

Framing Experiment Design

Background

Daniel Kahneman' and Amos Tversky's Prospect Theory suggests that the framing of an issue affects the distribution of attitudes regarding it. For example, support for a proposal to address the issue of homelessness will differ depending on how it is framed. To investigate this idea participants will answer a very brief one-item survey concerning a Santa Cruz city council proposal to address homelessness. On a random basis, participants will see one of two versions of a survey question. Version A suggests that under the proposal permanent housing will be provided for 40% of Santa Cruz's homeless. Version B indicates that under the proposal 60% of Santa Cruz's homeless remain homeless.

Proposed measure

Version A

Providing housing for the homeless in the City of Santa Cruz has been challenging. A new proposal before city council will provide permanent housing for 40% of Santa Cruz's homeless. Are you likely to support this program? Yes No

Version B

Providing housing for the homeless in the City of Santa Cruz has been challenging. A new proposal before city council will leave 60% of Santa Cruz's homeless without permanent housing. Are you likely to support this program? Yes No

Hypotheses

Despite being formally equivalent, the question's two versions should produce different results. More specifically, by highlighting housing people, Version A should enjoy greater support than Version B, which highlights leaving people homeless. This is likely due to the differing emotional impact of the two frames. Providing homes surely feels better than leaving people homeless. According to Kahneman this is characteristic of System 1 thinking, which produces fast, emotion-laden responses.

System 2 thinking can be engaged by viewing both versions of the question simultaneously, perhaps as part of a debriefing exercise. This will highlight the formal equivalence of the two questions as well as the slower and more deliberate style of thinking Kahneman calls System 2. The investigation thus highlights the distinction between fast (System 1) and slow (System 2) thinking.