Public Attitudes and Elite Discourse in the Realm of Biofuels

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Background on Research:

- Controversy in Elite Discourse – Media and Policymakers
  - Environmentally good/bad
  - Economically good/bad
  - Fair/unfair
  - Increases national/energy security

- Elite Discourse AKA "Framing" has profound effects on public attitudes on all topics
  - *Definition: "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events… The frame suggests what the controversy is about the essence of the issue." (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143) AKA: Stories, narratives, policy images, problem definitions
  - The media is the chief conduit through which message reach the public

- Little known about Public Attitudes on Biofuels

Research Questions:

- Are the public informed about biofuels?

- Do the public support specific biofuels technologies and policies?

- **What factors influence public support for biofuels?**
  - Economic Interest: Region (Midwest)
  - Ideas: Partisanship, Environmentalism
  - Elite Discourse

Data and Methods:

- **Public** Internet-based survey, N=1000
  - Knowledge
  - Explanations
  - Support
  - Frames

  - Biofuels Technologies:
    - Corn-based Ethanol
    - Cellulosic Ethanol

  - Biofuels Policies:
    - Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS)
    - Traditional (Corn) Subsidy
    - Cellulosic Subsidy

- **Media** articles about biofuels, N=610
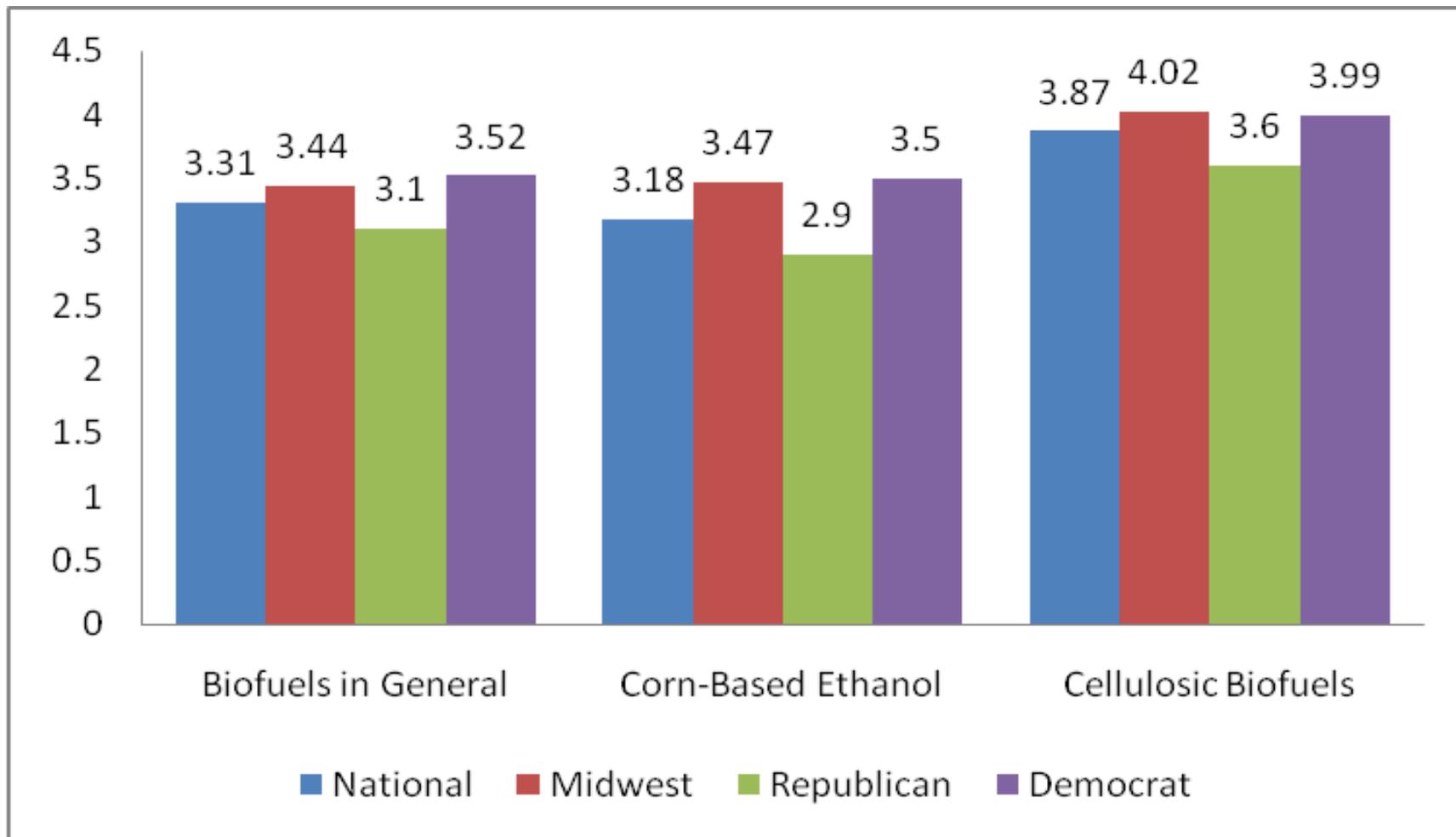 - *NYT* and *WP*

Public Opinion Survey Results:

- Low Self-Reported Knowledge
  - 36% Biofuels
  - 10% Cellulosic
  - 18% Policies
  - Midwesterners equally uninformed

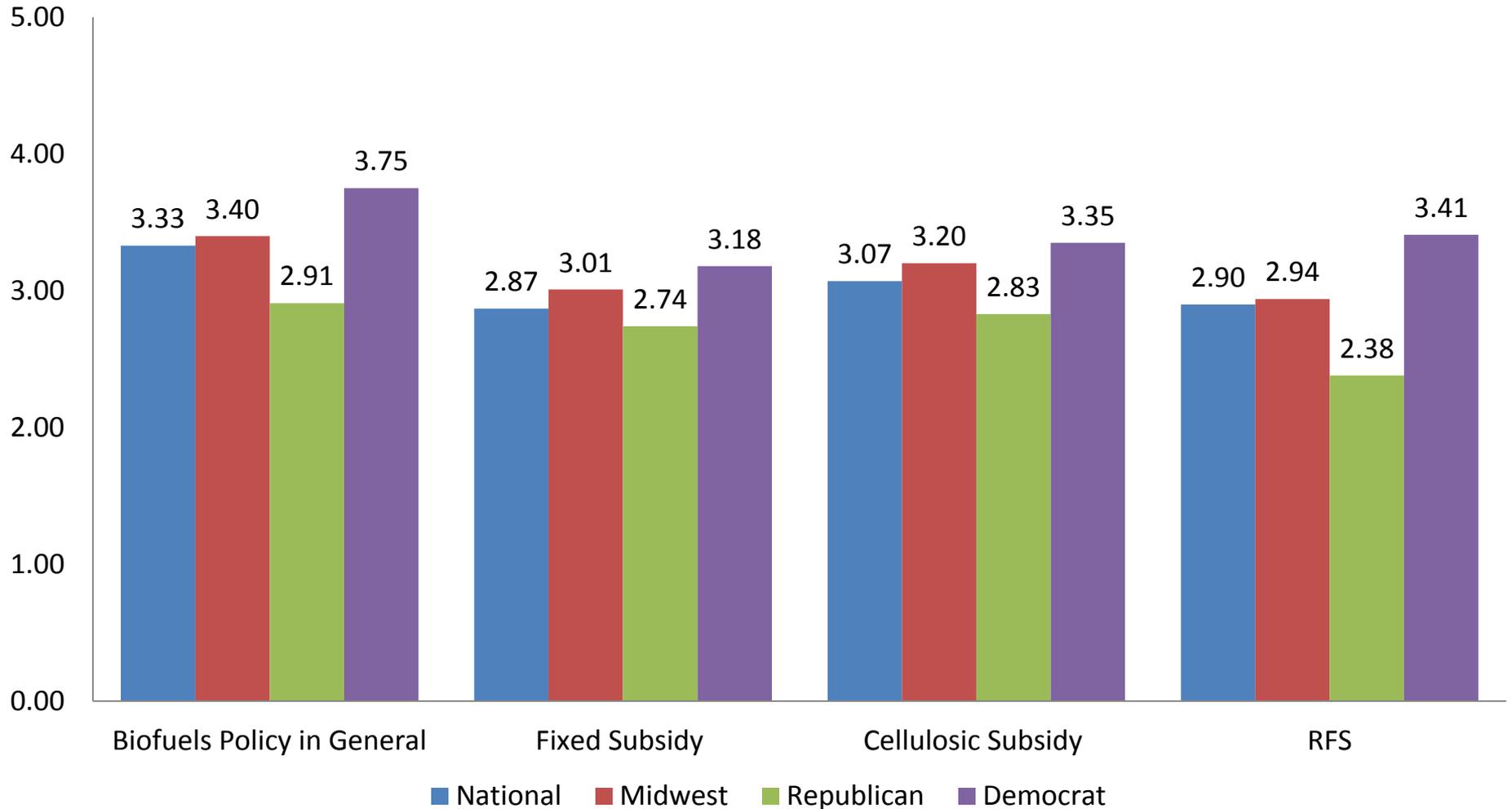 *Lack of Knowledge = High potential for reliance on elite frames

Public Support for Biofuels Technologies– Mostly "Neutral"
(Means, on a scale of 1-5, 5 being strongly support)

Public Support for Biofuels Policies – Mostly "Neutral"
(Means, on a scale of 1-5, 5 being strongly support)

Mean Agreement with Prominent Frames for Biofuels Technologies and Policies
## (5 = Strongly agree, 1 = Strongly disagree)

	Corn Ethanol	Cellulosic Biofuel	RFS	Fixed Subsidy	Cellulosic Subsidy
Helps Environment	3.24	3.79	3.25	2.77	3.13
Helps Consumers	3.06	3.68	2.94	2.63	2.98
Hurts Consumers	3.43	2.33	-------	-------	-------
Helps Farmers Economically	3.82	3.86	-------	-------	-------
Improves National Security	3.43	3.91	3.25	2.99	3.23
Policy is Fair	-------	-------	2.9	2.6	2.99

*Economic considerations reported as the **most important** for determining policy support

Percent Agreement with Frames for Supporters and Opponents of Specific Biofuels Technologies and Policies

Subject Frame	% Agreement by Supporters	% Agreement by Opponents
Corn - Helps Environment	93%	8%
Corn - Helps Consumers	87%	5%
Corn - Hurts Consumers	41%	94%
Corn - Helps Farmers	96%	56%

Media Coverage of Biofuels
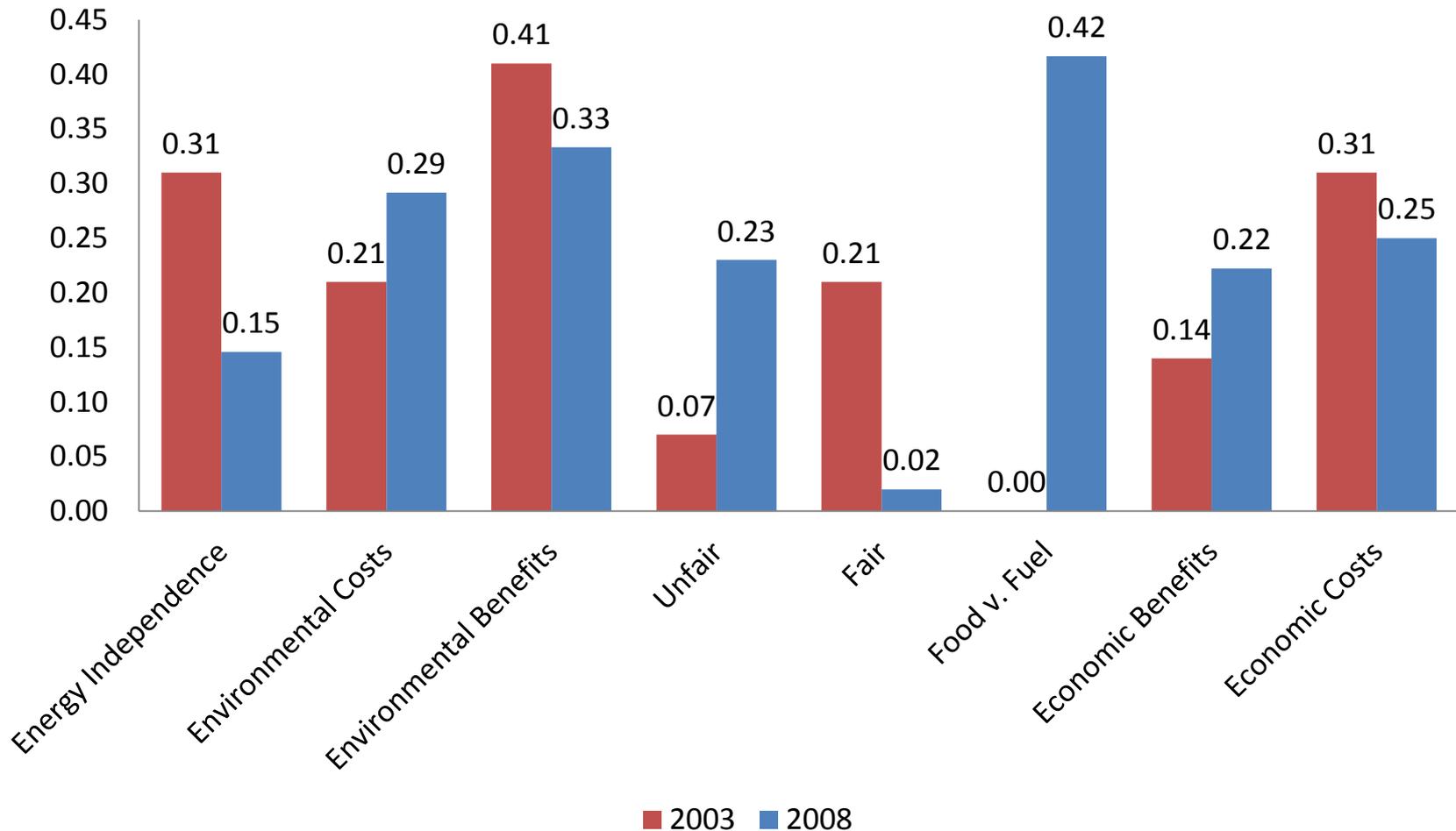
Potential Media Influence: % of Individuals Who Agreed with Biofuels Frames, sorted by News Attentiveness

Frame:	High News Attentiveness	Low News Attentiveness
Corn Ethanol - Helps Consumers	49	77
Cellulosic Ethanol - Helps Consumers	73	88
Corn Ethanol Subsidy - Helps Consumers	39	63
RFS - Helps Consumer	51	85
Corn Ethanol - Helps Environment	58	87
Corn Ethanol Subsidy - Helps Environment	47	73
RFS - Helps Environment	64	89
Corn Ethanol Subsidy - Fair	38	67
RFS - Fair	49	73

*Those who were more attentive consistently expressed less positive attitudes.

Conclusions

- Knowledge low
- Widespread Indifference
- Frames:
  - Most sizable and significant predictor of public attitudes
  - Media has likely influenced the public's framing
  - Changes in public attitudes will only come from changes in the quantity and content of the information they receive