What Framing Makes "Political Right" Messages Appealing Across the Aisle?
An A/B Test of How Balanced Framing Affects User Engagement on Digital Platforms

TL;DR: Balanced message framing improves attitudes and trust in sensitive political content and increases users' retention intention.

Summary

- To help mitigate polarization on digital platforms, this study tests whether *neutral* and *balanced* message framing can appeal to broader users on social media, newsfeeds, and AI Chatbots.

- Using the gender wage gap as a test case, it examines men's responses to left-leaning and balanced framings of newsfeed-style messages.

- A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was conducted using an A/B test survey.

- Results show that a balanced framing, recognizing both women's and men's struggles in today's labor market, significantly increased positive attitudes toward the message. This framing also notably enhanced trust and users' intention to continue using the platform.

- Findings suggest that adopting neutral and balanced framing that subtly and scientifically acknowledges opposing perspectives in content moderation, message design, and inclusive communication can enhance preference, trust, and retention on digital platforms.

Motivation

Message framing plays a critical role in shaping user experience across digital platforms such as social media, news feeds, and AI chatbots[i]. While existing research shows polarized messages may engage some users[iiiii] but alienate others and undermine long-term trust[iv], the potential of *neutral* and *balanced* framing to appeal broadly and enhance user satisfaction remains underexplored.

This study examines whether neutral and balanced framing, which subtly incorporates opposing political perspectives, can enhance message preference, trust, and retention or risk unintended backlash. It also illustrates how balanced framing may expand users' information exposure and disrupt digital echo chambers[vvi], where algorithms often promote pro-attitudinal content[vii].

Using the gender wage gap as a test case, the study focuses on male participants, a large, politically diverse segment of digital users. Those exposed to left-leaning media may be familiar with women's struggles, while right-leaning audiences may hear more about men's challenges. This context allows a rigorous test on whether a balanced tone can foster engagement, even among hesitant users.

Method

A randomized controlled A/B test survey (via Qualtrics on Prolific) examined how framing affects user responses. Participants were informed that they would evaluate messages from social media, news feeds, or AI tools. After consent, participants viewed two messages in random order.

One message, about the Big Beautiful Bill (BBB), served as a baseline to gauge receptiveness to balanced framing. The second, about the gender wage gap, was randomly assigned to reflect either a left-leaning or a balanced framing. While both views are supported by social science research[viiiix], claims about women's disadvantages typically appear in left-leaning media[x], and those about men's struggles in right-leaning outlets[xi]. They are rarely presented together in public discourse.

- *Baseline message:* "President Trump signed the Big Beautiful Bill, which focused on tax cuts and border enforcement, though some criticized it for not doing enough for social programs."

- *Left-leaning:* "On average, women still make about 80% of what men make. To close this gap, we

need to expand access to good jobs, ensure fair pay, and address the barriers women face at every stage, from hiring to promotion."

- *Neutral* & *Balanced:* "On average, women still earn about 80% of what men earn. Both women and men face challenges in a fast-changing economy. Women often face challenges like pay gaps, limited opportunities for advancement, and caregiving pressures. Men are more likely to struggle with issues such as access to education, job stability, and changing social expectations. A fairer system would recognize these differences and support everyone in moving forward."

After each message, participants rated their attitude, trust, and intention to keep using the platform.

Surveyed Population

The survey targeted college-educated Caucasian men aged 18–60 (average age is 38) (N =307), a large segment of digital platform users. While commonly assumed to be liberal due to higher education or conservative due to gender, this group's political ideology is increasingly diverse[xii]. This population offers insights into how framing shapes engagement in a politically mixed audience.

Results

Result 1: Balanced framing increases the positive attitude toward the message

Figure 1 shows the distribution of attitudes toward the two framings of the gender wage gap message. The neutral and balanced framing, which acknowledges both women's and men's struggles, more than doubled the share of respondents rating the message as *very positive* from 7% to 15% ($p < 0.05$).

The rise in positivity reflects a shift from neutral and somewhat positive responses to decisively positive ones under balanced framing. This pattern holds among younger men (ages 18–40) and participants with varying attitudes toward the baseline message. These findings underscore the broad potential appeal of a balanced framing approach.

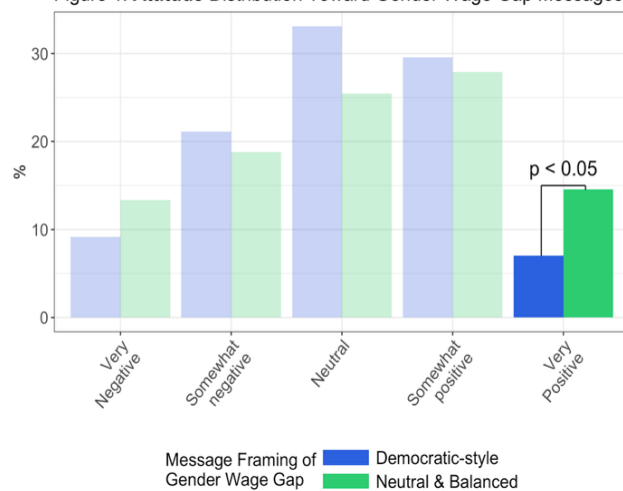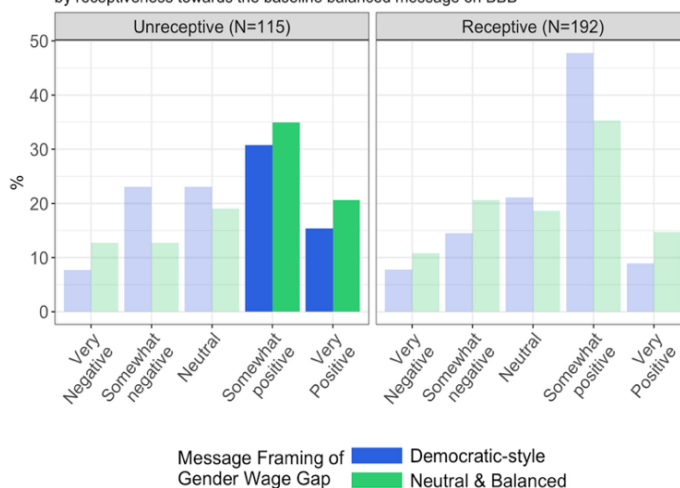Figure 1. **Attitude** Distribution Toward Gender Wage Gap Messages

Message Framing of Gender Wage Gap — Democratic-style / Neutral & Balanced

Figure 2. **Trust** Distribution Toward Gender Wage Gap Messages by receptiveness towards the baseline balanced message on BBB

Message Framing of Gender Wage Gap — Democratic-style / Neutral & Balanced

Result 2: Changes in Trust

Attitudes toward the baseline BBB showed 37% (N = 115) were unreceptive to neutral and balanced framing (very/somewhat negative), likely conservative or skeptical of neutral messaging. In comparison, 63% (N = 192) were receptive, likely moderate or left-leaning. Both groups were more positive toward the balanced message, but their trust responses diverged (Figure 2).

Result 2.1: Balanced framing increases trust among the initially skeptical

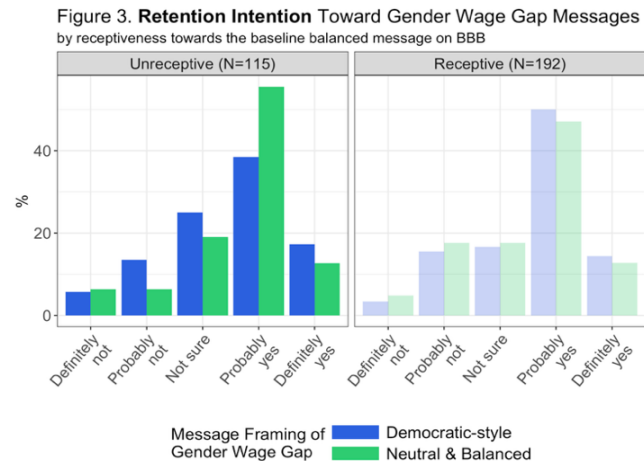Among the unreceptive group, the share

reporting somewhat or very positive trust rose by 20%, while somewhat or very negative trust dropped by 17%. This suggests that balanced framing can help build trust among users who were initially skeptical of both balanced political framing and the gender wage gap topic.

Result 2.2: Balanced framing reduces trust among some initially supportive

Among the receptive group, negative trust increased. This may reflect discomfort with seeing both left- and right-leaning perspectives combined—an unfamiliar departure from the more one-sided content often encountered on digital platforms.

Result 3: Balanced framing boosts retention intention among the skeptical

Figure 3 shows that among those unreceptive to the BBB message, the balanced framing of the gender wage gap significantly increased retention intention (somewhat or definitely would continue using the platform) by 22%. It also reduced the share of those who said they would not continue using the platform.

Figure 3. **Retention Intention** Toward Gender Wage Gap Messages
by receptiveness towards the baseline balanced message on BBB

Message Framing of Gender Wage Gap — Democratic-style / Neutral & Balanced

Suggestions & Broader Impact

- On digital platforms, content moderation and design should adopt neutral, balanced framing that subtly and scientifically acknowledges opposing views, as it can improve message attitudes, trust, and retention, even on sensitive topics.

- Future research should explore whether stronger scientific support for both viewpoints can reduce distrust among some users.

- Findings apply to social media, news platforms, and AI tools like chatbots and recommender systems. The A/B test survey method is also well-suited for various UX research applications, such as prototype testing and trend analysis.

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