

Framing Education Policy: Do Words Really Matter?

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The way information is presented, also known as framing, has the ability to influence public opinion and legislation. Framing is particularly relevant in education policy, where wording can impact political support and the legislative process. This research seeks to understand framing—specifically, word choice—and how it affects opinions on key education issues like school vouchers, teacher pay, pre-K accessibility, and general public school funding.

With Texas' 89th Legislative Session approaching, debates on the allocation of education funds and potential threats, such as the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education, are at the forefront of public discourse. These legislative actions could profoundly impact the structure of Texas schools and the equitable distribution of resources.

Texas consistently ranks low in national education assessments, highlighting systemic issues in funding and resource allocation. The state's basic educational allotment has remained stagnant since 2019, failing to keep pace with inflation and increasing educational demands (TPR, 2023). This financial stagnation has led to budget crises in numerous school districts. Additionally, the push for school vouchers in Texas has sparked significant controversy. Proponents argue that vouchers provide parents with more educational choices, fostering competition among schools. Critics, however, contend that diverting public funds to private institutions undermines public education, exacerbating existing inequities and depleting resources for the majority of students who remain in public schools (KVUE, 2023).

Despite acknowledging the importance of education and the economic development and social advancement it offers, support for education policy tends to depend on how it's written. For example, presenting salary increases for teachers as investments in quality education may garner greater public support than describing them as an increase in taxes. This research attempts

to understand these nuances as to offer recommendations for education policy advocates and legislators.

Foundations of Framing Research

Political psychology and communication have a rich history of studying the effects of framing. In their work, *The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice*, psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1981) demonstrated that the way an issue is presented—either as a gain or a loss—affects how people make decisions about that issue. They found that people are more likely to support something if it is framed as helping them avoid a loss, because they seem to have a natural inclination to protect what they already have. For instance, when a state's educational system is presented as at serious risk of "losing" its current quality because the system is underfunded, more citizens might be inclined to support an increase in the state's budget for public education than if the benefits of the increased funding were emphasized instead. Their research conceptualized that individuals evaluate potential losses and gains differently, leading to decisions that stray from the theory of rational choice.

Shanto Iyengar's book, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, adds depth to the body of work on framing effects. Iyengar and his colleagues conducted research on two styles of framing: episodic and thematic. Iyengar's studies revealed that episodic framing, which focuses on specific events or individuals, often leads audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals, and thematic framing, which provides broader context, encourages attributions to systemic factors. For instance, presenting a teacher's struggle due to low pay as part of a larger systemic issue can gain public support for policy changes addressing teacher compensation.

Additionally, Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman (2007) contribute to research on the dynamics of competitive framing by demonstrating how competing narratives can influence public opinion. Their findings show that the frame perceived as "stronger" or more relevant often dominates, particularly when it aligns with individuals' preexisting beliefs or values. Public education advocates might emphasize long-term societal benefits, such as economic growth and improved equity, while opponents focus on immediate costs. Lastly, Chong and Druckman analysis contributes to the conversation by highlighting how the strength of a frame can ultimately dictate its success.

Surveying Public Opinion

The study collected survey data from a Government 312 class which consisted of 807 people. Respondents were asked questions on major education policy questions: school funding, teacher salary, access to pre-K, and school choice. These questions were asked in two different ways. For one set, the study used "positive" or benefit-focused language (e.g., "Do you support expanding universal pre-K programs to ensure that all children, regardless of background, have access to early education?"). For the other set, they used "cost-sensitive" language that focused on the financial trade-offs (e.g., "Do you support increasing taxes to fund state pre-K programs for families who currently cannot afford private preschool?"). The study then looked at how well the question wording predicted the respondents' answers and whether certain demographic factors displayed correlations.

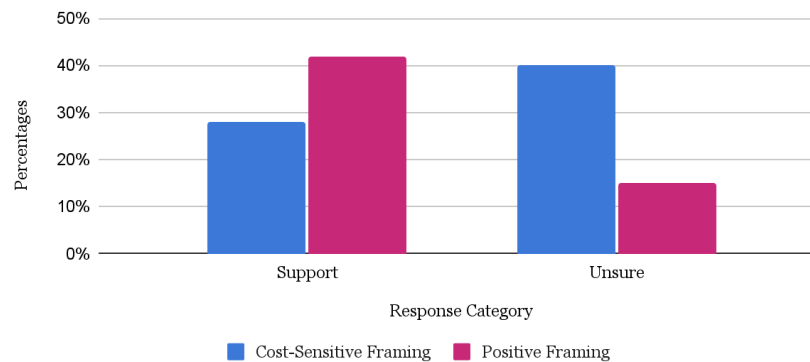
Findings on Framing Effects

Positive framing emphasizing "expanding opportunities" garnered more support, while cost-sensitive framing like "redirecting public funds" led to high levels of uncertainty. Opponents of school choice can focus on messaging that highlights the potential negative impacts, such as

"diverting critical resources away from public schools." This approach frames the debate to prioritize equitable access to quality education for all students.

Figure 1

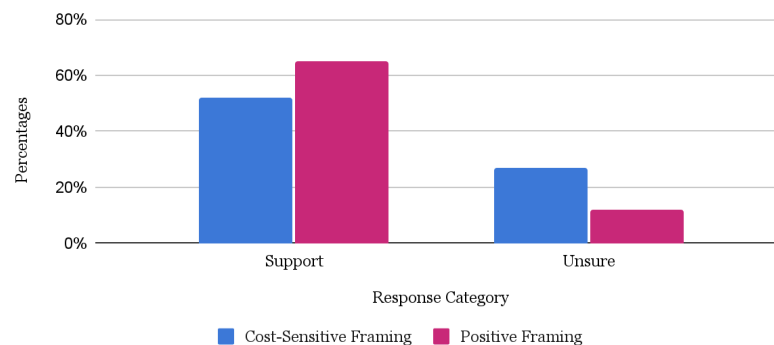
Support and uncertainty for school choice by framing style.



Across all demographics, respondents responded favorably to positive framing connecting pay increases with improving education quality. To promote an increase in teacher pay, advocates should highlight outcomes such as "attracting and retaining the best educators for our children" rather than focusing solely on financial details like funding sources. Framing it as an investment in quality education allows people to relate more broadly.

Figure 2

Support and uncertainty for teacher pay by framing style.

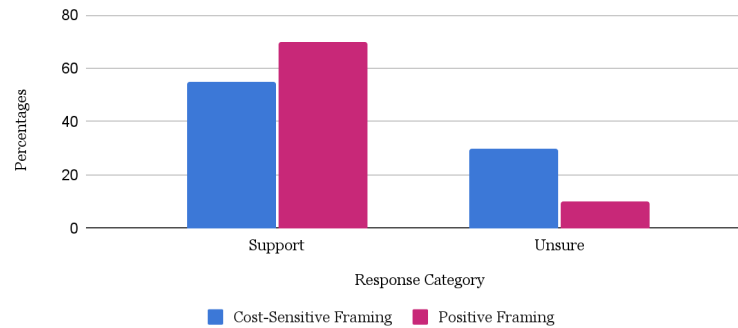


Pre-K accessibility demonstrated the widest gap between positive and cost-sensitive framings. This reflects public enthusiasm for ideas surrounding programs benefiting children but hesitancy when tied to tax implications. Highlighting equity and long-term developmental

benefits of pre-K can sustain high support levels. To combat concerns of cost, advocates could emphasize shared funding approaches that would diversify the financial responsibility.

Figure 3

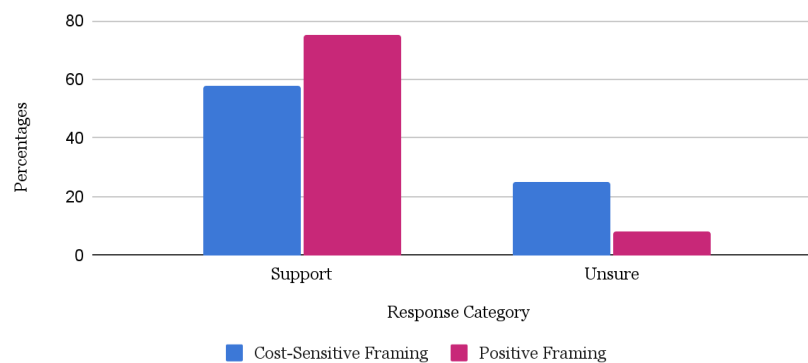
Support and uncertainty for pre-K accessibility by framing style.



The high levels of support under positive framing reveal a general consensus about the importance of education funding. However, uncertainty caused by cost framing suggests a need for clearer communication about the allocation and management of funds. To garner maximum support, public school funding discussions should focus on "building stronger communities through better schools," emphasizing collective benefits while also being transparent about the allocation of funds.

Figure 4

Support and uncertainty for public school funding accessibility by framing style.



In terms of demographic trends, Democrats consistently supported all policies across both framings, while independents were highly responsive to framing. For instance, framing increased independent support for pre-K from 40% to 65%. Additionally, women were more supportive of teacher pay and pre-K funding, with a 5-10% higher likelihood of support under positive framing compared to men.

Implications of Framing

Though the study presented several strengths and limitations, it also offered valuable insights into how framing shapes public opinion surrounding public education. Among the strengths, the survey captured responses across two framing styles, providing clear evidence of the influence of positive and cost-sensitive messaging. The inclusion of multiple policy areas, such as school choice, teacher pay, pre-K accessibility, and public school funding, allowed for a comprehensive analysis of framing effects in education.

However, the study also had notable weaknesses. One key limitation was the potential lack of generalizability due to the sample being limited to a Government 312 class. While this group provided interesting demographic insights, it may not fully reflect broader population trends, particularly in regions with different political or socioeconomic contexts. This limitation could have potentially skewed the results since respondents were primarily young and educated, which is not reflective of a representative sample. Expanding the survey to include a more diverse demographic could paint a more comprehensive picture of public opinion. Another challenge was the high level of “unsure” responses, especially under cost-sensitive framing. This suggests that questions may have been too complex or ambiguous for respondents, leading to a lack of clarity in the results.

If the study were to be conducted again, significant improvements could be made to the survey design. One major area of focus would be refining the questions to reduce variability and ambiguity. For example, instead of broadly framing cost-sensitive options, questions could specify the exact financial trade-offs or benefits to make the implications clearer. Additionally, reducing the number of variables and conditions might help simplify the survey for respondents while still capturing key framing effects.

Positive framing consistently generated higher levels of support and lower uncertainty, reinforcing the importance of strategic language, especially during critical legislative debates like the upcoming legislative session in Texas. This finding underscores the importance of strategic communication in policy advocacy.

The demographic trends further highlight the need for targeted messaging. For example, positive framing is particularly effective among independents and women, who are more likely to respond favorably to messages emphasizing equity and opportunity. These insights inform campaigns and legislative strategies, ensuring that education policies are framed in ways that maximize public support.

Overall, this study highlights the pivotal role of strategic language in shaping public opinion and fostering support for education policies, offering actionable insights to enhance communication strategies in upcoming legislative sessions. By leveraging effective framing strategies, policymakers and advocates can build stronger coalitions of support for policies that improve educational outcomes for all.

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