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Color-Coding Politics: Creating Meaning About "Red States" and "Blue States" in U.S. Newspapers Between 2003 and 2007

Benjamin Gross[1]

Abstract

During the 2000 Presidential election between George H.W. Bush and Al Gore, journalists often used the terms *blue states* and *red states* to describe the political landscape within the United States. This article studies the framing of these terms during the years 2004 through 2007. Using latent and manifest qualitative content analyses, six different news media frames were found in a sample of 337 newspaper articles. Two hypotheses were also tested indicating that framing patterns varied slightly by time period and article types. However, the argument that increased levels of political polarization in the United States have been created by predominantly conflict-oriented coverage may not be true. Instead, these terms became journalistic heuristics that were used to organize how people think about politics in a way that fit with contemporary media practices, and there is no single agreed upon interpretation of these terms within this reporting.

Keywords

politics, media frames, media effects

Introduction

The highly contested U.S. Presidential election between George H. W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000 turned the television network color-coding schemes of red and blue states into a shorthand system for describing political differences throughout the United States. In 2000, blue states represented those states which chose Democratic candidate Al Gore to become the next president, with red states supporting Republican candidate George H. W. Bush. These terms have continued to be used to describe political attitudes at both the individual and geographic levels.[1]

The focus of this article is to investigate how these terms have come to be used by the press since the 2000 election, specifically between 2004 and 2007. Although it is clear that these labels have become part of the political lexicon in many circles, it is unclear whether they define a political reality, a media artifact, or are simply a shortcut to describe political divisiveness. By illustrating how these terms were used over a 4-year period which included a presidential election, it is expected that this article can shed some light on this topic.

Literature Review

If we are to assume that the media are a persuasive force which has a tangible effect on political attitudes, then there is a need to understand how the news media are framing political discourse. How are writers portraying the nature of political divisions, and on what topics are politicians divided? What characterizes "red" voting behaviors and lifestyles in comparison with those on the "blue" end of the spectrum? Is America truly divided, or are the divisions exacerbated by political elites for their own interests? The media are expected to make sense of these aspects of the political and social landscape (Gamson, 1992), though it is an open question as to whether media reporting engages the power struggles that shape news articles, columns, and commentaries.

A useful, and often used, concept for studying news reporting is frames. A frame, as defined by George Lakoff (2004), is a cognitive map which helps viewers to understand how the information is to be recognized, understood, and processed. Frames used within media messages are also seen as a tactic of persuasion, created and maintained largely by politicians and pundits, mediated and disseminated within journalism, to get the voting public to think of any given issue within the language of a particular political campaign (Luntz, 2007). Moreover, people have a tendency to accept only facts which fit within the framework of the discussion,

[1]St. Bonaventure University, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Benjamin Gross, Department of Sociology, St. Bonaventure University, Plassmann Hall, Room A-4, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778, USA.
Email: bgross@sbu.edu

as frames are pervasive and critical to political discussion and thought which structure our ideas and reasoning (Lakoff, 2006; Luntz, 2007). Consequently, frames structure political debate, and those who are able to create and maintain frames built about their own assumptions and worldviews will be able to control political discourse and the ways in which the general public thinks about issues (Lakoff, 2004).

It is important to note that people are not necessarily impotent when dealing with frames, even those that have been found to be highly persuasive. For example, research has shown that media messages are often less persuasive when the receiver questions the credibility of the news source (Petty & Wegener, 1998), or whenever a person already holds strong and certain attitudes about the topic being discussed (Patterson, 1980). Still, frames do matter (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), and political sources often try to provide frames—or framing tools—to reports to shape news stories. Political discourse consists of differing interest groups and competitors trying to generate interest for their ideas in the minds of some component of the general population or special interest groups (Sunstein, 2009). In a democratic and media-saturated society (Thompson, 1995), we expect to find several competing discourses existing simultaneously in the marketplace of ideas. Within this field, media consumers must sift through the overwhelming amount of content, and find views and assumptions that compliment their own value sets (Manjoo, 2008). As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) noted, "On most policy issues, there are competing packages available . . . one can view policy issues as, in part, a symbolic contest over which interpretation will prevail" (p. 2).

Framing should not be confused with public opinion, as the media are multivalent (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). Frames are simply the ways in which reporting is structured, and frames are used and created by a wide variety of opinion leaders, professional politicians, news journalists, and the general American public over time. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) added, every policy issue has a culture, and there is an ongoing discourse that evolves and changes over time. Political discourse, as well as political frames, will change as social circumstances and political values also change (Gitlin, 1980). Media frames, which can include visuals, impact the social construction of meaning about political issues and candidates, and should not be thought of as inflexible but as relatively fluid (Barrett & Barrington, 2005).

The motivation behind this study stems from the work of Morris Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) in their book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. The authors challenge the characterization of an American public that is bitterly divided on major political issues. Among their findings is a claim that the U.S. public consists predominantly of ideological moderates who feel ambivalent on most issues, even on emotionally charged ones such as abortion. While there is a division among competing political party officials, the differences for the vast majority of Americans are considered far from polemic. If anything, Fiorina and colleagues see most Americans' political views as becoming more similar to one another. These points are supported by DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) whose research indicates that most Americans can be located at a stable centrist level, relatively unaffected by the polarization of political elites on either side. A decade later, Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) argued that while politicians have taken increasingly extreme positions over the last few decades, most people have maintained a stable and moderate political stance on a wide array of issues over the same time period.

From this point of view, political polarization is thought to be a myth. Increasingly, the United States is described as "purple" at both the individual and geographic level, and the assertion is made that "at the individual level, most Americans are ideological moderates rather than extremists, on both economic and moral issues" (Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2006, p. 5). Fiorina and colleagues (2006) supported this argument, claiming that each state actually contains a significant representation of both conservatives and liberals that can (and do) win elections at all levels of government. Therefore, the color of each U.S. state is not clearly "red" and "blue" but some shade of purple.

Fiorina et al. (2006) took the media to task for popularizing the idea that the United States is divided among political camps, stating "the prevailing media frame of a polarized nation is not an accurate one" (p. 66), citing that the idea of America being deeply divided is largely a product of the media. "They [the media] talk primarily to the political class and each other. This is not representative of what is normal" (Fiorina et al., 2006, p. 21) and "commentators often present Sociological factoids as if their electoral implications were self-evident" (Fiorina et al., 2006, pp. 34-35). Gronbeck and Wiese (2005) also found the red/blue paradigm to be a media oversimplification of reality; an overarching story line constructed to frame public opinion while on the campaign trail. The concept of *red* and *blue* were terms used in an effort to commodify the American voter by the reporters and politicians. This was done as an attempt to simplify the voting public into consumable products whose properties could be identified, packaged, and transformed by political professionals. Discussions about the existence of a "culture war" are believed to be nonsensical, and there seems to be little evidence that the public is now entrenched within one (Glaeser & Ward, 2006).

Instead of a cultural war, it seems to be the case that individuals, whether self-labeled as liberals or conservatives, tend to hold both conservative and liberal values depending upon the issue, and that states are not unidirectional in any sense (Dombrink, 2005; Fiorina et al., 2006). Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) found that many people neither match nor align their political stances consistently with any particular political party and also that voters often change their stances over time on a variety of issues. In the end, regardless of

their voting patterns, the majority of Americans can be viewed as experiencing a high degree of ambivalence on political issues. To categorize and identify entire regions of the country into colors based on the results of a winner-take-all presidential election distorts how people really feel or act within political contexts (Webster, 2007).

Still, there are political scholars who suggest that there is a growing cultural and political divide in the United States. Tom Frank (2004) claimed that there has been a transformation among American voters, who are now placing religious concerns ahead of economic ones, and he notes a small but increasing trend in levels of political polarization. Frank has argued that political stereotypes are being created as individuals connect their voter preferences to their lifestyle practices. The "latte liberal" is just one example. This constituent is a liberal who is positioned above the working class and holds no empathy for those below him or her. It is implied that he or she is also snobby, out-of-touch with ordinary people and their red-state values, and thinks that others are both ignorant and mysterious. In creating these kind of definitions, it is clear that one side is being defined as decent and noble, the other as distant and dispassionate.

There are other researchers who argue that there is evidence that these divides are real. Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) contended that political polarization is at an all-time high in the United States, and is increasing. In addition, Greenberg (2004) contended that the bulk of the American public is loyal to a specific party, and only a small number of voters are in a position to be won over by some political campaign or slogan. Abramowitz and Saunders also note that there are major sociological differences between red and blue states, particularly when it comes to religious services, opinions about abortion, and gun ownership. These writers believe that the news media are mirroring reality in their reports, accurately depicting a country suffering from a deep political divide.

Research Hypotheses and Method

It is predicted here that frameworks rise and fall in popularity over time, and that different types of article writers would be more or less likely to engage in inflammatory political rhetoric in their writing. Two specific hypotheses were developed and stated below.

Hypothesis 1: The prevalence of frameworks varied over different time period. In particular, newspapers would be more likely to use conflict-oriented before the 2004 U.S. Presidential election and less likely afterward.

Hypothesis 2: Frame usage patterns would differ by type of article writer. Specifically, editorialists would be more likely to use conflict-oriented frames to discuss the political landscape than would professional journalists.

To study the ways in which the "red and blue" rhetoric has been used and framed, a sample of 337 newspaper articles containing the terms *red state* and *blue state* was drawn over a 4-year time period—2004-2007—using LexisNexis. The purpose was to understand what kinds of assertions and assumptions were being made in these articles, what issues were being defined as important, and how these ideas were being packaged for interpretation by the readers.

Each newspaper article was coded using a variety of manifest and latent coding schemes. Articles were read by one researcher and then a random sample of these articles was read by a second individual who had been trained to use the same coding scheme. Intercoder reliability was found to be .80, which is relatively strong. In regards to the manifest codes, attention was given to the length of the story, the date the story was published, whether the story appeared on the front page, what section of the newspaper the article was located, where the newspaper was located, and whether or not the piece was editorial or commentary (e.g., George Will and Tom Frank). These manifest codes did not yield any statistically significant differences with regards to the framing couched within the red-and-blue discussions, showing coverage to be remarkably uniform by geographic location and time.

The articles were also analyzed qualitatively to discover if there were any recurring themes and portrayals of the U.S. political landscape that could be captured by latent content analyses. While reading the articles, attention was given toward interpreting underlying key meanings and assumptions that were being made about U.S. politics. Although interpretations of article content may vary from one reader to another, patterns began to emerge and articles clustered toward common themes and dimensions. The following discussion is based on these latent analyses.

Qualitative Frameworks: Analysis and Discussion

Six identifiable frames emerged while coding the articles. These have been termed *Call for Unity, Purple State, Lifestyle Stereotype, Culture War, Liberal Partisan*, and *How to Win.* Each frame will be defined below. In addition, I will develop and apply a conceptual framework for understanding the differences between them.

The *Call for Unity* frame urged people to put aside their differences, placing an emphasis on the need to unite the nation as a top priority for all Americans. Readers were called upon to stop focusing on what ideas separate them from each other and concentrate on commonalities. Authors using these frames suggested that it was important to put an end to any discussions of a cultural war. These articles are aimed at generating thoughts about commonalities and a sense of shared goals among all members of the U.S. public. Generally, these articles had an overall tone of civility and unity.

These writers implored the readers to think how they are being misrepresented by those who use more inflammatory rhetoric when describing the political sphere of the United States. This framework warns the readers to be on guard from political opportunists who would try to oversimplify complex political realities with labels to pursue their own gains. A telling quote within this framework comes from Barack Obama in a speech made during the 2004 Democratic Party convention. This quote succinctly summarizes the framework.

> The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red and blue states. Red States for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. (DeBose, 2004, Section A, p. 6)

It is important to note that this framework was not used as often as some of the more conflict-oriented frames. It appeared 39 times (11.6%) and was most commonly used in 2004 (24 times). The *Call for Unity* was most often used during the 2004 Presidential election with either direct references to the above statement from Barack Obama within an article, or with voices supporting the statement within an editorial piece within a few days following the Democratic National Convention.

In a theme similar to the *Call for Unity* frame, some writers used a *Purple State* frame when discussing the American political landscape. This frame was used to contend that each U.S. state simultaneously contained a complex mixture of both red and blue voter pockets, making the discussion of red or blue "states" both inaccurate and oversimplified. No state is entirely red or blue—each state is more like a shade of purple, where differences are much more nuanced than a simple clash of blue and red opposites. Those using this framework would agree with Webster (2007) that categorizing and identifying entire regions of the country with a political valence based solely on the results of a winner-take-all presidential election lacks validity.

Although these writers often did not deny the existence of divisive partisan politics or polarization, they emphasized that there is still a great amount of both heterogeneity (Glaeser & Ward, 2006) and ambivalence (Fiorina et al., 2006) within cities, counties, individuals, and states across the United States in terms of political party affiliation. Similar to the *Call for Unity* frame, these writers argued that the current blue/red paradigm created a disconnection from political reality (Kuttner, 2005). According to Sandler (2004),

> Our nation is not red and blue, but many shades of purple. Even in the reddest of the red states, Utah, Kerry picked up 26 percent of the vote. Even in true-blue New York City, Bush won the support of more than half a million voters, presumably including former mayors Rudy Giuliani and Ed Koch. (Section C, pp. 9-10)

In addition, it was typical for those using this frame to accuse the experts and the media of perpetuating animosity among the public. As Raspberry (2004) added,

> It has become routine for reporters to look for prototypical partisans in every fight and tell our stories through their irreconcilable arguments. It is a tendency that plays us false more often than we care to admit. We acknowledge from time to time that the red state/blue state paradigm we use to describe America's almost evenly split electorate leaves out the voters whom Senator-elect Barack Obama of Illinois characterized as blue people in red states and vice versa. The fact that, in all but the two states that apportion their electoral votes, a scant Electoral College majority is enough to turn an entire state red or blue tempts our analyses to these oversimplified images—even when we know that the states are all varying shades of purple. (Section A, pp. 6-7)

A common element of purple state articles after the 2004 election was the pessimistic tones regarding the motives of America's political and media institutions. Readers were urged to avoid the manipulation of political pundits who had an invested interest in keeping America divided via an artificial construction of differences. Accusations were made that discourse was retarding any meaningful political debates and distorting people's thoughts and views. These writers would likely agree with Gronbeck and Wiese (2005) who said that the creation of the red and blue labels were lazy constructs maintained by political professionals for the purposes of commodifying voters through the use of inaccurate stereotypes. As Landa (2006) added,

> I never cared much for the red-state, blue-state political composition; I thought it was lazy. When a TV news personality stood in front of a map and said "This is a red state and this is a blue state," most of us watching slumped on the sofa with our brains propped on the ottoman. It couldn't be that simple, and it wasn't. (Section A, pp. 7-8)

Claims were made within this frame that the predominant defining characteristic among the public were feelings of ambivalence toward politics, not sharp ideological divides (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina et al., 2006). For example, Kuttner (2005) added that

> Polls show that a majority of Americans want to keep abortion legal, but have serious qualms about its widespread use. As citizens, most Americans want a clean environment, but as consumers we are addicted to polluting cars. A majority of heterosexual Americans think the government should stay out of the bedrooms of gay adults, but still have trouble with gay marriage, though not necessarily domestic partnerships. Most Americans believe in God, but most believers are tolerant of people of diverse faiths or no faith, and don't think the government should be in the business of proselytizing, much less that religion should dictate science. (Section A, p. 12.)

The *Purple State* frame appeared 53 times (15.7%) within this 4-year period. It would appear that this frame was used mainly by those who either used it to speak of political battlegrounds during the 2004 election, or by those who wanted to openly challenge the very emergence of terms such as *red* and *blue* after election year news coverage. Over time, the meaning systems transformed from an assumption that differences between areas were tangible toward claims that minimal (or no) differences existed whatsoever between people of various geographic areas.

Nevertheless, writers often focused upon significant lifestyle patterns and markers which were seen to be the evidence of major social differences between those who were red-state or blue-state people. These writers constructed a *Lifestyle Stereotype* frame to discuss all varieties of social differences recognized across the nation between liberals and conservatives. Rarely did this framework talk at all about actual political issues, candidates, ideologies, or elections. Instead, these writers reduced the American populous to vague caricatures which they assumed could be easily witnessed in everyday interactions. Their focus shifted attention toward the more mundane daily lifestyle patterns of the American voters. One example comes from Patinkin (2004), who contributed the following:

> As you can see, there are already serious red/blue stereotypes.
>
> People in blue states are said to spend their time eating sushi, wearing Birkenstocks and drinking lattes, extra foam, biscotti on the side. Those in Red states chew tobacco, drink Pabst Blue Ribbon and watch NASCAR.
>
> The color labels have recast the stereotypes of each party.
>
> Once, being Republican meant you cared about law and order while calling your broker from your Lexus to ask about your portfolio. Now, Republicans are red-state people, who are caricatured as driving around in pick-ups with gun-racks on the back. There are already serious red/blue stereotypes. (Section D, p. 1)

Even when the writers were not attempting to speak seriously about actual political issues or promote political candidates, they consistently assumed that there were major differences between people in the United States. However, these writers never launched any serious investigation about whether the assumptions regarding "red" or "blue" lifestyles or personality types were accurate. While seemingly not motivated by any political ambitions, these articles had a way of painting a portrait of two Americas that were strongly divided, seeing the differences as self-evident and unworthy of debate. Readers were implicitly assumed by the writers to understand that a significant difference in cultural values and lifestyle patterns definitely existed within the United States. While not actively pursuing any political agenda, writers within this framework may have exacerbated differences among the population without an intention of doing so. These writers may have even used humor mixed with these personal stereotypes to call people to unity, such as was the following from Dave Barry (2004):

> Must we stereotype those who disagree with us? Do we truly believe that ALL red-state residents are ignorant racist fascist knuckle-dragging NASCAR-obsessed cousin-marrying roadkill-eating tobacco-juice-dribbling gun-fondling religious fanatic rednecks; or that ALL blue-state residents are godless unpatriotic pierced-nose Volvo-driving France-loving left-wing communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan weenie perverts? (Section D, p. 10)

Even though this specific piece was openly sarcastic of the caricatures at the time, stereotypes of conservatives and liberals were ultimately developed and maintained among these articles across a wide array of personal beliefs, values, consumer tastes, and daily practices. Whether intentional or not, these examples consistently developed vague stereotypes about varied segments of the U.S. populous. While some other frames downplayed or rejected the notions of significant differences among the U.S. electorate, the *Lifestyle Stereotype* frame strived to illustrate virtually all conceivable ways in which the red and blue groups differed. It was interesting to note the variety of ways these articles classified the public in terms of everyday commodities—tastes in movies, music, literature, coffee, comedy, architecture, and other arenas of personal life that most people would not typically think of in politicized terms.

Overall, the *Lifestyle Stereotype* frame was found in 45 articles (13.4%). These stories tended to surface slightly more often after 2004. In some ways, this framework is perhaps the most interesting because of the ways it was used to illustrate overlaps between personalities and politics, which calls into question linkages between structure and agency. It becomes an open question as to whether we are free to choose our politicians or that our politicians are given to us through our lifestyle choices.

While the *Lifestyle Stereotype* frame often poked fun at different American lifestyles by reifying assumptions behind them, the *Culture War* frame made far more serious claims about substantial political differences. Writers using this frame claimed

that there existed a sociopolitical divide so deep that there really were two Americas instead of one. As stated by political pollster John Zogby in an article by David Cook (2004),

> Among those who attend church or a place of worship at least weekly . . . 52 percent [live in] red states . . . 34 percent in blue states . . . I have to tell you the religion thing really just sort of blew me away. Frequent church-goers are dramatically more likely to live in red states and they vote. When you see the numbers of Protestants in these red states, you are always looking at least half of those being born-again—that is substantial . . . Democrats have to do something about family values. That is a huge deficit that they have against Republicans. (Section A, p. 2)

The *Culture War* frame projected the political left as a group that was out-of-touch with what people want from their country and demanded from the government. Writers often insisted that people in the blue states "just don't get it" when it came to the importance of religion, in particular. Conservative writers often pointed out that a shift in the political landscape had been the product of an enormous cultural shift rooted in conservative Christian moral values, and those who lived in the blue states were largely not even aware of this shift. These writers claimed that the blue-state liberals lost major elections because they failed to recognize the importance of religion in their political agendas.

These claims were often bolstered by political polling and the U.S. Census Bureau data, which were often offered as "sociological proof" that differences between the red and blue states was both striking and clear. For example, the following was pointed out by Carrubba (2007):

> *George Bush carried 14 of the 15 states which refused to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (Illinois was the exception);
>
> *Bush carried all 10 states with the lowest per capita income, and the 10 states with the lowest percentage of the population who are college graduates;
>
> *John Kerry carried 9 out of 10 states with the highest income and educational levels (Colorado was the exception);
>
> *Bush carried all 20 states that have the highest percentage of their populations belonging to Evangelical Protestant churches.
>
> *Bush carried all 10 states that still allow corporal punishment in the schools;
>
> *Bush carried 8 of the 10 states with the lowest abortion rates (except Maine and Vermont); while Kerry carried 8 of the 10 states with the highest abortion rates (except Nevada and Florida). (Section A, pp. 3-4)

The message and theme within the *Culture War* frame was to heed a warning call to all readers: by asking Americans to wake up to the regrettable reality of bitter political divisions across the country. In addition, the writers appeared motivated to claim that the political right should have the upper hand in the political sphere, as they are the representatives of the "real" America. The *Culture War* frame urged readers to think about these differences in values to create meaning about political issues—to see conservative politics as "right" and liberal politicians or movements as "incorrect" or "misguided."

Many using this frame voiced contempt for the values of the political left while expressing the notion that conservative politicians were in power because Republicans were the ones who understood real Americans. These claims were often controversial and conflict-oriented even though the writers consistently presented the data as if the divide was easy to document. Many *Culture War* articles suggested to the readers that differences were deep-rooted and that compromise was unlikely to be reached in the foreseeable future. Overall, there was a sense that those refusing to acknowledge this chasm were simply ignoring the facts.

There were 59 articles which asserted the existence of a culture war (17.5%). These articles were evenly dispersed between election and nonelection years, suggesting that the topic was (and continues to be) a central point to numerous political authors over long periods of time. This fact seems consistent with the claims made by Fiorina and colleagues (2006) that there is a political class with a vested interest in continually portraying the nation as bitterly divided for the purposes of acquiring political capital.

Meanwhile, the *Liberal Partisan* frame also argued that there were two different Americas. Alternatively, however, leftist writers dominated this framework. In response to frustrations stemming from the Bush administration policies and culture war frames, many liberal pundits fired back, regularly making confrontational statements about conservatives and their politics. The *Liberal Partisan* frame was a place where the animosity Democrats held toward Republicans became overt and fairly easy to see. Leftist writers would often revert to using rhetorical language and stinging accusations to make their points to the readers.

The *Liberal Partisan* frame featured writers who openly challenged all notions that conservatives had a monopoly on the representation of everyday "real Americans." Although writers using this frame generally agreed with *Culture War* writers that Americans were divided along major social and moral issues, this particular frame was used to express open contempt toward conservative America and its writers. For example, the following article from Arends (2004) claimed that the red states were financially bilking the blue states, paying them back with scorn, intolerance, and a lack of gratitude:

> The blue states remain the engine of the American economy. All in all they produced $5.4 trillion in goods and services in 2001, the last year for which reliable data is available . . . that's about $700 billion more than the red states, according to the government's Bureau of Economic Analysis. (Section C, p. 10)

Political critics from the left openly resented and questioned conservative claims of patriotism and piety, and accused the right of hypocrisy concerning moral values. While the political left was suggested to be "out-of-touch" and "elitist" by conservatives pundits, liberals accused conservatives of warmongering, excessive rates of adultery, divorce, teenage pregnancy, while being opposed to improvements in education programs and gun control laws.

Nevertheless, writers were not without their own objectives of accumulating political capital while questioning the moral turpitude of political opponents. Articles suggest that readers think about how none of the actions pursued by conservative politicians were justified on either religious or political grounds. Readers were supposed to recognize how Republican policies ran contrary to what people hold as being "moral," "spiritual," or even "American." These contests took place on most, if not all, major political issues such as taxation, abortion, the war in Iraq, and so on. Similar to the *Lifestyle Stereotype* frame, these battles often overlapped the personal with the political, although here the arguments were much more serious and never intended to be humorous. The hypocrisy of the conservative right is examined in the following quote from Steinfels (2004):

> Are not moral values also at stake in decisions about war, in drawing lines against torture, in addressing poverty or in providing desperately needed housing and health care? It has become commonplace to note that for every injunction in the Bible regarding homosexuality there are hundreds, maybe thousands regarding care for the poor. (Section A, pp. 5-6)

Overall, the *Liberal Partisan* frame was the most prevalent frame in this sample, being used in 89 articles (26.4%). This frame was particularly popular in the years in which the Republican Party held both the Presidency and the majority of U.S. Congressional seats, and began to decrease in popularity starting in 2007. It is possible that this may have reflected a reduction of rhetoric, frustration, hostility, and anxiety among liberal writers and politicians—feelings that may have been most salient and intense between the years 2004 to 2006.

Finally, the *How to Win* frame defined was a space where professional writers and political experts discussed both real and potential political strategies in attempts to figure out how a candidate could win an election. Campaigns were compared with sporting contests, being said to be "executing strategies" and "scoring points," often utilizing sports metaphors to describe U.S. politics as a contest or game. Writers using this frame liked to subdivide geographical regions by "figuring out what plays" in any given area, claiming that successful moves were analogous to "hitting a home run" or that opponents were "jockeying for position" to describe the motivations of candidate actions and policy formations.

Moreover, this framework offered an assumption of insincerity in the motives of the politicians to readers. Another key assumption connoted to the readers was that major social differences by regions and political parties were indeed factual and beyond question. These writers generally also assumed that any politician who did not acknowledge or address the differences did so at his or her own peril.

Continually, it was suggested that politicians must be willing to "win the contest" by consistently offering whatever words and phrases would "score well" with voters in an area, regardless of where they genuinely stood on the issue. Writers within this frame emphasized that professional political campaigns should be carefully managed, crafted, and tailored by candidates depending on audience characteristics and geographical region to gain a maximized payoff. The frames were full of advice, predictions, and suggestions from an assortment of political gurus or social scientists directed toward the candidates. Similar to a team coach or instructor, strategies regarding how a candidate should "speak to the people" in a particular state to get their support were voiced. It is not hard to imagine how anyone reading these texts would feel distrust for politics, skepticism about the candidates, and an overall negative feeling toward the election process.

Writers using this frame attempted to outline precisely how these two Americas differed in terms of demographics and their support of specific social-political issues. Data, in the form of polling statistics or other facts and trends about the U.S. population were always offered as unquestioned justification for the writer's suggestions. By recognizing these differences and appealing to them, a candidate could win or lose in any given election. One example comes from Skiba (2004) who used demographic data to support an argument being made about how John Kerry and George H. W. Bush should pursue effective campaign strategies:

> Red states have smaller percentages of younger voters, single voters, college graduates, liberals, Catholics and Jews, union members and non-prayers . . . Blue states have proportionally fewer Republicans, rural dwellers, conservatives, born-again Christians, daily or weekly attendees at a place of worship, local sports fans, gun owners, investors, military veterans and married voters. (Section A, p. 4)

Overall, the *How to Win* frame was the third most prevalent news frame in this study, trailing only the *Culture War* and *Liberal Partisan* frames in terms of frequency. However, half of these appearances were made during the 2004 U.S. Presidential contest. In total, *How to Win* was used 52 times

Table 1. Framework Usage by Time Period

	When was article written?			
	Between 2004 election and the end of 2004	2005 or later	Before 2004 Election	Total
Frame				
Call for unity				
Count	13	15	11	39
Expected count	11.6	19.9	7.5	39.0
% within when was article written?	13.0	8.7	16.9	11.6
How to win				
Count	7	26	19	52
Expected count	15.4	26.5	10.0	52.0
% within when was article written?	7.0	15.1	29.2	15.4
Culture war				
Count	19	29	11	59
Expected count	17.5	30.1	11.4	59.0
% within when was article written?	19.0	16.9	16.9	17.5
Liberal partisan				
Count	29	49	11	89
Expected count	26.4	45.4	17.2	89.0
% within when was article written?	29.0	28.5	16.9	26.4
Purple State				
Count	19	25	9	53
Expected count	15.7	27.1	10.2	53.0
% within when was article written?	19.0	14.5	13.8	15.7
Lifestyle stereotype				
Count	13	28	4	45
Expected count	13.4	23.0	8.7	45.0
% within when was article written?	13.0	16.3	6.2	13.4
Total				
Count	100	172	65	337
Expected count	100.0	172.0	65.0	337.0
% within when was article written?	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(15.4%). It appears that these frameworks decrease significantly in the absence of a major political election but are quite prevalent during election years.

Hypotheses Tests Using Quantitative Analysis

To test Hypothesis 1, articles were subdivided into three categories depending on when the newspaper article was published: before the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, between election night 2004 and the end of the year, and in the 3 years following the election (2005-2007). The data should not only show variance in the patterns of framework prevalence, but the time period leading up to the election should have higher rates of inflammatory claims being made on the left and right, or high frequencies of the culture war and liberal partisan frames. However, that did not seem to be the case.

Table 1 indicates small but significant findings in the relationship between frameworks used and the time the article was written ($\chi^2 = 23.182$, $p = .01$; Cramer's $V = .185$, $p = .01$). The data suggest that seems to be a weak but significant relationship between frameworks depending on whether the article was written before the 2004 election, slightly after, or 2005 and beyond. For example, alternate data analysis conducted showed that when these time periods were condensed into years (2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007), the findings were not found to be significant ($\chi^2 = 14.858$, $p = .462$; Cramer's $V = .121$, $p = .462$).

Based on these results, *the data show weak and partial support for Hypothesis 1, although the more conflict-oriented frameworks did* not *appear more frequently before the 2004 election.* However, it appears that a more appropriate interpretation of these data would claim that *while all six frames appear within newspapers in a fairly consistent pattern over time, some frames may become slightly more common than others at any given time period.* This is consistent with Gamson and Modigliani (1989), who pointed out that frames shift in definition, duration, and frequency of usage over time in any discourse of political issues.

Table 2. Framework Usage—Editorialists Versus Journalists

	Editorial?		
	No	Yes	Total
Frame			
Call for Unity			
Count	30	9	39
Expected count	26.4	12.6	39.0
% within editorial	13.2	8.3	11.6
How to Win			
Count	42	10	52
Expected count	35.2	16.8	52.0
% within editorial	18.4	9.2	15.4
Culture War			
Count	47	12	59
Expected count	39.9	19.1	59.0
% within editorial	20.6	11.0	17.5
Liberal Partisan			
Count	47	42	89
Expected count	60.2	28.8	89.0
% within editorial	20.6	38.5	26.4
Purple State			
Count	29	24	53
Expected count	35.9	17.1	53.0
% within editorial	12.7	22.0	15.7
Lifestyle Stereotype			
Count	33	12	45
Expected count	30.4	14.6	45.0
% within editorial	14.5	11.0	13.4
Total			
Count	228	109	337
Expected count	228.0	109.0	337.0
% within editorial	100.0	100.0	100.0

My second hypothesis required a classification of the articles where editorials were separated from others. It seemed plausible that editorial writers (often political pundits or members of the general public) would be more likely to take a less neutral stance than professional journalists, hence using more conflict-oriented frames. The results can be seen in Table 2.

The data show that editorial writers were more likely to espouse democrat critiques toward the Republican Party. However, editorials were also less likely to describe the American political landscape as being immersed in the middle of a culture war. In addition, these writers were also more likely to deny the existence of a red/blue dichotomy, as the purple state frame emerges often. As expected, articles written by professional journalists were more likely to adopt how to win frames to illustrate actual and potential political strategies. The data table also shows that journalists were slightly more likely to indicate that the United States was in a culture war. Although these findings did not show a strong correlation (Cramer's $V = .262$, $p = .000$), these figures do show significance between frame usage and article author type ($\chi^2 = 23.186$, $p = .000$).

Again, *the data show weak but partial support for Hypothesis 2, that patterns of news frames vary by type of author*. However, these patterns did not vary in the specific ways that were predicted. *Editorialists were* more *likely than journalists to question the existence of red or blue states*, although numerous critiques against the Republican Party and "red state" politics were voiced also. Journalists, by comparison, would often assume that political differences by region were real and could be exploited by politicians. In addition, these news articles were an avenue to inform the public more specifically *how* different groups and areas varied in terms of political values.

Discussion and Conclusion

The news media in the United States have an impact on society that goes beyond this content analysis of newspaper articles, though what that impact is goes beyond most studies. The media are multivalent (e.g., Gamson et al., 1992), as are its readers. Coverage reflected a wide variety of different viewpoints over time existing simultaneously at most points in time. Sweeping general statements regarding the relationship between political partisanship and the U.S. newspaper media are tenuous at best, and potentially misleading. There seems to be little evidence of any single dominant framework characterizing all news media coverage of politics. This suggests that the news media are not directly to blame for creating rapidly increasing political polarization among the U.S. public—if such polarization exists.

Perhaps more disconcerting is how news stories often regard the motives of politicians as potentially sinister or manipulative; that parties and political elites use sociological data and polls to manipulate publics by geographical region to gain their support. Furthermore, it is possible that readers may develop negative stereotypes of their fellow Americans based on the development of stereotypical "red state" or "blue state" behaviors and beliefs. These beliefs may be capable of breeding a disdain for political different others among American public and reducing the overall civility toward one another in U.S. political discourse.

Last, there did not seem to be any dominant pattern or frame in the coverage which would suggest that political elites effectively use specific rhetorical devises to uniformly pursue an agenda that deeply divided the nation. One could make the argument that political polarization is on the rise in the United States, but the data presented here did not support the idea that these cleavages are being driven by excessively conflict-oriented news coverage that ignores all contestations of whether the United States is really divided. It is imperative that researchers of the media and politics continue to keep one eye on the media and the other on the voting public.

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Note

1. In 1980, the term *blue state* referred to states that supported the Republican Party candidate—Ronald Reagan—and *red state* denoted the states that voted for the Democratic Party candidate—Jimmy Carter. Between 1984 and 2000, color-coding schemes varied arbitrarily by TV network. Since 2000, the networks have maintained a consistent color-coding scheme of blue for Democrat and red for Republican (Zeller, 2004).

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Bio

Benjamin Gross is an assistant professor of sociology at Saint Bonaventure University in western New York. His research interests include political sociology, media sociology, and social psychology.