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How Policy Framing Affects Support for Sanctuary City Policies

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This project addresses gaps in literature on framing or "the way in which messages are constructed, especially in the media and by opinion leaders, to alter the public's opinion on a subject or issue" (Chong and Druckman, 2010, p. 663). This project explores various issue framing effects on support for *sanctuary city policies*, which refer to "policies that aim to accommodate undocumented persons in their communities" (Bauder, 2017, p. 174). While previous research has identified the types and prevalence of sanctuary city policy frames in the media (Collingwood and O'Brien, 2019) and their effect on support for other immigration policies (Haynes et.al, 2016), scholars have yet to assess potential framing effects on public opinion on sanctuary city policies. We examined the following research questions: 1) How does the policy wording of sanctuary policies affect support for the underlying policy? and 2) How does mentioning particular sanctuary policy considerations affect support for this policy?

The survey design allowed assessment of six primary hypotheses on the framing effects of policy wording frames and policy consideration frames. The first policy wording frame hypothesis was that participants given the "limiting cooperation between local and federal law enforcement" frame would report a lower level of support for sanctuary city policies compared to those shown the "base" sanctuary city policy frame. A second hypothesis was that participants given the "providing services to immigrants" frame would report more support for sanctuary city policies compared to those receiving the "base" sanctuary city policy frame. With respect to the policy consideration frames, we hypothesized a) that participants given the "economic threat" frame would report a lower level of support for sanctuary policies than those receiving no frame, and b) that those given the "economic benefit" frame would not exhibit a higher level of support for sanctuary policies than those receiving no frame. We also hypothesized that a) participants given the "empathy" frame would report a higher level of support for sanctuary policies than those receiving no frame and b) those given the "high crime rate" frame would report no different level of support for sanctuary policies than those receiving no frame.

To evaluate these questions, we employed a 3x6 survey-experiment administered to 1,700 participants who were randomly given one of three sanctuary city policy-wording frames (base frame, base plus services frame, base plus limiting cooperation frame) and with one of six sanctuary policy consideration frames (economic threat, economic benefit, high crime rate, engendering trust, empathy, no frame). In a follow-up questionnaire, participants then answered questions on their level of support for sanctuary city policies (support or not support), whether they correctly understood the two framing treatments, by asking them which policy definitions and considerations they received and coding whether their answers were correct, and on a variety of demographic, socio-economic, and other related controls. Since the data suggested that a number of participants did not carefully read the survey questions and recognize the

manipulations, the analysis relied only on data from participants who correctly identified the manipulation, resulting in a total sample size of 308 participants. This yielded experimental group sizes ranging from 17-25 participants, and aplicationnegatively impacted our ability to identify significant differences in means between groups. We then used SPSS to perform a difference of means analyses comparing the average level of support for sanctuary city policies for each experimental group.

Results from the small sample suggest that framing the way we talk about sanctuary city policies does little to affect support for the policies. One interpretation is that people think of sanctuary cities as a collective set of policies as opposed to separate individual policies. The lack of a framing effect could also be due to the neutral impact of the two policy frames we chose to include. While support for sanctuary city policies does not appear to be susceptible to framing effects based on the particular sanctuary city sub-policy highlighted in the question, we did find interesting policy consideration framing effects. This finding suggests that when trying to increase support for sanctuary city policies, advocacy groups and politicians should not focus on the way they define the policies, but they should instead focus on highlighting the subsequent policy consideration. The one consideration that did move the needle of support, even with a small sample size, was the economic benefits frame. We measured support for sanctuary city policies using a rescaled continuous measure from 0 for "does not support" to 1 for "supports." We found that the level of support increased from 0.43 for those receiving no policy frame to 0.65 for those receiving the economic benefits frame. None of the other frames significantly impacted support, as much as the "economic benefit" frame. It should be emphasized that the economic benefits frame moved the sample from not supporting to supporting sanctuary city policies, a very substantively significant finding. These results could suggest that immigration advocacy groups and politicians who want to help pass sanctuary city policies by increasing public support for them should frame sanctuary city policies in a way that highlights their economic benefits.

References

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