



## A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte Fairness as a Frame

There's fairness and then there's fairness.

FrameWorks' field collaborators have been understandably confused by the outcomes of this frame as it has played out in our research across issue areas. For example, when communicating about rural issues, the Fairness frame is said to work well. But when the topic is race, Fairness does not help as much. What is the difference? And what happens, for example, when you are framing issues that lie at the cross-section of race and rural issues?

First of all, it is true that fairness is a core American value with some general enduring properties:

- Americans have a strong stake in being considered fair, as fairness is a foundation for the belief that anyone can make it in America. We work to eliminate vestiges of old systems of privilege and power (such as those associated with our European roots) that confined and constrained the talented individual.
- Americans often believe that blame should be allocated where and when it is deserved.
- As innovative and practical people, we believe that, when mistakes are made, we can work to redress them.
- To fix our problems, we believe that we need to acknowledge them and take responsibility. Americans face problems squarely.

But the concept of fairness can be executed in many ways. It can be about fairness between racial or other identity groups – a social justice kind of fairness. It can be about fairness between places and systems – a fairness more akin to responsible (or irresponsible) management. It can even be fairness that's about innovation – it isn't fair that so many women die from breast cancer, so more research funds should be put into solutions.

In each of these examples, the interplay of frame elements becomes an important determinant of whether the frame will work to lift policies. If it's fairness between groups, this can set up a sense of competition in which issues of self-identity and worthiness come into play. If it's fairness between places, the idea of the interdependence of those places, or who is responsible for maintaining those places (government? the residents themselves?) may be a pre-requisite to endorsement.

The point is that we can execute the concept of fairness in any number of ways depending on what the FrameWorks research shows the conceptual problem to be for the majority of Americans. In each of the following examples, we tested the power of a Fairness frame to lift

policies. But these executions are very different in their composition, were designed to overcome different problems in the research, and achieved different outcomes.

Let's take a look at three cases:

### **The Fairness Frame as Executed for FrameWorks' Rural Research**

For this inquiry, we specifically described how rural areas struggle because they are not given a fair share of the nation's resources. Leveling the playing field is the policy solution. Importantly, the Fairness frame is not a Disparities frame, (i.e. "Rural areas are falling behind the rest of the country") which did not test well in the qualitative research on rural issues.

#### **The Rural Fairness Frame**

*In this country, we believe that all Americans should have the same opportunities. But the reality is that people in small towns and rural places are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. In fact, nearly all of the poorest counties in the nation are in rural America, and the divide between urban and rural prosperity is becoming greater. This happens because the efforts that enhance a community's well-being, like economic development, availability of healthcare programs, and opportunities for a good education, have disproportionately benefited metropolitan areas. People in rural areas have proven they have ingenuity and a desire to work hard; they just need the same resources to succeed. We need to level the playing field and make sure that those parts of the country that are at a disadvantage get their fair share of opportunities.*

The critical distinction here is that the Fairness frame is not about sympathy, nor does it pit one group against another. The Fairness frame explains how policies are negatively affecting one region and elevates practical solutions that would restore equality. It also draws considerably from values of Opportunity For All and Progress.

**The Result:** People exposed to this frame showed the strongest overall support for rural policies of the frames tested. When rural and suburban groups were compared, however, significant differences did appear in their levels of support for the rural agenda in the fairness frame but not in the interdependence frame. Fairness may have cued up an "us versus them" way of thinking that created less support of suburban audiences for rural policy choices. For advocates designing communications efforts to reach suburban audiences, messages should stress interdependence over fairness.

Urban residents exposed to the interdependence frame demonstrated significantly less support for the rural policy agenda than did rural people. However, they did so in the control situation as well, where they got no frame stimulus. So weaving Fairness and Interdependence together in mass media situations that cross groups may prove an effective option.

### **The Fairness Frame as Executed for FrameWorks' Race Research**

In this research inquiry, we took our cues from the field's framing of structural racism, which includes early and explicit mention of race and injustice to emphasize race discrimination and the historic and institutional advantages/disadvantages that lead to racial disparities.

### The Race Fairness Frame

*Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that problems in minority communities are the result of discriminatory practices that continue to unfairly target minorities. Whether overtly or more subtly, minorities are treated differently when it comes to such things as getting ahead in the classroom, applying for a home loan, and being able to see a doctor. According to this view, we need to renew our commitment to a just society by devoting more resources to policies that recognize and address fairness in our society. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets to in a manner that is fairer to minority communities.*

**The Result:** Of five values frames tested, this produced the most negative frame effects. Put simply, this explicit racial cue, embedded into the Fairness frame, increased opposition to race-based public policies across all policy domains (welfare, immigration, affirmative action, health disparities, and social determinants of health). By contrast, other values frames that presented race less explicitly (Responsible Management, Prevention, Ingenuity, and Opportunity for All) all outperformed this Fairness frame.

### The Fairness Frame as Executed for FrameWorks' Healthy Communities Research

In this research, we specifically promoted the idea that that certain communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to get in good shape.

#### The Healthy Communities Fairness Frame

*Lately there has been a lot of talk about social conditions in America. Some people believe that certain communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to get in good shape. According to this view, we need to level the playing field so that every community's residents can breathe healthy air, exercise safely and conveniently, and get nutritious foods. When some communities are denied the resources they need to build these things into their environments, they are unable to improve school test scores, physical fitness and workforce participation. Please tell us if you have heard this explanation of why we should allocate societal assets in a fairer manner to shape the quality of life in American communities.*

**The Result:** This Fairness Frame had the greatest positive frame effects of any of the four frames tested. Frames were evaluated by their ability to move 7 policy batteries: physical education, school nutrition, transportation, parks and open space, community design/development, food and regulation. Some effects were substantial. For example, the impact on regulation was 8 points and on development 7 points.

**Our final conclusion? All Fairness frames are not the same. Nor do they achieve the same frame effects on diverse policies.** Their relative efficacy relates to the fact that, in constructing these test frames, we intentionally eliminated those executions that we knew from the research to be problematic. Put another way, each of the frames tested

reflects the best possible execution of that idea, and is not necessarily consistent with the execution of that frame in the field.

It's not your grandmother's Fairness frame. In general, when Fairness is seen as being between places not people, when it is imbued with systems thinking. When blame is assigned to systems rather than people, and when mistakes that were made can be shown to have solutions, these Fairness frames prove powerful.

Susan Nall Bales  
FrameWorks Institute  
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**About FrameWorks Institute:** The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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