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From Culture War to Difficult Dialogue: Exploring Distinct Frames for Citizen Exchange about Social Problems

Jacob Z. Hess
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, jzhess@gmail.com

Nathan R. Todd
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, ntodd2@uiuc.edu

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Abstract

While the precise nature of socio-cultural conflict in the United States remains contested, there is growing scholarly agreement that elite (media/governmental) framings may be significantly aggravating public animosities. In order to better understand how actual citizens frame meaningful issues in such an atmosphere, we collaborated as socially liberal and conservative-leaning researchers in a joint study of twenty citizens across the political spectrum, from a conservative pastor and a traditional family advocate to a socialist activist and a leader of a feminist organization. This paper reports our analysis of citizen comments on fundamental problems facing society and their proposed solutions. Themes are organized within three general categories: 1) Talking about citizen exchange: What is the essence of "good" public discourse? 2) Defining social problems: What is the nature of fundamental challenges facing society? and 3) Delimiting solutions: What is the scope of needed social change? Within each category, patterns across citizen comments are identified and explored in light of prevailing stereotypes about "liberals" and "conservatives." Based on this examination, possible shifts in the framing of liberal-conservative exchange are proposed as a potential contribution to a more nuanced and productive public deliberation across the partisan divide.

Keywords

Acknowledgements

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In October, 2004, Jon Stewart (*S*) from *Comedy Central's Daily Show* made what has become a legendary appearance on *CNN's CrossFire (CF)*:

S: I made a special effort to come on the show today, because I have privately, amongst my friends, and also in occasional newspapers and television shows, mentioned this show as being *bad*. . . . And I felt that that wasn't fair, and I should come here and tell you, it's not so much that it's *bad*, as it's *hurting America*. I wanted to come here today and say, *stop hurting America* . . . and come work for us, because we, as the people. .

CF: How do you pay?

S: The people—not well, but you can sleep at night. See, the thing is, we need your help. Right now, you're helping the politicians and the corporations. And we're left out there to mow our lawns. . . .You're part of their *strategies*. You are partisan, what do you call it, hacks . . . .You're doing theater, when you should be doing debate. . . . What you do is not honest. . . you have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you *fail miserably*. . .

CF: Wait. I thought you were going to be funny. Come on. Be funny.

S: No. I'm not going to be your monkey (Schantz, 1994).

This event, largely credited with the eventual cancellation of the syndicated debate program, is one passing illustration of a growing collective attention to forces that appear to be undermining the basic health of public discourse. While scholarly differences remain as to the origin, scope and likely outcome of deep socio-cultural animosities in the U.S. (see Hunter & Wolfe, 2005), an increasing number of researchers attribute the escalation of such hostilities to "elite" influences in government and media. As sociologist Hunter (1991) noted in his seminal exploration of political discord, "the culture war . . . has become institutionalized chiefly through special-purpose organizations, denominations, political parties and branches of government [and] . . . further aggravated by virtue of the technology of public discourse" (p. 290). Linguist Tannen (1998) detailed how a deeply entrenched "argument culture" across media, politics and courtrooms is absorbed into the daily experience of citizens. Political scientist Wolfe (1998) concurred, arguing that ordinary Americans are more moderate than their leaders, with the culture war "being fought primarily by intellectuals" (p. 276), as well as "partisans and ideologically inclined pundits" (2005, p. 42), rather than by the bulk of citizens themselves. Communications researchers Gastil, Kahan and Braman (2006) likewise attributed the "cultural polarization of a relatively tolerant public" to their reliance on "public figures who . . . sharply disagree with those with competing orientations" (pp. 18-19). And most recently, political scientist Fiorina (2006) reviewed the evidence that both media elite and political parties are spurring citizens toward extreme positions, critiquing the system as "dominated by activists and elected officials who behave like squabbling children in a crowded sandbox" (p. 78, 102).

Of course, academic attention to the role of broad interpretive frameworks ("frames")[1] in public discourse is not new. As early as Lippmann's (1921) work in *Public Opinion,* linguistic

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[1] Our use of "frames" is consistent with Hunter's (2005) broad sense of "categories through which people understand themselves, others, and the larger world around them" (p. 28). While sharing meaningful ties with "political philosophy" and "ideology," a "political frame" here refers specifically to language tangibly shaping both motives and citizen action in relation to others and the surrounding world (see Brock, et al., 2005, pp. 38-47).

constructions of societal issues have been linked to general citizen attitudes. Goffman (1974) later revived scientific interest regarding the subject in *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, in which "schemata of interpretation" were proposed as permitting individuals or groups "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" events and make possible the rendering of meaning and organization of experiences (p. 21). In subsequent years, scholars across an array of fields have contributed to a burgeoning examination of framing and its effects, including, specifically, frames associated with political discourse. Attention to political frames has ranged extensively, from analyses of patterns across "political key words" (Hart et al., 2004), to distinct public views on the nature of Supreme Court decisions (Baird & Gangl, 2006), as well as studies of how terrorism, juvenile crime and race are being framed for the public (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005) and how unexamined frames of fundamental questions may function to constrain public deliberation (Brock, et al., 2005). In one notable study, Seyle and Newman (2006) investigated the social psychological impact of the "red-blue" framework leveraged by media outlets during recent presidential elections in the U.S., presenting evidence that this dichotomous frame had prompted misinterpretations of political in/out-groups and interfered with the adoption of complex and multifaceted identities among citizens. In more recent comments, Hunter (2005) elaborated on how exactly these elite frames may have such an impact:

> It is in their interest to frame issues in stark terms, to take uncompromising positions, and to de-legitimate their opponents. Clearly, entire populations are not divided at anywhere near the level of intensity of the activists and the rhetoric, but because issues are often framed in such stark terms, public choices are forced. In such circumstances, even communities and populations . . . prefer[ring] other options and much greater reason and harmony in the process, find themselves divided (p. 30).

If the influence of dominant frames on public discourse has become increasingly clear, it has been less clear to what degree citizens can effectively counter their influence. In a recent review of the research, however, Callaghan (2005) challenges the notion of citizens as "passive recipients of elite influence" and mere victims of frames "imposed upon" them (p. 189), suggesting that elite framing effects may be moderated (and potentially mitigated) through education and interpersonal communication (pp. 182-183; see also Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Brewer, 2001).

At a minimum, Callaghan's argument challenges the impulse to pessimism about public discourse in the face of the hegemony of these elite frames. Indeed, many of the same scholars referenced above emphasize the real potential of healthy public deliberation in countering and moving beyond elite frames (e.g., Tannen, 1998; Hunter & Wolfe, 2005; Gastil et al., 2006). And on the practical level, recent years have seen a nascent "dialogue and deliberation" movement beginning in the nation, exemplified in the new and dynamic *National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)*. As defined by this organization, both "dialogue" and "deliberation,"[2] are "formal practices involving individuals from multiple, conflicting

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Further nuances of our particular philosophical hermeneutic approach to framing research are described in the methods section.

[2] Dialogue and deliberation are typically differentiated by ultimate aims (understanding vs. decision-making/action respectively). It is their common essence that we highlight here, as elaborated by Schwandt (1996), "Parties to the encounter are not viewed as opponents who seek to expose the weaknesses in each other's arguments. Rather, the conversation begins with the assumption that the other has something to say to us and to contribute to our understanding. The initial task is to grasp the other's position in the strongest possible light. . . . The other is not an adversary or opponent, but a conversational partner" (p. 67).

perspectives coming together to compare, weigh and carefully consider different views, interpretations and options" (see Heierbacher, 2007). In a prevailing atmosphere of simplistic media messages, this kind of exchange has been shown to potentially enhance the "sophistication" of political understandings in a direct way (Gastil & Dillard, 1999).

It was with these same optimistic aims that we participated in the creation of a "liberal-conservative dialogue" course for undergraduates at our university.[3] Based on evaluations of the first three semesters, we were heartened by evidence of many students questioning stereotypic notions of what "the other side believed"--gaining more complex understanding of others' views, as well as their own (see Hess et al., in press). At the same time, we were increasingly struck as facilitators with the difficulty of a subset of students in genuinely engaging those holding different views. Even well-intentioned students seemed, at times, incapable of basic conversation across issues of significant partisan difference, such as abortion, gay marriage, race relations, etc. In grappling with this challenge, we again became attuned to the subtle influence of implicit interpretive frameworks mentioned above, ranging from fundamental notions of religion, morality and diversity to basic conceptions of societal problems and their ultimate solutions. At times, these frameworks seemed to constitute almost wholly different languages for students—even "different rhetorical ground" and "incommensurate discourse norms" noted by researchers as a particular barrier for deliberative exchange (Levine et al., 2005, p. 9). Since these background frames seemed to be generally unquestioned, their influence on students likewise remained largely unacknowledged and thus "invisible".

Taken together, the constraints of this dialogue experience combined with our awareness of the growing framing literature to prompt our own study of this general challenge. While the study of elite framings associated with social issues had expanded considerably, there has been less attention systematically paid to how *citizens themselves* frame issues in such an atmosphere (with notable exceptions, i.e., Wolfe, 1998). In her summary of "future directions" of framing research, Callaghan (2005) went on to call for more rigorous examination of the framing contributions of citizens, suggesting that they may play a "central role in the [larger] framing process" (p. 185). Echoing Wolfe's (1998) seminal study of community views, we initiated an in-depth research project to examine how twenty diverse citizens in our own community frame social problems, ranging from a conservative pastor and a traditional family advocate to a socialist activist and a committed feminist leader. After a brief methodological review, we investigate three broad categories of citizen framing in relation to fundamental social problems: *1) Talking about citizen exchange: What is the essence of "good" public discourse? 2) Defining social problems: What is the nature of fundamental challenges facing society?* and *3) Delimiting solutions: What is the scope of needed social change?* For each category, patterns of citizen views are examined against a backdrop of general liberal/conservative stereotypes. In the final section, we consider more explicitly the overall implications of findings as they relate to general public deliberation across the partisan divide.

Method: Hermeneutic Analysis

Philosophical Approach

In our examination of interpretive frameworks reflected in citizen interviews, a particular philosophical hermeneutic approach is taken (Taylor, 1985; Hess, 2005). In its emphasis on the critical role of interpretation in both the object and process of research, this approach shares meaningful links with interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994) and constructionist revisions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990). In its explicit attention to the exploration of meaning and value, hermeneutic analysis also responds to Flyvbjerg's (2001) call for more attention to "value-rational" research within social science. At heart, philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes distinct interpretations as neither "reflecting" nor "producing" experience entirely, but instead *partially constituting* that experience (see Taylor, 1985). In this way, hermeneutic analysis reflects a viable middle ground between essentialist realism and strong constructivism (Bernstein, 1983). Perhaps for this reason, this approach is increasingly common across the social sciences generally (Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Polkinghorne, 2000; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987) and has been proposed as a valuable contribution to addressing challenges within political science, in particular (Gibbons, 2006).

Although for general discussion purposes, interpretation and framing are used interchangeably in this manuscript, *framing* technically refers to a more deliberate effort (by media or business) to package and construct ideas in order "to create a particular context around an issue" (Stempel & Gifford, 1990, p. 49). Resulting "frames" may then serve to predispose and shape particular ways of *interpreting* raw experience among the general public[4]. Since collective interpretation may often remain implicit, even "hidden" to awareness (see Slife & Williams, 1995), one aim of this research approach (similar to narrative and discourse analysis) is making interpretive patterns more explicit and accessible. To the degree this "surfacing" occurs, these patterns may then be critically examined *as frames* and openly compared to other alternative frames for issues. In our own field of community psychology, investigations of competing frames are commonly referred to as studies in "problem (and solution) definition" (Seidman & Rappaport, 1986). In the field of political science, potential benefits of a more rigorous investigation into interpretation and its manifestations in language have been increasingly noted (Brock et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2006). Ultimately, such research across fields may arguably contribute in tangible ways to a more thoughtful and productive public deliberation (Schwandt, 1996).

One of the nagging challenges of investigating contested values and assumptions is doing so in a way that is authentic and fair to diverse stakeholders. In light of this, a particular strength of our investigation is a research partnership across the "red-blue" political divide, with one author reflecting a primarily socially-conservative perspective and the other, primarily socially-liberal. From the project's beginning, this collaboration has permitted a tangible check on natural tendencies to favor our own positions in subtle, even subconscious, ways. In this way, we have ultimately worked for our analysis to merit credibility across diverse political audiences.

Participants

Participants were purposively sampled across the liberal-conservative spectrum to maximize variability of political views. When asked to self-identify politically along the "stereotypical liberal-conservative line," many participants qualified their positions as more

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[4] In this sense, framing and interpretation may be seen as parallel cognitive phenomena, reflecting encoding and decoding processes respectively. While much more could be said about formal distinctions at this higher level of specificity, Hunter's (2005) more general definition of framing reviewed earlier serves our purposes throughout the majority of the paper.

complex than could be captured with a simple label, preferring qualifications such as "compassionate conservative" or an alternative name entirely, such as "patriot" or "radical." Five participants qualified their conservative or liberal leanings as "moderate" with another five emphasizing their zeal (i.e., "a little more towards ultra [conservative]" or "very liberal"). Ultimately, however, all citizens leaned towards one label or the other, with ten citizens inclined towards social conservatism (7 males, 3 females) and ten to social liberalism (5 males, 5 females). For purposes of analysis, we subsequently relied on this distinction between general clusters of conservative citizens (including, for study purposes, the "patriot") and liberal citizens (including the "radical") as a helpful starting point to investigate framing nuances. [5]

   Given recruitment objectives primarily focused on diversity of political views, we did not intentionally sample across other categories of difference (e.g., race/ethnicity); consequently, our sample was predominately White/Caucasian with the exception of two participants identifying as Latino. Participants ranged from mid-twenties to fifties in age and included a member of a campus Christian ministry, a participant in the socialist party, a conservative lobbyist and a feminist activist. A variety of occupations were reflected among citizens, including students (five undergraduate, four graduate), a janitor, computer technician, lawyer, homemaker, teacher, professor and two ministers. The more socially conservative participants all identified as religious and Christian across several denominations. The majority of participants identifying as more socially liberal also referred to religion as a meaningful aspect of life, including those with backgrounds in several Christian denominations, Catholicism and one participant with Jewish heritage. The remaining liberal participants were atheist or agnostic.

Interview Structure and Analytic Process

   Interviews were completed over a period of six months, each lasting between one and two hours. Questions centered on exploring how participants were framing a selection of key social issues, reflecting a balance of stereotypically "liberal" and "conservative" concerns. Domestic violence, sexual assault, sexuality in education and the media, "diversity" in general and sexual orientation, in particular, were chosen as meaningful questions reflected in current public discourse, but about which the full scope of citizen views seemed to be less obvious. In the case of domestic violence and sexual assault, (issues presumed to reflect a significant degree of general societal disapproval), citizens were asked to share their views of "root causes" and solutions. In the case of diversity and sexual orientation, we were careful to frame our questions more broadly, avoiding any presumption of specific views (e.g., "This is an important question with many different views. What are your thoughts about this issue?"). [6] Early in the project, inquiry was also expanded to ask, "What do you see as major problems facing society currently?" followed by, "What do you think are ultimate solutions to these problems?"

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[5] For the remainder of the paper, "conservative" and "liberal" refer to "socially conservative-leaning" and "socially liberal-leaning" respectively. In using simpler terms, our aim has been neither to speak for particular political communities nor to reify simplistic categorizations of "liberals" vs. "conservatives." While retaining such terms as a useful starting point for this project, we acknowledge the problematic consequences of collapsing multiple identities into "catch-all" phrases generally (Seyle & Newman, 2006); indeed, our hope is that this analysis may contribute to the larger effort to appreciate the actual complexity and richness of citizen views (see Pew Research Center, 2005; Wolfe, 1998).

[6] Although both surprising commonalities and striking differences were observed across issues, citizen views on sexual orientation and diversity generally were especially divergent and intense, calling for more comprehensive and independent examination in a separate manuscript. This other analysis likewise aims to contribute to a more thoughtful and respectful public discourse by carefully examining competing ways of framing these questions.

Responses were subsequently transcribed by an undergraduate team, resulting in approximately 21 single-spaced pages of text for each interview. Transcripts were then reviewed by primary investigators against audio recordings for accuracy. Subsequently, text was sorted into general "problem definition" and "solution definition" categories and reviewed for themes and patterns (similarities and differences) in the way social problems and their solutions were framed, both within individuals and across liberal/conservative citizen clusters. Given our purposive sampling approach and small sample size, the analytic strategy remained qualitative in nature. Rather than assessing the *prevalence* of particular themes, our aim was documenting *kinds* of themes evident in our data, remaining focused on the relative qualitative dimensions of different framing patterns across political clusters. We believe this kind of analysis can function as a meaningful complement to other large-scale public surveys of attitudes (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2005), similar to the way a careful study of taxonomical differences in African wildlife may complement a larger prevalence study of the same.

Overall, this qualitative analysis was undertaken in an open, exploratory way that enabled us to compare/contrast frames across clusters and individuals, as well as test various ways of presenting these framing patterns. In practice, this entailed an iterative, sequential process, much like an extended, intensive dialogue with the text: alternatively "listening" to the text, asking further questions based on emerging understandings and maintaining openness to being shown new insight. In this way, consistent with modified grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological investigations, findings emerged from an unfolding engagement with the text, rather than some application of technical procedures to the text alone. Ultimately, this careful attention to themes and patterns in citizen language lead to interesting insights regarding potential "re-framings" of a conversation or issue, as explored at several points below. In what follows, comments are also linked to individuals by letter "tags" (from A-T) corresponding to our twenty interviewees. These citizen responses are presented verbatim, except where minor changes and deletions would serve the purposes of space or clarity.

Results: Explorations of Citizen Framings

How did citizens talk about problems (#2), solutions (#3) and public "talk" itself (#1)? Beyond responses to our primary questions of "major problems facing society" and "ultimate solutions," several themes related to overall public discourse *about these problems* emerged as somewhat of a surprise:

1. Talking about citizen exchange: What is the essence of "good" public discourse?
This first category captures interview themes related to engaging in basic public exchange. These themes range from general community resistance to dialogue, to other modes of exchange (such as teaching) that may subtly function to displace a perceived need for more discussion.

Immovability and a scarcity of dialogue: "I'm right, you're wrong." Among liberal-leaning citizens, one theme of concern was a general resistance to considering new ideas:
> I think the biggest issue is not necessarily an issue, but it's the way we *handle* the issues. . . . I think it's very common for people to state opinion as fact, just to state their view in a way that clearly communicates that they think they're superior to others. . . and they have no qualms about that. . . . And then, on the other side. . . instead of trying to really

learn something about that view, we immediately turn it around and do the exact same thing back, which is to say, "No, you're not right, *I'm right. You're wrong*.". . . I don't see how *anyone* could go *anywhere* when *everybody* is saying "I'm immovable." (T)

I think the biggest problem is . . . really just lack of dialogue. . . . I just don't feel like people . . . if they got into a conversation with someone else, they would stop themselves and say, "Wait a second, let me see this from both sides," [instead] they automatically pick one side. . . . "Oh, you're a Democrat; oh, you're a Conservative," and then just automatically defend yourself about it. . . . Across the board—Conservatives or Democrats—my friends and people I respect can be pretty closed-minded when it comes to trying to understand the other side. (S)

These same two individuals went on to highlight the consequences of strident moral statements when not accompanied by a genuine willingness to also listen and consider questions:

People may say, "This is the right thing to do, and it's immoral to do such and so." But then, we don't *listen* to one another, and we don't communicate with one another. Which in and of itself, to me, seems immoral and it doesn't seem right to just say, "I'm right, and you're wrong," and not be open to anything else. (T)

To come out and say, "Okay, it's been this way, and according to the scriptures and what not . . . it's *supposed* to be this way.". . . I can understand that. . . it's a valid viewpoint, but simply because there [are] a lot of religious people . . . you can't just vote it out because you've got more numbers, you know, the issue needs to be discussed . . . I really don't have any issue with viewpoints as long as people are willing to discuss them. (S)

While these concerns seem to be largely directed towards conservative communities, similar concern with limited openness was expressed *by* conservative citizens, as well, including the following individual lamenting the refusal of friends to hear him out:

I find it very alarming . . . that you see people . . . not willing to consider or even look at the idea that there is a God. . . . You even suggest there's a problem in terms of "you have this sin that separates you from God and this is something that has eternal consequences" —they aren't even willing to consider it . . . they won't even disagree with you. (G)

This individual continued:

My heart absolutely breaks when I see my friends . . . just absolutely reject this. . . . People get so angered by Christians, "Oh, you know, what are you doing in my business?". . . If I were asking . . . about anything else, you know, this would not be an issue. (G)

While this and other conservative citizens pointed to lack of societal openness to messages of faith, it ironically appeared to be a refusal to listen among some religious messengers that prompted similar concern among liberal participants. While a call for more widespread openness was thus evident across political clusters, *specific solutions* in terms of desirable improvements to public exchange looked quite different, as reflected in the following two themes.

Public deliberation and dialogue: "Can we talk?" On one hand, an overriding theme of comments from liberal citizens was the potential of more broad-based collective exchange. For

many of these citizens, resistance and lack of openness mentioned earlier were seen as best addressed through engagement in public dialogue or deliberation:

> It's the more pedestrian ways of communicating our views that, in the long run, will benefit us more—getting these issues out there and *letting people talk about them* in whatever way they want to . . . It's a small thing that I think matters. (T)
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> I think in order to be able to change anything . . . you have to have *everybody* looking at the problem, *everybody* coming up with their own points of view and then take what you want from all of that—from some sort of logical basis that most people can agree on. (S)

Another individual, referring to "years and years—decades—of sort of deferred maintenance on this project we call democratic society or civil society," elaborated his views of the problem:

> We're *taught* in many ways that people with *strong* political views, with *passion* to their political views . . . "*will not listen*, they *don't* understand your perspective,"—"they're *dismissive*" because we don't have models of "how can I have passionate views and *disagree* with you—*vociferously disagree*—and yet sit down and *have* a civil discussion?" ... And I think that imbues our institutions and our structures and our dialogues and our communities with a *lack* of *healthy democratic* public discourse. . . . I can't tell you how many e-mail lists—public e-mail lists that anyone can join—that as soon as you have a disagreement, people are like, "*Whoa. Whoa. Whoa*," you know, like "take it off lists" it's almost like in disagreeing that's considered *uncouth*, *uncivil*. [7](R)

He went on to label this hesitancy as a disturbingly new phenomenon, pointing to the history of America as a country "*steeped* in an ideology of vociferous disagreement and civil debate" with founding documents of the nation emphasizing the "health of democracy [as] predicated on open debate" (R). He continued:

> And this is why I say we are heading towards crisis *because* we refuse to engage in a discourse with each other. . . . the *lack of* civil discussion and debate in our society . . . leads to extremism on the one hand [and] a lack of education amongst the body politic on the other: problems *that will hit us much harder down the road.* (R)

This individual concluded by calling for the creation of more public spaces that support community exchange: "I think . . . that across the political spectrum people *crave* the type of interaction, debate, discourse, discussion. . . . were we to choose as a society to privilege this sort of discussion and discourse, we would find a *huge* outlet and interest in that (R)." Another liberal-leaning participant emphasized the importance of journalists in facilitating and prompting a more thoughtful public deliberation, stressing the need for media personnel to apply critical inquiry to all groups and perspectives in a balanced way (S).

Among conservative participants, there was less attention given to civil deliberation. Rather than necessarily reflecting a lack of concern for public exchange generally, we found their attention in this area often directed to other modes of collective communication.

Opportunities to be heard: "Can I share something?" One possible reason for the relative silence of conservatives regarding collective deliberation may be their consistent

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[7] Italics throughout citations reflect vocal emphases *of participants* (rather than our own), with this particular individual especially emphatic in his comments.

attention to *teaching* as a top priority in community exchange. Most of the conservative citizens referred in some way or another to the importance and benefits of sharing their perspective, especially in regards to their religious faith:

> Well, again, *my solution* [to sexual assault] would be to teach people. . . . Teach them to love *one another*, to know that God created us with a purpose and a plan—human life is precious – it's not to be *violated,* you know, to *respect women.* (L)
> If [a message] is going to be better for me and for my family, and provide more peace and stability and happiness, then I think it would be good for others also. And I know . . . that what's good for me isn't always going to be good for everyone else. . . . And I know also that . . . I can never . . . force my opinion and my issues on anyone. . . . It wouldn't do any good anyway. (A)

> The man whose friends resisted his attempts to share his faith went on to clarify:
> I am not doing this because I'm getting some kind of points or . . . tally, you know, I'm not going to get the Christian gym bag. . . ., if I (*laugh*) get, you know, three people to sign up for this. You know, once you realize what this means for people, this is, in my understanding, the most intense way to love people. . . because this has been something that has been shared with me, it is my responsibility to share it with others. (G)

While stereotypically associated with religious conservatives, desires to share regarding issues that were central to one's sense of morality (e.g., religious faith) were, once again, clearly not a concern exclusive to one political cluster. Indeed, the basic interest and willingness to express one's voice regarding what is personally important are arguably implicit in most forms of public discourse. Among liberal participants, for instance, the value of education and "speaking out" was also evident regarding issues of personal importance, such one woman who emphasized the need to speak out against racist language:

> I feel like I'm not being true to myself when I sit here and let him spout off these ignorant things and disrespectful things. . . . I am the kind of person who just has to say something. You know, I don't think that social change comes from being quiet. I think you definitely, when you're someone like me, you have to bring it up whenever you hear [derogatory comments]. (H)

In speaking about societal problems and solutions, citizens across the political spectrum mentioned both problems and potentials associated with citizen discourse itself. While citizens across perspectives raised concern with the lack of general openness and authentic listening, they diverged on the preferred mode of doing so—with liberal-leaning citizens tending to emphasize the need for more extensive public dialogue, and conservative-leaning citizens more focused on the need for greater attention to teaching.

2. Defining social problems: What is the nature of fundamental challenges facing society?

In addition to the state of public discourse, citizens also offered many other ideas about "fundamental problems facing society." While perhaps not surprising, one refreshing finding was the degree to which individuals across perspectives expressed sincere concern for the general well-being of society (an insight more important than it may first appear, given the prevailing suspicion of motives and intentions across the partisan divide). On the level of details, citizens spoke of a wide variety of concerns—from poverty and environmental issues to moral questions

and family breakdown. It was on the broader level, however, that the more interesting insights emerged in relation to divergent (and similar) views of tradition and change.

What is the primary problem?: Eroding versus entrenched tradition. Citizen views on the relationship between traditional beliefs/practices and current societal problems, in particular, reflected meaningful differences and surprising commonalities. Among conservative citizens, on one hand, emphasis was given to potential *negative consequences* of the challenge to traditional Judeo-Christian standards, as reflected in the following comments about sexual issues:

> I think in a *large sense* . . . moral relativism—"what's right for me is what's right for me" . . . is opening a doorway for people to be sexually *violent* . . . I think we set ourselves up for this in our society . . . by demoralizing our society. There's just going to be *more evil.* There's just going to be more . . . of these things . . . that we *can't control anymore*. (L) People who want to tear down the laws of chastity . . . have made tremendous advances in . . . Western Europe and the United States, and it's a *tragedy* . . . we have become to where we are *obsessed* with sex and we've taken away a lot of the boundaries and a lot of the sacredness and a lot of the respect for sexual relationships. (N)

Although similar concerns regarding prevailing sexual norms were raised across the political spectrum (see category #3, *Delimiting Solutions*), for conservatives, the *erosion* of tradition was the primary point of concern. Conversely, some liberal-leaning citizens emphasized the *maintenance* of traditional social arrangements and norms as potentially problematic. One individual, for instance, spoke at length about the ongoing existence of harmful "power differentials" reflecting "all these different ways of having people who are the ones who know best and other people don't" and "people who have the power and who make the decisions and who dictate what other people do" (E). He went on to attribute such differences to particular social arrangements and ideological norms reflected in traditional institutions:

> [Power comes] from society, from how we've been socialized to understand the world. We've been socialized to understand . . . that men in Catholic traditions say mass and women don't . . . and if we just you kind of unpack that [socialization]--my gosh! That's got an incredible amount of power for everyone who believes in that particular tradition. Because all of the sudden there is something the men can do that the women can't do. (E)

Another liberal participant stated "different ideologies create inequality," emphasizing that the "only reason" everyone is not receiving equal opportunities "is because of things that have happened in this society that has created that" (H). Once again, the *preservation* of particular ideologies and religious practices is here highlighted as *contributing* to societal problems—a direct contrast to the social conservative emphasis.

To better illustrate the nuanced differences in evaluating traditional norms, it becomes helpful to turn to a specific issue taken up by multiple participants: domestic violence. While opposition to family abuse was obviously evident across political leanings, there were serious differences as to what was seen as contributing to and underlying the problem. Continuing the emphasis on problematic aspects of traditional gender socialization, another liberal citizen noted:

> Traditional gender roles are taught more in . . . certain types of American families more than others . . . boys are supposed to be strong and aggressive. . . . Girls, on the other hand, it's about being a little bit more passive and concerned with feelings . . . and when it goes to *extremes,* domestic violence happens. (T)

Several conservatives, in contrast, emphasized the gradual change *away* from traditional gender norms as potentially aggravating family problems—including violence. These traditional roles, when fully understood, were defended as offering positive patterns for families and communities. One man, for instance, pointed to misunderstandings of a controversial passage in the *New Testament* ["Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (*Ephesians 5*)]*,* adding, "That's where most people stop reading":

> It does say the man is supposed to be the head in the relationship, but it compares it to Christ being the head of the Church-- that "just as Christ gave himself up for and loved the church," [giving] this ultimate self-sacrifice for the church, so too should the husband totally love his wife and be willing to give up anything for her, including himself. That's the second component people really miss. (G)

> He went on condemn abuse as a failure to live the true spirit of this standard:
> This is probably one of the best Biblical portrayals or communications of what marriage looks like. . . What it sets up here, I think, is something you see fundamentally "out of whack" in most relationships that have problems, but in a very, very severe way in terms of domestic violence. . . . I don't think the wife respecting her husband is quite the problem here. I think it's the total lack of love in those relationships [from the man]. And so when the woman sees there is no love and the man is just in this relationship for sex or if he needs a place to stay . . . that is not right, not something she should be comfortable with. . . . this man is not "loving her like Christ loved the church."
> *Interviewer:* So, according to the text you read, domestic violence does not fit?
> Yes, it's an absolute perversion on the most striking level [reflecting] that somebody has no idea of what Biblical marriage looks like. (G)

From the origins of domestic violence, to standards for sexual behavior, citizen discourse thus reflected this significant, if predictable, liberal/conservative framing distinction about change and tradition. Whereas the *departure* from traditional norms was primarily emphasized among conservatives as contributing to societal problems, it was the *persistence* of many of these same norms highlighted among liberals as problematic. Related to these differences in citizen problem definition, perspectives on societal "solutions" varied as well.

What is the primary solution?: Preserving tradition vs. embracing new ways. As we moved from "fundamental problems" to asking about "viable solutions," other interesting patterns emerged. Most basically, as might be expected, for citizens who saw the defiance of traditional standards as underlying problems, *reconnecting* to these standards, norms and principles was emphasized as crucial to societal progress. For instance, turning away from sin, studying scriptural text and defending the traditional family were all emphasized among conservative-leaning citizens as important to addressing societal problems. Where citizens saw traditional standards as complicit in inequalities and power disparities, however, *challenging* these norms was emphasized as critical for societal progress. For instance, questioning traditional gender roles, valuing other beliefs and accepting different family structures were all emphasized among liberal-leaning citizens as important to addressing societal problems (for

similar patterns identified in relation to "reactionary" and "radical" stances, see Brock et al., 2005, pp. 85-89).

Connecting to analysis from the previous section, it is important to note that liberal citizens went beyond simply challenging tradition, to emphasizing the value of openness to diverse ways and additional perspectives:

> You're inevitably going to be much more peaceful . . . just [an] across the board *better society* . . . if everybody can come to the table with different experiences and with their different cultural values and with their different histories. . . . It gives you a window into a whole different experience [of] this world. (S)

> One of the only things that is absolutely *key* is . . . to have an open mind, and be *willing* to discuss things and be *willing* to look at all different sides, not to say "*my* culture, *my* society, *my* ideas are the only way and . . . *I'm* just not going to listen to what you have to say." (R)

In contrast to the focus on diversity, conservative emphases on common standards implicitly reflected a more general aspiration towards unity. From this vantage point, calls for diversity were also evaluated differently, as reflected by this conservative woman:

> I usually feel like if somebody says, "Well, we're not being diverse enough" . . . it's a challenge to me, like "why aren't you more *open*?" I *do believe* . . . diversity from our background of different immigrant societies and . . . is just really a beautiful thing and has made America a beautiful tapestry. I feel, though, as if some people have taken this tapestry and beaten the rest of us over the head saying, "You need to be diverse, you need to be diverse.". . . I like the idea of having a diverse society, [but] . . . feel beat up on like "I'm not diverse enough," and it's a challenge to my core beliefs. (Q)

While a fuller discussion of the complexities of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, it is at least worth noting how closely tied the issue of diversity is with clashing views of needed societal change. Aside from offering further insight on the intensity of current public feelings about "diversity" generally, this linkage also highlights the need for additional examination and deliberation on the issue.

To change versus not to change: Is that the question? On the surface, the above analysis seems to merely confirm one widely acknowledged pattern: "conservatives like to keep things the same, without much openness to change" and "liberals like things to change, without much interest in keeping things the same." While such emphases clearly reflect general, but real historical distinctions, we again found the full scope of citizen views contradicting this common heuristic in subtle, but profound ways. For instance, although conservatives emphasized the preservation of tradition with particular force, attention to valuable aspects of stable tradition was reflected among liberal citizens as well. To illustrate, one of the more liberal citizens who spoke critically about many traditional institutions also raised a very conservative-sounding alarm at a "*hyper-sexualized media*" with "sex *everywhere*":

> We allow kids to be a part of a society that uses sex to sell just about everything . . . just about everything that is made for mass consumption has some sort of sexuality attached to it these days. (R)

This man went on to express concern with the growing societal "addiction" to instant gratification (R). Another liberal citizen similarly voiced impassioned concerns with the consequences of oppressive messages about women reflected in increasingly widespread pornography (T) (see category #3 below, *Delimiting Solutions*). Conversely, although it was liberals who tended to emphasize improving upon tradition, conservatives also pointed to the need of progress beyond current realities in multiple ways. The final category likewise takes up examination of these diverse comments about needed social change, reflecting wide variation in scope and form.

In terms of broader framing, this nuance suggests a potential shift in public conversation from *whether* to change or not (the amount or quantity of change), to *what kind* of change is needed (the quality of this change) (or perhaps the *desirable pace* of societal change, see Brock et al., 2005, p. 71). Rather than perpetually debating, for instance, *whether* to change or preserve traditional gender norms (a framing which effectively permits only two viable options: "change traditional gender roles" vs. "keep traditional gender roles the same"), conversation might be resituated to consider *how* or *what* aspects of particular norms or standards ought to be preserved, as well as what aspects could be modified. This latter framing goes beyond two absolute options, insisting on openness and space for multiple positions. From such a place, conservative citizens might consider more seriously aspects of traditional gender roles needing revision and liberal citizens, those perhaps deserving of some preservation. In short, recognition of a shared interest in the preservation of *some* aspects of society—as well as interest in changing *some* others—might ultimately bolster dialogue and deliberation among a diverse citizenry.

In a proposed broadening of conversation to explore "desirable change," it is worth mentioning possible shifts associated with the related framing of deliberation about "morality"--a topic permitting only brief mention here. Similar to questions of both tradition and change, rather than seeing morality as the exclusive domain of one group, it may be acknowledged more broadly that different moral positions exist *across political communities* (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Indeed, modern philosophy has made it increasingly clear that avoiding values— including some position on "the good"—is humanly impossible (Slife, 2000; Taylor, 1985). From this basis, collective exchange on the subject may potentially move from strident declarations that often preclude dialogue (reviewed earlier), to a more open exploration of morality itself: *what is good or bad for society?* This more inclusive exchange is reflected in the following reflections from conservative and liberal participants respectively:

> I was able to learn a balance between what I personally believe is right and allowing other people their own viewpoints . . . I have learned to view them as people who, for the most part, are trying to do what they believe is right. And instead of berating them . . . I need to [see] . . . they are trying to do what they believe is right. (J)

> I think we really need to stop and say like, what *really* is the bad stuff, what *really* is harming society, and focus on that. . . . If everybody can come to the table with different experiences and with their different cultural values and with their different histories . . . then you can get that greater picture of what's going on, but if everybody is saying, "No, this is the way I've lived and this is the way everything is," you get *nowhere!* (S)

In sum, although citizen comments on the nature of fundamental problems and their needed solutions reflect expected distinctions, surprising anomalies stood out as well. As further detailed below, closer attention to the complexity of these citizen views (especially their

departures from prevailing liberal-conservative stereotypes), point towards potentially exciting "re-framings" of public exchange on these same issues.

3. Delimiting solutions: What is the scope of needed social change?

Given the value afforded across the political spectrum to some kind of general social change, our third analytic category examines in finer detail the particular *kinds* of societal changes emphasized by liberal and conservative-leaning citizens. Whereas the basic nature of change relative to traditional norms was highlighted in the previous category, here we take up significant distinctions in the scale or scope of proposed solutions, ranging from personal and family changes to more extensive institutional shifts.

Changing individuals versus changing context: Is <u>that</u> the question? Similar to the over-generalization relative to "preservation/maintenance" vs. "change/progress", conservatives have also been portrayed as exclusively prioritizing "individual-level" aspects of problems and liberals the reverse—almost entirely focused on surrounding contextual factors. Although large-scale survey research does, in fact, confirm wide divisions in the degree to which citizens believe in the power and potential of individual initiative (Pew Research Center, 2005), our analysis, once again, cautions against over-generalizations on this point by articulating additional nuance and complexity across a diverse citizen discourse. That is, citizens from varied perspectives spoke of needed changes involving both *individuals and surrounding context*, albeit with distinct languages and emphases.

a) Individual change: Changing understanding, changing being. In contrast to prevailing stereotypes, we observed personal, individual-level changes receiving attention from participants across diverse perspectives. There was, of course, variation in the specific nature of these changes and distinctions in how they were seen as coming about. For instance, individual change associated with healthy community dialogue was emphasized by a number of liberal citizens, involving shifts such as new understanding and greater levels of tolerance:

> I think the only thing that can change [harsh views] is really talking to that person, you know, communication and education, and getting to know where they are coming from . . . getting down to the core of who people are, I mean, and that's where we are all the same--our core, you know. (H)

> [In] dialogue . . . I'm supposed to *understand*, or try to *understand* and *appreciate* the other view, and I've gotten better at that. I think that, while I don't necessarily *agree*, I *understand* . . . this is what someone believes--*the same way that's what I believe*, and I *know that*. And so, I'm not going to say that they're *crazy* and they're . . . whatever, I'm not going to call someone bad names because they believe this; I just disagree. (T)

These kinds of insights emerging from dialogue may constitute significant and profound personal shifts--ranging from altered views to a deeper change of heart regarding another individual or group. The same individual went on to question one common negative perception of this kind of change:

> [There's a] negative bias against changing our minds--like flip-flopping as a sign of weakness, you know. . . . When you have the information that allows you to change your view logically, then that's fine, *change your view*, as long as you're doing it in an

educated way. . . . What the *hell is wrong with changing your mind if you've found out something better?* (T)

In contrast to personal change through public exchange, conservative citizens stressed a process of personal change primarily centered on "turning to God":

You know, I mean I know that sounds like a cop out answer--turn to God or whatever-- but I mean some of these people have deep problems . . . [and need to] just totally revamp how they look at it. (G)

I think the more *loving* we are, the more *forgiving*, the more merciful . . . the more we *respond* in a Christ-like way and . . . learn to *control* our anger and not to "let the sun go *down* on our anger," we become more . . . loving. So to me, *that* would be the answer [to violence]--for each person to be . . . led by the Holy Spirit and have a gentle *heart,* a loving, understanding heart towards other people. (L)

This kind of direct experience with God was emphasized by multiple conservative citizens as central in freeing individuals from problems and restoring happiness, love, etc. Of importance to note, this explicit attention to divine engagement may be a second explanation for less priority given to civic discourse among conservatives, as explored in the first category. Indeed, a reliance on God was emphasized by several conservative citizens as a consummate precondition for fundamental solutions—more important than other considerations:

You can't, *I don't think* you can solve problems, *ultimately* solve problems, except through Christ. I think we can do *a lot of good* otherwise, but … *ultimately* that's the only place to answer all of this. (M)

Without the gospel of Jesus Christ, *I could not survive;* I don't know how people do it. . . . I am so grateful I have it to give to my children … the good news--there *really is a savior. . . . There is no other answer.* There is *no social program*, there's *no law. . . . Nothing* can stop this slide to destruction, except repentance. (N)

In spite of differing emphases, it is important to note that religion and spirituality were central to the framings of participants across the political spectrum (as documented more broadly by Pew Research Center, 2005). A more adequate exploration of the contribution of religion/spirituality to diverging partisan frames requires both further research and space for a more comprehensive analysis. At a minimum, it is worth noting the subtle, but striking barrier to deliberative participation that energetic professions of faith may potentially entail for some citizens (i.e., Jesus is the only answer, so unless you accept that, what is there to talk about?).

b) Nurturing relationships and valuing family: Universal concerns? While an emphasis on "family" is likewise stereotypically associated with conservatives, citizens across political perspectives were clearly concerned about familial well-being—albeit in different ways. For conservative participants, a major consideration was given to the importance of the traditional family and the radiating negative impact on society when this family structure weakens or fragments. One man, for instance, said, "I feel like . . . the family is really the basis of our society and so when families are not functioning. . . . I think it definitely has ramifications in society and all the little things I think we can talk about--spin offs--directly go back to that" (Q). Citizens across perspectives, however, expressed concerns with the general well-being of families, with both liberal and conservative-leaning citizens expressing concern for the basic care

of children and loved ones, as well as the ongoing problem of family violence[8]. Furthermore, on the level of community connections and relationships generally, participants across perspectives expressed concern with the collective consequences of excessive self-interest. One liberal individual emphasized the fundamental problem facing society as "extreme individualism . . . we don't get to interact to see others' suffering and . . . we're actually in our own little worlds." He continued:

> We have a ghetto in [our community]--a poverty ghetto. We cross [there] when we go shopping, [but] we're not part of it. . . So you don't interact with those people, you don't see those problems, and you don't care. . . . It's a loss of that notion of really, "we're in this together," you know? . . . That indifference to suffering … really depresses me sometimes, you know, makes me sad. (F)

A conservative citizen likewise highlighted the need of reaching out to those facing challenges. After noting the value of supporting the government's efforts, he added:

> I think what may have *more impact* . . . is to look around us to our extended family and our neighbors and friends . . . and see who's *going through these problems* and offer them the help they need. You know, if everyone were to look around and see a neighbor or two . . . that are going through these issues and say, *"Hey*, how can I help? Can I come over and watch the kids for you? How about I bring over dinner on Sunday?" You know and it's *the little things* . . . that can help. (K)

As noted earlier, we reiterate how refreshing it was to hear individuals across the partisan divide expressing heart-felt concern for the general well-being of society. It was similarly exciting to see in our analysis, a deep, shared concern across citizens regarding the implications of a self-absorbed atmosphere--a commonality highlighted in these comments from self-identified "radical" and "patriot" citizens respectively:

> Well, we have an *addicted society*. We have an instant gratification society. . . the same sorts of things that lead to video game addiction, that lead to obesity, the same sorts of things that lead to cigarettes, alcohol . . . We live in a society that *teaches us* to *value* excess. And it *teaches us* that *more* of a good thing is better, and it teaches us that the *here and now* is more important than the long-term, and it's *every facet* of our society that does this. (R)
> You got [some] who believe in "anything goes. I'll just do whatever I want to do," and it's just like, "I don't care how it affects myself or my family, or society as a whole, I'm just going to do what I want.". . . I don't like about 95 percent of the stuff that I have to do in my life, but you know what? It doesn't make *any difference* because it's my responsibility. It has nothing to do with my feelings, it has everything to do with what's right. You can't base your life on feelings. (O)

Although the precise language often differed ("individualism/indifference/ excessive consumption" for liberal citizens vs. "not serving neighbors/whatever-I-want-to-do attitude/evading responsibility" for conservative citizens) and deeper philosophical differences likely remained, we were again struck by the similar thrust of concern among citizens with both

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[8] Just as our study of actual citizen discourse denies family well-being as an exclusive "conservative issue," so also it challenges a notion active in some communities that domestic violence is a "liberal" one (see Hess, Allen & Todd, under review, for further examination of citizen views specific to domestic violence).

the overall quality of community relationships and the specific state of families. Without denying the existence of potentially real and threatening "anti-family" elements (see following section), we found in our interviews evidence for a much more encompassing consensus around family and community well-being than is generally acknowledged in partisan rhetoric.

c) Institutional accountability: Agreements wider than typically acknowledged? In addition to individual and interpersonal (family/community) level changes, larger institutions and systems were also emphasized across participants as critical to public well-being. Across comments on systems of government, business, education and media, there was particular stress given to holding institutions accountable.

Among the liberal cluster, several spoke of more deliberate, broad-based public engagement in the actual democratic process. One man, for instance, proposed that "every American realize they're a shareholder in this corporation we call a government . . . it can be more benevolent than it is, if it's more democratic--you know, [if] . . . we oversee it" (F). Others called for citizens being given a stronger voice and leaders held to higher standards of accountability:

> If every single human being in the country voted, it would *drastically* change the way our country is run. Or if every single person in the country listened to what was going on even and just talked about this stuff, it could really change things. (T)
>
> I think supporting democratic discourse and debate among our politicians is vital and holding our leaders accountable when they . . . refuse to engage in discussion and discourse. (R)

Media institutions were also highlighted as needing greater accountability. As noted earlier, for instance, liberal citizens saw media influence as contributing to weak civic exchange:

> One of the big problems is, you know, from my perspective, is the media itself is not diverse and, in fact, becoming less and less diverse. Just recently this last week, two reports found . . . our national policies have lead to a conglomerization of media that has lessened diversity and discussion and debate. (R)
>
> Social conscience and the media in general do absolutely nothing to promote [dialogue], so many of these problems or lack of understanding or lack of ability to dialogue about things, come from the fact that the *media doesn't promote it at all*. (S)

This man went on to call for more government funding of public media institutions such as *PBS* and *NPR*. Similar to the impetus for more citizen involvement in government, he then called for a greater democratization of media processes:

> Media really should be grass-roots, I think . . . it needs to be brought back to the people, and the people need to, like, put their ideas out there so we can hear them ourselves . . . we live in a country where all of this technology exists to be able to speak to other people, to be able to broadcast your ideas. (S)

Conservative citizens also expressed concerns with media accountability. Although centered more on media content than process, their concerns likewise highlight a need for greater public accountability for this institution. One school teacher related:

> The kids . . . because they've seen [violence on TV] *over and over and over again,* have gotten to the point where it's just become very *normal*. . . When we had September 11th, I

remember teaching in a school class that very day and, of course, the rest of the week we talked about it. . . . and their comments were *"cool!"* or *"wow!"* And I'm like, "What are you guys talking about?" And they said, "Oh, that'd be so cool to watch an airplane go into a side of a building. That'd be *so cool*.". . . It was just like an *impossibility* to get through to them . . they're so used to those images. . . They ingest it like food; they ingest it so *heavily* that it just absolutely means nothing to them anymore. And that affects their *relationships*; that affects how they *treat* people. (M)

In this same vein, two conservative women shared their experiences and feelings about sexually-explicit media:

My husband brought out pornography, *reels* of pornography . . . and I was subjected to one film and *then* my husband wanted to imitate what he saw, which I was not at all interested in doing. . . . I think it's *extremely* destructive . . . very degrading to women and I think that's ah, very hard for a woman to compete with what men see in pornography. I also think it changes the way a man *functions.* (P)

[Pornography] does *damage* to the persons themselves; it damages their relationships. How many marriage relationships have been messed up because no woman is walking around airbrushed, you know [*laughs*] or digitally modified? . . . The way pornography is set up, it can't be truly satisfying and so it's got to keep pushing the limits . . . Someone who's in that addiction really has to keep going; if they are trying to fill something, they have to go to more and more extremes to try and get the same kind of charge. (Q)

While such comments would be expected from social conservatives, it was striking that some of the most strident comments about sexually-explicit media came from liberal citizens. In addition to comments from one citizen cited previously, another liberal-leaning woman elaborated on this concern with particular feeling:

I think if someone wants to watch something like [pornography] . . . then I have a hard time saying, *"No, you can't."* On the other hand . . . violent pornography is the thing that encourages things like sexual abuse and domestic violence. . . . [with sexual violence] presented as something pleasurable. Well, *my goodness, no wonder*, I mean *no wonder* people think a lot of this stuff is okay. . . . I understand free speech and all that stuff, but when it has concrete effects on important things like sexual abuse . . . . What about the rights of the women who are being abused? *What about them?* So you're saying the right to make violent pornography is *more important* than the right for that woman to feel safe in her own home? *I don't buy that! [emotional/angry]*. . . . I don't understand how that's okay. (T)

While certainly meaningful differences remain, we were struck by the similar thrust of media concerns. Rather than a "pet" conservative issue, as sometimes portrayed, general media influence and the need for more accountability were issues explored in sophisticated ways across perspectives.

Beyond "individuals versus context": Other questions? To review, in contrast to stereotypes of exclusive attention to "individual change" (conservatives) versus "contextual change" (liberals), our analysis identified concerns across personal, social and institutional levels present in both liberal and conservative clusters (though in unique ways and with different

emphases). Related to this, we also found similar attention within each cluster to both meaningful degrees of *personal agency/responsibility* associated with social problems and to ways this agency may be tangibly *constrained*. Two citizens, for instance, specifically stressed limitations to agency in the context of domestic violence, with the liberal individual attending to the impact of media socialization and economic forces, and the conservative individual noting the binding power of destructive family traditions.

Overall, such insights suggest another possible shift in the overall "framing" of partisan deliberation about social problems. Rather than focusing on *whether* to prioritize individual or contextual challenges, these results invite greater public attention towards *how* to address both individual and contextual changes needed, including holistic interrelationships between the two. By such a re-framing, citizens may be prompted to more carefully explore distinct ways of portraying and interpreting *individuals-in-context*. For instance, citizens might explore to what degree larger meta-narratives of individuals oppressed by hostile institutional "structures" (typical of liberal/progressive explanation) and individuals enslaved by sin in a "fallen world" (typical of Christian conservative explanation) overlap and differ. What are the implications of such distinctions and in what ways might they share common cause?

Discussion: Why Does This Matter?

Near the end of Jon Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance mentioned earlier, one of the hosts interjected, "We're here to love you, not confront you. . . . We're here to be nice"--to which Stewart responded:

> No, no, but what I'm saying is this. I'm not. I'm here to confront you, because we need help from the media, and they're *hurting us*. . . . You're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great . . . you know, because we need what you do. This is such a great opportunity you have here (Schantz, 1994).

Attention to the influence of elite voices on collective discourse was a foundational starting point for our project exploring citizen framings. In many instances of the larger analysis, we found citizens talking about social problems in a language reflective of prevailing government/media framings—from sharp, dichotomous polarizations, to harsh stereotypes of particular groups or differences. Of course, such evidence of elite influence was neither remarkable nor unexpected and consequently not the focus of our examination. What *has been* noteworthy, however, was also finding within a micro-discourse of twenty citizen interviews evidence of wholly alternative frames across these same issues. In the end, it was these surprising instances of anomalous citizen framings "transgressing" broader liberal-conservative stereotypes that attracted our primary analytic attention.

As the discourse generally stands, conservatives are often portrayed as "the ones who care about" questions of individual-level change, family well-being, the defense of tradition, and opportunities to share that tradition more broadly. Liberals, conversely, are just as often portrayed as "the ones who care about" broader societal change, the well-being of marginalized populations, improvements to tradition, and respect for diversity. Undoubtedly, these generalizations are grounded in distinctive values and historical emphases that are real and important to appreciate. Without qualifications, however, such a dichotomous framework may predispose citizens to see each other as widely diverging, if not incommensurable, across a range of meaningful questions. Consequently, when deliberation between liberal and conservative

citizens *does* happen, encounters may center on questions such as: Preserving tradition *or* changing it? Promoting openness or *not*? Embracing diversity or *not*? Valuing common standards or *not*? Encouraging individual change or *not*? Better supporting families or *not*? Holding larger institutions accountable or *not*? In such an exchange, with such dichotomous terms, it should be unsurprising that citizen exchange is often dominated by intractable, absolute positions and shrill debate. Indeed, even in settings such as our liberal-conservative dialogue course with an *explicit* emphasis on civility, these kinds of subtle, but dominant, frames may *implicitly* predispose participants to see contrasting views as inherently orthogonal and threatening to their own. Along these lines, Seyle and Newman (2006) suggest that the prevailing "red-blue" metaphor may tacitly "encourage people to see themselves as members of a unified group opposed by people with fundamentally different perspectives," thus reinforcing a "winner-takes-all approach to public judgment" and predisposing engagement that "does not allow other perspectives to be incorporated into the final decision" (p. 577). When left unquestioned, such dichotomous frames may arguably exert subtle, but powerful effects on citizen exchange.

If this is the case, a greater awareness of the simple existence and function of prevailing frames may be a basic starting point in mitigating their impact. As hinted earlier, some experimental evidence points to the active processing of frames as an especially effective way to limit their influence (Brewer, 2001). In her comments on the future of framing research, Callaghan (2005) further proposes a "worthwhile goal" of "alerting citizens to the characteristic ways elites try to influence opinions, specifically teaching them to recognize subtle attempts to persuade them ideologically or emotionally with frames" (p. 188). To draw on an e-mail metaphor, since the incessant "spam" of media sound-bytes and stereotypes will likely persist indefinitely, such awareness may, in essence, allow for a more conscious detection and "filtering" of incoming messages in a way that prevents their mass "download" unaware.

Brock and colleagues (2005) take it one step further, pointing beyond simple awareness of prevailing frames, to potential transformations in their fundamental characteristics. This proposal streamlines with our own findings that hint at the positive potential of deliberate "re-framings" of key issues taken up in public deliberation. To conclude, we review four points summarizing the essence of our framing-findings and elaborating their possible implications for public exchange and joint action.

1. Fresh Commonalities: *"Liberals are from earth, and conservatives are too*!"

To begin, we cannot help emphasizing, once again, the surprising degree of common ground to be found, at closer examination, underneath *both* liberal and conservative feet. Our analysis of citizen framings regarding fundamental social problems specifically suggests that individuals *across political communities* care about lack of openness to new ideas (from different sources), problematic media influence (in different forms), the well-being of the family (even with distinct definitions), the maintenance of tradition (in some ways) and change to tradition (in other ways) and both individual and institutional change (in different forms). Rather than automatically seeing deviation from one's own perspective as threatening, citizens operating within this kind of an alternative, broadened meta-frame may better acknowledge profound common interests. In this way, citizens may be encouraged to move beyond a "culture war" of rigid, unassailable oppositions to a joint exploration of the rich diversity of thought across issues. Bizer and Petty (2005) point to ways that even slight shifts in the "valence" of exchange—the degree to which issues are framed as oppositional or not—can have significant effects on

fundamental feelings of openness and resistance in citizens. In addition to positive consequences for dialogue itself, such framing shifts may also impact citizen willingness to collaborate on joint action (see final point).

2. New Questions: "Perhaps we really <u>do</u> have something to talk about?"

In addition to recognizing a deeper mutuality of core interests, our analysis also highlights potential changes in the precise nature of questions taken up in partisan dialogue/deliberation. In contrast to simplistic dichotomies of "individual vs. context" and "change vs. stability," citizen comments point towards more nuanced, qualitative distinctions across groups: "*What exactly* should be preserved in tradition and *what* perhaps ought to change? What do we *mean* by openness, tolerance and acceptance? When and how should diversity (or commonality) be appreciated as helpful or harmful for communities? What is good and bad for society—and how can we know the difference? How may family be supported *alongside* broader community measures? How may media accountability reflect broad-based concerns from diverse citizens?"

Across issues, such questions may reflect fresh "centers of gravity" for public exchange, leading citizen discourse, once again, beyond intransigent culture-war ruts, towards an open exploration centered on rich questions of broad import. In a similar shift away from the dichotomous "red-blue," "winner-takes-all" framing, Seyle and Newman (2006) propose moving towards a "Purple America" portrayal allowing space for more sensitive, qualitative gradations of political affiliation—welcoming a range of views on a continuous spectrum from extremely red to extremely blue (pp. 577-579). In calling for more intensive inquiry into characteristics of political discourse, Brock and colleagues (2005) likewise aim for greater "depth and breadth in political communication" towards increasing the "ideological richness" of such exchange (p. 31). As alternative frames cultivate a deeper and more nuanced public exchange, the likelihood of its success with difficult social issues increases, if only by prompting fresh ways of hearing different perspectives. In the case of deliberations about morality, for instance, psychologists Haidt and Graham (2007) point towards an expanded framing as permitting citizens from one party to "open their ears" to the views of the other side as "moral (instead of amoral, or immoral, or just plain stupid)," ultimately "open[ing] up a door in the wall that separates liberals and conservatives when they try to discuss moral issues" (p. 113).

3. Additional Participants: "Maybe <u>they</u> have something to contribute to this conversation too?"

In addition to awareness of new commonalities and fresh questions, subtle shifts to overarching conversational frames may have other potentially profound effects on a practical level. Most basically, such changes may help expand public exchange to include a wider range of participants, with more "space at the table" for every citizen to have a say across issues. Liberal-leaning citizens, for instance, may be better appreciated as potentially offering significant contributions to discussions of individual-level processes and aspects of society needing preservation. Conservative-leaning citizens may likewise be understood as potentially having meaningful things to say about context-level processes and needed progress in society.

The potential effects of such re-framings, however, go beyond simply enlarging the sheer, quantitative scope of partisan dialogue. As observed in our own course, even when participants gather for the explicit purpose of dialogue, deep-set background assumptions may prevent many from finding enough openness to authentically listen and connect. For these individuals, shaking up prevailing frames and assumptions may prompt movement from an

overarching "framing-to-persuade" to a "framing-for-deliberation" before the dialogue begins (Friedman, 2007; Kadlec & Friedman, 2007). That is, an initial disruption of comfortable frames around issues may gently spur participants to consider more openly the true nuance and complexity of diverse views (including their own).

     Illustration: Addressing conservative dialogue hesitancies. Although potentially beneficial to any participant, these re-framings may have unique implications for individuals and groups especially hesitant to participate in dialogue settings. For instance, the absence of conservative citizens has been recently identified as a key challenge by leaders of the dialogue and deliberation field (S. Heierbacher, personal communication, August 3, 2006; Davenport, 2008). As noted earlier, conservative participants in our study tended to emphasize other kinds of exchange over public deliberation (i.e., teaching others, prayer, engagement with sacred text). For some, an emphasis on Christ and the gospel as consummate answers to societal problems appears to minimize "other" efforts as secondary or unimportant (an implication certainly not made by all Christian citizens).

     Rather than seeing this lack of conservative participation in dialogue as somehow *inherent* to particular beliefs or values, however, attention to the re-framing of issues (including "dialogue" itself) permits the exploration of readily changeable aspects of the challenge (Hess, 2008). For instance, greater awareness may be given to portrayals of dialogue as inherently "relativistic" or implicitly serving a "liberal agenda." Davenport (2008), a professor of public policy, recently wrote, "Some conservatives fear that the tools of citizen engagement come only from the progressives' tool box" (p. 97; see Hess, et al., in press). To the degree that citizens realize, however (like the conservative author of this paper), the degree to which authentic dialogue or deliberation a) defies the imposition of any particular political agenda and b) permits and even encourages the sharing and learning of truth, any related resistance to dialogue may quickly abate. Ultimately, these re-framings may reinforce and further activate norms of healthy deliberation that some have argued are already at play among religious conservatives (see Shields, 2007) and cast dialogue as a safe place of learning and even "being taught by God's spirit" (rather than as a dangerous distraction from the same).   As a question with many other complexities, a separate manuscript will review varied ways that dialogue is framed and examine their implications for the participation of diverse groups.

4. Startling Collaborations: "You're really not the person I thought you were . ."

     Changes to openness and trust associated with re-framing, described above, may clearly have an impact beyond simply improved public exchange. As Gadamer (1989) suggested, new interpretations of another person, rather than merely reflecting a fresh subjective perception, may also literally constitute a "*being differently*" with the other as well. Students in our dialogue course spoke of coming to appreciate "sincere intentions of good"—"I have learned they aren't bad people, they just bump heads with me on certain topics." One student commented that prior to the dialogue course, "I went through the logic of conservatives and would think, 'they have to be *crazy!*' From this experience, it's great to know half of the world is *not nuts*. . . I may not agree, but it makes more sense." In addition to supporting increased efforts to exorcise the "demonization" rhetoric in partisan exchange and better overcome political gridlock (see Greenberg, 2004; De Luca & Buell, 2005), inter-group dialogue is increasingly demonstrating its tangible relevance to actual peace building (Lowry & Littlejohn, 2006; Omalley, 2004; Pruitt & Kaeufer, 2002). While optimistic, such possibilities resonate with conclusions from other

researchers as well. After examining aspects of problematic cultural polarization, Gastil and colleagues (2006) go on to suggest:

> The foundation of such conflict is soft. The overwhelming majority of Americans are not zealots but persons of good will who want the same things. Their disagreement is tractable. It can be civilized—perhaps even dispelled—through structured deliberation and culturally sophisticated policy framing (p. 19).

It is precisely this combination of deliberation and careful issue-framing that our research and experience suggests as crucial. Once again, although deliberation on political issues has, itself, been shown to often increase the sophistication of individual judgments (Gastil & Dillard, 1999), we believe that without careful framing, this exchange may just as easily--in spite of better intentions--fall into rhetorical ruts and pitfalls. Without implying such "re-framing" as holding magical power to dissolve underlying philosophical or ideological differences, we do propose it as potentially allowing these rich differences to be explored in a more open and productive manner.

To the degree this healthier community exchange occurs, much more may be possible. As Kadlec and Friedman (2007) suggest, improved discourse entails "an enormous range of possibilities for the advancement of meaningfully democratic practices and policies" which may be achieved "simply for the price of improving our capacities and enlarging our opportunities for collaborative inquiry about common problems" (p. 23). They go on to explain that such exchange may create possibilities to "identify and pursue new, unforeseen and unexpected directions for working together" and "a greater appreciation of previously unknown shared interests that can form the basis of working agreements for moving forward on concrete public problems" (p. 14-15). In its long-standing insistence that both "Shifts Happen!" and "Shifts Matter!" in dialogue, the *Public Conversations Project* similarly attests that "relationships that evolve through dialogue hold previously unthinkable possibilities . . . for collaboration" (see Herzig & Chasin, 2006).

Our own findings point towards a few such possibilities for shared work related to these alternative frames for deliberation. For instance, abusive behavior by men towards women—whether framed as "instantiations of traditional gender norms" or "incompatible with Biblical standards for relationships"—may be jointly raised as something deserving more vigorous and categorical condemnation across groups. Additional common causes may include challenging excessive individualism, fighting unrestrained media influence, promoting the general well-being of families, fostering a greater degree of both community openness and unity, and the overall striving for basic individual and societal-level improvements. In their recent finding of a striking complexity *within* political communities that challenges the "widespread impression of a nation increasingly divided into two unified camps," the Pew Research Center (2005) similarly concludes that "numerous opportunities exist for building coalitions across party lines on many issues currently facing the nation"—coalitions that, in many cases, may "include some strange political bedfellows" (p. 2).

While meaningful differences will remain important and pressing, explicit re-framings described above may contribute to the ongoing expansion of a societal dialogue and deliberation infrastructure within which to better explore these differences. Especially given an atmosphere where elite frames will likely continue to provoke mass hostility, these alternative frames may quietly contribute to the cultivation of alternative spaces—settings where citizens may acknowledge both rich, profound commonalities and equally rich, nuanced differences.

Ultimately, in place of the relentless, wearying battles to persuade and convince, we may thus increasingly approximate what Tinder calls "the attentive society"--a place "in which people listen seriously to those with whom they fundamentally disagree" and where is cultivated a "widespread willingness to give and receive assistance on the road to truth" (Dionne & Cromartie, 2006, p. 8). In all these ways, the difficult work of dialogue and collaboration may increasingly come to flourish across partisan boundaries, in spite of and, indeed, because of our deepest differences.

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