

Framing Effects and Group Differences in Public Opinion about Prison Pell Grants

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ABSTRACT After years of gridlock on the issue, a bipartisan group of members of Congress struck a deal in 2020 to restore eligibility for inmates to access Pell Grants. Evidence indicates that college education programs in prison reduce recidivism and, consequently, state corrections expenditures, but legislators in prior decades feared that voters would resent government subsidy of college classes for criminals. To assess the contemporary politics of the issue, we analyze data from a framing experiment embedded in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. We find that Americans, on average, neither support nor oppose the proposal to restore inmates' Pell Grant eligibility; however, exposure to arguments about the proposal's benefits to inmates in particular and American society more broadly both increased subjects' support. We further explore how this framing effect varies across political partisanship and racial resentment. We find that both frames elicited a positive response from subjects, especially among Democrats and subjects with low or moderate racial resentment.

As part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, a bipartisan coalition of members of Congress struck a deal that restores eligibility for incarcerated people to secure Pell Grants to cover tuition of college classes offered in prison (Stratford 2020). This is the latest evidence of bipartisan support for criminal justice reform among elected policy makers that began to emerge in the George W. Bush administration and has gained momentum since (Dagan and Teles 2016; Percival 2015). This pro-reform stance is a significant departure from the “tough on crime” politics that dominated both parties’ platforms throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Gottschalk 2006; Murakawa 2014; Schoenfeld 2018). Enns (2016) argued that one political factor that paved the way for elites to support reform efforts in the twenty-first century was a reduction in punitive attitudes among the mass American public.

Educational benefits for prisoners are a prime example of the ways that politics can conflict with evidence-based policy making.

Researchers find that people who participate in educational programs while incarcerated are significantly less likely to recidivate and be arrested for a new crime once released than inmates who did not participate in any educational programs (Bozick et al. 2018; Davis et al. 2013; Kim and Clark 2013; Oakford et al. 2019). One team of analysts estimated that reducing the need to reincarcerate recidivist offenders would save states more than \$350 million per year, meaning that expanding access to higher education in prisons will yield a net financial benefit (Oakford et al. 2019). Despite the evidence that access to education in prisons is good for both prisoners and society, Congress stripped prisoners of Pell Grant eligibility in the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. The politics of “least eligibility” fueled support for this restriction; legislators argued that no criminal should have access to any benefit that the poorest law-abiding citizen cannot also receive—and millions of citizens never receive a college education (Clear 1994; Lewis 2018).

In 2016, the Obama administration launched a pilot program to extend Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated individuals at 67 colleges and universities, and the Trump administration expanded the pilot program in 2020 (Douglas-Gabriel 2020; US Department of Education 2016). The Trump administration, the US Chamber

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of Commerce, and even the National District Attorneys Association (2019) all expressed support for the Restoring Education and Learning Act (REAL) Act in order to make the initiative permanent. However, efforts to repeal the Pell Grant ban made little progress during several successive sessions of Congress until it was finally added to an omnibus spending bill. New York State provides a recent cautionary tale that may explain why it took federal legislators many years to enact this particular reform. Governor Andrew Cuomo was forced to abandon a proposal to pay for college classes for prison inmates with state funds in the face of substantial backlash. This included Republican members of the state's delegation to Congress introducing the "Kids Before Cons Act" that would have blocked the expenditure of federal funds on prison educational programs (Kaplan 2014). These Republican legislators had been motivated by citizen-led petitions that expressed opposition to Governor Cuomo's proposal. Thus, despite an overall decline in mass punitive attitudes (Enns 2016), specific reform proposals can still generate backlash among both voters and policy makers.

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A few studies suggest that financial aid for prisoners to access college-level courses may be one such trigger for least-eligibility backlash among members of the public. Participants in several focus-group studies expressed the opinion that the government should subsidize inmates' education only up to a high school degree (Brooks, Visser, and Naser 2006; Heumann, Pinaire, and Clark 2005; Immerwahr and Johnson 2002). Likewise, respondents to a survey fielded in Missouri expressed substantially less support for allowing inmates to access college classes that lead to a four-year degree than they did for those that lead to a high school degree, GED, or two-year technical degree (Garland, Wodahl, and Cota 2016; Garland, Wodahl, and Schuhmann 2013). In contrast, only 33% of respondents to a survey of South Carolinians agreed with the statement: "People who are coming out of prison should not be allowed to receive federal grants for education." However,

differ across demographic subgroups. Similarly, Bandara, McGinty, and Barry (2020) found that participants exposed to a message explaining that incarcerating nonviolent drug offenders does little to enhance public safety because prison does not reduce their likelihood of recidivating expressed more support for eliminating mandatory minimum sentences. This message had no effect on respondents' support for ending bans on felons' access to food stamps and public housing. These two studies suggest that arguments about the benefits of criminal justice reform to society may increase public support for policy change. However, framing effects appear to be limited to attitudes about particular policies; the precise scope of these effects is unclear.

We build on this nascent literature on framing effects in public opinion about criminal justice policy by analyzing the results of an experiment embedded in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). To assess contemporary public support for extending Pell Grant eligibility to prisoners, we manipulated whether the proposal to restore their eligibility emphasized the benefit to inmates themselves or the broader benefits to society. We also

tested for subgroup differences because these frames may appeal to different voters. Conservatives who are concerned about the high, economically inefficient costs of the nation's correctional systems today may find arguments about cost savings to taxpayers particularly appealing (Dagan and Teles 2016). Furthermore, focusing on the aggregate benefits to society rather than benefits to individuals may circumvent least-eligibility backlash among people who believe that criminals are undeserving of taxpayer-funded benefits—beliefs that likely are racialized and concentrated among voters who harbor racial resentment, which is a key predictor of punitive attitudes (Brown and Socia 2017; Muhammad 2011; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010; Unnever and Cullen 2010).¹ Appeals along individual grounds, by contrast, may attract progressives and racial liberals who are concerned about the impacts of mass incarceration on people of color (Chudy 2021). In the end,

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this statement does not address public support for granting inmates access to Pell Grants *while they are still incarcerated* (Ouellette, Applegate, and Vuk 2017). Given the divergent findings and limited generalizability of these past studies, we do not yet have sufficient empirical evidence to properly delineate the American public's "zone of acquiescence" (Stimson 2018) for this particular type of criminal justice reform.

Recent experimental research suggests that people's support for criminal justice reform may be sensitive to framing. Gottlieb (2017) found that participants exposed to a message about the poor ability of incarceration to prevent recidivism or a message about the high costs of incarceration expressed significantly more support for sentencing nonviolent drug offenders and parole violators to community corrections instead of prison. These effects did not

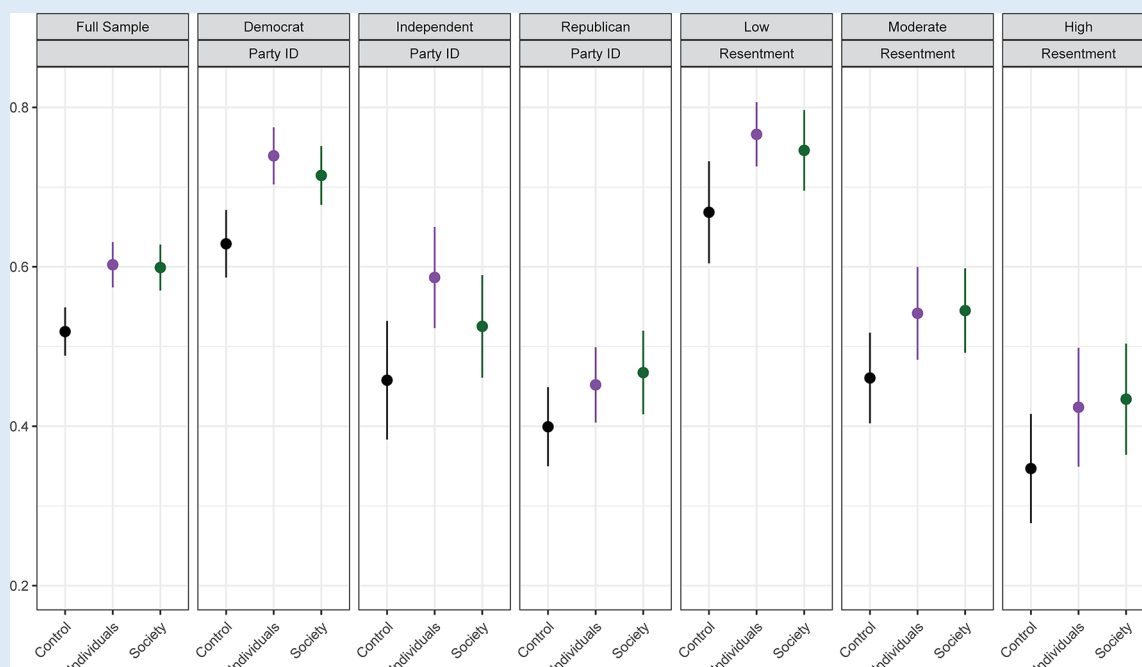
the experiment's findings suggest that both frames increase support for the policy, especially among Democrats and individuals with low racial resentment. It appears unlikely that the policy makers who restored educational benefits to incarcerated individuals will face a least-eligibility backlash from today's voters.

DATA AND METHOD

We embedded a novel survey experiment in the 2016 CCES, which is a national online survey conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2017). The survey is fielded in two waves, with the same panel participating before and after the general election. In addition to the survey's Common Content questions, the 2016 CCES included 60 team modules. Our experiment was included on the pre-election

Figure 1

Effect of Message Frames on Pell Grant Access Support among Full Sample and Subgroups



wave of one module. The items used in the subgroup analyses varied across the two waves. The survey's standard partisanship question was included on the pre-election survey and the racial-resentment items were fielded on the post-election wave.²

In the "Control" condition, respondents received the following prompt: "The Department of Education is piloting a program to offer **financial aid to incarcerated individuals** interested in attending college while incarcerated. Do you support this program?"³ In the two treatment conditions, respondents were provided additional reasoning to support the program. Before evaluating the program, respondents in the "Individuals" condition were told:

Most Americans seem to be initially indifferent to the idea of extending higher-education financial aid to inmates, but it does not take much advocacy to increase their estimation of the proposal merits.

"Supporters argue that the program will **benefit these individuals** by providing them with new skills that will reduce reincarceration." Finally, respondents assigned to the "Society" condition read: "Supporters argue that the program will **benefit society** by decreasing the costs associated with reincarceration." These frames are similar to those used by Gottlieb (2017) and Bandara, McGinty, and Barry (2020), albeit shorter in word count. Advocates of the Second Chance Pell program promised that it would decrease recidivism, which rewards both the individuals involved and society as whole. By emphasizing different aspects of the policy, the experiment tests whether subjects and various subgroups are more supportive when primed to consider either the particularized benefits or the broader societal merits of the policy.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents results of the framing experiment.⁴ First examining the full sample, we see that the average response to the proposal to offer financial aid to incarcerated people fell at the midpoint of our scale, which indicates, at worst, public indifference or ambivalence rather than opposition.⁵ Both argument frames significantly increased public support relative to the control group, pushing the average response into the supportive range of the response scale. Examining the differences by partisan affiliation, we see that Democrats were significantly and substantially more supportive of extending financial aid to prisoners than

both Independents and Republicans. At the baseline (i.e., the control group), Democrats expressed mild support for the proposal, on average, whereas Independents expressed ambivalence and Republicans expressed moderate opposition. Exposure to both frames significantly increased support among Democrats, pushing them to express strong support, on average. Exposure to both frames also increased support among Independents and Republicans, but the magnitude of this increase was statistically significant only for the individuals frame among Independents and only marginally significant for the society frame among Republicans. Frame exposure pushed Independents from the midpoint to weak support and Republicans from moderate opposition to mild opposition or indifference, on average.

Consistent with the racialized nature of crime and criminal justice in the United States (Brown and Socia 2017; Muhammad 2011; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010; Unnever and Cullen 2010), we found that support for extending financial aid to incarcerated people decreased as a linear function of stronger racial resentment. Exposure to both frames significantly increased support for the proposal among respondents who scored at low and moderate levels on the racial-resentment scale, but frame exposure had no statistically significant effect among respondents with high racial resentment.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research present both good news and not so good news for the legislators and advocates who supported the restoration of Pell Grant eligibility to prisoners in order to reduce recidivism and improve post-incarceration life outcomes. The average response among our subjects who were not exposed to a pro-reform frame fell around the midpoint of our response scale, suggesting ambivalence toward the proposal among the mass public. Disaggregated by subgroups, only Democrats and individuals who are low in racial resentment expressed baseline support for this reform proposal, whereas Republicans and individuals high in racial resentment expressed baseline opposition. This finding suggests that only those legislators who represent relatively liberal districts (both politically and racially) have a strong electoral incentive to advocate for Pell Grant eligibility reform. Legislators who represent moderate or conservative districts likely feel more inclined to support reforms that generate a more enthusiastic response among their constituents.

Our more heartening finding for supporters of this long-delayed reform is that all respondent groups responded favorably to pro-reform arguments that emphasized the program's benefits to the prisoners and society more broadly. Both frames increased support for the proposal among all subgroups, although not all differences were statistically significant. Moreover, we found no evidence of backlash to either frame. This result suggests that any sitting members of Congress who are asked to justify their votes can effectively explain their support for this reform to their constituents, even with a short and simple justification. Most Americans seem to be initially indifferent to the idea of extending higher-education financial aid to inmates, but it does not take much advocacy to increase their estimation of the proposal merits. Our findings also add further evidence to the small body of literature that finds that arguments about the social benefits of criminal justice reform cause many Americans to react favorably to policy-reform proposals (Bandara, McGinty, and Barry 2020; Gottlieb 2017; Pickett, Ivanov, and Wozniak 2020). All told, our findings suggest that proposals to restore inmates' eligibility for financial aid fall within Americans' "zone of acquiescence" for criminal justice reform (Wozniak 2020). More important, voters exhibit malleability on the issue. The days of least-eligibility backlash against extending rehabilitative benefits to prisoners may have passed.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication materials are available on Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OTN7GQ>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000019>. ■

NOTES

1. To test for least-eligibility attitudes among the public, we also analyzed whether support for Pell Grant reform differed between respondents who are and are not paying off student loans. See online appendix figure 2.
2. For political party, we used the CCES `pid7` variable to create three groups: Democrats, Independents and Republicans. Leaners were treated as partisans. The racial-resentment groups were created using four items from the post-election survey: CC16_422c (Racism Angry), CC16_422d (Racial Advantages), CC16_422e (Racial Fear), and CC16_422f (Racial Problems Isolated). The four items were combined into one scale (1–5) and respondents were divided by their overall score: Low: 1–1.75, Moderate: 1.75–2.75, and High: 2.75 and higher.
3. Respondents evaluated the Pell Grant program from “strongly support” to “strongly oppose.” For ease of interpretation, we rescaled this five-point variable to range between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating greater support for the policy. The emphasis in the text is original to the survey instrument.
4. The figure displays the experimental means, with 95% confidence intervals, for the full sample and by subgroup. Following best practices on weighting, the experimental results are presented without survey weights (Miratrix et al. 2018). Given the number of subgroups, there is high potential for false positives (i.e., Type I Error). To address this multiple-testing problem, the t-tests (see online appendix table 1) are adjusted using Benjamini-Hochberg's (1995) procedure for controlling the false-discovery rate. Our discussion of the results is based on these corrected t-tests.
5. In online appendix figure 1, we examined the pattern of responses to evaluate how the policy issue was received by subjects. Looking at both the full sample and the control condition, we found that the modal response was “somewhat support” followed by “neither support nor oppose.” The experimental treatments, unsurprisingly, shift the distributions upward, but significant ambivalence remains. To the extent that results are located around the midpoint, we find that this reflects indifference or uncertainty toward the policy (Shaeffer and Presser 2003) rather than an averaging of two sets of extreme opinions.

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