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PREVIEW


FRAMING THE HEALTH CARE REFORM CAMPAIGN OF 1993-94:
NEWS FRAME, INTERPRETATION, AND PUBLIC OPINION CHANGE

June Woong Rhee


A DISSERTATION
in
Communications

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial
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Supervisor of Dissertation



Graduate Group Chairperson

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT
Framing the Health Care Reform Campaign of 1993-94:
News Frame, Interpretation, and Public Opinion Change

June Woong Rhee
Joseph N. Cappella, Supervisor

This dissertation investigates the nature of public opinion change in relation to the way in which the public interprets news coverage of a political issue. The primary questions are how news frames influence the way people interpret news coverage of a complex social issue and whether different interpretations of news coverage affect their opinions. To address these questions, a framing model of public opinion change is proposed. The central propositions of the framing model assert that (1) a campaign context provides the public with conditions under which campaign messages can be interpreted; (2) news stories are typically organized or 'framed' in a way that emphasizes a particular story line as more relevant than others; (3) the individual takes up the interpretive cues from news frames to contextualize their overall interpretation of a public issue; and (4) interpretation constrains the way political considerations are brought up to evaluate the issue in a way that selects relevant considerations, emphasizes particular semantic associations among the considerations, and constructs a coherent representation of a situation.

The framing model was evaluated in three related studies within the context of the 1994 health care reform debate. Study 1 revealed that, at the aggregate level, news frames influenced public opinion independent of the evaluative implications of news stories. Study 2 tested a two-sided information flow model of public opinion change: the individual's attitude toward the Clinton plan was associated with the extent to which he or she received and accepted the dominant media messages, the anti-Clinton plan

messages. Study 3 demonstrated that individual interpretations of the health care reform debate accounted for public opinion change over and above the baseline model tested in Study 2. Taken together, the findings suggest that as news frames provide the public with a relevant interpretation of a political issue, the public uses concepts associated with its overall interpretation of the issue to construct attitudinal responses. Public opinion change thus is considered an outcome of complex interplay among media frames, the public's active engagement in interpretation of media messages, and the effects of interpretation on attitudes.

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I. Introduction

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll on January 18, 1994 found that 48 percent of respondents approved of the Clinton health care plan while 39 percent disapproved. The NBC/Wall Street Journal poll released on March 9, however, showed that the majority opinion had changed; more people disapproved (48%) than approved (42%) of the Clinton proposal. The majority opinion had changed. Other polls including ABC News/Washington Post and Gallup/CNN/USA Today during this period reported the same pattern of public opinion change. These surveys seem to suggest that some time between January and March in 1994 public opinion about the national health reform changed in the direction that the anti-Clinton plan campaigns pushed.

However, if one carefully examines the pattern of opinion change during this period, one may find some inconsistent aspects in the movement of public opinion. For example, Hart and Teeter's March 9 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll reported that when asked details about the Clinton plan, the majority (60%) of 1503 nationwide adults favored the "comprehensive Clinton plan" over the "less expensive congressional plan." It seems that the public in fact favored the basic ideas in the Clinton proposal but became indifferent to 'the Clinton plan.' Similarly, a CBS News poll released in February revealed that the majority supported two key elements of the Clinton proposal, i.e., universal coverage (49%) and employer mandate (53%), while deserting the plan itself.

These contradictions seem to suggest that the public responded differentially to various aspects of the health care debate while not necessarily having coherent opinions. One might suppose that while campaigns directed against the Clinton plan led people to identify the Clinton plan with undesirable government control over the health care system, people generally had positive attitudes toward the ideas of universal coverage and employer mandate. Or, others might suppose that since Clinton's favorability rating was lowest during the time, the public might have reacted negatively to 'President Clinton'

when asked to evaluate the 'Clinton plan.' It seems also plausible that the American public was so confused about the details of the health care debate that it found meaningful only specific implications of the debates -- e.g., bureaucratic control -- while ignoring others.

These suppositions lead to a series of questions about the nature of public opinion change in relation to the way in which the public interprets complex aspects of public policy campaigns such as the health care reform debate. How do people interpret the news coverage of a complex social issue in a campaign environment? How, and why, do they associate a policy alternative with a particular interpretation but not with others? How do the mass media 'frame' or 'reframe' the individual's interpretation of a social issue? Do different interpretations affect attitudes? If so, what are the mechanisms by which the individual's interpretation of news coverage affect his or her opinion formation and change?

This dissertation attempts to answer these questions by examining the news coverage of the 1994 health care reform debate and its impacts on public opinion change. In particular, this study investigates how the mass media portrayed major agents, their actions and implications of such actions in the coverage of the health care reform debate, how people interpreted the news coverage, and what consequences people's interpretations of the news stories brought to public opinion change. The aim is to provide empirical support for the ideas that news stories shaped the individuals' interpretations of the health care reform debate and that such interpretations helped them utilize thoughts and ideas associated with the interpretations in their evaluation of the Clinton plan.

Central Themes and Basic Assumptions

The central claims of this dissertation concern the media framing process and its impacts on public opinion. The claims are based on three theoretical assumptions: (1) a

political campaign is an information environment where the public learns issues and events from the mass media; (2) news coverage provides the public with contextualizing information with which the public interprets the complex of issues and events; (3) political schemas play central role in organizing individuals' thoughts and ideas modifying their active interpretation of news accounts.

Central Themes

Theoretically, this dissertation introduces the framing perspective developed in the field of mass communication to the attitude change paradigm in public opinion research. Studies on political campaigns have accounted for attitude change as a function of the amount of information that people receive and accept from the media. But little attention has been paid to a prerequisite condition of message reception and acceptance, namely interpretation. In this dissertation, I will argue that depending on the way news coverage frames a social issue, people find some interpretation more relevant to the issue than others and that this kind of interpretation constrains the way people evaluate attitude objects. Thus public opinion change is considered an outcome of the interplay among media framing, the individual's interpretation of media messages, and the effects of interpretation on attitudes. In other words, the individual's opinion is not only based on the information one received from the mass media but also on the additional considerations associated with his or her overall interpretation of the situation.

An inquiry into the relationship between the mass media and public opinion requires some theorizing about how the mass media cover campaign issues and events and how the public interprets media coverage. The framing perspective takes seriously the interpretative process in the individual's cognition and provides a theoretical ground for examining the association between the media message and individual opinion (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Specifically, based on the notions of news frames and individuals' interpretive schemas.

this dissertation first focuses on the media framing process by which people take up interpretive cues from news stories and consequently construct their overall interpretation of a situation.

News stories are typically organized in a way that emphasizes a particular story line as more relevant than others. For example, headlines may provide an initial cue to help the interpreter favor some interpretations over others by invoking relevant ideas and concepts (Bleske, 1995; Geer & Kahn, 1993). Not only headlines but also audio-visual components (Graber, 1990; Crigler, Just, & Neuman, 1994), metaphors and depictions (Fowler, 1991; Johnson & Talyor, 1981), symbols and iconic phrases (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995), and textual formalism (Entman, 1991; Olson, 1995), alone or in combination, may function to emphasize a certain line of interpretation as valid and relevant while discarding other competing ideas as irrelevant. Media framing--an overarching term for referring to the process by which news stories are organized in a way that emphasizes a particular story line as more relevant than others--is assumed to influence the individual's interpretation of issues and events. People take up the interpretive cues from news frames to contextualize their overall understanding of issues and events.

Interpretation of media messages could have direct consequences for individuals' attitudes. I will propose the interpretation-integration model of attitude construction to explicate the mechanism by which interpretation affects attitudes. Adopting the ideas such as 'attitude as representation in memory' (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989; Tesser & Shaffer, 1990) and 'attitude as conceptual knowledge structures' (Cappella & Folger, 1980; Judd & Krosnick, 1989), this model first defines attitude as a system of conceptual representations. The central premise of this model asserts that the individual's interpretations determine the accessibility and availability of considerations (beliefs or attitude concepts) in the attitudinal process. In other words, interpretation constrains the

way thoughts and ideas are brought up to evaluate a particular attitude object in a way that selects relevant thoughts and ideas, emphasizes particular semantic associations, and constructs a coherent representation of a situation.

Applied to individual opinion processes, the interpretation-integration model of attitudes suggests that attitudes are not only influenced by the information received and accepted. Attitudes are also often constructed based on thoughts and ideas associated with a particular interpretation of received information. Interpretation led by news frames may bring about thoughts and ideas (beliefs or attitude concepts in more traditional terms in social psychology) that are suggested by news frames and eventually utilized to construct a coherent representation of a situation – a kind of story-line or interpretive narrative about a public issue. Interpretive narratives will have evaluative implications about a public affair since some interpretation will evoke thoughts and ideas that have positive implications for the issue, while others will elicit thought and ideas that have negative implications. It follows that different interpretations of the news coverage will bear upon one's opinion about a social issue in different ways.

Political Campaign as an Information Environment

A campaign is purposive, aimed at a large audience, and involves large social institutions (Paisley, 1981). Campaign communications are presumed to influence how people make political judgments and behavioral decisions. In exploring the consequences of political campaigns, therefore, most scholars have focused on attitude change and voter conversion. It has been agreed on that when messages are carried in the mass media and people are exposed to them repeatedly, their impacts on attitudes and behavior are likely to be sizable if not persistent (see Rogers & Storey, 1989 for a review; see also Johnston, 1990 for political campaign effects).

However, from the public's point of view, a campaign is a complex information environment to be learned and experienced. In a usual political campaign context, a

person will receive an amalgam of various messages such as news stories, advertisements, debates, speeches, interviews, poll reports and conversations. A way of characterizing campaign phenomena is that they create a complex information environment where the ebbs and flows of competing messages are delivered through different channels of communications (Lenart, 1994).

In a typical campaign context, any functional distinction among various information flows is rarely clear. For example, people learn from both the mass media and personal interactions and they use the information from the mass media sources to contextualize the information from direct campaign communication; and vice versa. By receiving the messages from political news and other campaign communications, people learn about campaigns (Patterson, 1980), confirm what they have already learned from campaigns (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954), explore more information to make political judgments, and seek further interpretations of campaigns (Nimmo & Combs, 1983).

In this dissertation, the public opinion process in a campaign environment is considered a process within which the public actively reacts to diverse information flows. Elite opinions represented in the mass media presumably play a central role in helping the public make judgment on issues and align its opinion with them. In many campaign environments, however, elite opinions themselves send different signals with contrary implications. In this situation, people try hard to make sense of what the issues are about and to figure out how the elite opinions bear upon their overall interpretation of the situation.

Interpretive Role of News Coverage

It is well-documented that people learn most campaign information from print news (Patterson, 1980; Patterson & McClure, 1976) and now increasingly from broadcast news (Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994). People learn from news what issues are salient

among others (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981), and depending on their perception of issue salience, use different judgmental standards to assess governments, presidents, and policies (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The public's perception of social issues relies largely on the information provided by television and print news (Graber, 1988; Robinson & Levy, 1986).

Recently, the framing approach in political communication explores how the mass media's portrayal of issue and events influences people's understanding of political reality. In Iyengar's (1991) study, depending on the way that the mass media portray political issues, people attribute social responsibility to different sources. Iyengar first distinguished event-oriented news coverage, i.e., 'episodic' frames, from issue-oriented news coverage, i.e., 'thematic' frames, and examines how these different ways of presenting political issues affect the ways in which people make judgments. Those who were exposed to episodic frames (hence, who presumably develop episodic interpretations about the political issues) tended to attribute political responsibility to individuals rather than politicians and systems. Cappella and Jamieson (in press) also provided evidence that the format of campaign news influenced the ways in which the public characterized the campaigns. In their studies, news coverage focusing on strategic aspects led people to see the campaigns in terms of self-interested politicians' strategic games rather than issue-oriented debates.

Political news plays an important role in shaping people's understanding of social issues. In particular, recent studies of media framing have substantiated the supposition that media's representation of political campaigns may change the way the public interprets public affairs. Extending this line of research in this dissertation, an assumption is made that news coverage of a campaign provides the public with the contextualizing information with which the public develops a coherent understanding of the situation.

Political Schema as an Organizer of Political Information

In contrast to the cases emphasizing the public's ignorance and inconsistent attitudes (e.g., Converse, 1964; Neuman, 1986), a growing body of evidence shows that despite limited knowledge and motivation, people efficiently process a flood of information provided by news by employing discourse comprehension strategies (Graber, 1988; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) and the public's understanding of public affairs relies on socially shared knowledge about the situations and contexts of news messages (Biocca, 1991; Graber, 1988; van Dijk, 1988).

On receiving political information, people may not passively soak up intended messages. Rather, they actively select, ignore, and construct meanings of delivered information based on their social knowledge. That is, people do not merely pick and choose in a complex campaign environment but actively consider what they encounter and figure out whether it makes sense (Gamson, 1992; Neuman et al., 1992; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, & West, 1996). Even if a flow of persuasive information pushes in a particular direction, therefore, different people may react differently depending on their knowledge, beliefs and ideology.

It has been assumed that people rely on their organized knowledge structures, or schemas, in their active reception and use of political information (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Graber, 1988; Haistie, 1986; Hamill, Lodge, & Blake, 1985; Lau & Sears, 1986, but see Kuklinski, Lusk, & Bolland, 1991). In general, a political schema is defined a structured knowledge set based on prior political experiences. It is presumed to guide selection, abstraction, and storage of political information and to help the retrieval and interpretation of information in long term memory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Public opinion research has employed the notion of schemas to examine how people utilize political knowledge in forming their opinions about various political issues. Since Converse's (1964) work on the role of political knowledge in the formation of

belief systems, the major questions about public opinion have centered on how people use their political knowledge in formation of political opinion (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Converse & Marcus, 1979; Judd, Milburn, & Krosnick, 1981). At the individual level, two strands of evidence explain the function of political schemas in political information processing. First, people with highly developed political schemas are more likely than others to be consistent in their issue evaluation (Conover & Feldman, 1989) and to deal efficiently with various issues (Hamill et al, 1985; Hamill & Lodge, 1986; Lodge, & Blake, 1985; Lau, 1986). Second, people with developed political schemas are more likely than others to show higher domain specific recall (McGraw & Pinney, 1990). Politically knowledgeable people are quicker at reading new messages, quicker at making judgments, and better able to recall the received messages (Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990). These results support the argument that the more developed the individual's schemas, the more efficient and effective his or her information processing. Thus people with developed political schemas are better in organizing their thoughts and reporting their opinion consistently.

In this dissertation, schemas are assumed to be functioning as an organizer of mental concepts. Political knowledge may be organized as a set of semantically interconnected concepts (Hastie, 1986; Tetlock, 1989). Based on the structured political knowledge, people can efficiently select and integrate schema-consistent messages into their knowledge while discarding schema-inconsistent messages. What this suggests is that political schemas help the individual efficiently and effectively react to incoming information. Thus even in a complex campaign environment where the mass media deliver the flood of competing messages, people can sort out irrelevant information, focus on what they want to consider, and make a reasonable choice.

Organization of Dissertation

The central theoretical claims of this dissertation will be presented in Chapter II.

This theory chapter begins with introducing ‘the baseline model of public opinion change,’ which is an application (and extension) of McGuire’s information processing model of attitude change in political campaign contexts. Highlighting the complex nature of the individual interpretation of messages, this chapter discusses reasons for which this baseline model may not be sufficient to account for subtle movements in public opinion. The framing approach is then introduced to cope with the complications due to message interpretation. To explicate the framing process in people’s interpretation of media messages, the “interpretation-integration” model of attitude construction will be proposed. This model views attitudes not as simple evaluative responses to attitude objects but as an outcome of the interaction between message propositions and mental concepts evoked by message frames. Thus this model emphasizes the constructive role of interpretation in attitude formation and change.

The theoretical claims regarding public opinion change will be evaluated in three inter-related studies. Methodologically, this dissertation concerns two levels of analyses: the analysis of media framing at the aggregate level and the analysis of the impacts of media frames on attitudes at the individual level. In theory, these two levels should be considered just two different problematizations of the same process. In an effort to bring empirical support for the central thesis of this dissertation, the research hypotheses are formulated at both levels of analysis. Study 1 investigates the relationship between the mass media’s portrayal of the health care reform and the aggregate movements of public opinion. Subsequently, Studies 2 and 3 focus on the way interpretation led by news frames affects the individual’s attitudes. The linkage between the two levels is grounded upon the extent of homogeneity between the media’s portrayal of the health care reform debate and people’s interpretations of the debate. In Study 3, where the linkage between two levels is sought, the qualitative similarity between the themes in the media coverage and the themes in the individuals’ interpretations is also explored.

Study 1 in Chapter III focuses on the impacts of the broadcast news coverage of the health care reform debate on public opinion change. This study attempts to explain public opinion movement as a function not only of the evaluative implications of news accounts but also of news frames. News frames are conceptualized as a set of clustering thematic propositions which give a coherent thematic story line to news stories. A content analysis will be conducted to explore the way the major broadcasting networks covered the health care debate during the first half of 1994. The data from the content analysis will then be analyzed to predict public opinion change. This analysis aims to support the idea that not only the evaluative implications of news stories but also news frames (or the thematic organization of news stories) are responsible for changes in people's appraisal of public affairs.

At the individual level, Study 2 in Chapter IV tests a persuasion model as a baseline account of opinion change. Study 3 in Chapter V adds the framing component to the baseline model. These studies will use the three-wave panel-data compiled by Cappella and Jamieson (in press) for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation project at the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania.

Study 2 raises a question as to how attitude change occurs, if any, as a function of the individual's reception and acceptance of the dominant media messages. Zaller's (1992) two-sided information flow model of attitude change is employed to account for the persuasion effects of the campaigns for (and against) the health care reform on opinion change. Zaller's model is particularly useful here since, as an application of McGuire's information processing model of attitude change, it provides testable propositions concerning the idea that individual attitude change depends upon the extent to which the individual receives and accepts media messages.

Study 3 takes the two-sided information flow model as the baseline model of public opinion change and determines whether interpretation of the news coverage has

additional explanatory power over and above the baseline model. Before testing the predictive strength of interpretation, this chapter first explores the way people interpreted the coverage of the health care reform debate. Using the narratives written by the participants' of the RWJ Foundation study, interpretation is operationalized as a cluster of organized themes in the narratives. The interpretation variables are then incorporated into the baseline model tested in Study 2 to predict public opinion change. This chapter will determine whether the individual's interpretation of the health care reform debate account for the variance of public opinion change over and above the baseline model tested in Study 2.

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