

# Natural Cause Jail Deaths: A Survey of Public Perceptions

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# Media Framing



KYTX-TV Tyler-Longview

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## Texas Rangers confirms Rusk County Jail inmate died from natural causes

Story by Reagan Roy • 4mo

The Texas Rangers have concluded their investigation regarding the death of an inmate in an East Texas jail on Friday.

Johnny Bradley's autopsy report indicates that his death was from natural causes.

According to the [Rusk County Sheriff's Office](#), on Sunday, July 23, Rusk County jail staff noticed Johnny Bradley, 61, was unresponsive on his bed. Staffers immediately began CPR and Bradley was taken to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead.

"We pray for strength and healing for his family during this time of loss," Sheriff Johnwayne Valdez said.

### Most frequent media presentation:

Reporting from press releases with no additional interviews or context (more likely in rural areas)

- "The death was not an apparent suicide. The man appeared to die of natural causes," said Tom Newton, a spokesperson for the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office. (Hayes, 2023).
- "An inmate found dead in his jail cell Tuesday is believed to have died of natural causes, according to the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office. [...] No foul play is suspected at this time." (WBRZ, 2020).
- "The McLennan County Jail inmate who died in custody on May 25 died from natural causes, according to a final autopsy report." (Witherspoon, 2023).

# Background & Literature

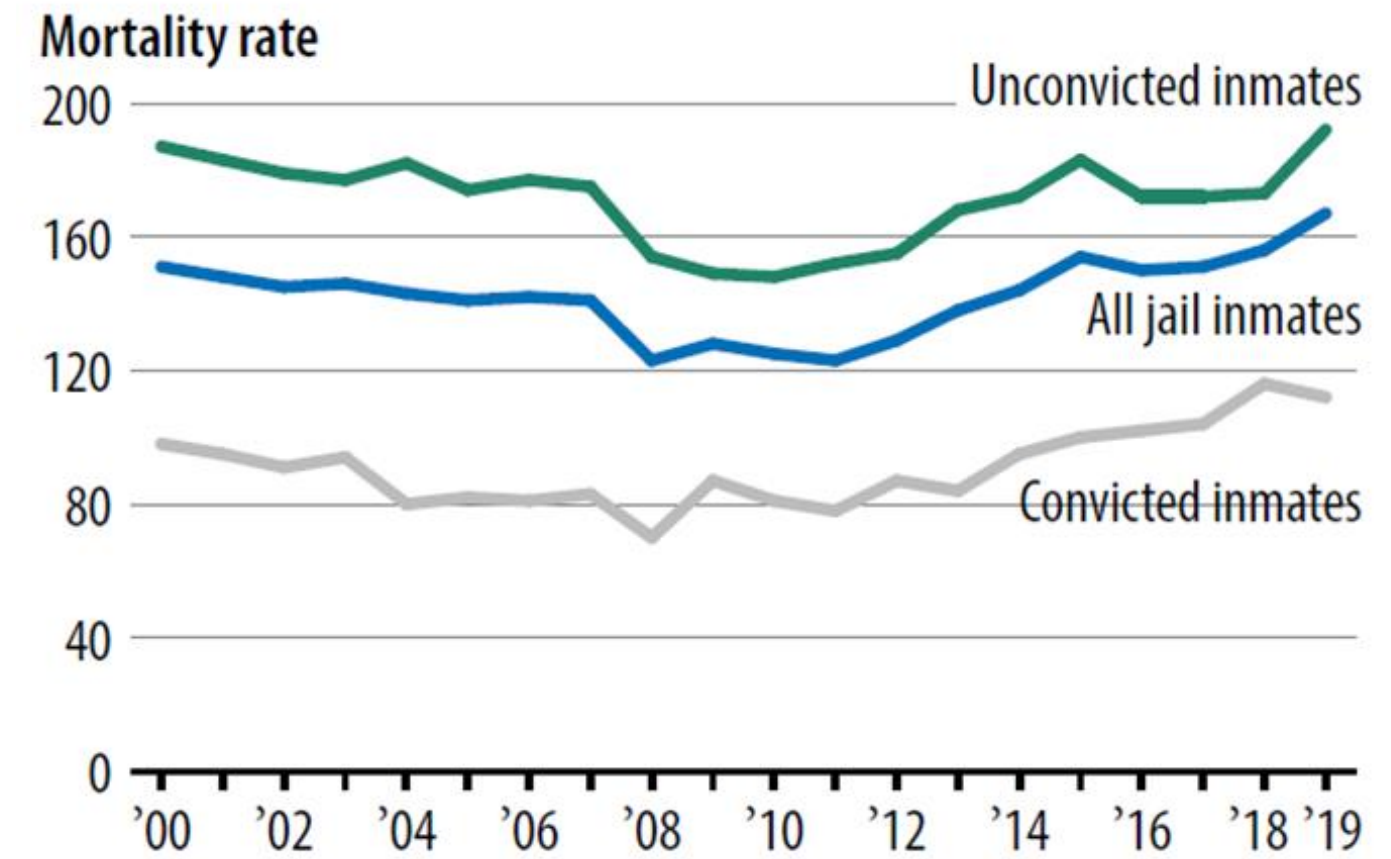
Most research focuses on prisons.

- **Jail incarceration tripled over 30 years.**  
Rural counties driving (Copp & Bales, 2018)
- **Leading jail death cause = natural cause**  
(BJS, 2021; Powell & Zevitz, 2011)
- Majority of people dying are:
  - **Pretrial** (BJS, 2021; TJI, 2023)
  - **Under 65.**  
Ex: Texas: 47, Milwaukee: 41.4 (TJI, 2023; Powell & Zevitz, 2011)
  - **Black and Hispanic men** (Kim et al., 2006; Shapiro & Keel, 2023)
- Leading cause = **heart related** and **unsupported detox** (Lozano & Molina, 2015; Victor, et al., 2022)
- **High staff turnover** associated with higher death rates (Adler & Chen, 2023)
- Medical examiners in LA **determined natural cause in manner that minimize jail culpability** (Shapiro & Keel, 2023).

**No research on how public perceives natural cause deaths.**

**FIGURE 1**

**Mortality rate per 100,000 local jail inmates, by legal status, 2000–2019**



# Research Question:

**What is public perception of natural cause jail deaths, and does local media framing influence that perception?**

## Hypothesis 1:

Americans will be most likely to perceive natural cause deaths as due to old age.

## Hypothesis 2:

When natural cause deaths are reported without additional reporting, the public will be less likely to suspect the jail of wrongdoing.

# Research Design:

Pilot survey = 336 U.S. adults  
Opt in via CloudResearch

H1 dependent: Perception of natural cause death.

*“When you hear that someone has died in jail of natural causes, what does that mean to you?”*

Open-ended:

Qualitative  
Structural Topic Model

H2 dependent: Perception of jail wrongdoing.

Here is some information about someone who recently died in a jail in the United States:

- An inmate was found dead in her jail cell Tuesday morning.
- She is believed to have died of natural causes.
- The sheriff said no foul play is expected at this time.
- NPR claims that the jail refused to provide heart medicine.

*How much if at all do you suspect the jail of wrongdoing?*

Experiment:

3 Regression Models  
Survey-weighted Generalized Linear Model



# Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended Responses

Top Topics	No. of Respondents
Old Age	112
Suspect of Jail	57
Illness/Disease	57
Not from violence or foul play	53
Health Issues	46
Heart Attack	40
Other / Unclear	36
Concerned about healthcare access	24
Unpreventable	23
Cancer	18
Presumed long post-conviction prison sentence	18
Stroke	12
During sleep	7
Not from illness or health issue	6
Do not know	6

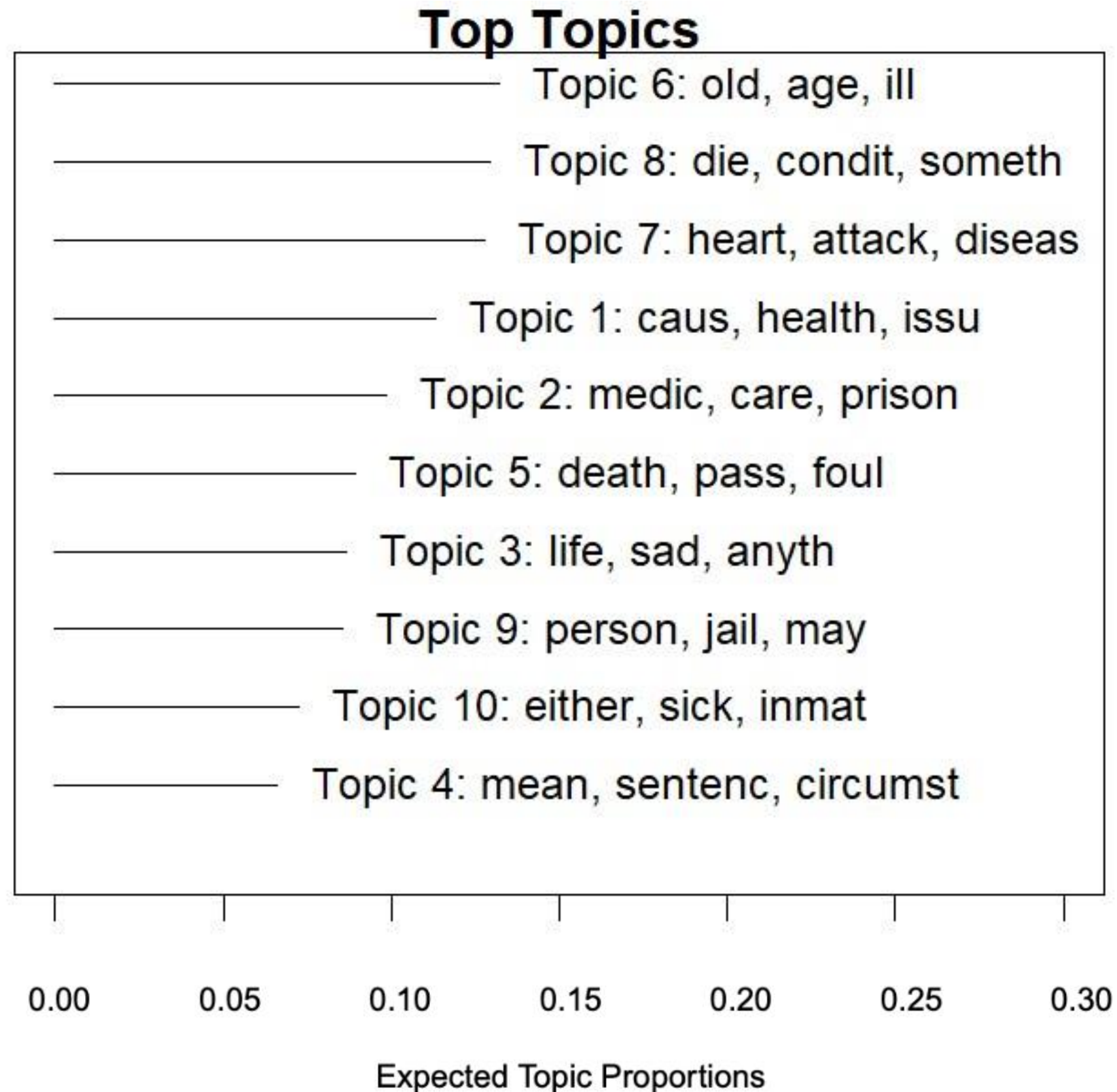
They died due to old age or due to factors that cause death in any human being

It means someone old died of being old and they just so happened to die while physically being located in a jail

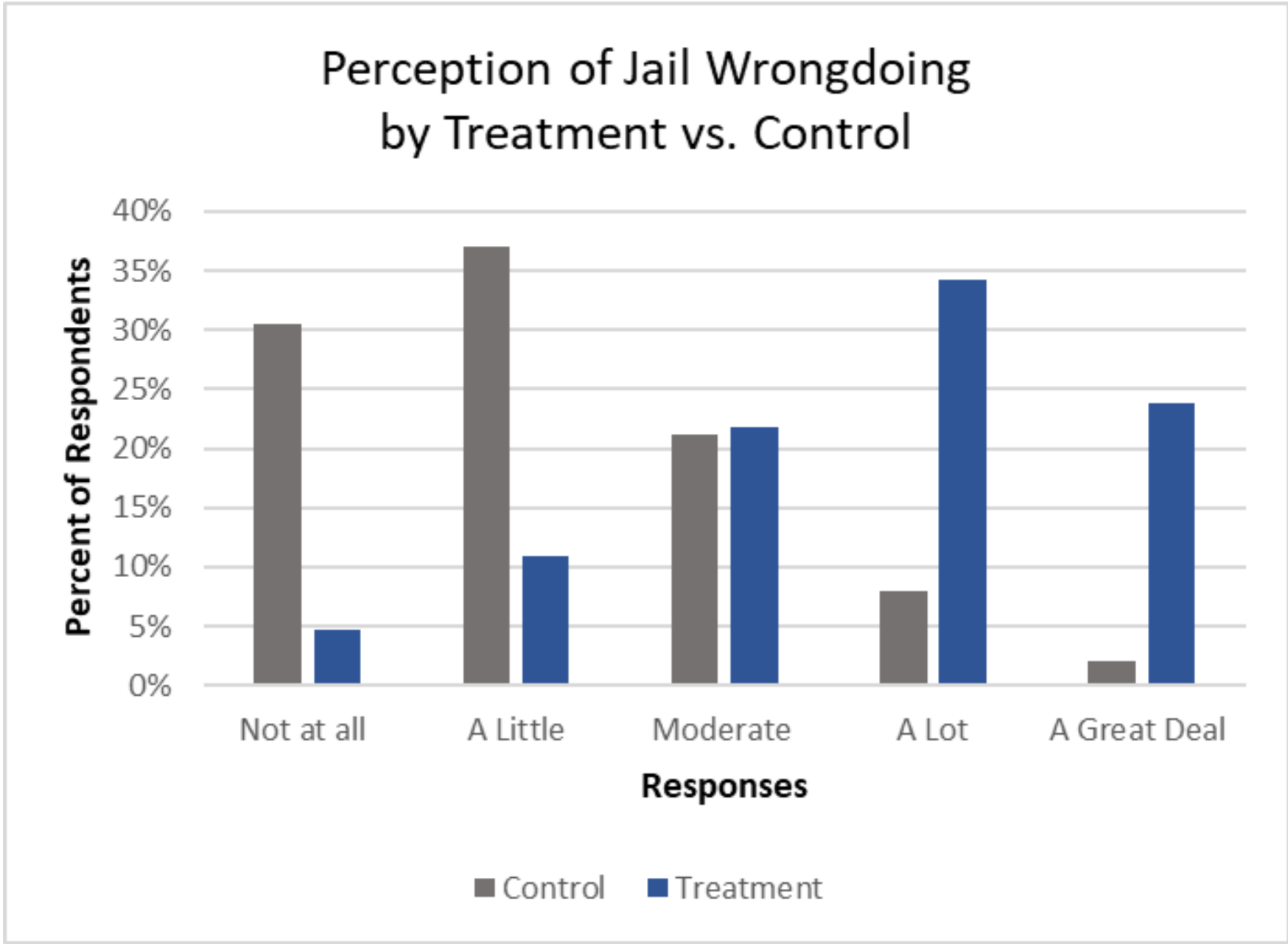
It raises questions about the adequacy of healthcare and oversight within the correctional system.

It means they probably didn't get medical attention in time. Or their death is being covered up.

# Structural Topic Model: Open-ended Responses



# Results: Experiment



Consistent when weighting responses to demographics

## OLS Regression Results of Treatment Effects on Perception of Jail Wrongdoing

	Dependent variable:			
	Perception of Jail Wrongdoing			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	1.500*** (0.119)	1.481*** (0.117)	1.490*** (0.112)	1.484*** (0.112)
Liberalism		0.126*** (0.034)		0.075** (0.034)
White		-0.267** (0.119)		-0.244** (0.119)
Female		0.068 (0.109)		-0.022 (0.107)
News			0.014 (0.058)	-0.006 (0.060)
Increasing			-0.120** (0.061)	-0.106* (0.061)
Problem			0.384*** (0.070)	0.351*** (0.072)
Constant	2.147*** (0.088)	2.131*** (0.194)	1.605*** (0.558)	1.793*** (0.566)
Observations	334	331	334	331
R <sup>2</sup>	0.324	0.367	0.404	0.426
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.321	0.360	0.396	0.414
Residual Std. Error	1.082 (df = 332)	1.055 (df = 326)	1.021 (df = 329)	1.009 (df = 323)
F Statistic	158.776*** (df = 1; 332)	47.322*** (df = 4; 326)	55.663*** (df = 4; 329)	34.296*** (df = 7; 323)

Note: \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01



# Discussion and Next Steps

## Discussion:

### **H1: Preliminary support.**

- Respondents most frequently associate natural death in jail as attributable to **old age**.
- **Variation** in perceptions = top categories representing extremes around presumptions of deaths as suspect and deaths as unavoidable

### **H2: Treatment effects.**

- Line of critical context, increases respondents' perception of jail wrongdoing.

## Limitations:

- Small sample
- Intercoder reliability
- Need to directly connect experiment to open-ended question.

## Next steps:

- Expand study to larger sample.
- Test *Competing Media Frames* (Druckman 2007, 2010, 2016)
  - Control, local article, national investigative article

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# Thank You

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