

Framing same-sex marriage in terms of equality may help encourage more African-Americans to support it

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Same-sex marriage has enjoyed increasing support in recent years in the US. And yet, many African Americans remain less supportive compared to other groups. One way to persuade a group to support an issue is to change the way in which the issue is framed. [Laurie Rhodebeck](#) looks at whether more African Americans can be persuaded to support same-sex marriage if it is reframed as an equal rights issue. Combining tracking of news coverage of same-sex marriage with a survey experiment, she finds that changing how same-sex marriage is framed may be able to persuade people to support it.



Same-sex marriage has been a contentious issue in American politics for over two decades. During that period, [support for marriage equality](#) has steadily increased, but some sectors of the public have been less supportive than others. One of the less supportive groups, African Americans, is particularly interesting because it has long been concerned with equal rights on racial matters. Yet, some African Americans have been less willing to think of same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue. Would framing same-sex marriage in terms of equality encourage African Americans to be more supportive? In new research, I find that yes, it would.

Framing defines issues by using well-chosen language. That language, in the form of frames, draws attention to certain features of issues. This then shapes the public's comprehension of and response to them. Framing is pervasive in politics because it can be an effective way for political parties, interest groups, and other actors to shape support for an issue position.

Many issues are open to multiple interpretations. In the case of same-sex marriage, framing could emphasize the equal rights of everyone to marry whom they choose, or those who oppose it, could stress the moral and religious aspects of maintaining a traditional institution. Frames that evoke such abstract ideas as equality and morality are thought to be especially useful to policy advocates because they resonate with deeply-ingrained cultural values. Thus, equality and morality constitute "value frames."

Social scientists have found that [value frames influence opinion](#) on an array of issues. Value framing works in two ways. It can encourage people to think about what values they associate with an issue. And, it can persuade people to take a position on an issue that is consistent with the values they hold. Most people are likely to endorse multiple, even conflicting, values, but they are not likely to be equally conscious of all their values at any given moment. Political actors use value framing to remind people of the specific value associated with the actors' preferred position on an issue.

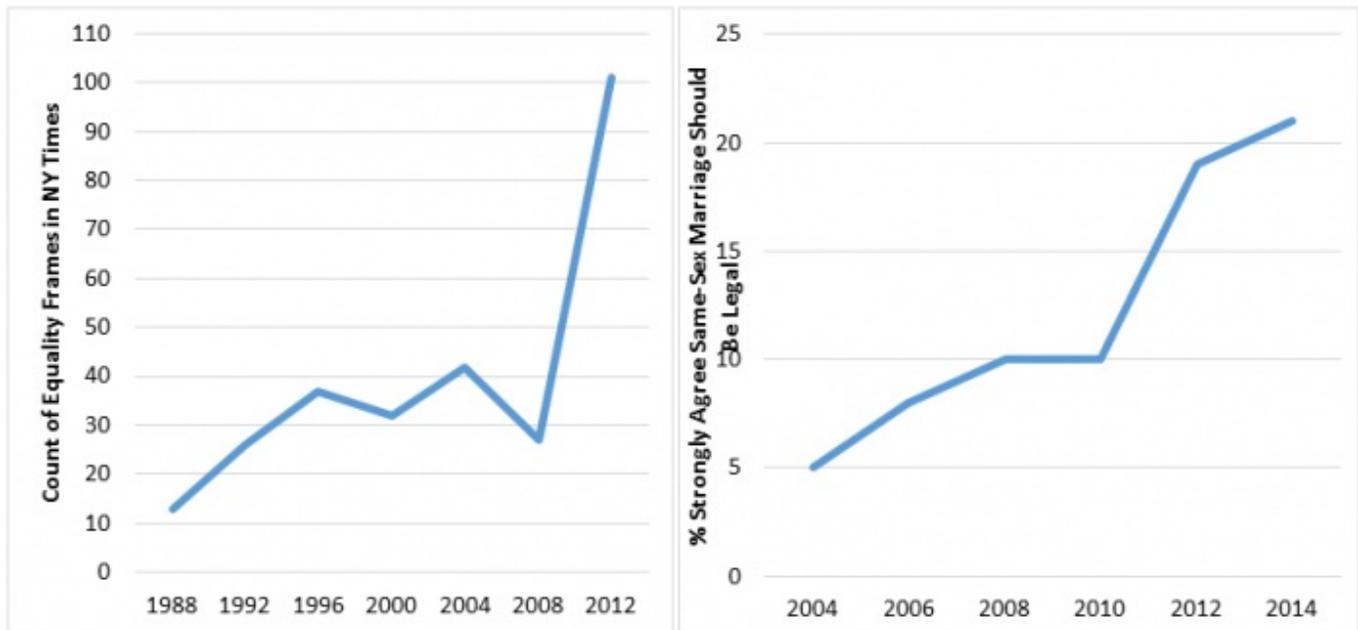
Jason Gainous and I examined the effects of value framing on African Americans' understanding of and support for same-sex marriage. [Conservative political actors](#) have encouraged African Americans to oppose marriage equality by framing the issue in terms of the moral values that pervade the religious beliefs of many African Americans. We thought that emphasizing equality might remind African Americans of an alternative frame and encourage them to take a position on same-sex marriage consistent with the equality value.

We used two approaches to investigate equality framing. First, we tracked the presence of the equality value frame in news coverage of gay rights issues and compared the pattern of coverage to the pattern of opinions favorable to same-sex marriage among African Americans. If framing really does influence opinion, and equality framing increases over time, there should be a parallel increase in support for marriage equality. We found this to be the case.

Figure 1 shows our findings. The graph on the left shows the use of equality frames in *New York Times* coverage of

gay rights during the seven presidential elections from 1988 through 2012. We do not assume that most African Americans, or anyone else, read this source. But, as the national newspaper of record it shapes the nation's common knowledge through its influence on other news outlets.

Figure 1 – Equality Framing and African Americans' Opinions about Same-Sex Marriage



We focused on coverage of all gay rights issues, not just marriage equality, to gauge the general climate of discussion surrounding gay rights over time. To identify news that would have been especially visible and influential, we searched for articles in which references to gay rights issues appeared in the headlines or lead paragraphs. Our search yielded 272 articles.

We then read each article and counted the number of references to equality that appeared in the use of variations on the words 'equal', 'inequality', 'fair', 'unfair', 'civil rights', 'human rights', 'discrimination', and mentions of advocacy groups whose names evoke equality. Our analysis identified 278 instances of equality framing during this time period, by far the most occurring in 2012.

The graph on the right tracks support for same-sex marriage among African Americans. Using [General Social Survey](#) data, we plotted, over the period from 2004 through 2014, the percentage who strongly agree that same-sex marriage should be legal. We lack comparable data for the earlier election years, and we included 2014 to show that the recent sharp increase in support for marriage equality among African Americans has persisted beyond 2012, a point I will return to.

Considered together, the graphs in Figure 1 suggest that the pattern of support for marriage equality among African Americans since 2004 parallels the appearance of equality value framing in news about gay rights. The evidence does not, however, allow us to make a casual inference about the impact of equality value framing on same-sex marriage opinion. Framing effects depend on exposure, but we do not know the extent to which African Americans were actually exposed to the frames we documented.

To address this limitation, we conducted an experiment. It took place during the winter of 2010, a time of relative quiet on the matter of same-sex marriage. We recruited 81 African Americans from the student body of a border state public university. Along with the standard informed consent materials, each participant received a one-page news article about a statewide referendum to repeal marriage rights for gays in Maine and a questionnaire that measured opinions about gay rights issues, egalitarian beliefs, party identification, political ideology, and several demographic characteristics.

We contrived two news articles by drawing from actual coverage published in Maine immediately after the November 3, 2009 referendum. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group received an article that framed the referendum and its outcome using references to equality, discrimination, and civil rights. The other, our control group, received a neutral article devoid of any reference to values. After reading the news article, participants completed the questionnaire.

We hypothesized that framing same-sex marriage as an equality issue would encourage African Americans to rely more heavily on their egalitarian values to form an opinion about the issue. Our evidence confirms this. The relationship between egalitarianism and opinion toward marriage equality was significantly stronger among the participants who read the equality framed article.

We also hypothesized that equality value framing would encourage African Americans to be more supportive of same-sex marriage. Our evidence confirms this as well. Participants who received the equality framed article were significantly more supportive than those who received the neutrally framed article.

Our two approaches to examining the effects of equality framing are complementary. The experiment allows us to make causal inferences about value framing under controlled conditions. The combination of news content data and survey data allows us to establish the parallel patterns of value framing and public opinion in the “real world.”

There has been considerable discussion in the [public domain](#) and [academic literature](#) about African Americans’ lack of support for marriage equality. Our results suggest that any opposition that does exist may be malleable. Using the equality value to frame the marriage issue seems to encourage African Americans to draw on their long-held, [well-documented egalitarian beliefs](#) to form a supportive opinion. Our data also suggest that this effect may persist, as the trend in support from 2012 to 2014 indicates.

We are not advocating that everyone should be persuaded to support marriage equality, especially if doing so would violate a strongly held value. Instead, we are arguing that the potential for supporting same-sex marriage lies within many people. Our evidence implies that it can be drawn out by appealing to their egalitarianism.

This article is based on the paper, ‘Is Same-Sex Marriage an Equality Issue? Framing Effects Among African Americans’, in the Journal of Black Studies.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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Laurie Rhodebeck is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Louisville. Her current research focuses on public opinion, media framing, political values, and partisan discourse. Her work has appeared in *Journal of Politics*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, *Gender & Society*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Journal of Black Studies*, and *Micropolitics*, as well as in various edited books. She is a co-editor of *Ethnic and Racial Minorities in the Advanced Industrial Democracies*.



