

# When Framing Matters: How Partisan and Journalistic Frames Affect Individual Opinions and Party Identification

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## Abstract

This monograph examines how the consistency and content of issue frames used by politicians and journalists from 1975–2008 affect preferences and partisanship. Combining our content analysis of *Newsweek*'s coverage of abortion and taxes with public opinion data, we show that consistent, partisan-sourced frames affect preferences and partisanship. In general, specific frames affect attitudes but not partisanship when sourced by partisan politicians, and both attitudes and partisanship when sourced by journalists. Policy-oriented liberal frames were associated with more liberal preferences and Democratic partisanship while symbolic conservative frames were associated with more conservative preferences and Republican partisanship.

## Keywords

framing, journalism, political communication, political partisanship, public opinion

A central set of questions for journalism and mass communication scholars concerns whether people's preferences and behaviors are affected by the way that U.S. mass media frame issues. Indeed, the idea that issue framing by journalists can explain individual preferences and political partisanship is not new. Scholars from theoretical and empirical perspectives as diverse as Kenneth Burke, E. E. Schattschneider, Murray Edelman William Riker, Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, and Rune Slothuus

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and Claes de Vreese have explained how issues can be portrayed in ways that encourage specific opinions and/or actions.<sup>1</sup> Framing's importance is perhaps most famously explained by Schattschneider's assertion that "he who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power."<sup>2</sup> More than a half century of framing studies have shown that defining the alternatives affects how people think about an issue and even the preferences people express about that issue.<sup>3</sup> Less is known about how these frames are manifested in the actual media environment over long periods of time and whether the competing frames used by political actors challenging one another in the marketplace of ideas actually affect preferences.

Gamson and Modigliani define frames as a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them."<sup>4</sup> Druckman's similar but simpler operationalization defines frames as verbal or nonverbal statements that clearly emphasize particular considerations. Two kinds of framing effects are conventionally described: when the framing of the exact same information is presented differently, resulting in different opinions (equivalency framing); or when the position someone takes on an issue and the reasons offered for taking that position change as a direct function of the way in which the alternatives are framed (emphasis framing).<sup>5</sup>

Political parties provide a structured mechanism to present such competing claims to the public.<sup>6</sup> Because parties are not at all likely to agree in advance to engage in equivalency framing battles, and because much of the news media's reporting of political issues relies on official sources who are labeled by their party affiliation,<sup>7</sup> it is reasonable to focus attention on emphasis framing effects in competitive environments.<sup>8</sup>

A more theoretically appealing way to conceive of framing effects comes from Druckman's distinction between "frames in thought" and "frames in communication."<sup>9</sup> A "frame in thought" consists of the various dimensions on which someone evaluates an attitude object. An attitude object is the entity around which an attitude is oriented; an attitude is the expression of a psychological tendency to evaluate an attitude object with some favor or disfavor.<sup>10</sup> When considering how to evaluate a hate group's right to participate in a rally, frames in thought might consist of attitudes about free speech, violence, race, and civil rights. A "frame in communication" is focused on the dimension of an attitude object that a speaker says is relevant—such as a free speech expert extolling the virtues of defending the rights of a group to promote unpopular, ugly ideas. Note that these are emphasis frames, not equivalency frames.

When a frame in communication affects a frame in thought, a framing effect has occurred. Of course, in politics, frames in communication compete. For example, those who prefer an end to legal abortion tend to frame abortion as though the issue turns on the sanctity of human life; in contrast, advocates of legal abortion tend to frame the issue as revolving around a woman's right to choose what happens to her body.

In 2007, Chong and Druckman could correctly assert that the "literature on framing effects has virtually ignored perhaps the most typical communications environment in

which competing sides promote alternative interpretations of an issue.”<sup>11</sup> Many recent framing studies take these effects of competing communications seriously.<sup>12</sup> These works show that framing effects are often contingent on the strength of frames, the sources of the frames, whether the frames are examples of cheap or costly talk, and the values that the frames highlight.

Still generally absent from these treatments of framing is an examination of how these frames work in an environment where real-world political battles take place between Republican and Democratic elites, and sometimes even between lawmakers in the same party. Research shows that staying on message is a crucial factor for partisan elites (referring to partisan elected officials, partisan-appointed government officials, and partisan candidates for office) in maintaining partisan alignments.<sup>13</sup> But scholars are only just learning about the dynamics involved with multiple partisan elites framing the same issue in slightly different ways, albeit to similar policy ends.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, very few researchers have examined how specific sets of frames systematically resonate and persist in actual news coverage over several decades. Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston’s<sup>15</sup> thorough, innovative treatment of news coverage of the death penalty and Gruszczynski and Michaels’s<sup>16</sup> analysis of Congressional water policy hearings shed light on how specific frame sets can evolve over time. For example, Baumgartner et al.<sup>17</sup> chronicle how the rise of the “innocence” frame on death penalty issues affected both public opinion about the death penalty and policy outcomes related to the death penalty, including the number of death row convictions and the actual number of executions. Kellstedt’s<sup>18</sup> analysis of how the variance in the news media’s framing of racial issues affected the support or opposition to a variety of racially oriented public policies showed how mass opinion changed in response to racial issue frames that highlighted either individualistic or egalitarian positions about race in the United States. When a higher preponderance of frames highlighted individualistic frames, American racial attitudes became more conservative. When the balance of frames moved toward more egalitarian conceptions of race, attitudes supported more liberal racial policies. Kellstedt’s,<sup>19</sup> Baumgartner et al.’s,<sup>20</sup> and Gruszczynski and Michaels’s<sup>21</sup> analyses are not concerned, however, with the sources of the frames; they focus solely on packages of frames themselves.

We add to the literature on framing effects by asking this research question: How do the partisan sources of specific frames affect opinions and partisanship? We also pay attention to how journalists themselves frame issues; that is, when journalists do not cite a partisan (or any other) source when articulating an argument about an issue. Thus, we also ask: How do the frames that journalists introduce on their own affect opinions and partisanship in the United States?

Our thesis is that the way in which partisan political elites and journalists frame issues in the news media—both in terms of the consistency with which politicians frame issues and with respect to the content of sets of related frames themselves—affects individual preferences and party identification over long periods of time. In other words, we focus on the frames found in news coverage and their sources. Indeed, Zoch and Turk call source selection one of the most important aspects of framing.<sup>22</sup> The power of source selection is also evident in Herbert Gans’s classic *Deciding*

*What's News*; Gans quotes a newsmagazine editor saying that, "we don't deal in facts, but attributed opinions."<sup>23</sup> This monograph examines the consequences of the attributed opinions of partisan politicians—and the rising number of unattributed issue frames offered by journalists themselves in news coverage.<sup>24</sup>

We measure the frames that were reported in news media coverage about abortion and taxes from 1975–2008 in two distinct ways to test frames' effectiveness at influencing attitudes and/or partisanship. First, we examine partisan framing consistency, demonstrating that when partisan elites (partisan lawmakers and candidates, partisan government appointees) frame issues with consistent arguments within their party, they are more likely to have modest effects on individual preferences. We also show that framing consistency among co-partisans predicts statistically and substantively meaningful effects on party identification. We treat party identification at the individual level, examining the strength with which a person identifies with a political party.<sup>25</sup> Individual political partisanship is a singular workhorse in the study of American politics, affecting vote choice, political participation, and how individuals process information.<sup>26</sup> Second, we move beyond examining the effects of the consistency of frames to show that increases in the salience of the reporting of the frames' actual content affect individual preferences on important political issues, but not partisanship. Finally, we turn our attention to journalists themselves, showing how the salience of the content of "journalist-sourced frames"—frames reported without a source attached to them—has evolved over time and how this affects attitudes and, surprisingly, partisanship. In total, our research design allows for generalizable analyses and a more holistic examination of framing effects.

## Theory and Hypotheses

The claim that people's evaluations of issues are influenced by how issues are framed is not new in the study of mass communication or the social sciences more generally. Many empirical examinations demonstrate how audience members' opinions systematically and intelligibly depend on the way issues are framed.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, recent framing scholarship addresses some crucial limitations to the pioneering framing studies that explored only the framing effects of one-sided information flows. Once frames are allowed to compete, *equivalency* framing effects largely disappear,<sup>28</sup> whereas partisan-sourced frames actually strengthen the linkages of mass belief systems.<sup>29</sup> Competing *emphasis* frames have differential effects on preferences based in large measure on the strength of the frames and the political context in which they appear.<sup>30</sup> When frames compete over time, experimental evidence indicates that people are most responsive to the most recent message they have heard, suggesting that greater framing consistency from partisan elites is more likely to affect preferences.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, studies of citizens in Denmark suggest that partisan-sourced frames have some power to affect public opinion formation on an issue an individual previously had not considered, given the constraints of their supporters' preexisting beliefs,<sup>32</sup> and to change individuals' prior preferences on issues that are at the center of interparty conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Parties have an interest in providing different, competing choices to the public to win public power.<sup>34</sup> Despite a tradition of finding that media messages have “minimal effects” on public opinion,<sup>35</sup> there is good reason to think that news coverage affects public attitudes and behaviors once scholars take into account the nature of political debate. As Zaller noted, “the effects of the pushing around (of the media on public attitudes) are hard to see only because the media (via the reporting of political conflict) push in opposite directions.”<sup>36</sup>

In addition to regularly reporting partisan conflict as a way to provide objective, balanced coverage of the news, the news media often cover issues in a way that is operationally liberal but symbolically conservative.<sup>37</sup> That is, news coverage often highlights conservative values and liberal policy positions. Interestingly, content analyses of the *New York Times* and *USA Today* found that the term “conservative” is much more likely to accompany broad philosophical positions that are conservative than the term “liberal” is to accompany policy positions that are liberal.<sup>38</sup> This is important for American public opinion, because, as Ellis and Stimson have shown, Americans express attitudes that reveal a strong affection for conservative symbols while simultaneously expressing actual policy preferences that reflect liberal views. Individuals tend to be more likely to identify themselves as conservatives because of their conservative attitudes that are related to personal moral values. At the same time, individuals are also more likely to prefer liberal policies such as increased spending on social policies and expanded rights for homosexuals. What has not been documented or tested, however, is whether specific frames and their sources interact to affect the ideological directions of issue attitudes and partisanship.

Of course, not all issues are created equal. Several scholars have shown that preferences on “moral” or sociocultural issues (i.e., same sex marriage, prayer in public schools) are more deeply held and resistant to change<sup>39</sup> as compared with opinions on economic issues (i.e., income tax rates, social-welfare spending). We do not expect social issue preferences to be impervious to framing effects, but we expect that the size of the effects to be larger for economic issues.<sup>40</sup> All else equal, we argue that people will be influenced by news coverage in proportion to the consistency of partisan-framed messages and by the joint movement of specific frame sets, as sourced by partisans or journalists themselves. By frame sets, we mean sets of specific arguments from a common source (such as Democrats or Republicans or journalists) that move together over time through news coverage.

Almost all of the articles and books on framing referenced above examine framing effects in experimental situations. Framing experiments have isolated several crucial variables and contexts affecting how people form preferences in response to frames offered by political elites. Our monograph moves out of the laboratory and into the contemporary American political environment of the last half century to explore how the consistency of frames and the specific frame sets communicated by Republican and Democratic elites affect issue preferences over time. We do this in part to test whether the results from the carefully designed and controlled framing experiments we have referenced hold up in the messiness of the world.

Regarding preference formation, then, we build on previous framing research and the growing evidence that U.S. public opinion is symbolically conservative and operationally liberal to generate several hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Controlling for the behavior of the other major political party in the United States, the more consistently that elites within the same political party frame an issue, the more likely an individual's preference on that issue will move in the direction preferred by the party.

**Hypothesis 1a (H1a):** The effect posited in H1 should be larger for economic issues as compared with social issues.

We connect the above-mentioned literature to Ellis and Stimson's insights about an operationally liberal and symbolically conservative public to generate the following hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** When the salience increases for Democratic-sourced frames that characterize issues in an operationally liberal way, individual opinion will be more likely to favor liberal preferences on the issue.

**Hypothesis 2a (H2a):** As the salience of Democratic-sourced frames that are symbolically liberal increases, individual opinion will be unaffected.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** When the salience with which Republican political elites frame issues in a symbolically conservative way increases, individual opinion will be more likely to favor conservative preferences on the issue.

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a):** As the salience of Republican-sourced frames that are operationally conservative increases, individual opinion will be unaffected.

With respect to political partisanship, research has shown that citizens tend to view the world through partisan-tinted lenses; this is especially true for issues that individuals find to be less important to them. That is, if Republicans and Democrats in Washington clash on an issue and that issue is of low importance to someone, that person tends to adopt the view of her or his party on the issue.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, if an issue is important to someone and the parties disagree on that issue, that person is more likely to *change* political parties if her or his own party expresses a view different than the view of the individual.<sup>42</sup> For example, Republicans in the 1970s whose pro-choice views were very important to them were more likely to move to the Democratic Party than to change their pro-choice views to pro-life ones once the two parties started taking competing positions on the abortion issue in the 1980s.

Interest groups and activists have been shown to play a crucial role in communicating their position on issues to the public, as well as in fostering long-term changes in party identification.<sup>43</sup> We argue that the way partisan elites' efforts to frame issues are quoted or cited by journalists in news coverage can make it easier for people to select the party with which they most closely identify. Specific frames are unlikely to be as persuasive when it comes to changing one's partisanship—which Brady et al. describe as the most durable of political identities.<sup>44</sup> Testing precisely how partisan issue

framing affects partisan change would require panel data over decades, but such data are unavailable. Instead, as we rely on cross-sectional data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), usually conducted every two years, we examine how partisan framing is related to party identification, but not partisan change.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Controlling for the behavior of the other major political party, when partisan elites frame issues with increasing consistency, individuals will be more likely to identify with that party.

**Hypothesis 5 (H5):** Increases in the salience of specific frames sourced by partisan elites will not affect individual partisanship.

Our expectations about how frames sourced (that is, introduced) by journalists themselves will affect attitudes and partisanship have less to draw on from previous research. Researchers have clearly demonstrated that media effects are limited—based on the perceived credibility of the source. For example, readers find frames in the *New York Times* to be more credible than those found in the pages of the *National Enquirer*. Given that people tend to select media sources that they believe to be broadly consistent with their ideological predispositions<sup>45</sup> and that individuals tend to judge ideologically sympathetic sources as more balanced than other sources,<sup>46</sup> we expect liberal policy frames sourced by journalists to nudge preferences in a liberal direction and conservative symbolic frames sourced by journalists to push opinions in a conservative direction. Stated more formally:

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** Increases in the salience of specific frames comprised of operationally liberal arguments sourced by journalists will result in an increased likelihood that issue preferences will become more liberal.

**Hypothesis 7 (H7):** Increases in the salience of specific frames comprised of symbolically conservative arguments sourced by journalists will result in an increased likelihood that issue preferences will become more conservative.

We expect operationally conservative and symbolically liberal frames sourced by journalists to have no effect on partisanship. Given the importance previous work has placed on the source of information conveying crucial information regarding the development of party identification, we do not expect journalist-sourced frames to affect party identification.

## Data and Research Design

An ambitious content analysis helped us test our hypotheses about how frames and their sources were represented in news coverage over a four-decade period. A quantitative approach allowed us to systematically examine longitudinal trends in framing and to test for generalizable changes in the consistency of partisan-sourced frames as well as changes in the salience of specific frames. We identified two issues that have played key roles in the divide between the two major political parties in the United States over

the last half century: taxes, representing an issue from the economic domain, and abortion, a social issue.<sup>47</sup> What is especially useful about these two issues is that taxes represent an entrenched issue animating partisan alignments over the entire time period we examined whereas abortion became a partisan issue during this period.

Other issues have played major roles in the past several decades of partisan politics, and were candidates for analysis as well, but none were as suitable as taxes or abortion for our purposes. For example, economic issues such as social security spending and social-welfare spending have contributed to the contemporary ideological divide between Republican and Democratic lawmakers, but neither issue was as consistently addressed in the ANES as were taxes. Regarding social issues, questions surrounding a “woman’s place” in society were dominant in the 1970s, but have been largely dropped from public opinion research today due to overwhelming changes in societal attitudes about women working outside the home. Other social issues such as capital punishment have not been addressed on a consistent basis in the ANES either. Moreover, researchers have specifically noted that tax policy was a crucial driver of the New Deal alignment and abortion policy was central to contemporary changes to the U.S. party system.<sup>48</sup>

### Content Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we needed to systematically trace both the overall consistency and the substantive evolution of both partisan elite and journalists’ own framing of abortion and tax policy over time. To do this, we analyzed every single story printed about either issue in one of the nation’s most widely circulated newsweeklies, *Newsweek*, from 1975–2008. Using Lexis-Nexis, we engaged in a “full text” search of every *Newsweek* article containing the word “abortion” for the abortion issue and “tax policy,” “tax plan,” “tax cut(s),” “raise taxes,” or “tax hike” for the tax issue. We originally searched for “tax” for the tax policy issue, but the searches produced a high percentage of articles unrelated to tax policy in the United States and were, thus, not suitable for coding. After trying a variety of combinations of words and phrases, we settled on the above list as providing a comprehensive list of relevant stories without also identifying a high number of irrelevant stories. A team of coders content analyzed a total of 2,810 stories containing 4,734 frames on taxes and 2,185 stories containing 3,056 frames on abortion.

The coders were carefully trained before coding on their own. First, coders were educated about and then tested on their knowledge of party positions on these issues at different points in time. Next, coders were taught how to identify frames in news coverage.<sup>49</sup> Then, coders practiced coding a random sample of articles from 1976. After they finished coding, their work was compared with the coding completed by the authors on the same data. One author discussed any discrepancies between the coders’ work and the authors’ work. After the discussion, coders coded a sample of articles from 1986. The discussion process was repeated and the coders coded a sample of stories from 1996. By this point, the error rates of the coders had dropped significantly, but the process was repeated one more time as the coders practiced on a sample of

stories from 2006. Then, the coders were assigned to code a specific set of years. They were assigned in such a way that two coders coded every story from every year.

Although framing is an undoubtedly complex concept and process, we followed the coding efforts described by others who have engaged in complicated, long-term coding of frames in news coverage. Thus, we chose to treat specific arguments that were made about an issue—favoring, opposing, or neutral to the issue—as the unit of analysis in our coding of frames.<sup>50</sup> We coded every argument about our issues that was mentioned in a story. To help develop the exhaustive list of frames from which we would code, we used a random sample of 25% of the *Newsweek* articles pertaining to each issue.<sup>51</sup> Each time we identified a frame, we added it to our spreadsheet of potential codes. We also added frames that we thought could be related to the ones we located in the random sample of articles we used. From the comprehensive list of potential frames we developed (see the codebook appendix), we assigned each identified frame a code reflecting the specific argument the frame made. We categorized each frame under ten general topic areas for abortion (“Status of Fetus,” “Partisan/Ideological Issue,” “Women’s Rights Issue,” “Personal Opinion vs. Legislative Preference,” “Federal Funding,” “Political Issue,” “Late-Term/Partial Birth,” “Morality,” “Legality,” “New Technology”) and five for taxes (“Raise Taxes,” “Cut Taxes,” “Political Debate,” “Tax Policy Affects Other Issues,” “The Tax Code and Reforms Thereof”). Once each frame was identified, it was coded with the specific value representing the argument the frame was making.

Next, the source of each frame was coded. We coded for whether the source of the frame was a Republican, Democrat, Journalist, or someone else. (The full list is in the codebook appendix.) If the source of the frame was a partisan elite, we coded for whether the frames sourced by a partisan elite were consistent with their party’s official position on the issue as defined by the national party’s most recent presidential election year platform. We gave a 1 to frames from a partisan source that were consistent with the official party position on the issue and a 0 for frames that were not consistent. For example, if a Democrat in 2004 said, “I am proud to support a woman’s right to choose,” the Democratic Party match category was coded with a 1; while a Democrat saying “it isn’t a fetus, it is a person” was coded in the same category as a 0.

On the very rare occasions that the frame was inconsistent with the party platform but the article directly pointed out that the frame was inconsistent with the party platform, we coded the frame as 1 if the additional context were directly connected to the frame we identified. For example, a story noting that 2008 Republican presidential hopeful Rudolph Giuliani “directly contradicts Republican Party orthodoxy by favoring a woman’s right to choose” would be coded as consistent with the Republican view on abortion whereas a story quoting Giuliani as favoring a woman’s right to choose with no immediate additional context would be coded as a 0. If, a few sentences later, another frame we identified noted that Giuliani’s position was atypical of Republicans, we would have coded that separately.

Thus, we have measures for all the individual frames covered on abortion and taxes in *Newsweek*, a record of all of the sources of those frames, and evidence of whether the partisan sources provided a view that was consistent with the official party line.

Intercoder reliability between the three coders was high; the Kappa statistic for identifying particular frames is above .87 and the source and matching codes were above .86. Using another method of checking for intercoder reliability, Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  was greater than .80 for all of our categories.

Large-scale content analyses have shown whether individualistic or egalitarian frames dominated racial issues coverage<sup>52</sup> and have shown the specific frames used in media coverage on the death penalty.<sup>53</sup> But we are not aware of any other research that codes frames, their sources, and the sources' agreement with their party's platform on multiple issues over several decades. This comprehensive strategy means first that users of the data can trace the presence of specific frames in news coverage over time. As Baumgartner et al.<sup>54</sup> demonstrated, over time, measures of the dynamics of specific frames in news coverage can illuminate both public preferences and policy outcomes on meaningful political issues such as the death penalty.

Second, our content analysis allows us to understand not only how specific frames operated over time, but also who was using them. To our knowledge, no study has traced the sources of frames over multiple decades nor have they done so using multiple issues. Given the central role of political partisanship in how people interpret political arguments, the ability to trace partisan elites' use of frames over time is crucial to investigations of how issue frames operate in the real world.

Third, our coding strategy allows scholars to examine the clarity with which partisans were framing issues at different points in time. Kellstedt's<sup>55</sup> examination of racial issue framing was similarly advantageous in this regard as he was able to explore the precise dynamics of individualistic and egalitarian racial issue frames over several decades and compare changes in the public's "racial policy mood" to changes in the frames that were present in *Newsweek*. While we do not code for whether the frames we identify fit a broad core value such as egalitarianism, as Kellstedt did, we do know the source of each frame and can allow systematic factor analyses (see the section "The Evolutionary Factor Analysis Approach" below) to determine whether particular frames move with each other over time.

Fourth, we have selected two issues for analysis that have animated the central philosophical divides between the two major political parties during the past four decades. The tax issue—symbolizing partisan differences over the role of the size of government and what the government chooses to spend its resources on—is one that Republicans and Democrats at all levels of American life have competed over since the 1930s<sup>56</sup> while the abortion issue—highlighting contemporary partisans' divides over moral right and wrong—became a partisan issue in the late twentieth century, after a few decades of clarification in terms of partisan messaging,<sup>57</sup> activist behavior,<sup>58</sup> congressional roll call voting behavior,<sup>59</sup> and the relationship between abortion preferences and individual partisanship.<sup>60</sup>

### *On the Generalizability of Newsweek*

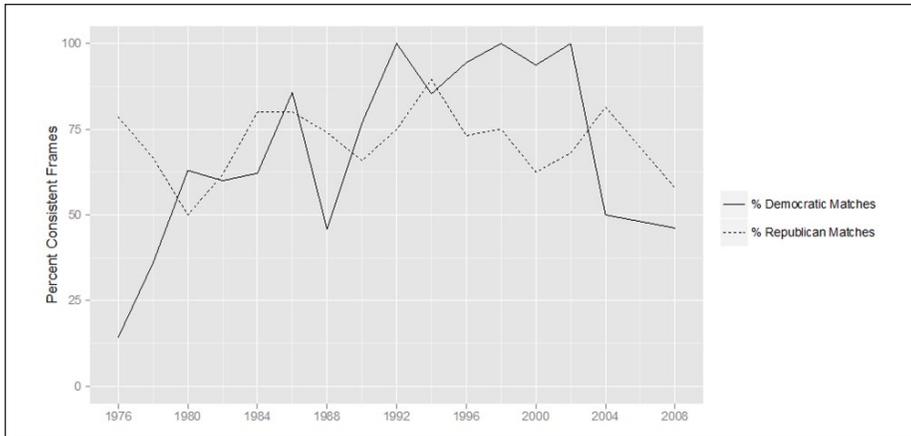
The most notable potential disadvantage of our content analytic strategy is our decision to focus on one news outlet. We chose *Newsweek* as our primary source of news

coverage for several reasons. First, *Newsweek's* circulation was quite consistent from 1975 to 2008, the years we examine in this analysis. It had been delivered to the mailboxes of two- to three-million subscribers per year from the 1960s to the end of our time series.<sup>61</sup> While the *New York Times* is the national "paper of record" and has been shown to be a reasonable, if imperfect, proxy of journalism in general,<sup>62</sup> the *Newsweek* audience is comprised of less elite, urbane members of society. Thus, the political messages to which *Newsweek* readers were exposed to likely better reflected the messages the average American was exposed to as compared with what was printed in the *Times*.<sup>63</sup> Although *Newsweek* underwent significant changes after 2010, even ending its print run in 2012, it is reasonable to assume that *Newsweek's* impact on society was stable during the time period analyzed here, given that its circulation was so consistent. But can we assume that *Newsweek* is a reasonable proxy for media coverage during this time period?

To supplement his five decades' worth of *Newsweek* data about racial issues coverage, Kellstedt<sup>64</sup> also coded a random sampling of articles about racial issues that appeared in the *New York Times*. Just as Carmines, Gerrity, and Wagner<sup>65</sup> found with respect to coverage of abortion and interest groups in their comparison of *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*, Kellstedt found no significant differences in the way racial issues were framed in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. This reduces, but does not eliminate, concerns about the generalizability of the *Newsweek* data to other national media sources.

To increase our confidence in the generalizability of the conclusions we draw from our analyses below, we applied our codebook to a random sample of stories about taxes and abortion in the *New York Times*, the source used in Baumgartner et al.'s<sup>66</sup> examination of how changes in death penalty framing affected attitudes and policy outcomes and in Boydston's<sup>67</sup> analysis of factors that set the news media's agenda. The entire population of stories in the *New York Times* was too large to code by hand. Although others have adopted a strategy of simply coding the abstracts of stories in the nation's paper of record,<sup>68</sup> our coding protocol, which requires coding the source of frames as they appeared in the stories, is too fine-grained to use the abstracts. As we need whole articles to know who was the precise source of a specifically identified frame, we chose to conduct a random sample of 20 articles per year for each issue, a total of 1,280 articles, or 640 articles per issue.

Our comparison of the two datasets reveals a strong correlation between how both *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* covered abortion and tax issues over the past four decades. The average correlation between the likelihood that a specific frame was covered by *Newsweek* over a six-month period and the likelihood that same frame (e.g., abortion frame #101, fetus is a person/abortion is murder) was covered by the *New York Times* over the same period was .8 for taxes and .81 for abortion. The average correlation for whether Republican frames matched the party line across our two media sources in a given six-month period was .88 for taxes and .83 for abortion. The average correlation for the percentage of Democratic frames that matched the party line in both *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* in a given year was .81 for taxes and .9 for abortion.



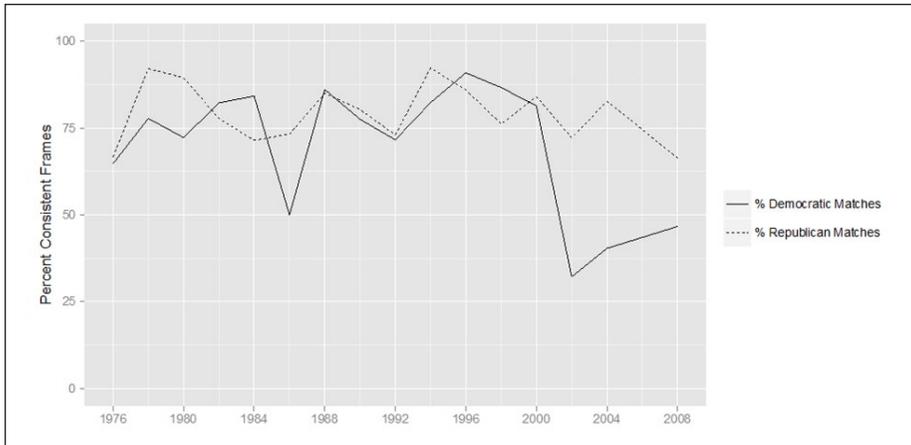
**Figure 1.** The consistency of partisan officials' framing of abortion, 1975–2008.

To wit, the full population of stories about taxes and abortion in *Newsweek* compares very favorably with a random sample of stories about the same issues in the *New York Times*. To be sure, there were small differences in how each source approached the issues. What is important for our analysis, however, is whether we can say with a reasonable confidence that journalists were telling similar stories across sources—with respect to the specific frames reported, the sources of those frames, and the consistency with which partisan sources were reported to be towing the party line when discussing the issues. We can. We report the results of the *Newsweek* data as they reflect the full population of coverage as compared with the small, random sample of stories we collected from the *New York Times*.

### Matching: Coding and Preliminary Analysis

To examine whether partisan-sourced frames that advocate a consistent policy position are associated with changes in political attitudes and party identification, we constructed two variables, Republican Match and Democratic Match (% Rep Match and % Dem Match in the tables below). Each variable is constructed by calculating the percentage of frames sourced by members of the same political party that were consistent with the party's official position on the issue in a given two-year period. We use a two-year period because that is the length of time between ANES's public opinion data we use in our analysis. Thus, if 75% of frames offered by Democrats about abortion were advocating a "pro-choice" position from 1991 to 1992, the Democratic Match score that we would merge with 1992 ANES public opinion data would be .75 in our full dataset.

Figure 1 (abortion) and Figure 2 (taxes) present the party matching variables for the abortion and tax issues, respectively. Importantly, the degree of consistency exhibited by partisan elites in each major political party varies over the time period we analyze.



**Figure 2.** The consistency of partisan officials' framing of taxes, 1975–2008.

Moreover, much of the movement within each party appears to be correlated with the consistency exhibited by the opposing party. Thus, in general, Figures 1 and 2 reveal that when Democrats were using ideologically consistent frames on abortion and tax issues over time, so were Republicans. This is important because news reporting of clear and consistent differences between the two major parties on issues such as abortion, energy policy, taxes, and foreign policy has been shown to increase the likelihood that individuals believe the differences between the parties are major—a crucial prerequisite for a host of political communication effects.<sup>69</sup>

The figures reporting the policy-specific consistency that partisan elected officials were reported to use for abortion and taxes illuminate a broad sketch of the politics surrounding the issues from 1975–2008. One major difference between how the two issues were framed is that tax policy entered our time series as a contested partisan issue with relatively high partisan consistency within both parties, stemming from New Deal debates that were already four decades old in 1975.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the controversial abortion issue did not develop a partisan character at the elite level until the late 1980s and at the mass level until the 1990s.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the first years of the time series are marked with remarkably low and highly variable levels of consistency from either party. After 1990, Democrats spoke with nearly one voice from a consistency perspective, as their abortion-related issue frames advocated, in one way or another, legal abortion. This is consistent with Adams's<sup>72</sup> account of the process by which the Democrats slowly clarified their position on abortion with respect to roll call votes from the 1970s to the 1990s.

As Republicans have generally been consistent in advocating the abolition of legal abortion since the mid-1980s, it is interesting to note that congressional Republicans did not always frame abortion in such a homogeneous fashion. Although we do not break down consistency of frames by political office in our analyses below, others have shown that Republican presidents and nominated candidates for president have

been remarkably consistent in their framing of the abortion issue since Ronald Reagan's 1980 run while considerably more heterogeneity has been present in the Grand Old Party (GOP) congressional delegation.<sup>73</sup>

Near the end of the time series in each figure, it appears as though the consistency of the Democratic Party takes a deep nosedive. However, in both cases, the drop is mostly due to a smaller set of cases in which Democrats were quoted on each issue in *Newsweek*. Indeed, these years are the ones that exhibit the greatest differences: the *New York Times* supplementary analysis showed a much more consistent Democratic Party near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Stipulating that, it bears mentioning that Democratic candidates for president were unanimous in their endorsement of the pro-choice perspective when their abortion frames received coverage in *Newsweek*. Why were there fewer stories about this hot-button issue than in years past? From 2004–2008, the Iraq War dominated the pages of *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*, diverting attention away from taxes and abortion. During the debate over the Bush tax cuts in 2001 and 2002—the last time taxes took up major column inches in *Newsweek*—Democrats exhibited their highest levels of consistency in the time series.

In short, the parties entered and exited the time series issuing frames about taxing and spending that were internally (within the parties) consistent, but externally (between the parties) competitive. This highlights the central role that the economic issues cleavage has played in American politics for decades.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, the abortion issue was one of partisan confusion in the 1970s and early 1980s. Republican senators such as Oregon's Bob Packwood received national awards from women's interest groups for advocating the pro-choice perspective while a Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, struggled to win the support of women's groups after discussing his personal view opposing abortion while adopting political support for a woman's right to have one. By the 1980s, abortion had become a partisan issue at the presidential candidate level; no major party presidential nominee has taken a position on abortion at odds with their official party's position since 1980. By the early 1990s, partisan elites in Congress followed. Below, we use our measures of Democratic Match and Republican Match to examine systematically whether and in what direction the increasing consistency in partisan issue frames influenced abortion attitudes, preferences about government spending, and party identification.

### *The Evolutionary Factor Analysis (EFA) Approach*

We are interested in how the general consistency with which partisan elites frame issues might influence individual preferences and party identification over time. Although not focusing on partisan consistency per se, general examinations of framing over time on broad core values such as individualism and egalitarianism have been shown to affect the dynamics of mass racial attitudes.<sup>75</sup> However, fine-grained coding of the movement of specific frames over time has been shown to affect how the death penalty was discussed in the *New York Times*, the actual provision of capital punishment sentences, and public opinion about the death penalty itself.<sup>76</sup> Our coding of

party matches allows us to test hypotheses related to broad trends in preferences and partisanship, but our coding of specific frames and their sources also allows us to test whether the salience and persistence of particular arguments influenced changes in opinions and partisanship in the United States.

To examine how specific frames operated in concert with other frames over time, we used the EFA methodology pioneered by Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston in their analysis of the rise of a set of specific frames they called “the innocence frame” related to people facing the death penalty.<sup>77</sup> The same method has been used to examine the dynamics of framing of other policy issues such as water policy and bureaucratic regulation.<sup>78</sup> Unlike traditional analyses of quantitative textual data, EFA uses factor analyses of moving five-year windows of data to ascertain which specific frames move together as one meaningful category of frames over the time period in question. This allows researchers to get at subtle variations in the dimensions of arguments longitudinally. Overlapping five-year windows within the data are analyzed using standard factor analysis techniques; for example, dimensions of arguments were analyzed for 1985–1989, 1986–1990, and so on.

To identify dominant frame types, only those frames that loaded above .80 in each factor analysis were kept for subsequent analysis; frame types not central to the underlying dimension of argument were discarded.<sup>79</sup> This analysis technique essentially treats sets of specific frames as indicators of a latent underlying construct of broader argument. Thus, those frames that load above the threshold are interpreted as being “explained” by the unobservable evolutionary frame and those falling below the threshold are interpreted as constituting random noise. Applying these factor analyses over rolling windows of time provides the frames that occupy each dimension in that time period, as well as shared movement among frames on the underlying dimensions of argument. Generally speaking, most factor analyses of the rolling five-year windows produced three to four underlying factors, explaining a totality of the variance among the dimensions of argument.

Baumgartner et al. distinguish between evolutionary frames, which persist over time, and nonadaptive frames, which do not.<sup>80</sup> Evolutionary frames are identified as such if they occur in consecutive years, allowing for a skip of one year. Nonadaptive frames, in contrast, do not persist over time and may also split their factor loadings into separate dimensions of argument from year to year. Thus, an evolutionary frame for abortion may be composed of the “abortion should be illegal” and “women have no right to abortion” frames if those frames moved concurrently over consecutive years. Importantly, dimensions of argument do not necessarily include frames of the same valence—for example, dimensions of argument could theoretically include both “tax the rich” and “cut taxes for the rich” if the said argument is defined by the debate over taxes for the wealthy during the same time period. Because we were looking for evolutionary factors among the frames offered by members of the same party, we find fewer of these examples in our data than Baumgartner et al. did in their data.

We identified evolutionary frames by examining the factor loadings for each frame across the time windows. Frames that persisted and moved together across consecutive time windows were marked and listed for purposes of retaining them in later

analysis. This early stage of the analysis does not require consideration of the substantive content of frames loading on each dimension of argument, but rather simply whether individual frame types persisted systematically over time. Other frames that load on the same dimension of argument over time are also identified. Separate frames that load on a single factor across time windows constitute a dimension of argument; thus, if “women do not have a right to abortion” and “abortion should not be federally funded” have shared variation across consecutive time windows, these frame types are identified as a persistent dimension of argument.

Once each set of evolutionary frames is established, the content of each argument dimension is then carefully considered and given an appropriate label by the researchers. We considered the substantive meaning of each argument dimension and of the set of frames that made up the dimension, and formulated names for each persistent argument dimension. For example, the abortion data featured a persistent dimension that included the frames “personally oppose abortion but support the right to one,” “abortion is a moral issue,” and “abortion should be federally funded.” This evolutionary frame was named “An Immoral Right” because of its component parts’ condemnation of the practice of abortion together with support for women’s abortion rights.

Finally, we calculated the degree to which each argument dimension was salient in news coverage. The factor loadings for each persistent frame were multiplied by the raw frame counts in each five-year window; the resulting numbers were added within each argument dimension to glean the salience of argument types over time. Although the raw counts of frames across time can be thought of as measures of salience, multiplying the counts by the factor loadings produces weighted scores that include only the average amount of variance accounted for by each latent evolutionary frame and discarding that variance that is attributable to other sources, such as random variation.<sup>81</sup>

After we identified the sets of related frames (“frame sets”) that emerged from the EFA, we had measures of three characteristics of each evolutionary frame. The salience of the frame is represented by how often frames within a particular frame set appear in a given year. The persistence of the frame is the number of rolling time windows in which the frame set appears. The resonance of the frame is the number of specific frames that make up the frame set. Here, we use the measure of salience. That is, we measure how often frames within one evolutionary frame set appear in news coverage in a given year. However, we discuss matters related to persistence and resonance in our “Discussion” section.

### *EFA of Partisan and Journalist-Sourced Frames: Initial Results*

Figures 3 and 4 report the results of EFAs performed on our content analysis of abortion. For frames sourced by Democrats, four separate evolutionary frames emerged from 1975–2008, none of which lasted for more than four years. Even though the Democratic Party’s official position on abortion has been the more popular position in terms of public opinion for decades, the Democrats offer remarkably few evolutionary frames. The most prominent evolutionary frame the Democrats provide, “An Immoral Right,” reveals the delicate nature of the issue as it both endorses the Democratic

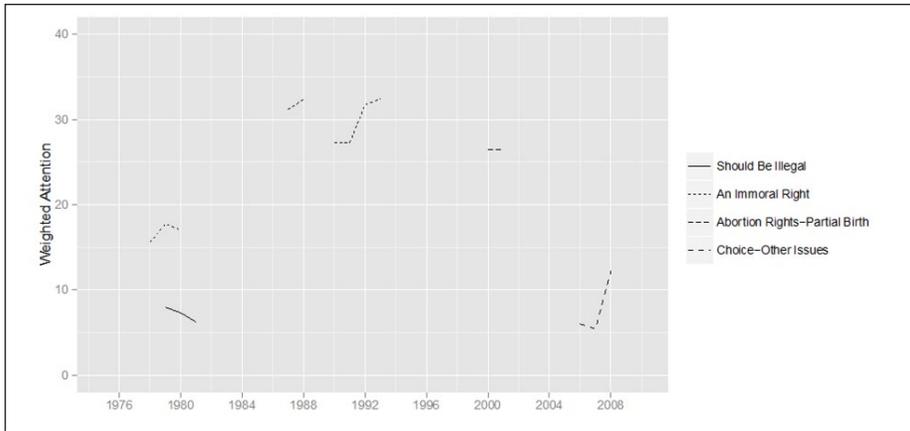


Figure 3. Democratic Party evolutionary frames on abortion, 1975–2008.

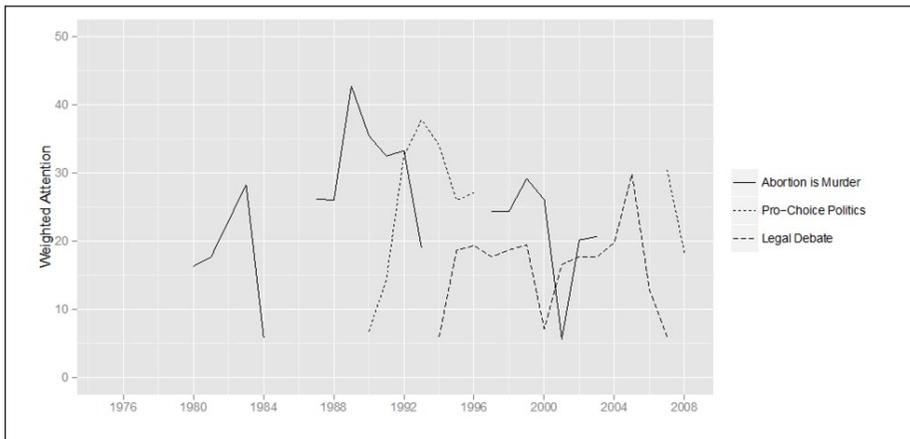


Figure 4. Republican Party evolutionary frames on abortion, 1975–2008.

Party’s official policy position favoring women’s right to legal abortion while acknowledging the difficult moral questions often connected to the issue.

Recalling Figure 1’s demonstration that once the Democrats began offering a unified voice with respect to their policy pronouncements on abortion, their frames were remarkably consistent over time, it is especially noteworthy that the evolutionary frames that emerged from news coverage of their positions did not last for very long. Figure 3 also illustrates the high degree of ambivalence of the Democratic Party regarding abortion during the 1970s, as evidenced by the two evolutionary frames that Democrats provided on the abortion issue during that period, “An Immoral Right” and “Abortion Should Be Illegal.” However, both of these frames emerged before the

Democratic Party had solidified itself as the party of “choice” and did not persist past the early 1990s. By 2006, the Democrats’ framing the abortion issue in *Newsweek* began to find a clearer voice by connecting frames related to choice to frames about other sociocultural political issues. In addition, the evolutionary frame connecting right to choose arguments to specific frames used for other sociocultural political issues was more resonant. That is, it comprised more individual frames sourced by Democrats.

Figure 4 reports all of the evolutionary frames sourced by Republicans on abortion from 1976–2008. Consistent with the conventional wisdom that Republicans are generally more homogeneous than Democrats, Republicans offered more evolutionary frames, and these evolutionary frames were longer lasting than the Democratic Party’s evolutionary frames. The most prominent Republican evolutionary frames are much more symbolically oriented as compared with Democrats’ evolutionary frames on abortion, which are more policy-oriented. The evolutionary frame “Abortion Is Murder” was persistent, stretching over the decades. It was also resonant, containing frames such as “abortion is murder,” “the fetus is a person,” “abortion is a hot-button moral issue,” and “abortion connects to other cultural issues.” The evolutionary frame “Pro-choice Politics” contains frames that symbolically attack the pro-choice perspective as a general affront to proper morality. Consistent with Ellis and Stimson’s<sup>82</sup> demonstration that Americans are symbolically conservative but operationally liberal, Democrats’ specific frames focus more on specific policies and Republicans’ frames focus more on a symbolically conservative cultural politics.

The one deviation from this general pattern of policy-related evolutionary frames from Democrats and symbolically conservative evolutionary frames from Republicans is the Republican-sourced “Legal Debate” evolutionary frame. This frame begins in the late 1990s, animated by frames about politics (abortion is a moral hot-button issue) and legal questions (abortion should be illegal; is there a right to abortion?).

Figure 5 presents the evolutionary frames that emerged when journalists did not attribute the frames to a source. Three evolutionary frames emerged from our coding of journalists’ issue frames: “Abortion as a Hot-Button Issue,” “Abortion as a Cultural & Political Touchstone,” and “Supreme Court Influences Abortion.” The Supreme Court frame was the most salient of the three frames while the other two lasted longer. As research chronicling both indexing and horserace coverage imply, when journalists frame issues on their own, they focus on a narrow range of debate between political elites and the political/electoral consequences of issues.

The “Abortion as a Hot-Button Issue” frame includes frames dealing with the controversial nature of abortion, and how abortion connects to other issues. The “Abortion as a Cultural & Political Touchstone” evolutionary frame comprises frames connecting abortion to other issues. The last evolutionary frame largely deals with frames about the importance of Supreme Court membership on abortion policy and the cultural nature of the issue.

Turning our attention to taxes, Figure 6 presents the evolutionary frames stemming from how Democrats discussed tax issues from 1975–2008. Six frames emerged, and five of them—“Targeted Cuts,” “Need to Raise Taxes,” “Targeted Hikes and Cuts,” “Behavioral Hikes and Cuts,” and “Behavioral Cuts”—were clusters of specific

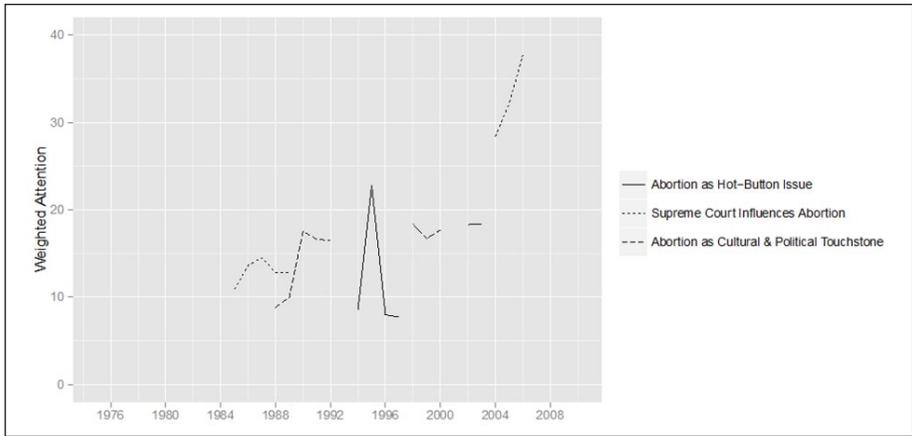


Figure 5. News media evolutionary frames on abortion, 1975–2008.

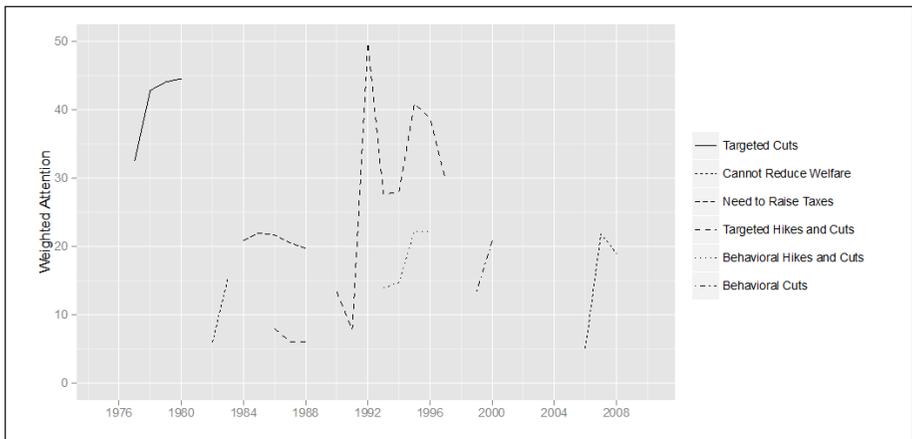
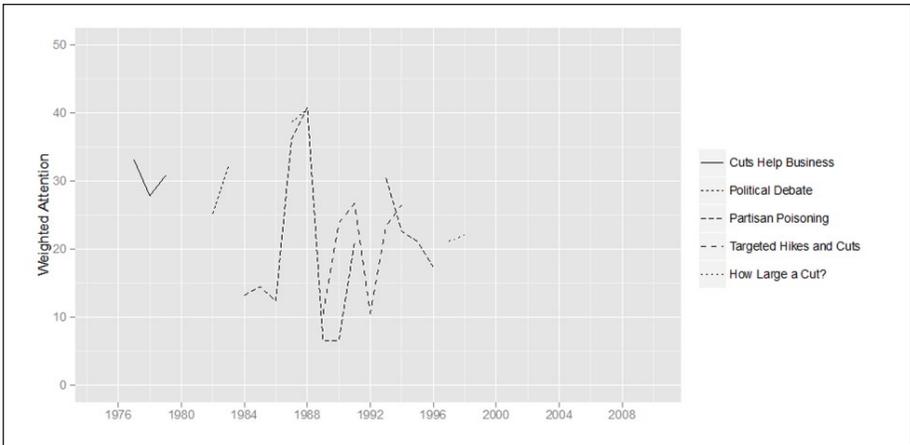


Figure 6. Democratic Party evolutionary frames on taxes, 1975–2008.

frames making specific, operationally liberal policy suggestions.<sup>83</sup> The “Cannot Reduce Welfare” evolutionary frame was more symbolic and less policy-specific as it included frames such as “make it fair,” “welfare helps the poor,” “tax cuts hurt the poor,” and “raise taxes for the poor.”

Figure 7 reveals the evolutionary frames Republicans used on tax issues. Three of the five frames that emerged—“Political Debate,” “Partisan Poisoning,” and “How Large a Cut?”—largely dealt with symbolic frames promoting individual freedom, the partisan nature of opposition to tax cuts, and the broad equality that would emerge from a fair system in which taxes were low. The “Political Debate” and “Partisan Poisoning” frames were the most persistent Republican-sourced frames in the taxes



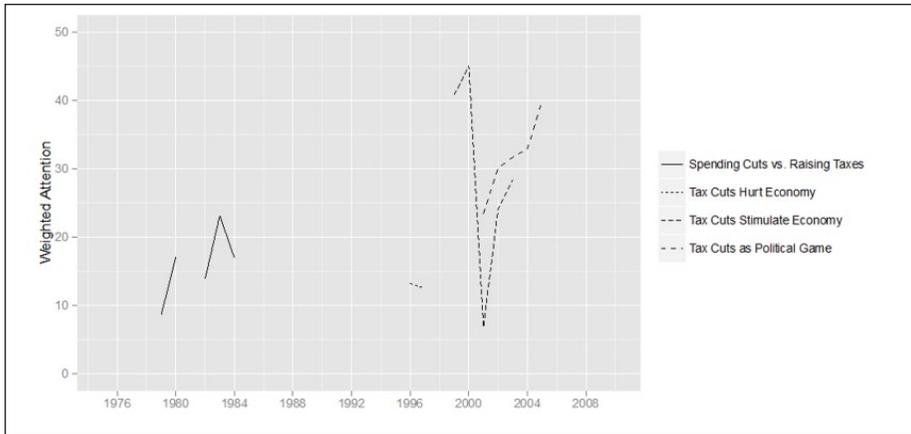
**Figure 7.** Republican party evolutionary frames on taxes, 1975–2008.

time series. Two evolutionary frames—“Cuts Help Business” and “Targeted Hikes and Cuts”—comprised more operationally conservative frames advocating specific tax cuts that Republicans argued would provide specific, positive policy outcomes. These tax frames were quite salient as compared with the other GOP frames, but they were also less persistent and resonant.

Four evolutionary frames emerged from frames that journalists reported without attributing the frames to a source (see Figure 8). As was the case with abortion, some sets of specific, unsourced frames were so commonly used by reporters that they consistently revealed themselves across periods of multiple years. The emergence of these frames speaks to the importance of newsgathering routines, journalists’ perceptions about politics, and indexing. Two frame sets were largely symbolic. “Spending Cuts vs. Raising Taxes” contained frames such as “liberals like high taxes,” “conservatives like low taxes,” and “tax cuts are popular” while “Tax Cuts as Political Game” was made up of frames related to political strategies such as “tax increases punish Southern Democrats,” “tax issue helps Democrats,” and “tax cuts help Republicans.” The other three frames contained frames dealing with specific policies. One frame, “Tax Cuts Hurt Economy” largely endorsed liberal policy preferences. Another, “Tax Cuts Stimulate Economy” largely endorsed conservative policy preferences. This evolutionary frame lasted far longer than the frames arguing that tax cuts hurt the economy. The “Tax Cuts as a Political Game” frame began after President George W. Bush’s tax cut was introduced and increased in salience after it was signed into law. This factor was comprised of frames such as “tax cuts are coming,” “spending cuts are not real cuts,” and “politicians are only cutting taxes for political gain.”

### *Public Opinion Data*

Previous uses of EFA have not generally connected evolutionary frames with actual public opinion data, but rather have used the method to illuminate clusters of frames



**Figure 8.** News media evolutionary frames on taxes, 1975–2008.

in an exploratory manner.<sup>84</sup> We advance the analytical use of EFA by merging our evolutionary frame data (how salient a frame was in a particular year—ranging from 0 to 50) with public opinion data present in cross-sectional analyses conducted by the ANES from 1976 to 2008. To this end, we used the cumulative time series file of the ANES in each presidential and midterm election since 1976, with the exception of 2006, when ANES did not field a midterm survey.

The public opinion data include the requisite demographic variables, such as age, gender (1 = *female*), race, income, and education, to which we also added whether respondents resided in the South, seven-point ideology (*extremely liberal–extremely conservative*), respondents' level of importance attached to religious beliefs, three-point partisan identification (*Democrat* = 1, *Independent* = 2, *Republican* = 3), and beliefs on abortion and government spending on social services. For these latter two variables, used as dependent variables in several of the analyses, the following questions were asked. For abortion preferences (1980–onward), respondents were asked, “By law, when should abortion be allowed?” For spending preferences (1982–onward), respondents were asked,

Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Our use of level of education bears special mention given that we use it as a proxy for news reception in our models. We do this because Zaller has persuasively reasoned that the media must be a central entity from which people learn about politics and that “education is closer to being a measure of reception than is self-reported media use.”<sup>85</sup> Other research shows that education and political knowledge operate as better predictors of

news story recall than media use measures.<sup>86</sup> For the years we can incorporate media use variables as controls, our central findings do not change. The media use variables rarely approach and/or reach conventional levels of significance and they do not do so in a patterned way. Zaller furthermore showed that political knowledge is an even better measure of news reception, but the ANES lacks a consistent set of questions across the time series we wish to analyze for us to use political knowledge in this way.

The public opinion data were merged with the evolutionary frames derived from the EFA analysis using a one-to-many merge. We avoided aggregating the public opinion data down to the year to account both for respondents' individual-level demographic and political characteristics and for purposes of treating the media environment as an exogenous, systemic variable in each analysis. Certainly, not all individuals would have encountered each evolutionary frame, but the frames provide a valid measure of the condition of the media environment in that time, so it is important to account for their role in influencing public opinion on these issues.

## **Analysis and Results**

Although we initially assumed that including lags of the evolutionary frames and consistency in party messages in our models would be theoretically useful, for purposes of more thoroughly modeling the media environment, we have two reasons for not including in our models the lags of the framing variables. First, because the time interval of our data is two years, the lags would cover a time range that likely overstates the persistence of information in Americans' news media environment. Most Americans are unlikely to recognize strategic framing attempts from the previous two years. Future work that examines the life cycle of frames could be done using smaller time periods (i.e., weeks, months, fiscal quarters) that could be analyzed in their own right and not in the context of trying to explain outcomes in public opinion. In other words, work that does not seek to explain public opinion does not need to be tied to a large, cumbersome dataset such as the ANES and could treat time more formally in analyses.

Second, because many of our evolutionary frames occupy three- to four-year rolling windows at the longest, many of the observations for each evolutionary frame in a particular year have zero observations. From a statistical standpoint, this introduces too much collinearity into the models and raises important questions about the lagged models' stability in the computation of standard errors. As such, we chose to omit the inclusion of lags but believe that the models as specified offer a representative picture of the likely media environment of most Americans during each election cycle. We chose not to implement the ordered probit models used in our analyses as time series because we model ANES respondents' attitudes individually; as a result, except in extremely rare cases where an individual may have been surveyed in multiple years of the cross-sectional study (and not the ANES panels that persist over some four-year periods), responses are very likely independent. Were we to aggregate responses within years, a time series model would be most appropriate for computation of error variances; however, we believe for our data the most computationally efficient

method—and the method least likely to overstate any empirical findings—is the computation of pooled time series ordered probit. Ordered probit regression is used when the dependent variable is categorical, rather than continuous, and has more than two categories. For example, party identification is measured along a seven-point scale where 1 = *strong Democrat* and 7 = *strong Republican*. Each value along the scale is assumed to be the same distance from the values immediately before and after it (i.e., the distance between 5 (*Republican leaner*) and 6 (*Republican*) is the same as the distance from 6 to 7 (*strong Republican*)).

### *The Effects of Partisan Issue Framing on Abortion and Spending Attitudes*

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that the rate at which partisan elites consistently frame abortion and taxes varies considerably over time. Do variations in the consistency of these frames affect individuals' attitudes on the issues? Recalling H1, we argue that consistent partisan framing should affect individual attitudes on each issue—specifically, as the consistency with which a group of co-partisan elites frame an issue increases, individual attitudes should be more likely to move in the ideological direction advocated by the increasingly consistent frames. Moreover, we predicted that the effect of consistent partisan framing would be greater on spending attitudes than abortion attitudes, given the general stability of cultural issue preferences among individuals as compared with economic preferences (H1a).

Table 1 reports the results of two ordered probit regressions in which abortion attitudes and spending attitudes are the dependent variables. Recall that the same abortion question was asked in the ANES from 1980–2008, so the first four years of our content analysis are not included in these results. As noted above, higher self-reports on the four-point abortion attitude scale and seven-point spending attitudes scale were associated with more liberal opinions on those issues. The left-hand column of results in Table 1 reveals that as Democrats offered in political news coverage increasingly consistent pro-choice issue frames on abortion, individual Americans' attitudes became more liberal. The Republican Match variable was not statistically different from zero. While we had hypothesized that consistent frames from Republicans would move abortion preferences in a conservative direction, our analysis of abortion attitudes is consistent with Ellis and Stimson's<sup>87</sup> account of an American public that is symbolically conservative but operationally liberal. It is also consistent with public opinion evidence of aggregate stability in preferences on abortion over several decades coupled with changes in how Democrats in the electorate began exhibiting pro-choice positions.<sup>88</sup>

Several variables that we included as controls were also significantly associated with abortion attitudes. Older Americans, women, the more educated, and the wealthier were all more likely to favor expanded rights for women to have an abortion. In contrast, ideological conservatives and those for whom religion played an important role in everyday decision making were more likely to favor restricted-to-no-access to legal abortions in the United States. But even when controlling for a host of demographic factors, as well

**Table 1.** The Effect of Party Matching on Issue Attitudes.

	Abortion attitudes	Spending attitudes
% Dem. Match	0.491** (0.181)	-0.813** (0.101)
% Rep. Match	0.036 (0.120)	1.000** (0.097)
Number of Stories	0.001 (0.0003)	-0.001 (0.0003)
Ideology	-0.210** (0.008)	-0.237** (0.008)
Age	0.002* (0.001)	-0.004** (0.001)
Sex	0.177** (0.021)	0.218** (0.020)
Education	0.125** (0.007)	-0.052** (0.007)
Income	0.046** (0.008)	-0.068** (0.008)
Religiosity	-0.375** (0.010)	0.009 (0.009)
South	-0.042 (0.022)	-0.038 (0.022)
White	0.012 (0.026)	-0.383** (0.025)
Cut 1	-1.900	-3.834
Cut 2	-0.721	-3.223
Cut 3	-0.196	-2.631
Cut 4		-1.792
Cut 5		-1.174
Cut 6		-0.625
$\chi^2$	3,433.54	2,106.44
Observations	12,934	11,276

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

as self-reported ideology and religiosity, we show evidence that the news reporting of Democrats' framing of abortion independently influenced abortion attitudes.

The right-hand column of Table 1 reveals the results of our ordered probit regression analysis of spending attitudes from 1982–2008. Once again, when Democratic elites frame tax issues with increasing uniformity, individuals were systematically more likely to adopt more liberal government spending preferences. Unlike our results on abortion, our analysis also reveals that as Republicans framed taxes with reliably conservatively oriented issue frames, individuals were more likely to adopt conservative positions on government spending. This finding is consistent with our first hypotheses.

As was the case with our model predicting abortion attitudes, several control variables were associated with spending attitudes. Conservative ideology, age, being White, more education, and higher income were all systematically associated with more conservative spending preferences, while women were more likely than men to prefer more liberal government spending practices.

Our analyses examining the effects of internally consistent frames within a political party reveal that steady, reliable messages in the actual news media environment can affect individual preferences in the direction that the party desires. The effects were larger on the taxing and spending issue than the abortion issue, which we argue is due to the nature of sociocultural issue attitudes as compared with economic attitudes.<sup>89</sup>

These results are consistent with laboratory demonstrations about how competing frames operate in a partisan, polarized environment.<sup>90</sup> Previous scholarship has shown that consistent, partisan messages over time are associated with individuals believing that political parties differ in important ways.<sup>91</sup> The results presented here move beyond that work by revealing that individual issue *preferences* have actual consequences that stem from how partisan political leaders frame issues. Even so, what can be learned from examining the consistency with which elites frame issues is limited. After all, the choice of frames that Democrats and Republicans offer is rooted in the belief that the specific arguments—not merely the dependability of their arguments over time—are the crucial factor in successfully shaping individual attitudes. Moreover, specific, consistent attempts to strategically frame issues may be much more nuanced than just overall consistency. Thus, our investigation of when framing matters now turns to exploring whether the salience of evolutionary frames emerging from partisan elites, as well as journalists, affects opinions about abortion and government spending.

Table 2 presents the results of an ordered probit regression in which the dependent variable is one's preference for abortion policy in the United States and the major independent variables are the evolutionary frames used by Republican and Democratic elites from 1980–2008. Recall that H2 predicted that operationally liberal frames from Democrats would foster more liberal issue preferences; H2a predicted that symbolically liberal frames would not affect preferences. H3 predicted that symbolically conservative frames sourced by Republicans would correlate with more conservative issue preferences; H3a hypothesized that conservative policy frames coming from Republicans would have no effect on individual attitudes. The model that we estimated in Table 2 contains the same control variables as our abortion model in Table 1. The control variables in Table 2 behaved in precisely the same way as they did in Table 1. In fact, the coefficients are almost identical to the ones reported in Table 1.

The Democrats did not frame issues in such a way as to cause many evolutionary frames about abortion to emerge for very long periods of time. The three frames that advocated specific policy positions, “Should Be Illegal,” “An Immoral Right,” and “Rights-Partial Birth,” did not affect preferences on abortion. Contrary to H2a, Table 2 reveals that as Democratic elites' efforts to tie abortion to other cultural issues became more salient in news coverage, they were associated with the expression of more conservative attitudes on abortion. That is, rather than simply falling flat, in the way their policy-related appeals did, Democrats' symbolic appeals on abortion had the opposite of their intended effect. This provides individual-level evidence in line with previous demonstrations that public opinion is symbolically conservative.<sup>92</sup> People tend to respond to symbolic appeals by being more likely to express conservative issue attitudes. Moreover, policy appeals are less successful at shaping attitudes on cultural issues such as abortion.

A somewhat similar pattern emerged among Republicans. As hypothesized, the “Pro-choice Politics” symbolic frame attacking the moral standing of the pro-choice perspective was associated with more conservative abortion attitudes. The Republican-sourced symbolic evolutionary frame served the Republican Party's goals with respect

**Table 2.** The Effect of Partisan Framing on Abortion Attitudes.

	Abortion attitudes
Should Be Illegal (D)	0.002 (0.006)
An Immoral Right (D)	-0.003 (0.002)
Rights-Partial Birth (D)	-0.0002 (0.002)
Choice-Other Issues (D)	-0.012** (0.004)
Abortion Is Murder (R)	0.004* (0.002)
Pro-choice Politics (R)	-0.005** (0.001)
Legal Debate (R)	-0.003 (0.002)
Number of Stories	-0.001 (0.001)
Ideology	-0.211*** (0.008)
Age	0.001* (0.001)
Sex	0.179** (0.021)
Education	0.124** (0.007)
Income	0.045** (0.008)
Religiosity	-0.376** (0.010)
South	-0.043 (0.023)
White	0.010 (0.026)
Cut 1	-2.004
Cut 2	-0.824
Cut 3	-0.299
$\chi^2$	3,465.09
Observations	12,934

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. D = Democrat, R = Republican.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

to encouraging more conservative individual attitudes on abortion. The policy-oriented evolutionary frame sourced by Republicans—as was the case with the symbolic evolutionary frame Democrats used—had an effect that directly contradicted the party’s goals. That is, counter to our hypothesis that policy-oriented frames about abortion would not move the needle with respect to individual opinion, the “Abortion Is Murder” frame that consisted of GOP frames advocating an end to legal abortion was significantly related to more liberal abortion attitudes.

To test the robustness of our results across issues, we turn to an analysis of partisan-sourced evolutionary frames’ influence on spending preferences. The control variables in the tax model in Table 3 behave just as they did in Table 1. Recalling Figure 3, the Democrats had four policy-oriented evolutionary frames—“Need to Raise Taxes,” “Targeted Hikes and Cuts,” “Behavioral Hikes and Cuts,” and “Behavioral Cuts”—and one symbolic evolutionary frame, “Cannot Reduce Welfare.” As hypothesized, all four policy-oriented evolutionary frames sourced by Democrats were significantly related to individual preferences for more liberal government spending. As those frame sets were increasingly present in news coverage, attitudes on spending were more likely to move to the ideological left.

**Table 3.** The Effect of Partisan Framing on Spending Attitudes.

	Spending attitudes
Cannot Reduce Welfare (D)	-0.029** (0.007)
Need to Raise Taxes (D)	0.145** (0.026)
Targeted Hikes and Cuts (D)	0.065** (0.011)
Behavioral Hikes and Cuts (D)	0.013** (0.003)
Behavioral Cuts (D)	0.020** (0.005)
Cuts Help Business (R)	-0.007 (0.004)
Political Debate (R)	-0.033** (0.006)
Partisan Poisoning (R)	-0.064** (0.011)
Targeted Hikes and Cuts (R)	-0.046 (0.08)
How Large a Cut? (R)	-0.031** (0.006)
Number of Stories	0.0001 (0.001)
Ideology	-0.236** (0.008)
Age	-0.005** (0.001)
Sex	0.220** (0.020)
Education	-0.054** (0.007)
Income	-0.067** (0.008)
Religiosity	0.010 (0.009)
South	-0.040 (0.022)
White	-0.371** (0.025)
Cut 1	-4.043
Cut 2	-3.429
Cut 3	-2.834
Cut 4	-1.991
Cut 5	-1.370
Cut 6	-0.818
$\chi^2$	2,211.75
Observations	11,276

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. D = Democrat, R = Republican.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

In contrast, the one Democratic Party-sourced evolutionary frame that contained primarily symbolic frames about the importance of the welfare state was significantly related to more conservative individual preferences on spending. This was contrary to our hypothesis that any symbolically oriented evolutionary frames sourced by Democrats would not affect public opinion but it was consistent with our findings on abortion. That is, partisan frames that do not fit into symbolically conservative/operationally liberal formulation of public opinion in the United States can backfire.

Figure 4 revealed that Republican framing of tax issues from 1976–2008 resulted in the emergence of five evolutionary frames, three of which were largely symbolic and two of which were more policy-oriented. As hypothesized, the three symbolic-oriented frames had a statistically significant relationship with the endorsement of

**Table 4.** The Effect of Journalists' Frames on Abortion Attitudes.

	Abortion attitudes
Abortion as Hot-Button Issue	0.011** (0.004)
Supreme Court Influences Abortion	-0.003 (0.002)
Abortion as Cultural & Political Touchstone	-0.005** (0.002)
Number of Stories	0.0001 (0.001)
Ideology	-0.211** (0.008)
Age	0.001* (0.0006)
Sex	0.178** (0.021)
Education	0.125** (0.007)
Income	0.045** (0.008)
Religiosity	-0.375** (0.010)
South	-0.045* (0.022)
White	0.016 (0.026)
Cut 1	-1.989
Cut 2	-0.810
Cut 3	-0.285
$\chi^2$	3,448.27
Observations	12,934

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

more conservative opinions on the appropriate level of government spending in the United States. Increases in the salience of GOP-sourced frames describing the central conflict over taxes as related to “Political Debate,” “Partisan Poisoning” and “How Large a Cut?” advantaged Republicans in the court of public opinion. The policy-specific frames from Republicans did not significantly affect attitudes on spending issues, consistent with our original expectations.

Now that we have demonstrated how partisan-sourced frame sets that are largely symbolic or policy-oriented can affect attitudes across a variety of issues, we turn our attention to the growing number of frames that are not accompanied by an external source but represent the journalists' frames. Weaver and Wilnat<sup>93</sup> have shown that journalists express an increasing desire to report longer, more analytical stories. This might result in journalists offering more of their own interpretations. Tables 4 and 5 provide the first-ever reported evidence that journalists' framing of political issues can have independent effects on political attitudes.

### *Journalists' Frames Influence on Abortion and Spending Attitudes*

We showed in Figure 5 that three evolutionary factors emerged from the frames journalists printed without attributing them to a source. One frame was symbolic (“Abortion as Cultural & Political Touchstone”), one was largely policy-oriented (“Abortion as Hot-Button Issue”), and one was a mixture of symbolic and game frames about how the makeup of the Supreme Court affected abortion policy. As was the case with partisan-sourced

**Table 5.** The Effect of Journalists' Frames on Spending Attitudes.

	Spending attitudes
Spending Cuts vs. Raising Taxes	-0.009** (0.002)
Tax Cuts as Political Game	-0.013** (0.002)
Tax Cuts Stimulate Economy	0.002 (0.001)
Tax Cuts Hurt Economy	0.006** (0.001)
Number of Stories	0.001 (0.0004)
Ideology	-0.238** (0.008)
Age	-0.005** (0.001)
Sex	0.220** (0.020)
Education	-0.057** (0.007)
Income	-0.066** (0.008)
Religiosity	0.010 (0.009)
South	-0.036 (0.022)
White	-0.386** (0.025)
Cut 1	-3.254
Cut 2	-2.644
Cut 3	-2.053
Cut 4	-1.216
Cut 5	-0.599
Cut 6	-0.052
$\chi^2$	2,060.46
Observations	11,276

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

frames, increases in the salience of the symbolically oriented evolutionary frame was significantly related to more conservative abortion attitudes while the policy frame set was related to more liberal attitudes. The Supreme Court frame did not affect the dependent variable. Once again, the control variables performed exactly as they did in the abortion model in Table 1.

The four evolutionary frames sourced by journalists shown in Figure 6 are the major independent variables of interest in Table 5, which presents an ordered probit regression analysis of factors that influence individual spending attitudes. The "Tax Cuts as a Political Game" frame set significantly predicted more conservative attitudes on spending as hypothesized. The symbolic debate between cutting spending and raising taxes was also significantly associated with broad opposition to increasing government spending. The frame set populated by arguments that "Tax Cuts Hurt the Economy" predicted more liberal individual opinions on spending issues. The control variables performed just as they did in the spending analysis in Table 1. Thus, H6 and H7 were supported in our analysis.

In general, consistent partisan framing of abortion and taxes had modest effects on attitudes while Democratic-sourced frames dealing with policy and Republican-sourced frames dealing with conservative symbolism influenced attitudes on abortion

**Table 6.** The Effect of Partisan Matching on Party Identification.

	Party identification (abortion)	Party identification (taxes)
% Dem. Match	-4.501** (0.185)	-2.651** (0.096)
% Rep. Match	2.146** (0.127)	1.257** (0.106)
Number of Stories	-0.001** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.0003)
Ideology	0.370** (0.008)	0.369** (0.008)
Age	-0.002** (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Sex	-0.090** (0.021)	-0.084** (0.021)
Education	0.068** (0.007)	0.070** (0.007)
Income	0.032** (0.008)	0.033** (0.008)
Religiosity	0.025** (0.007)	0.051** (0.007)
South	0.028 (0.023)	0.041 (0.023)
White	0.345** (0.026)	0.316** (0.025)
Cut 1	1.658	1.017
Cut 2	1.889	1.246
$\chi^2$	3,543.01**	3,298.39**
Observations	15,724	15,724

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

and taxes in the direction favored by the party. In some cases—just with the Democrats, that is—frames appealing to more symbolically liberal ideas led to a boomerang effect that resulted in a greater likelihood of individuals' adopting more ideologically conservative opinions on abortion and taxes.

### *Partisan and Journalistic Issue Framing's Effects on Party Identification*

As compared with the consistency of partisan-sourced frames, the actual content of frames—and whether the content was largely symbolic or largely policy-related—had greater effects on people's opinions about abortion and government spending in the United States. Nonetheless, recall that we have hypothesized that consistency will matter more than content when it comes to long-term trends in party identification.

Table 6 reports the results of two ordered probit regressions with party identification as the dependent variable in both models. The key independent variables in the model in the left-hand column are Democratic Match and Republican Match on abortion. We also control for age, sex, education, income, religiosity, living in the South, and being White. As we hypothesized and all else equal, as Democrats engage in higher levels of consistency when framing the abortion issue, people are more likely to identify as Democrats while as Republicans frame abortion issues with increasing uniformity, people are more likely to identify as Republicans.

In the right-hand column of Table 6, the Republican Match and Democratic Match variables are measures of the consistency with which partisan elites in each party framed tax issues over time. Once again, increasing clarity from Democratic politicians

about their party's positions on tax issues are significantly associated with identification with their party among members of the public while increased consistency in tax framing from Republicans is significantly related to individuals being more likely to identify as Republicans. In both models, and consistent with decades of prior research, a conservative ideology, education, income, religiosity, and White ethnicity are all positively associated with identifying as a Republican while age, the number of stories reported on abortion, and being female were associated with being a Democrat.

Regardless of the issue—although it is important to remember that these two issues are among the centrally defining issues of the past century with respect to party issue cleavages in the United States<sup>94</sup>—when elites from a party frame issues in consistent ways, they draw people toward their party, controlling for the actions of the other party and a host of demographic factors. To interpret these results, one should keep in mind that we do not present evidence of party *change* but party *identification*. Drawing on the theory we have developed, we would expect people who, through news coverage, come to realize that they have a different view than their party regarding an issue that is very important to them to be more likely to change their party; conversely, those who make the same realization about an issue that is not important to them should be more likely to change their preference. To test these claims, however, we need panel data that we do not have.

Table 7 empirically tests the influence of partisan-sourced evolutionary frames about abortion on party identification. Again, we hypothesized that those evolutionary frames will not systematically affect party identification. In the main, we found the null effects we expected for our major independent variables. Five of the six evolutionary frames in our model had no significant effect on party identification. The one that did, the Democratic-sourced “Should Be Illegal,” is the frame set that lasted for the least amount of time of any of the frame sets that emerged from the EFA (see Figure 3). The control variables operated in the exact same manner as the control variables did in Table 6 with the exception of the “Number of Stories” and income variables, which were not significant in Table 6.

Table 8 reports the results of an ordered probit regression with party identification as the dependent variable and the evolutionary frames about taxes that emerged from our EFAs shown in Figures 6 and 7. As hypothesized, none of the eleven evolutionary frames (six Democratic-sourced, five Republican-sourced) affected party identification in the American electorate. The control variables performed just as the controls in Table 7 did. The rise and salience of specific frame sets from either the Republican or Democratic Parties on both taxes and abortion were not related to individual party identification from 1980–2008.

Turning our attention from frame sets accompanied by a partisan source to frame sets that came from journalists themselves, Table 9 reports the results of an ordered probit regression analysis in which party identification was the dependent variable and the major independent variables were the evolutionary frames that emerged from journalists' frames from 1980–2008. Surprisingly, both “Abortion as a Hot-Button Issue” and “Supreme Court Influences Abortion” were statistically significant predictors of Democratic Party identification among ANES respondents while “Abortion as a

**Table 7.** The Effect of Partisan Abortion Frames on Party Identification.

	Party ID (3 point)
Should Be Illegal (D)	-0.027** (0.006)
An Immoral Right (D)	0.003 (0.002)
Rights-Partial Birth (D)	0.002 (0.002)
Abortion Is Murder (R)	0.630 (11.179)
Pro-choice Politics (R)	-0.001 (0.001)
Legal Debate (R)	-0.001 (0.002)
Number of Stories	-0.0002 (0.001)
Ideology	0.451** (0.009)
Age	-0.004** (0.001)
Sex	-0.097** (0.024)
Education	0.065** (0.008)
Income	0.047** (0.009)
Religiosity	0.012 (0.011)
South	-0.031 (0.065)
White	0.612** (0.031)
Cut 1	2.394
Cut 2	2.655
$\chi^2$	5,875.48**
Observations	14,201

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. D = Democrat, R = Republican.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Political & Cultural Touchstone” predicted Republican identification. Journalist-source frames—frames presented without partisan “uniforms”—were significantly associated with party identification. Once again, the control variables operate in substantially similar ways as they did in the other models in which party identification was the dependent variable.

Similarly surprising results emerged in Table 10, which reports the results of an ordered probit regression predicting party identification using journalistic evolutionary frames dealing with tax issues. The frame sets “Spending Cuts vs. Tax Increases” and “Tax Cuts Hurt Economy” were both statistically significant predictors of Democratic Party identification while “Tax Cuts as a Political Game” positively and significantly predicted GOP identification. The operationally conservative set of frames “Tax Cuts Stimulate Economy” was not significant.

In short, as we predicted, partisan-sourced evolutionary frames did not predict party identification; but journalist-sourced evolutionary frames generally were associated with party identification, contrary to our expectations. The findings related to partisan-sourced frames were largely as predicted while our results for journalist-sourced frames were surprising. As for whether the journalists’ frames were associated with Democratic Party or Republican Party identification, the results in Tables 9 and 10 suggest once again that policy-oriented frames favor the Democrats and symbolic frames favor the Republicans.

**Table 8.** The Effect of Partisan Spending Frames on Partisan Identification.

	Party ID (3 point)
Targeted Cuts (D)	0.048 (0.941)
Cannot Reduce Welfare (D)	0.686 (12.306)
Need to Raise Taxes (D)	-0.795 (14.861)
Targeted Hikes and Cuts (D)	-0.374 (6.937)
Behavioral Hikes and Cuts (D)	-0.094 (1.759)
Behavioral Cuts (D)	0.194 (3.555)
Cuts Help Business (R)	0.356 (0.662)
Political Debate (R)	0.198 (3.695)
Partisan Poisoning (R)	0.372 (6.890)
Targeted Hikes and Cuts (R)	0.328 (6.067)
How Large a Cut? (R)	0.236 (4.393)
Number of Stories	0.0001 (0.0001)
Ideology	0.451** (0.009)
Age	-0.004** (0.001)
Sex	-0.097** (0.024)
Education	0.064** (0.008)
Income	0.047** (0.009)
Religiosity	0.012 (0.011)
South	-0.031 (0.026)
White	0.614** (0.031)
Cut 1	7.710
Cut 2	7.971
$\chi^2$	5,879.41**
Observations	14,201

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. D = Democrat, R = Republican.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

This monograph usefully suggests how the structure of democratic debate and the content and sources of issue frames that animate that debate affect party politics in the United States. Our hypotheses emerged from synthesizing theories focusing on news coverage of politics,<sup>95</sup> partisan identification,<sup>96</sup> and framing effects.<sup>97</sup> We believe we have made several significant contributions to the understanding of how politicians and journalists affect public opinion and political partisanship in the United States.

Our first major contribution is the specification of how both the consistency of partisan debate and the content of that debate (e.g., framing) move over time. We show how the consistency of overall party messages along with changes in the salience and persistence of specific arguments are associated with changes in opinions and partisanship. Some scholars have examined how frames highlighting particular core values<sup>98</sup> or how the emerging of different frames affected public opinion on matters of support for civil rights and the death penalty,<sup>99</sup> but no study connected multiple years

**Table 9.** The Effect of Journalists' Abortion Frames on Partisanship.

	Party ID (3 point)
Abortion as Hot-Button Issue	-0.094** (0.004)
Supreme Court Influences Abortion	-0.033** (0.002)
Abortion as Cultural & Political Touchstone	0.014** (0.002)
Number of Stories	-0.010** (0.001)
Ideology	0.378** (0.009)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)
Sex	-0.091** (0.022)
Education	0.080** (0.007)
Income	0.032** (0.009)
Religiosity	0.001 (0.010)
South	0.037 (0.024)
White	0.279** (0.027)
Cut 1	0.615
Cut 2	0.840
$\chi^2$	3,322.86**
Observations	14,201

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

of frames and their sources to an analysis of individual attitudes and associations. Specifically, the more consistent parties are at framing issues, the more likely they are to help to foster party identification. We have also shown that consistency in partisan framing can create statistically significant changes in preferences as well—although the substantive effects are greater for the economic issue of taxes than for the sociocultural issue of abortion.

Moreover, the merging of our EFAs of partisan-sourced frames over time with public opinion data from the ANES demonstrate that specific frame sets can affect attitudes, but not partisanship. In particular, frames from Democrats that highlight policy preferences and frames from Republicans that focus on symbolic conservatism tend to be effective in the ways that the sources of the frames intended them to matter.<sup>100</sup> Democratic forays into symbolism and excessive public attention to policy, in our analysis, generally either fell on deaf ears or had a significant effect in the opposite direction of the goals in making those framing attempts.

Our second contribution is to show how public opinion surveys and data from the actual media environment can be used to test the generalizability of theoretical and empirical advances made in experimental laboratories showing how framing affects opinions and partisanship. To be sure, most research examining framing effects uses experiments.<sup>101</sup> Although this has generated important literature about framing effects, most findings are related to a single treatment given to a single sample. That research left open questions about the durability of effects, how the repetition of messages

**Table 10.** The Effect of Journalists' Tax Frames on Partisanship.

	Party ID (3 point)
Spending Cuts vs. Raising Taxes	-0.049** (0.003)
Tax Cuts Hurt Economy	-0.029** (0.003)
Tax Cuts Stimulate Economy	-0.004 (0.011)
Tax Cuts as Political Game	0.022** (0.002)
Number of Stories	0.008** (0.0004)
Ideology	0.370** (0.008)
Age	-0.002** (0.001)
Sex	-0.078** (0.022)
Education	0.074** (0.007)
Income	0.033** (0.009)
Religiosity	0.001 (0.010)
South	0.047* (0.024)
White	0.283** (0.027)
Cut 1	2.217
Cut 2	2.437
$\chi^2$	2,953.27
Observations	14,201

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

affects attitude formation, and how more durable associations that are not typically affected in a single treatment, such as partisanship, might be influenced by media messages and partisan framing strategies over time. Moreover, even those studies that do examine framing outside of the lab and inside the marketplace of ideas tend to do so over comparatively short time periods, focusing on a single election season or specific policy event. Our analysis covers two issues over a four-decade period, chronicling the dynamics of how consistent partisan arguments were and how specific frame sets evolved over time in actual media coverage, comparing the real media content with real changes in American public opinion as measured by the ANES.

The third significant contribution of our proposed monograph is that it covers a much longer time period than most framing studies consider—thirty-three years of political debate across two centrally important issues in American politics. Indeed, by merging our own hand-coded content analysis of every frame and its reported source from every story appearing in *Newsweek* magazine from 1975–2008 about both abortion and tax policy in the United States with public opinion data from the ANES over the same period, we are able to connect how reporters and partisan elected officials framed issues with the impact those frames had on individual opinion and partisanship over seven different presidential administrations in four different decades. Our findings about the importance of the consistency and salience of frames are not bound to a single issue, policy battle, election, or partisan era.

We use the innovative method of EFA<sup>102</sup> to study how frames originating from specific sources affect public attitudes and party identification. EFA allows researchers to examine whether different arguments “move” together with other arguments over time, highlighting which frames are salient (reported the most often) and which persist (last over the course of several years). Doing the analysis in this way allowed for systematic examination of framing effects over time. Previous work has examined how specific frames rise and fall in salience and persistence over time but none have systematically examined how frames sourced specifically by Republicans, Democrats, and journalists have operated in American politics.

Our final contribution relates specifically to shedding new light on how journalists themselves frame issues and not how they attribute sources’ opinions in news coverage. As Wilnat and Weaver’s *The American Journalist in the Digital Age* shows,<sup>103</sup> journalists have increasingly favored longer, more analytic stories. Wilnat and Weaver speculate that, as a result, reporters may offer their own frames to news stories. Our evidence is consistent with their intuition: These changes in how reporters cover politics have surprisingly strong effects on attitudes and partisanship in the United States.

### Limitations

As with any study, ours is not perfect. One of the most important limitations of our study is directly related to one of its central advantages: Because we analyze frames as they existed in the real world and measured their influence on public opinion and partisanship at times those factors were systematically measured, we needed to make some important assumptions that must be taken into account when considering our findings. First, we do not measure consumption of news, for a few reasons. The ANES did not ask a consistent question across the time period that we used to analyze issue attitudes. Even if the questions had been asked more consistently and for a longer period of time, the news consumption questions that the ANES has asked over time have been roundly criticized—the main issue being respondents’ overreporting of media use. Furthermore, as we discussed when describing our control variables, we have theoretically and empirically grounded reasons to use education as a measure of media reception.

Second, while merging our content analysis with the ANES is an innovation of our study not unlike Kellstedt’s<sup>104</sup> merging of *Newsweek* content analyses about race with his measure of racial public mood, we also assume (absent a good measure of news exposure) that the messages we chronicle in Figures 1–8 generally filtered through the public in a consistent way, controlling for the demographic factors we address in our quantitative models. Experimental analyses uncovering framing effects have far more control over who receives what than we do in our analysis. Although our theoretical expectations rise from the wellsprings of framing research that grew out of careful laboratory experiments, we have potentially sacrificed internal validity for generalizability of our analyses. That our findings hold across issues and sensibly extend what has been found in lab settings gives us increased confidence in our results. But the fact remains that our simplifying assumptions are just that, assumptions.

Third, we analyzed news coverage from one source, *Newsweek*. While we did a great deal of work comparing our results from *Newsweek* to a random sample of stories of the *New York Times*, we are still assuming that coverage in *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* mirrored national and local television news coverage of these issues from 1975–2008. While evidence is available that other news organizations often follow the *New York Times*'s lead and that stories in national news magazines such as *Newsweek* often set other media outlets' short-term issue agenda, work is needed to examine how partisan and journalistic issue framing operated on television during the time period we analyze. What is more, future work in political and/or cultural communication that conducts more contemporary analyses of framing's effects on attitudes and partisanship should incorporate new players such as cable news and social media.<sup>105</sup>

### Future Research

We recommend that researchers pay careful attention to who, specifically, is responding to competing partisan frames reported by the news media. Ellis and Stimson<sup>106</sup> show general media effects using a rough measure of the tone of news coverage fostering operationally liberal and symbolically conservative attitudes. They also produce evidence that those with “middle” levels of knowledge are most likely to express “conflicted conservatism” in their attitudes—a reflection of receiving both conservative and liberal frames in news coverage. Whether the consistency of partisan frames or the evolutionary frames that emerge from partisan sources or journalists themselves affect citizens in the “middle,” individuals more generally, or both, is a matter for future inquiry.

Moreover, it may be worthwhile to consider operationally liberal and symbolically conservative frames as analogous to what Marietta<sup>107</sup> has called “sacred rhetoric.” He demonstrates that conservative elites are more likely to use moral “absolutist” frames and conservative individuals are more likely to respond favorably to them while liberal elites tend to favor policy-specific “consequentialist” frames that appeal more to liberals in the electorate. Because people judge partisan-sourced frames according to their own opinions about the problems surrounding issues<sup>108</sup> but tend to favor an argument made by their party when the environment is polarized,<sup>109</sup> work unpacking the contexts in which liberals and conservatives respond to absolutist and consequentialist frames in competitive environments would be a major advance in the study of preference formation and partisanship more generally.

Finally, with respect to the specific frames offered by Republicans, Democrats, and journalists over time, this monograph only empirically analyzed the effects of the salience of the frames. EFA also produces estimates for how persistent a frame set is (how long it lasts) and how resonant it is (how many individual frames make up the evolutionary frame). Baumgartner et al. have shown that these elements of evolutionary frames had a major policy consequence—reversing the rising trend of capital punishment sentences in the United States. Time-series analyses seem likely to find that the persistence of particular frames affects issue attitudes and partisanship. But this remains an empirical question.

Research examining the life cycle of issue frames and more nuanced analyses of framing's role in agenda setting can use our analysis to explore hypotheses testing whether frames are more effective when they are more or less resonant.

## **Conclusion**

Political parties are crucial for the maintenance of democracy.<sup>110</sup> Party competition—measured here in the competing frames Republican and Democrats have offered on abortion and tax issues since 1975—is the “sine qua non of democracy.”<sup>111</sup> By analyzing partisan framing competition over time, we have shed new light on the importance of party competition, framing strategies, and media reporting of politics more generally. Partisan competition matters, but so do frames offered by journalists themselves—frames offered outside the competitive partisan context favored by scholars.

Our results do not paint a uniformly positive or negative picture of democracy in the United States. Adding our analysis to previous accounts of framing effects, we can report with confidence that individuals are responsive to the messages communicated by both partisan elites and journalists themselves, even in competitive political environments. People are not fated to adopt a political position promoted by their party. Nor can people be counted upon to reason through the relative strengths and weaknesses of arguments made by competing political actors and the news media more generally. Parties are “not free to frame issues however they wish,” as Sniderman and Theriault<sup>112</sup> have claimed, but partisan frames are nonetheless powerful under a variety of circumstances.<sup>113</sup> That the same is true for journalists' unsourced frames raises important questions about the nature of news reporting that merits careful consideration in future research.

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## **Supplemental Material**

The codebook is available as an online data supplement at <http://jmo.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

## Notes

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