



## FlashReport

## How to keep on keeping on: Framing civil rights accomplishments to bolster support for egalitarian policies

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing attention to historic increases in equality carries the risk of encouraging complacency about the need to further advance equality. This risk may be reduced by carefully framing the interpretation of increased equality. We apply an influential goal-framing model (Fishbach and Zhang, 2008) to test whether framing the accomplishments of the American Civil Rights Movement in terms of progress toward equality vs. commitment to equality influences white Americans' support for further egalitarian policies. In two experiments, we manipulated whether progress or commitment was in mind when participants considered civil rights accomplishments. As hypothesized, participants more strongly supported egalitarian policies when civil rights accomplishments were framed as evidence of commitment to equality than when these same accomplishments were framed as evidence of progress toward equality. We discuss implications for applying the goal-framing model to political goals and the advantages of using experimental methods to study framing processes in social movements.

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One of the trickiest dilemmas faced by many social movements is finding a way to publicize their accomplishments that will not cause supporters to become complacent and prematurely disengage from the movement's goals. It is important to publicize accomplishments to bolster a movement's perceived efficacy (Meyer, 2006). However, there is a risk that publicizing accomplishments will lead supporters to assume that the movement's work is complete and cause them to shift their attention and resources to other worthy causes (Chong, 1991). Thus, social movements must avoid becoming victims of their own successes. Ideally, movements should try to publicize accomplishments in a way that bolsters rather than undermines motivation to support the movement's goals. In the present paper, we test the hypothesis that whether movement accomplishments are framed in terms of goal progress or goal commitment can determine continued support for movement goals.

This work draws directly on a goal-framing model introduced by Fishbach and Zhang (2008). Their model suggests that drawing attention to goal-relevant accomplishments can either bolster or undermine goal persistence depending on how accomplishments are framed (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). Framing accomplishments in terms of progress has a demotivating effect on goal persistence. Progress frames create a sense of partial goal attainment, psychologically liberating people to disengage from the focal goal and prioritize other goals (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). By contrast, framing accomplishments in

terms of goal commitment bolsters goal persistence. When commitment is emphasized, accomplishments signal that the goal is highly valued (Bem, 1972), which inspires further efforts to achieve the goal (Brickman, 1987). Fishbach and Dhar (2005) found that when participants thought about goal-relevant accomplishments (e.g., studying to achieve academic success) their subsequent decisions to disengage or persist towards that goal were influenced by whether their accomplishments were framed in terms of progress or commitment. When accomplishments were framed as progress, participants disengaged from the focal goal and prioritized competing goals (e.g., attending a party rather than studying). However, when accomplishments were framed as commitment, participants continued to prioritize the focal goal (e.g., studying rather than attending a party).

Here, we apply this model to test whether goal-framing has similar effects on motivation to pursue political goals. Specifically, we test whether framing civil rights accomplishments in terms of either America's progress toward equality or Americans' commitment to equality influences white Americans' support for policies to further racial equality. We predicted that participants would more strongly support further investments in egalitarian policies when civil rights accomplishments were framed as evidence of commitment to equality than when these accomplishments were framed as evidence of progress toward equality.

## Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that white Americans would support racial egalitarian policies more strongly when we induced participants

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to frame increases in racial equality as evidence of Americans' commitment to equality than when we induced participants to frame increased equality as evidence of America's progress towards equality.

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred forty white undergraduate participants (56.4% female) at a northeastern United States university participated for \$5.

### Materials and procedure

Participants read a passage describing improvements in conditions for African-Americans during the 20th century. This passage summarized civil rights movement accomplishments (e.g., the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and presented evidence of improvements in African-Americans' finances, health, and educational opportunities.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to answer one of two questions designed to frame the meaning of these civil rights accomplishments (based on Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). In the progress frame condition, participants were asked, "How much progress have Americans made towards achieving racial equality?" In the commitment frame condition, participants were asked, "How strongly are Americans committed to achieving racial equality?" Participants responded on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*very little progress or not at all committed*) to 5 (*a great deal of progress or very strongly committed*).

Finally, participants reported their attitudes towards 5 race-targeted policies adapted from Bobo and Kluegel (1993) (e.g., "Increasing funding for schools in predominantly black neighborhoods, especially for preschool and early education programs.") on a 5-point scale ranging from  $-2$  (*strongly oppose*) to  $+2$  (*strongly support*). These 5 items were averaged for an overall index of support for race-targeted policies ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## Results and discussion

Participants' ratings of progress in the progress frame condition ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) and commitment in the commitment frame condition ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) were moderately high and did not differ,  $t(138) = 1.24$ ,  $p > .2$ . However, the framing manipulation altered support for race-targeted social policies. Participants supported race-targeted policies significantly more in the commitment frame condition ( $M = 0.54$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) than in the progress frame condition ( $M = 0.16$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(138) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ .

We also assessed correlations between framing question responses and policy support. As predicted, in the progress frame condition, progress judgments were negatively correlated with policy support,  $r(68) = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, in the commitment frame condition, commitment judgments were positively correlated with policy support,  $r(68) = .20$ ,  $p < .1$ .

Results supported our hypothesis that white Americans would more strongly support further action to address racial inequalities when civil rights accomplishments were framed as evidence of equality progress than when those accomplishments were framed as evidence of equality commitment.

### Study 2

Study 2 examined whether the study 1 findings would replicate using a different framing methodology. Specifically, study 2 manipulated goal-framing directly in the content of a political message rather than indirectly by asking participants to assess progress or commitment as was done in study 1. We used a more direct framing

method in study 2 because it more closely resembles the framing strategies that are used in actual political messaging. Study 2 also tested the effects of progress and commitment framing on a different outcome variable, namely affirmative action support.

Finally, study 2 included a control condition to test whether one of the framing manipulations more closely corresponded to the interpretive frames white Americans themselves apply when considering civil rights accomplishments. Based on previous research (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006), we expected that in the absence of a suggested goal representation, white Americans would tend to frame civil rights accomplishments in terms of progress rather than commitment, which should reduce their support for further investment in racial equality. We thus predicted that white Americans' affirmative action attitudes in the control condition would resemble their attitudes in the progress frame condition more than the commitment frame condition.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-five white undergraduate participants (52% female) at a northeastern United States university participated for \$5.

### Materials and procedure

All participants read the passage described in study 1 to focus their attention on civil rights accomplishments. We varied elements of the passage to influence the framing of these accomplishments. In the progress frame condition, three elements emphasized racial progress: 1) the instructions informed participants that the passage would describe "the progress Americans have made towards achieving racial equality," 2) the passage title was "Progress towards Racial Equality during the 20th Century," and 3) the concluding statement was a quote from a scholar stating, "These accomplishments illustrate how much progress Americans have made towards achieving racial equality. This evidence shows how far we've come toward achieving equality." By contrast, in the commitment frame condition the three essay elements were as follows: 1) instructions indicated that the passage would describe "Americans' commitment to achieving the ideal of racial equality," 2) the passage title was "America's Commitment to Achieving Racial Equality," and 3) the quoted scholar stated, "These accomplishments illustrate the strength of Americans' commitment to achieving racial equality. This evidence shows that equality is a goal that many Americans highly value." In the control condition, these three essay elements emphasized neither progress nor commitment.

Next, participants completed an affirmative action attitudes measure. On a 5-point scale ranging from  $-2$  (*strongly oppose*) to  $+2$  (*strongly support*) participants rated policies to increase affirmative action in the following: 1) university admissions, 2) hiring and promotion, and 3) government contracts (adapted from Sidanius, Singh, Hetts, & Federico, 2000) ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Finally, to examine whether one of the framing manipulations more closely corresponded to the interpretive frames white Americans themselves apply when considering civil rights accomplishments, participants rated how many thoughts they had about the following: 1) "how much progress Americans have made towards racial equality," and 2) "how committed Americans are to achieving racial equality." They reported their thoughts about each topic on the following scale: (0) *no thoughts*, (1) *a passing thought*, (2) *some thoughts*, and (3) *extensive thoughts*.

## Results and discussion

As predicted, support for affirmative action varied significantly by condition,  $F(2, 72) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .05$  (Table 1, row 1). Newman-Keuls

**Table 1**  
Mean affirmative action support, progress thoughts, and commitment thoughts as a function of framing condition (control vs. progress frame vs. commitment frame).

Measure	Condition		
	Control	Progress frame	Commitment frame
Affirmative action support	−0.77 (0.93)	−0.95 (0.94)	−0.25 (0.83)
Progress thoughts	1.64 (0.70)	2.08 (0.70)	1.60 (0.71)
Commitment thoughts	1.08 (1.08)	1.32 (0.80)	1.92 (0.86)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

comparisons showed that support for affirmative action in the commitment frame condition was significantly higher than in the progress frame and control conditions,  $p < .05$ . Support for affirmative action in the progress frame and control conditions did not differ,  $p > .4$ .

Participants' reports of thoughts about progress towards equality differed significantly by condition,  $F(2, 72) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .05$  (Table 1, row 2). Newman–Keuls comparisons showed that thoughts about progress were significantly higher in the progress frame condition than in the commitment frame and control conditions,  $p < .05$ , which did not differ,  $p > .8$ . Participants' thoughts about commitment to equality also differed significantly by condition,  $F(2, 72) = 5.51$ ,  $p < .05$  (Table 1, row 3). Newman–Keuls comparisons showed that thoughts about commitment were significantly higher in the commitment frame condition than in the progress frame and control conditions,  $p < .05$ , which did not differ,  $p > .3$ .

We also conducted paired-samples  $t$ -tests comparing participants' thoughts about progress and commitment in each condition. Control and progress frame participants thought significantly more about progress than commitment,  $t(24) = 2.79$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $t(24) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively. By contrast, commitment frame participants thought marginally more about commitment than progress,  $t(24) = -1.78$ ,  $p < .1$ . It thus appears that white Americans are more likely to interpret civil rights accomplishments as evidence of equality progress than equality commitment unless these accomplishments are explicitly framed in terms of equality commitment.

Finally, for the entire sample, we subtracted commitment thoughts from progress thoughts and correlated these difference scores with affirmative action attitudes, obtaining a significant negative correlation,  $r(73) = -.30$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, as progress thoughts predominate, white Americans support affirmative action less.

## General discussion

Social movements are defined by the stories they tell about their aspirations and accomplishments (Polletta, 2006). Not only the substantive content of movement stories but also the way those stories are framed can determine a movement's success in furthering its goals. Our results show that how movements frame their accomplishments can either bolster or undermine support for further goal-directed action. When civil rights accomplishments were framed as evidence of America's progress toward equality, white Americans showed less support for policies addressing persisting inequalities than when those same accomplishments were framed as evidence of Americans' commitment to equality. This research thus demonstrates the advantages of using experimental social psychology methods to investigate framing processes in social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000).

This research also makes theoretical contributions to the goal-framing literature by situating goal-framing in a more social context. Whereas previous goal-framing research has emphasized how framing individual actions in terms of goal progress vs. goal commitment affects individuals' self-perceptions and thus their motivation to invest further in goal-directed action, the present

studies demonstrate that the framing of societal-level changes can also affect individuals' support for further investments in goal-directed action. The framing of societal changes may affect individual support for further goal investments because individuals' attitudes and judgments are in part influenced by their perceptions of societal norms (Sherif & Sherif, 1954). Thus, if people frame their society's advances towards equality as indicating their society's commitment to the goal of equality, then they themselves should be more likely to support further investments in equality as we found in the present studies.

The results of study 2 also contribute to the goal-framing literature by demonstrating that individuals may be inclined to frame goal accomplishments in a specific way unless they are actively encouraged to frame those accomplishments in an alternative way. We found that, in the control condition, participants tended to frame civil rights accomplishments in terms of progress toward equality rather than commitment to equality. It is possible that the progress frame tends to be the default frame when white Americans consider changes in societal equality because the progress frame in this context emphasizes how much equality has improved and thus has system justifying implications (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006, 2010). Future research might explore whether the progress frame tends to be the default frame for most goals or whether it tends to be the default frame primarily with goals that implicate system justification motives.

Our findings also have implications for understanding the risks of publicizing social movement accomplishments. High-profile accomplishments of the American Civil Rights Movement, such as the recent election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president, often trigger concerns that public attention to these events will lead white Americans to disengage from the cause of furthering racial equality (Swarns, 2008). These concerns may be justified because research shows that white Americans tend to focus on progress toward racial equality and overlook persisting inequalities (Brodish, Brazy, & Devine, 2008; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Eibach & Keegan, 2006; Eibach & Purdie-Vaughns, 2009). Furthermore, a recent longitudinal study found that people's perceptions of racial progress increased and their support for policies to address racial inequalities decreased after Obama's election (Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, & O'Brien, 2009). However, an important implication of the present research is that disengagement from the cause of advancing racial equality is not an inevitable consequence of perceiving increased equality. Disengagement is a likely consequence if civil rights accomplishments are framed in terms of progress. But these same accomplishments can inspire increased support if they are framed in terms of commitment.

While goal disengagement may not be an inevitable consequence of seeing evidence of civil rights accomplishments, the study 2 results suggest that there is a genuine risk that this will be the consequence unless white Americans are actively encouraged to frame those accomplishments as evidence of Americans' commitment to equality. In study 2, both control and progress frame participants but not commitment frame participants reported more thoughts about equality progress than commitment. Also, control participants' affirmative action support was similar to that of progress frame participants and both were lower than commitment frame participants' support. These findings suggest that white Americans more readily interpret civil rights accomplishments as evidence of progress than as evidence of commitment to equality, which in turn undermines their support for egalitarian policies. Thus, the tendency of white Americans to perceive civil rights accomplishments as evidence of racial progress may lead them to disengage from furthering racial equality unless civil rights advocates and political leaders encourage them to perceive those accomplishments as evidence of Americans' collective commitment to achieving equality. Careful framing work thus can make important contributions to sustaining a social movement.

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