue rather than as a social condition associated with declining moral values. How AIDS is defined, and ultimately understood, can influence the focus of policy proposals, who participates in policy processes, and who may win or lose (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Portz 1996; Rochefort and Cobb 1994).

But why should public opinion depend so critically on how an issue is framed? The limited cognitive capacity of citizens to attend and process relevant policy information appears to be the answer (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Simon 1957). Although there are a variety of beliefs or considerations that citizens could reasonably access when responding to a question about a given issue, frames appear to prime a specific subset of considerations that will have relatively more influence on the subsequent opinions of respondents. Because opinion expression frequently requires negotiation among competing, often inconsistent, considerations, many citizens are ambivalent (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Feldman and Zaller 1992). Frames provide direction by assigning relative importance to particular considerations (Nelson and Oxley 1999). In other words, frames, by emphasizing a specific component of an issue, influence which considerations are most accessible (Feldman 1995) or those deemed important to the problem at hand by the respondent receiving the information (Jones 1994; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

However, framing effects are not unlimited. Respondents are anchored by important political predispositions that serve as critical intervening variables between opinion and information (Converse 1964). What is an accessible consideration to one individual may not be to another, even though both may be exposed to the same information frame. For respondents predisposed to the direction or tone of incoming information, the impact of accessible considerations or beliefs can be substantial (Zaller 1992). By contrast, it is far less certain whether frames will be effective when predispositions are at odds with presented information (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller and Feldman 1992). The effects of framing are thus about more than mere accessibility. The persuasive effects of any given frame depends on how the content of framed considerations interacts with the predispositions of those receiving the message (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991).

Although framing research has generally examined how opinions can be influenced by alternative depictions of an issue, we believe individuals' causal attributions may be affected as well. The most influential work on framing attributions was conducted by Iyengar (1990, 1991), who examined how news accounts frame judgments of responsibility for social problems. Iyengar demonstrated that stories focusing on individual actors rather than abstract issues direct attention toward individuals as causal agents. He concluded that such

episodic stories evoke individualistic attributions of responsibility for the societal-level problems emphasized in the news frame. These findings are consistent with earlier investigations in social psychology that established attribution processes are susceptible to accessibility effects (e.g., Anderson and Slusher 1986; Pryor and Kriss 1977; Rholes and Pryor 1982; Smith and Miller 1979). For example, Rholes and Pryor (1982) provided data showing that recently activated causal agents are given more weight in making causal judgments. More recently, Strange and Leung (1999) demonstrated that brief episodic experiences conveyed through news accounts selectively activated certain judgments of a given problem's causes and cures and the priority with which the problem should be addressed. Given the deficiencies both in the deliberateness with which individuals confront political information—via their limited processing capacities—and the clarity of causal determinants underlying most political issues and events, it therefore appears reasonable to expect activation processes to affect causal attributions in ways that are similar to their effects on opinions.

Indeed, Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh (1988) found that media cues influence who voters hold responsible for personal economic problems by increasing coverage of the economy. Voters are more likely to punish or reward political leaders for their personal financial situation if they connect government economic policy to their own pocketbooks. In a similar manner, elected officials may be able to manipulate voters' perceptions—and subsequent credit or blame—of policy decisions, the consequences of policy choices, and even personal scandal by providing causal explanations, accounts, or “interpretations” of events (McGraw 1991; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995). However, the literature has neglected the potential impact of alternative depictions of blame for tragic events on citizens' attributions of responsibility for these events.

The framing literature has principally centered on welfare (Smith 1987), affirmative action (Kinder and Sanders 1990; Gamson and Modigliani 1989), government spending (Jacoby 2000; Nelson and Kinder 1996), and civil liberties (Chong 1996; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). We wish to add regulation of guns to this list, citing several reasons to justify its inclusion. First, distinct from the aforementioned policy areas, the temporal stability of opinion on gun issues (Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen 1996, 154–55), and the noted intensity of positions (Schuman and Presser 1996, Chapter 9) suggests considerable resistance to political frames (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991, 669). Gun issues thus pose a particularly stringent test of framing. Second, elected officials appear less responsive to public opinion on gun issues, suggesting that elites may be making a greater effort to lead public opinion rather than follow (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2000), heightening the import of issue framing (Jones 1994; McGraw 1991; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995). Finally, gun issues received significant electoral attention in several high-profile state ballot initiatives as well as the 2000 presidential campaigns and have been dramatically magnified by recent tragedies (Kuczynski 1999; Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2000; Lloyd 1999; Pierpoint 2000; Wagar 1999a, 1999b).

Thus, our broad research question is whether alternative issue frames will affect opinion about gun-related policies and blame attributions for shooting tragedies. More narrowly, we ask the following: (1) whether support for concealed handgun laws is greater when framed one way as opposed to another, (2) whether partisanship and political knowledge moderate the influence of alternative frames, and (3) whether frames influence attributions of blame for the Columbine shootings.

Study 1: Support for a Concealed Handgun Law

All adults in Kansas represented the population of interest. The population was sampled using a random digit dialing telephone survey from March 7 to April 3, 1999. Our survey concerned several public policy issues and took 15 minutes to complete. The cooperation rate was 81%.¹ Although somewhat better educated and older than the general population, sample characteristics are a reasonably accurate demographic portrait of Kansas (see Appendix for profile details).

The content of the experimental frames was designed to mimic political debate on concealed handgun laws (Kinder and Sanders 1990). We exploited campaign rhetoric from recent state ballot initiatives concerning handguns. Gun control proponents typically emphasized threats to public safety, especially the safety of school children. One particularly memorable advertisement in a Missouri initiative for allowing concealed handgun permits suggested citizens would be able to carry Uzi semiautomatic pistols onto school grounds (Wagar 1999a). Opponents repeatedly argued that carrying a gun is an individual right. The successful theme in a Washington initiative was “guns do not kill, people do” (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2000), and some in Missouri argued further that citizens are better able to protect themselves from criminals by exercising their constitutional rights “to protect themselves” (Wagar 1999b).

We adopted such language to construct an individual rights frame and a public safety frame. Prior to asking respondents their degree of support for a concealed handgun law, they were randomly assigned to one of the following frames:

- “Concealed handgun laws have recently received national attention. Some people have argued that law-abiding citizens have the **right** to protect themselves. What do you think about concealed handgun laws?”
- “Concealed handgun laws have recently received national attention. Some people have argued that laws allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns **threaten public safety** because they would allow almost anyone to carry a gun almost anywhere, even onto **school grounds**. What do you think about concealed handgun laws?”

¹The cooperation rate is the percentage of adults contacted who agreed to complete the survey. The contact rate, or percentage of households in which an adult was contacted and asked to complete the survey, was 63%.

Citizens' rights are emphasized in the first frame, casting debate about concealed handgun laws in constitutional principles. We label this as the individual rights frame because it attempts to tap devotion to liberty and individualism (McClosky and Zaller 1984). By contrast, the second frame stresses the potential consequences to society rather than individuals. The frame evokes issues of public safety in general, while providing a subtle cue of recent gun-related tragedies in schools. We expect frames will increase the accessibility of specific considerations—public safety or individual rights. Relative to respondents in the individual rights frame, respondents in the safety condition should exhibit greater opposition to concealed handgun laws.

Results of Study 1

Our preliminary data analyses revealed significant variation in aggregate opinion between experimental conditions. Opinion distributions are exhibited in Figure 1. Note that the distributions are bimodal, which is consistent with previous surveys on this issue (Spitzer 1998). Note also that the distribution means conform well to the intended direction of the frames. The one-point difference in means reflects a significantly greater number of strong concealed handgun supporters under the individual rights frame—approximately 10% of the sample. Although extreme opinions and opinion rigidity tend to characterize gun-related issues, it appears that alternative frames can influence opinion on concealed handgun laws

To determine if opinion differences can be attributed to alternative information frames, independent of other relevant predictors, we utilize a multivariate model. Based on previous studies we anticipate a number of factors determining support for concealed handgun laws. Partisanship should play a role as Republicans are more supportive of concealed handgun laws (Gimpel 1998; Kleck 1996; Langer 1999). In addition, the highly educated are more likely to oppose concealed handgun laws, while gun owners are likely to be more supportive and women and older individuals less supportive (Danigelis and Cutler 1991; Newport 1999b). We also included a political information index, capturing knowledge of political affairs (Price and Zaller 1993; see Appendix for descriptive statistics).²

Given response categories for our question about concealed handguns are ordered but do not form an interval scale, estimates are derived from an ordered

²Our index is an additive score (0–4) based on the number of political knowledge questions a respondent answered correctly. The political knowledge questions were: 1. Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Al Gore? 2. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not: Is it the President, the Congress, or the Supreme Court? 3. How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto? 4. Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington?

FIGURE 1

Support for Concealed Handgun Law by Experimental Frame

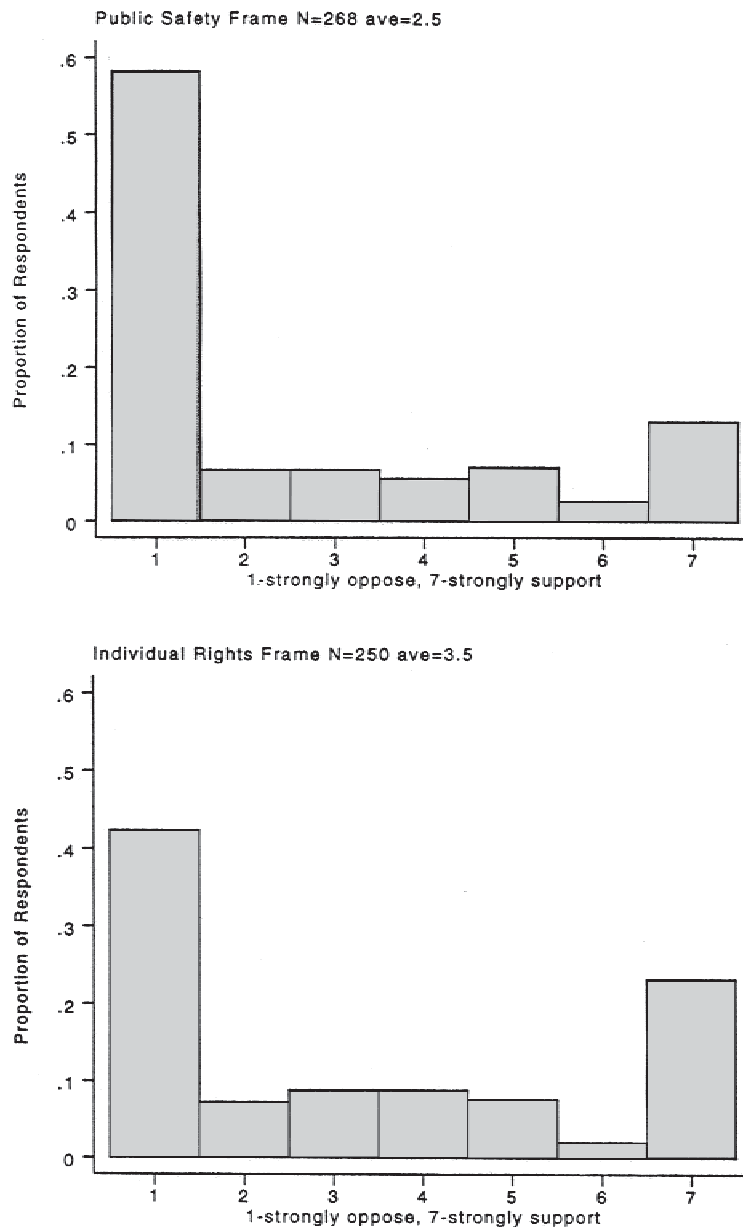


TABLE 1
Determinants of Support for a Concealed Handgun Law

Study 1 Kansas Adults' Variables	Ordered Logit Coefficients	t-Score
Gun Safety Frame	-.674** (.189)	-3.559
Gun Ownership	1.054** (.192)	5.463
Female	-.915** (.202)	4.529
Partisanship	1.809** (.345)	5.245
Political Knowledge	-.387 (.390)	-.992
Education	-.457 (.301)	-1.521
Age	-.739* (.413)	-1.787
Pseudo R Squared	.08	
Chi Squared	106.38**	
Log Likelihood	-616.681	
Number of Cases	445	
Cut point 1	-.307 (.423)	
Cut point 2	.048 (.423)	
Cut point 3	.464 (.423)	
Cut point 4	.830 (.425)	
Cut point 5	1.367 (.429)	
Cut point 6	1.544 (.431)	

Notes: Coefficients are Ordered Logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05; *Sig. < .10. Question used for the dependent variable: "How strongly do you support or oppose a proposed state law allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns?" (see Appendix for variable coding). All variables are standardized on a scale from 0 to 1.

Logit model displayed in Table 1.³ As expected, gun owners and Republicans are more supportive of concealed handgun laws whereas women and older people are less supportive. More important, even after controlling for conventional determinants, estimated differences between gun frames are statistically significant, correctly signed, and substantively meaningful. For example, the predicted probability of reporting strong opposition to concealed handgun laws—the modal category exhibited in both frames—is approximately .60 in the gun safety frame while reduced considerably to .41 by the individual rights frame.

³ Estimates derived from an OLS regression provide similar results—both in terms of statistical significance and substantive interpretation.

Partisanship and Political Knowledge

Our next step is to consider partisan categories across the two experimental frames. Given Republicans' adherence to individual liberties and less government (Carmines and Layman 1999; Feldman 1999), we expect opinion considerations emphasized by the individual rights frame to reinforce this propensity. Likewise, we also anticipate Republicans to readily accept an emphasis on public safety (Haider-Markel and O'Brien 1997). Accordingly, Republicans, pulled in opposite directions by competing, relevant considerations, should display significant opinion differentiation across information frames. This same pattern is likely for Independents but for different reasons. Independents, not possessing the type of political cognitions that may predictably counter highlighted considerations, are hypothesized to accept considerations from both frames.

However, the situation should be very different among Democrats. Given Democrats' support for government and gun control, their natural inclinations should be buttressed by the safety frame. But considerations emphasized by the individual rights frame are inconsistent with Democrats' predispositions on gun issues (Newport 1999b). In other words, Democrats are not cross-pressured by competing considerations to the same extent as Republicans, nor do they lack sufficient predispositions like Independents. Our alternative gun frames should then play a major role in shaping the political thinking of Republicans and Independents, a minor role if any in shaping the thinking of Democrats.

To examine these hypotheses, we partitioned the sample by party identification and estimated the effect of alternative frames. We are therefore comparing the reported opinions of each partisan group across the two experimental frames.⁴ Although all variables were retained for model estimation, Table 2 presents only the estimates that distinguish whether opinion differences emerge across frames. The results show that Republicans and Independents' opinions on concealed handgun laws are most influenced by alternative frames and that they are less likely to support such laws in the safety frame. By contrast, the impact of frames is not evident for Democrats. Thus, while framing is a significant factor for the sample as a whole, it is clearly most important for shaping the thinking of Republicans and Independents.

⁴This method of data analyses was favored over the traditional product term interaction for two important reasons. First, our theoretical proposition concerned presumed differences *within* partisan groups across the two experimental frames. That is, how distinct are Republicans, Independents, and Democrats' reported opinions on concealed handguns from one frame to the next. By sub sampling the data by partisan category, relative differences *within* groups across frames can be ascertained. Second, the typical product term interaction specified within the full model yields a comparison of partisan differences across frames. The resulting coefficient conceals the nature of change across partisan categories, as it compares differences between partisan groups—as opposed to differences within partisan categories—across frames. The product term interaction thus provides a significantly different interpretation of the data—indicating the degree to which alternative frames inflame or reduce partisan differences—a perspective not explicitly addressed by our theoretical proposition.

TABLE 2
 Determinants of Support for a Concealed Handgun Law;
 Partisanship Across Issue Frames

Study 1 Kansas Adults' Variables	Coefficient for Difference Between Frames	t-Score	Model Chi-Square	Log Likelihood
Democrats Only	-.290 (.358)	-.811	30.99**	-180.209
Independents Only	-1.047** (.480)	-2.181	28.47**	-107.902
Republicans Only	-.765** (.266)	-2.873	35.26**	-317.317

Notes: Coefficients are Ordered Logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05; *Sig. < .10. Question used for the dependent variable: "How strongly do you support or oppose a proposed state law allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns?" (see Appendix for variable coding). Only results for gun safety frame variable are shown, but results are based on full model estimation.

We also examined the degree to which respondents' level of political knowledge may condition the effectiveness of alternative frames. The politically informed and uninformed differ in the amount and nature of information they process and retain (Lodge 1995). High knowledge respondents possess a vast store of information that can provide resistance to external information cues (Converse 1962; McGuire 1968). As such, opinions are based on a broad spectrum of previously acquired information, with new bits of information having a diminished efficacy to affect opinion. By contrast, less knowledgeable respondents are unable to draw upon an extensive information reserve. Rather, they are more likely to accommodate new information frames (Kinder and Sanders 1990). We therefore expect the highly knowledgeable respondents to exhibit opinion stability across experimental conditions. Table 3 presents the information frame estimates by level of political knowledge.⁵ As expected, the estimate for high knowledge respondents indicates opinion stability whereas the less knowledgeable exhibit significant differences across experimental conditions.

To this point, the evidence demonstrates that alternative representations of concealed handgun laws are significant predictors of support for such laws. When framed as a threat to public safety, support for concealed handgun laws

⁵ Political knowledge was divided into two groups based on a mean split of the index. Those above the sample mean were categorized as high knowledge those below were labeled low.

TABLE 3
 Determinants of Support for a Concealed Handgun Law;
 Political Knowledge Across Issue Frames

Study 2 Kansas Adults' Variables	Coefficient for Difference Between Frames	t-Score	Model Chi-Square	Log Likelihood
Low Knowledge	-.958** (.264)	-3.624	60.31	-319.172
High Knowledge	-.358 (.277)	-1.293	52.24	-292.451

Notes: Coefficients are Ordered Logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05; *Sig. < .10. Question used for the dependent variable: "How strongly do you support or oppose a proposed state law allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns?" (see Appendix for variable coding). Only results for gun safety frame variable are shown, but results are based on full model estimation.

is low. Yet support is higher when the issue is presented as an individual right.⁶ Republicans, Independents, and low knowledge respondents appear most sensitive to our particular presentations. Although these findings are important, we also wish to explore whether framing influences attributions of blame. Specifically, can framing alter respondents' causal beliefs about why an event such as the Columbine shooting occurred?

Study 2: Littleton, Colorado and Blame Attribution

A Gallup Poll administered in the days following the Columbine shooting asked respondents the following open-ended question: "In your opinion, why did this [the shootings at Columbine] happen?" The modal response category concerned the parents and family of the two assailants (20%). Another 6% of

⁶We argued that the content of the safety and rights frames drive opinion differences. However, we cannot be as definitive regarding the specific content responsible for differences. The public safety frame draws attention to the issue of safety generally, but also introduces a potentially confounding emphasis of guns on school grounds. To determine whether the secondary emphasis of guns and schools was responsible for the opinion difference—as opposed to public safety more generally—we utilized 40 undergraduate subjects in an additional experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two framing conditions. One group of 20 read the precise public safety frame introduced in this study then responded to the same question on concealed handgun laws. The other group of 20 subjects read only the first portion of the safety frame, with "even on school grounds" deleted. If in fact respondent's levels of support differ, then it may be attributed to the content differences across frames. However, if not, we have evidence that either version of the public safety frame affects opinion in a similar manner. A difference in means test showed no opinion differences in this specific sample ($m = 4.9$ to $m = 4.75$, $t = .31$ n.s.). We are indebted to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to this issue.

the sample blamed teasing from other kids, 2% blamed violence in the entertainment industry, 2% cited lack of morality in the country, and only 1% blamed guns. The remaining responses were too diverse to collapse into categories above 1% (Gillespie 1999).

Based on these figures, the public held parents most responsible for the Columbine shootings.⁷ However, elected officials did not seek to exploit this particular attribution but rather focused on guns and the entertainment industry. Congressional Democrats insisted that weak gun control policies were responsible, while Republicans attributed responsibility to violent images in the entertainment media. Though family and parental issues were not ignored (Rosin 1999), existing policy proposals addressing gun control and media violence were evidently more easily accessed and utilized by opposing parties. So while citizens were more likely to hold individuals responsible, elites active in policy debates selected causal frames associated with existing public policy solutions (Kingdon 1995).

Shortly after the Columbine shooting, we conducted a random telephone survey of adults in Kansas to examine the effects of framing on attributions of blame. The questions were added to an annual state survey that examines political views and consumer confidence. A total of 490 surveys were completed from April 26 to May 14, 1999. Our cooperation rate was 84% and our contact rate was 67%. As with the first study, the sample was somewhat better educated and older than the population but shared important demographic characteristics (see Appendix).

Respondents were randomly assigned to three conditions: (1) a control group, (2) a “blame gun laws” frame, and (3) a “blame violence in the media” frame. Like Gallup, we opted for an open-ended response format. The following question was posed to control group respondents:

“You have probably heard about the recent school shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Who or what do you think is most to blame for why this tragedy occurred?”

The respondents exposed to the “blame gun laws” frame were read the following:

“You have probably heard about the recent school shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Many people are suggesting that *weak gun control laws* should be blamed for the shootings. Who or what do you think is most to blame for why this tragedy occurred?”

And respondents exposed to the “blame violence in the media” frame received the following:

“You have probably heard about the recent school shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Many people are suggesting that *violence on television*, in the *movies*, and in *video games* should

⁷Gallup took a second poll at the end of April 1999. The distribution was similar to the previous poll but categorical percentages significantly higher. Most respondents still blamed the parents or the family (40%), but more respondents attributed blame to guns (4%) and the media (4%) (Newport 1999a). It appears respondents began to coalesce around particular causal attributions over time.

be blamed for the shootings. Who or what do you think is most to blame for why this tragedy occurred?"

Although these frames are relatively simple, they mimic the thrust of the policy debate occurring in Congress, national media, and state legislatures following the shootings (Lloyd 1999). Policymakers focused largely on the suspected causal antecedents in the social environment, seemingly less preoccupied by dispositional properties of the persons involved. The question we therefore ask is whether these societal attributions primed by alternative frames shape respondents' attributions for the Columbine tragedy.

Table 4 displays the frequency of responses for several categories of blame across the control and experimental conditions. Consistent with the Gallup Poll, respondents across each condition were more likely to attribute blame for the tragedy to parents or family. However, respondents were more likely to blame guns in the blame gun laws frame than in the control condition (16.9% to 3.4%). Gun related attributions were in fact second only to parents and family in the blame guns condition. Also, the blame media violence frame appears quite effective. Approximately 9% of control group blamed the shooting on violence in the media, whereas 26% did so in the media violence frame. Although the differences are substantial, they may also be influenced by demographic and political variations among the samples. To control for these differences, we again employ multivariate analyses.

TABLE 4
Comparison of Respondent Attribution of Blame
Based on Exposure to Issue Frames of Blame
Attribution for Shooting in Littleton, Colorado

Study 2 Kansas Adults' Blame Responses	Control Group	Blame Guns Frame group	Blame Media Violence Frame group
Parents/Family	40.5%	45.0%	47.5%
The kids/Mental Illness	17.6%	7.5%	9.5%
Society/Culture	9.5%	6.9%	4.4%
Violence in the Media	8.8%	6.9%	25.9%
Declining Moral Values/lack of religion/God	4.7%	5.6%	5.1%
Weak Gun Control/Guns	3.4%	16.9%	1.3%
The schools/security	3.4%	4.4%	1.9%
Government/justice system	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Gangs/peers	1.4%	0.0%	1.3%
Other	7.4%	6.9%	3.2%
Chi-Square		15.04**	15.94**
Number of Cases	148	160	158

Notes: Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .01. Chi-square tests are conducted between the control group and each frame group separately. Respondents with no opinion were not included.

Our first model considers the differences in attributions between the control and the blame guns laws frame. We constructed a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondent blamed guns or gun laws and 0 for all other response categories. In the second model, we estimate differences in media attributions between the control and media violence frame. A second dichotomous variable was constructed with respondents receiving a 1 if attributing blame to the media and 0 otherwise.

The key independent variables document whether a respondent was in the control group or one of the experimental frame groups. Assignment to one of the experimental frames received a 1 and a 0 if in the control. Based on previous research (Danigelis and Cutler 1991; Newport 1999b), several political and demographic variables were also utilized in the model, including party identification, gender, education, and age (see Appendix).

Study 2 Results

Binary Logit estimates for both models are displayed in Table 5.⁸ Estimates show that the likelihood of attributing blame to guns is significantly greater for Democrats and women. These two groups are strong supporters of gun control measures and for this reason are likely to attribute blame for Columbine to guns (Kleck 1996; Langer 1999; Saad 1999). More important, even after controlling for important social and political characteristics, respondents exposed to the blame gun laws frame exhibit a greater likelihood of designating guns or weak gun control laws as the cause of the Columbine shootings. Predicted probabilities reveal more clearly the extent of the impact. Holding all other variables at theoretically meaningful values—continuous variables are set at their

⁸Our other option here was to follow the rationale of Whitten and Palmer (1996), who argue that binary Logit artificially limits the response categories. Thus, in our case they may suggest using multinomial Logit. Although we agree with their argument as it concerns vote choice in multi-party elections, the theoretical rationale for how or why our issue frames might impact respondent attributions of blame to categories other than guns or the media is not clear, nor our primary focus. Nonetheless, we did construct a new dependent variable by creating a multiple category variable (with four categories, including blamed guns, blamed media violence, blamed the kids, and blamed the parents; a fifth category, “all others,” was used as the baseline). This variable was used in estimating a multinomial Logit model. Although not shown here, the results are statistically and substantively similar to what we found with binary Logit for our variables of interest (the results are available from the authors). Interestingly, the estimates show that the frames also influenced the likelihood a respondent would blame the parents, a relationship we had not discussed and did not have any theoretical reason for examining. We suspect that the media frame increased the probability a respondent would blame the parents because the frame may have primed respondents’ ideas concerning who is most responsible for regulating children’s exposure to certain media. Following this logic blame may be reasonably attributed to the parents. The gun frame also approached statistical significance in predicting the likelihood a respondent would blame the parents. Again this would make sense if we consider that parents have the most control over whether or not their children are exposed to guns.

TABLE 5
Determinants of Blame Attribution for Shooting
in Littleton, Colorado

Study 2 Kansas Adults Variables	Model 1 Blame Guns Coefficients	Model 2 Blame Media Violence Coefficients
Weak Gun Laws Frame	1.778** (.511)	—
Violence Depicted in the Media Frame	— (.364)	1.312**
Female	.628* (.442)	.814** (.363)
Education	.118 (.183)	-.371** (.174)
Partisanship	.182* (.116)	-.228** (.101)
Age	-.010 (.012)	-.014 (.009)
Constant	-4.927** (1.257)	-1.048 (1.008)
Pseudo R Square	.15	.18
% Correctly Predicted	88.69	83.10
Chi Square	22.96**	33.01**
Log Likelihood	176.78	239.79
Goodness of Fit	282.83	277.94
Number of Cases	283	290

Notes: Coefficients are Logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05; *Sig. < .10. Model 1 includes all respondents exposed to the “weak gun laws” frame and the control group while model two contains all respondents exposed to the “violence in the media” frame and the control group. Using an open-ended question, the frame variables are coded as a 1 if the respondent attributed blame in accordance with the frame and 0 for any other response.

means and discrete variables at their modes—the likelihood of attributing blame to guns increases from .03 in the control to .30 in the blame gun laws frame.

Column 2 presents the estimates for the blame media violence model. Women and Republicans appear more likely to blame the media, while respondents with higher levels of education are less likely to blame media violence. These results appear to support polls that show gender and partisan cleavages concerning the effects of media content (Cowan, Chase, and Stahly 1989; Gunther 1995; Saad 1999). What is more, the media frame imposes an independent effect on attributions. Respondents exposed to this characterization of the causes of the Columbine shootings were predicted to be .16 more likely to attribute blame for the shootings to media violence than those in the control group. In short,

results suggest that both frames influenced respondents' attributions of blame. This is strong evidence that the causal theories and beliefs that often underlie mass opinions can be shaped by how a tragedy is framed.

Partisanship

Next, we again examine the influence of party identification on frame effectiveness. As before, frames are expected to reinforce partisan propensities, resonating with predispositions that are congruent with frame direction. Given the partisan nature of congressional debate after Columbine, we expect the causal beliefs underscored by the blame gun laws frame to bolster Democrats, creating a significant disparity in the nature of attributions between control and experimental conditions. Similarly, the blame media violence frame should be a potent force in strengthening Republican predispositions toward the media. On the other hand, Democrats and Republicans are unlikely to show significant differences between control and experimental conditions when the frame direction is inconsistent with their predispositions.

Table 6 provides evidence bearing on these postulates. Estimates indicate that Democrats are in fact most sensitive to the blame gun laws frame whereas Republicans and Independents are not. As shown in Table 7, Republicans appear most influenced by the blame media violence frame, while the nonsignificant estimate for Democrats suggests no apparent differences in attributions compared to the control condition.

Clearly, alternative frames influence respondents' attributions, yet effects are conditioned by partisan predispositions. Consistent with the arguments used by

TABLE 6

Determinants of Blame Attribution for Shooting in Littleton, Colorado; Partisanship and Blame Guns Frame

Study 2 Kansas Adults Variables	Blame Guns Frame Coefficients	Wald	Pseudo R-Square	Chi Square
Democrats Only	2.599** (1.102)	5.568	.37	20.775**
Independents Only	1.184 (.875)	1.829	.09	3.649
Republicans Only	1.282 (.838)	2.343	.07	3.674

Notes: Coefficients are Logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05. The model includes all respondents exposed to the "weak gun laws" frame and the control group. Using an open ended question, the frame variables are coded as a 1 if the respondent attributed blame in accordance with the frame and 0 for any other response (see Appendix for variable coding). Only results for issue frame variable are shown, but results are based on full model estimation.

TABLE 7
 Determinants of Blame Attribution for Shooting in
 Littleton, Colorado; Partisanship and the Violence in the Media Frame

Study 2 Kansas Adults Variables	Blame Violence in the Media Frame Coefficients	Wald	Pseudo R-Square	Chi Square
Democrats Only	.784 (.475)	2.726	.35	16.782**
Independents Only	.692** (.307)	5.067	.18	11.911**
Republicans Only	.726** (.296)	6.033	.17	12.674**

Notes: Coefficients are Logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis. Two tailed significance test = **Sig. < .05. The model includes all respondents exposed to the “violence in the media” frame and the control group. Using an open-ended question, the frame variables are coded as a 1 if the respondent attributed blame in accordance with the frame and 0 for any other response (see Appendix for variable coding). Only results for issue frame variable are shown, but results are based on full model estimation.

Democrats in Congress, Democratic respondents in our survey were most responsive to the blame guns frame. Likewise, Republicans were most susceptible to the blame media violence frame, the same frame used by Republicans in congressional debate shortly after the Columbine tragedy. Although we cannot definitively assert that partisans in our sample were influenced by the congressional debate, our simulation of frames does suggest that the actual representations utilized by elites are useful for influencing blame attributions of partisan constituents. Our results also suggest that frames are unlikely to influence the attributions of citizens who are not predisposed to the message. Thus, if elites make use of partisan frames, they are unlikely to “convert” anyone. Rather, frames are most likely to reinforce or activate partisan attributions.

Conclusions

Although guns are ubiquitous in our culture, the rash of mass shootings in spring 1999 brought increased political attention to gun policy (Kuczynski 1999; Lloyd 1999; Newport 1999b). We examined whether alternative information frames might influence citizens’ opinions about gun policy and attributions of blame for mass shootings within this highly charged political environment. Given the temporal consistency and relative intensity of opinion on guns, one might expect that issue frames would be ineffective (Lau, Smith, and Fiske 1991, 669). We nevertheless posited that influence was possible if frames were accessible, political predispositions were consistent with the frame, and political knowledge was low.

Our first study examined support for a concealed handgun law. The frames mirrored language used in recent state ballot initiative campaigns. Opponents of gun control raised the specter of big government usurping individual rights while proponents underscored public safety, especially the security of school-age children. Our results indicated that alternative gun frames do in fact influence respondent opinion. Republicans, Independents, and respondents with low political knowledge exhibited the greatest sensitivity to alternative frames. Thus, while frames may influence opinion, their influence is conditioned by predispositions (Converse 1962).

Our second study explored attributions of blame for the Columbine High School shootings. Utilizing an open-ended response format, respondents receiving experimental frames were quite willing to attribute blame to primed subject matter—media violence or weak gun laws. However, partisanship once again conditioned the influence of frames. Democrats' attributions were sensitive to the gun law frame but not the media violence frame. Conversely, the media frame, but not the gun law frame, influenced Republicans' blame attributions.

These results contribute to issue framing and policy theories in a number of ways. First, while issue framing studies concentrate on opinion, comparably few emphasize causal attributions (Iyengar 1991). Political thinking is full of causal mysteries. Particular linkages of cause and effect can induce specific dynamics in the mass public, whether attitudinal or behavioral. The fact that issue frames can activate specific causal chains underscores the importance of issue presentation during policy formulation (Portz 1996; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Characterizations of political events and tragedies are not simply rhetorical representations but rather important determinants of citizens' causal reasoning. Indeed, while congressional Democrats framed the Columbine shootings as a result of weak gun laws, Republicans turned their attention to violence in the media. Each frame endorsed a specific causal chain that advanced a distinct policy objective. We discovered these frames affected mass attributions but that they were especially effective in reinforcing existing partisan beliefs of cause and effect. Thus, frames may contribute to partisan polarization and a subsequent lack of consensus on inflammatory political issues.⁹

Second, our research raises the possibility of a link between the nature of attributions and attitudes toward government intervention (Haider-Markel and O'Brien 1997; Jones 1994; Portz 1996), but more research is needed. For example, are individualistic attributions like blaming parents for the Columbine tragedy associated with greater or less support for government action? How are societal-level attributions of responsibility for Columbine—media violence and gun laws—related to attitudes about government intervention in these policy areas? Subsequent research may even ask whether beliefs about the causes of

⁹Our results also reaffirm the import of frames in policy debate. The availability of accessible frames determines who is mobilized to participate, and subsequently, the potential for policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones 1994).

tragedies affect presidential support (Iyengar 1991). In the present political context of events such as Columbine, Waco, or the Oklahoma City bombing, public assessments of presidential response to the causes of tragic events may be increasingly important for determining presidential support.

Third, while we have presumed that frames selectively activate specific beliefs or considerations and that these considerations become the basis for opinion, we cannot rule out the potential effects of framing on the perceived importance of specific considerations (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Although a definitive adjudication between accessibility and importance models was not the purpose here (e.g., Nelson and Oxley 1999), the mediating effects of partisan predispositions and political knowledge do suggest that mere activation is not the only story (Gross 2000). Our theoretical reasoning regarding differences among party identifiers was in fact based largely on an understanding of what considerations would be relevant to partisans, and that frames would make such considerations more accessible. Our results generally confirmed this reasoning and make clear that research hypotheses generated to investigate the effects of framing on identified groups will necessarily include *a priori* assumptions about the importance of specific opinion considerations. In other words, identification of opinion considerations that are likely to be meaningful to respondents—or groups of respondents—are necessary for a statement about when the frame may succeed. We do not view our results as entirely in the accessibility or importance camp, but as a contribution to a developing theory of framing effects.

Finally, this study deliberately exploited the stimulus of actual events. Much of the framing literature examines opinion stemming from hypothetical situations involving tradeoffs or value conflicts. By contrast, the topic of our frames was immediate, tangible, salient, and the topic of considerable attention by partisan political entrepreneurs in Congress. One might expect the use of high visibility issues may diminish the influence of frames. People might be better equipped to formulate independent attributions of responsibility, especially when provided an open-ended response, as in our second study. Frames are nonetheless effective in such circumstances. Our results thus indirectly implicate the importance of policy entrepreneurs in advancing issue frames during periods of extensive public attention. The stimulus associated with focusing events, combined with the political dialogue that follows, provides a valuable and rich resource for future studies of issue framing.

Appendix

Descriptive Statistics for Two Studies of Issue Framing

	Number	Percent		
<i>Study 1: Kansas Adults: Question on Concealed Weapons</i>			<i>National/Kansas</i>	
<i>Support for a Law Allowing Concealed Handgun Permits</i>			<i>National^a</i>	
1 Strongly Support	93	18.0%	Approve 22%	
2	12	2.3%		
3	38	7.3%		
4	37	7.1%		
5	40	7.7%		
6	36	6.9%		
7 Strongly Oppose	262	50.6%	Disapprove 73%	
<i>Gun Ownership</i>			<i>Midwest Only^b</i>	
0 No	320	60.6%	60%	
1 Yes	208	39.4%	39%	
<i>Partisanship</i>			<i>Kansas^c</i>	
1 Strong Republican	57	11.1%		
2 Somewhat strong Republican	72	14.1%	All Rep. 44.8%	
3 Weak Republican	99	19.3%		
4 Independent	103	20.1%	All Ind. 25.2%	
5 Weak Democrat	86	16.8%		
6 Somewhat strong Democrat	51	10.0%	All Dem. 29%	
7 Strong Democrat	44	8.6%		
<i>Age</i>				
Interval level in years	median years	45	<i>Kansas^d</i> 33.1	
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Kansas^e</i>	
1 Female	350	64.3%	51%	
0 Male	194	35.7%	49%	
<i>Education</i>			<i>Kansas^f</i>	
1 Less than 9th grade	1	0.2%		
2 Some High School	18	3.4%		
3 High School or GED	115	21.8%	sum 96.4%	81.3%
4 Some College	140	26.5%		
5 Two-year degree	56	10.6%		
6 Four-year degree	111	21.0%	21.1%	
7 Some graduate school	19	3.6%		
8 Graduate degree	68	12.9%		
<i>Political Knowledge Index*</i>				
0 Questions correct	43	7.9%	—	
1 Question correct	55	10.1%		
2 Questions correct	80	14.6%		
3 Questions correct	150	27.4%		
4 Questions correct	219	40.0%		
<i>Frame</i>				
0 Exposed to Rights Frame	250	48.3%	—	
1 Exposed to Safety Frame	268	52.7%		
Total Number of Cases	518			

(continued)

Appendix—Continued

	Number	Percent		
<i>Study 2: Adults: Attribution of Blame for Columbine Shootings</i>			<i>National/Kansas</i>	
<i>Partisanship</i>			<i>Kansas</i>	
7 Strong Republican	29	6.3%		
6 Somewhat strong Republican	86	18.7%	All Rep.	44.8%
5 Weak Republican	58	12.6%		
4 Independent	155	33.8%	All Ind.	25.2%
3 Weak Democrat	39	8.5%		
2 Somewhat strong Democrat	56	12.2%	All Dem.	29%
1 Strong Democrat	36	7.8%		
<i>Age</i>				
Interval level in years	median years	47	<i>Kansas</i>	33.1
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Kansas</i>	
1 Female	295	60.7%		51%
0 Male	191	39.3%		49%
<i>Education</i>			<i>Kansas</i>	
1 Less than High School	24	5.0%		
2 High School or GED	139	28.8%	sum 95%	81.3%
3 Some College	166	34.4%		
4 Four-Year College Degree	104	21.5%		21.1%
5 Graduate Degree	50	10.4%		
Total Number of Cases	490			

Notes: Both studies were random sample telephone surveys conducted in Kansas during spring 1999. *See footnote seven for the questions constituting the political knowledge index.

^aData are from a NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll conducted April 17–19, 1999 with 1,006 adults nationwide. The question asked was: “Do you approve or disapprove of the idea of passing new laws to make it easier for people to carry concealed weapons?”

^bData are from Gillespie (1999a).

^cData are from the Kansas Secretary of State.

^dData are from the 1990 U.S. Census.

^eData are from the 1990 U.S. Census.

^fData are from the 1990 U.S. Census.

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