

## Framing the Future of Race Relations

By *[David C. Wilson](#)*

**I**n the measurement of racial attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, survey researchers face a complex trade-off in which they must choose either to track historical questions or seek more reflective measures of contemporary opinions. The general rule of thumb is to select items that work. In the United States, however, where race is an especially sensitive topic, responses may be influenced by [social desirability](#) and survey context.

[Context effects](#) can take many forms, including those due to question order, content, and wording. Many consider such effects to be forms of bias or sources of error, yet these “artifacts” of surveys can serve as useful indicators of social relations of a broader nature. For instance different question wordings may elicit different considerations that affect how respondents judge racial topics. Researchers such as Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser have shown that Americans are more willing to “not allow” speeches than they are to “forbid” them. These response differences across variations in the tone of wording for similar items likely highlight the extent to which Americans are sensitive to the importance of civil liberties. Other studies show that the public expresses greater support for affirmative action for women than for racial minorities, indicating that racial and gendered contexts likely bring about different substantive considerations about who deserves what.

The point is that survey questions require constant attention, and must periodically be reviewed and evaluated to determine their utility. If different wordings elicit different considerations, then researchers must understand what they are getting when they ask a question one way versus another.

**Y**et it's no secret that minor changes in question wording can have large effects on survey results. As early as 1941, results from a Roper survey showed that support for free speech was higher when question tone was more restrictive ("forbid public speeches against democracy") versus less restrictive ("allow public speeches against democracy"). Subsequent studies have shown similar results. Reported support for helping economically disadvantaged Americans, for example, can be influenced by how the groups are framed. The public expresses a greater willingness to help "poor" persons than "people on welfare." Thus, one can easily argue that the public is attentive to the specific wording of questions, rather than the broader concepts that social scientists are measuring.

Research suggests that these effects are most likely to occur when the issue under consideration is ambiguous, and when attitudes toward the issue are less extreme. The reasoning is that because ambiguous items are less specific and more general, and extreme attitudes are more crystallized than less extreme attitudes, responses are less likely to be influenced by subtle differences in question wording. While the idea of race relations is an ambiguous concept rather than a concrete phenomenon, individual attitudes toward race are arguably crystallized in the minds of both blacks and whites. Therefore, whether or not more ambiguous racial items are influenced by question wording is still inconclusive.

**T**o what extent, then, are beliefs about the future of black-white race relations influenced by the tone of the questions being presented? I would begin this inquiry expecting variations in the question wordings related to race relations to have a significant influence on response. I would predict that the more questions are framed in terms of race being a problem, the more considerations of race relations as a problem will arise. Alternatively, if race relations are framed positively, then

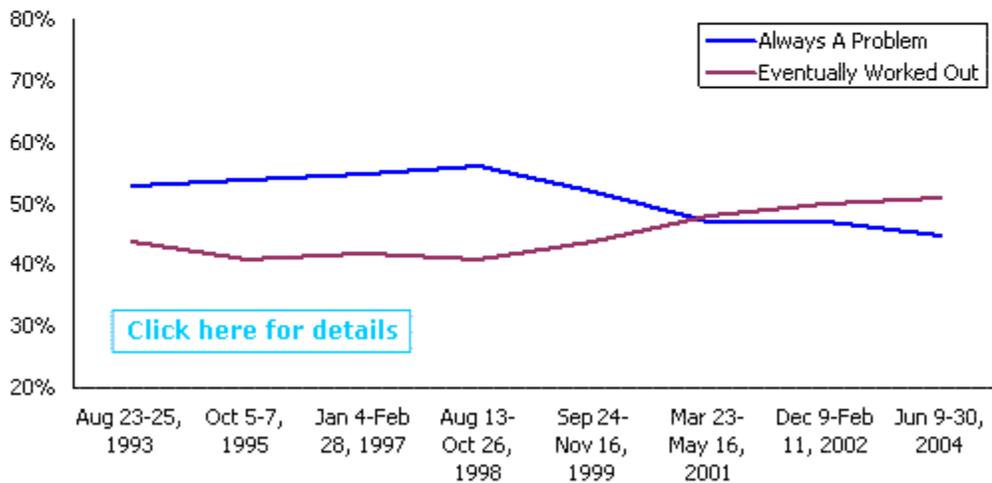
negative considerations are less likely to be brought to mind. Thus, the more negative the presentation, the more negative the outlook, and vice versa.

For more than a decade, the Gallup Organization has been asking the public a question that probes its expectations about the future of black-white relations in the United States. Phrased very straightforwardly, it asks the respondent to choose between hope (optimism) and despair (pessimism) on this defining issue in the historical, political, and social life of our nation.

Figure 1

## Gallup Trend of Future of Race Relations, 1993-2004

**Question:** Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem for the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out?



Note: Time intervals are not to scale.

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 2005.

Like many items that address race relations, this “future” question reveals quite a bit of pessimism. Although differences were generally less than ten percentage points, for the most part, up to 2001, the majority of American adults believed race would always be a problem for the United States. After 2001, the majority believed that problems would eventually be worked out. Based on these results, one might

conclude that things are headed in the right direction but remain close. This trend can be seen in Figure 1.

But to what extent is the public's expressed optimism or pessimism due to the wording of the question? Perhaps while appropriate in the past, framing race relations as a problem that will either always exist or eventually fade away does not fit the way in which many people view the issue today. By and large, race problems will likely never go away; there is little doubt, however, that for most black Americans, relations have improved and are likely to continue to get better. Thus, an alternative approach would be to frame race relations positively, presenting optimistic and pessimistic alternatives in a tone of gradual positive improvement, rather than conclusive resolution.

**F**or this analysis, I use results from [a 2005 Gallup Social Attitudes study](#), which contained a number of split-sample experiments. In one experiment, respondents were randomly assigned one of two wordings for a question related to optimism or pessimism toward the future of race relations. The primary difference between the two questions was the tone of the wordings. I classify the two questions very broadly as "positive" and "negative" for simplification purposes; however, an additional feature of the wordings is the finality (conclusive versus gradual change) of the tone. The exact wording of the items is as follows:

[Negative Tone] *Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem in the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out?*

[Positive Tone] *Do you think that relations between blacks and whites are as good as they are going to get, or will they eventually get better?*

The sample sizes for the items were considerably different—"Negative Tone" was asked of 538 respondents, "Positive Tone" of 482—however, the respondents in each experimental sample were no different across race, sex, age, or education. The "Negative Tone" question used the traditional wording ("always" [be a problem]), while "Positive Tone" used a new wording ("as good" [as they are going to get]).

In both forms, the questions contained what are considered baseline or status quo responses, and responses that would indicate a positive change—that is, the questions didn't provide a response asking if things would get worse. Assuming that the existence of racial problems is a fact, the baseline position would be pessimistic, and a response for change would be optimistic. Thus, an optimistic response would be either "a solution will eventually be worked out" (Negative Tone) or "will eventually get better" (Positive Tone), and a pessimistic response would be "will always be a problem" (Negative Tone) or "as good as they are going to get" (Positive Tone).

Given the nature of race relations and the firm grounding they have in the United States, the more negative tone should elicit a lower likelihood of optimism. Additionally, given the progress that has occurred in the United States relative to the past, while things are not resolved in one way or the

other, they have objectively improved. Thus, the more positive tone should elicit a greater likelihood of optimism.

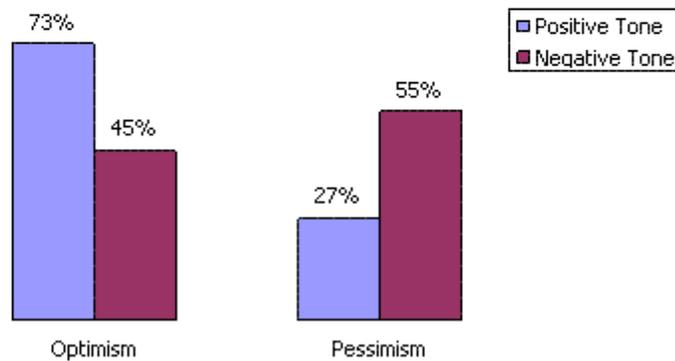
A comparison across the two items reveals that optimism was higher (pessimism was lower) in response to Positive Tone, and pessimism was higher (optimism was lower) with Negative Tone. In Negative Tone 45 percent of respondents were optimistic, and in Positive Tone 73 percent were optimistic. The change of twenty-eight percentage points was statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level. The percentage difference in pessimism across the two forms was also twenty-eight percentage points. Thus, respondents were more likely to believe that race relations would “eventually get better” than that they would “eventually be worked out.” These results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

## Future of Race Relations Items Across Question Wording

**Questions:** [Negative Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem in the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out?

[Positive Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites are as good as they are going to get, or will they eventually get better?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 2005.  
 Note: Negative Tone, n=538; Positive Tone, n=482.

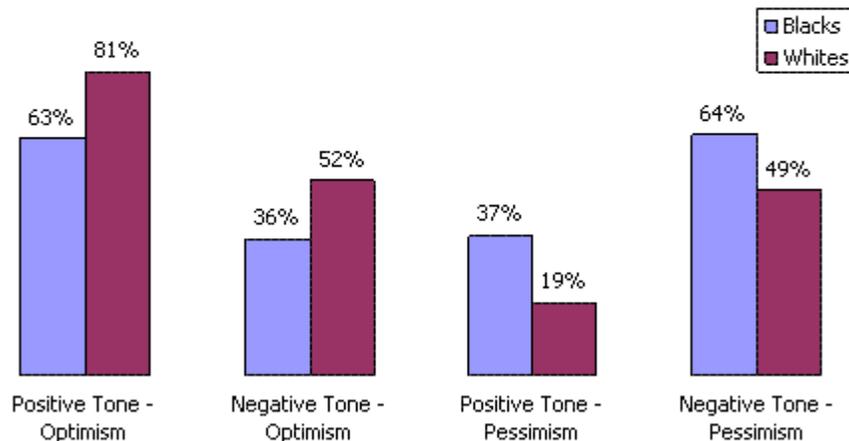
Controlling for race, the question wording effect was the same for both blacks and whites. As shown in Figure 3, similar to the overall effect, both groups were more optimistic in response to Positive Tone than to Negative Tone. When asked about race relations in Negative Tone, 36 percent of blacks and 52 percent of whites were optimistic; however, in Positive Tone, optimism increased by twenty-nine and twenty-seven percentage points for blacks and whites, respectively. Both increases were statistically significant. Moreover, regardless of wording, blacks were less optimistic and more pessimistic than whites. This is not surprising, given the different experiences and perceptions regarding race across the two groups.

Figure 3

## Future of Race Relations Items Across Question Wording, by Race

**Questions:** [Negative Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem in the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out?

[Positive Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites are as good as they are going to get, or will they eventually get better?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 2005.

Note: Blacks (Negative Tone n=222; Positive Tone, n=197); Whites (Negative Tone, n=316; Positive Tone n=285).

Since, as we have mentioned, research suggests that more extreme attitudes are more likely to be influenced by question wording, I next examined the extent to which the tone differences were associated with perceptions of white-black relations in the United States by crosstabulating the responses to Negative Tone and Positive Tone by responses to the following question:

*Next, we'd like to know how you would rate relations between various groups in the United States these days. Would you say relations between*

*whites and blacks are very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad?*

Both the negative tone and positive tone questions essentially make predictions about where race relations will be in the future. The starting point for these perceptions may be the past, or they may be current perceptions. Thus, respondents who are more pessimistic about current race relations should also be more pessimistic about future race relations.

As Figure 4 reveals, differences in optimism across the two wordings is largest at the negative end of the race relations scale. With the positive tone item, respondents who perceived that white-black relations are bad or very bad were more optimistic than those who responded to the negative tone item; yet Negative Tone is statistically related to perceptions of white-black relations, while Positive Tone is not. The results indicate that with these items, question wording has its strongest effects at the negative end of the scale, or, alternatively, not at the positive end of the scale.

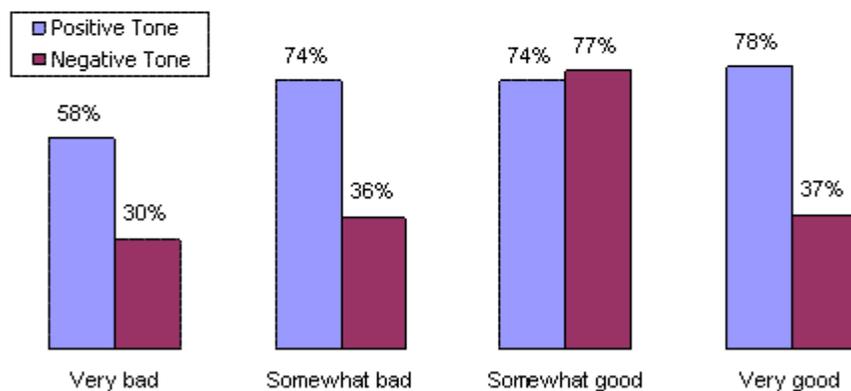
Figure 4

## Future of Race Relations and Current Perceptions

**Questions:** [Negative Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem in the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out?

[Positive Tone] Do you think that relations between blacks and whites are as good as they are going to get, or will they eventually get better?

[How would you] rate relations between various groups in the United States these days. Would you say relations between whites and blacks are very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 2005.

Note. Negative Tone: Very bad (n=23), Somewhat bad (n=124), Somewhat good (n=359), and Very good (n=22); Positive Tone: Very bad (n=24), Somewhat bad (n=101), Somewhat good (n=321), and Very good (n=27); Negative Tone (F=4.0,  $p < .01$ ); Positive Tone (F=1.02, n.s).

To assess how race and perceptions of race relations today interact to influence perceptions about the future of race relations, I conducted a statistical procedure called a [logistic regression](#), predicting a pessimistic response.

Controlling for both race of respondent and perceptions of race relations, [the results showed](#) that there was more pessimism in response to Negative Tone and less pessimism in response to Positive Tone. Also, racial differences

appeared for both question forms, although the differences between whites and blacks were slightly larger in response to Positive Tone when controlling for race relations. The key difference between the question forms seems to be that the negative tone is significantly related to pessimism toward race relations today, while the more positive tone is not. Thus, it appears that pessimism in response to Negative Tone is due to negativity regarding current race relations, while pessimism in Positive Tone is about the same across regardless of today's race relations.

Given the current context of group relations in the world, and continuing concerns about race relations in the United States, especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, understanding racial progress is vital to realizing the principles of a nation that prides itself as a stronghold of democracy.

The results of the question wording experiment presented here indicate that the public, regardless of race, is very sensitive to how race relations are framed. Individuals tend to be more pessimistic about race relations when they are framed in a negative manner ("problem") and more optimistic when they are framed in a positive manner ("good"). This pattern is the same for both blacks and whites.

What's more, the results imply that negative considerations of current race relations are significantly associated with pessimism regarding the future. When race relations are presented in a negative frame, individuals who perceive them to be bad tend to be more pessimistic, whereas when race

relations are presented in a positive frame current perceptions are unrelated to future considerations.

The results show that context matters with regard to race relations, but, more importantly, it shows that in the broader social context, public perceptions of race may actually be more optimistic than we think.

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## **Additional Reading**

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