# How the News Media Persuades: Framing Effects and Beyond

Thomas J. Leeper and Rune Slothuus

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## Abstract and Keywords

Framing research has greatly advanced our understanding of how mass communication shapes public opinion and political behavior. However, the dominance of the framing concept has limited integration across different theoretical approaches and concepts like priming, belief change, and persuasion, leading to theoretical confusion and empirical sloppiness. This chapter proposes a way to integrate various approaches to media effects and obtain more coherent, cumulative knowledge on how mass communication shapes political opinion. First, it distinguishes framing from other concepts, most notably persuasion, using the expectancy-value model as a common framework. Second, it discusses the implications of this more rigorous conceptualization for research design and offers an example of an experiment disentangling emphasis framing and persuasive information. Third, it highlights promising avenues for mass communication research emphasizing competition, dynamics over time, and struggle between political parties as key features of democratic politics.

Keywords: framing, persuasion, priming, mass communication effects, public opinion, political opinion, political behavior, media effects, political parties, experiment

A quarter century ago, Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody (1996, 1) called for the creation of “political persuasion” as a distinctive field of study, arguing that, “even today, despite all the notable studies that have been accomplished, it is difficult to point to a body of cumulative studies establishing who can be talked out of what political positions and how.” Much was at stake, they asserted, because a fundamental premise of democratic politics is the ubiquitous attempts by political entrepreneurs and citizens alike to influence the preferences and behaviors of others through communication: “Politics, at its core, is about persuasion.”

Even though it is debatable how distinct the study of political persuasion is from work on attitude change in general (Fabrigar and Petty 1999), democratic politics has several important features that scholars need to take into account to adequately understand how and under what conditions mass communication will influence political opinion and be-

havior. Most notably, political communication usually takes place in competitive environments where multiple actors try to push their message (Chong and Druckman 2007b; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Politics, moreover, is inherently dynamic, with competing communications being delivered over time, and the timing of messages and their effects can be pivotal (e.g., around elections and major policy decisions) (de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Druckman and Leeper 2012). Likewise, competition in the realm of politics primarily takes place as a partisan struggle between political parties (e.g., in elections and as key sources in the news) with citizen audiences sensitive to the partisan sources of messages (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010).

How far have we come toward establishing a field of political persuasion research? In one sense, not very far. Still today it is difficult to see an integrated, cumulative body of research on "who can be talked out of what political positions and how." In another sense, however, research on mass communication effects on political opinion and behavior has made remarkable progress over the past decades, just under a different name: framing research. Over the past decades, there has been a dramatic growth in published studies on framing (Scheufele and Iyengar 2017), and this research has brought us a long way in understanding how citizens' political opinions and behaviors are affected by the way communicators choose to frame—that is, selectively present and interpret—political issues and events. Furthermore, this work has illuminated how framing effects are conditioned by factors like the type of frame, the source promoting the frame, audience characteristics, context and timing of delivering the frame (e.g., one-sided framing versus competing frames), and more (for comprehensive reviews, see Busby, Flynn, and Druckman 2018; Chong and Druckman 2007a; de Vreese and Lecheler 2012; Lecheler and de Vreese 2018; Nelson, Bryner, and Carnahan 2011).

The success of framing research is impressive and has helped us advance a much deeper understanding of how political communication through the news media shapes public opinion and political behavior. However, a downside of the dominance of the framing concept in literature on mass communication and political opinion is a limited integration across different theoretical approaches and related communication concepts. Worse, the same labels—especially "framing"—have been subject to considerable conceptual slippage (Caciattore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2016), leading to theoretical confusion and empirical sloppiness. Yet, as we will argue in this chapter, this confusion is unnecessary as a reasonably coherent theory of mass communication effects that entails simply the transmission of information and the emphasis upon distinct considerations can encompass nearly all of the processes that have been called framing, priming, belief change, and persuasion. Furthermore, we suggest that taking conceptual distinctions seriously—and developing empirical designs accordingly—will deepen our understanding of precisely how and why news media work to influence opinion. In fact, following one such more rigorous approach, we find that much of the apparent extant experimental evidence for framing is evidence for information-driven persuasion rather than emphasis framing.

Our aim with this chapter is to propose some steps toward better integration between various approaches to media effects and more cumulative development of knowledge on how mass communication shapes political opinion. We proceed in three steps. First, we review the usage of the framing concept and explain how it can be distinguished from other concepts, most notably persuasion. This leads us to elaborate the expectancy-value model as a common framework for how to integrate various types of communication effects. In this model, opinions reflect a mix of durable balances of affective and/or cognitive considerations that can be temporarily or permanently adjusted by exposure to new information. Second, we discuss the implications of this more rigorous conceptualization for research design and offer an example of how an experiment disentangling emphasis framing and persuasive information can be designed accordingly. Third, we highlight some promising avenues for further research on questions vitally important for understanding the *political* aspects of mass communication effects. In the end, our goal is to inspire further development toward a coherent, cumulative literature on political persuasion broadly conceived.

# The Concept of Framing and a General Framework

Framing is commonly thought of as one among many types of media effects, with persuasion, priming, and agenda-setting and sometimes cueing pointed to as alternative ways that media might influence the public (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kinder 2003).[1] These varied forms of media influence differ in their emphasis on informational richness, depth or durability of influence, and the outcomes thought to be affected by media inputs. That there are so many alternative views of how, when, and in what ways the news media can influence opinion and behavior reflects a long-running and now familiar distinction between the traditions of “maximal” and “minimal” effects. Some scholars have believed that media can have pervasive, deep, and indeed “hypodermic” influence on the content of citizens’ thinking and their opinions toward objects in the social and political world. Others are more skeptical, taking a view that media are shallowly, temporarily, and/or only partially influential on these kinds of outcomes. The maximalist and minimalist schools of thought have waxed and waned over the past century of theorizing and the debate continues to this day (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). Yet there remains little controversy over the core belief that media can—at least sometimes, in some ways—influence public views, opinions, and behaviors.

## Emphasis Framing Defined

At the core of debates about media effects lies one of the most important, but most confused, concepts in the social sciences: framing. This concept is used in different ways across disciplines (for reviews, see de Vreese and Lecheler 2012; Druckman 2001; Kinder 2003), and recent scholars have gone so far as to argue that the concept should be abandoned as its meaning is lost in a confusion of alternative definition (Caciattore, Scheufele,

and Iyengar 2016). Scheufele and Iyengar (2017, 620) describe the framing literature as in a "state of conceptual confusion" where "any attribute of information is treated as a frame and any response from the audience is deemed a framing effect. From this perspective, framing cannot be distinguished from other forms of media or social influence such as agenda setting, learning or persuasion" (also see Chong and Druckman 2007a, 115–116; de Vreese and Lecheler 2012, 299). While we agree with this diagnosis, we disagree with Scheufele and Iyengar's prescription to focus on only one variant of framing: equivalence framing.

Equivalence framing presents an issue in different ways by using "different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases" (Druckman 2001, 228). An example of this is how Kahneman and Tversky (1984) frame the effectiveness of a program to combat "an unusual Asian disease" in terms of 200 out of 600 people who "will be saved," or in terms of 400 out of 600 people who "will die." While we appreciate the precision in this type of frame, equivalence framing is clearly not the most widespread in the news media. Most work on framing effects in politics has instead focused on "emphasis framing" (Druckman 2001); hence, we concentrate on this type of framing.

Despite the muddle, (emphasis) framing remains a highly useful concept. Rather than be abandoned, we believe that its original meaning should clarified and its theoretical implications put to greater use. To make this concrete, we think there is a remarkable degree of clarity and consistency among early research on emphasis framing regarding the definition of both "framing" and a "framing effect." In studies of how frames influence public opinion, a frame is "an emphasis in salience of some aspects of a topic" (de Vreese 2003, 27), it "suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143), and it stresses "specific elements or features of the broader controversy, reducing a usually complex issue to one or two central aspects" (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 568). A frame is simply an organizing idea, dimension, or principle that colors interpretations of an issue.[2]

However, this familiar usage is not the most precise definition. Indeed, an emphasis frame is better defined more narrowly as a message that provides an interpretation of an issue or policy by *emphasizing* which aspect of the issue is relevant for evaluating it, *without the frame itself providing any new substantive information about the issue* (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Price and Tewksbury 1997). As Kinder (2003, 359) summarizes, "It might be said that in pure form, frames supply no new information. Rather, by offering a particular perspective, frames *organize*—or better, *reorganize*—information that citizens already have in mind. Frames suggest how politics should be thought about, encouraging citizens to understand events and issues in particular ways."[3]

It is here that we make an important distinction, often muddled in discussions of framing and communication effects generally, between *emphasis* and *information*: frames provide a lens through which to characterize and understand an issue. Frames may therefore be relatively devoid of information, merely guiding audiences to think about that which they already know (i.e., frames may be mere emphasis), or they may be information-rich in a

way that focuses only on a subset of considerations relevant to an issue (i.e., frames may entail information and emphasis). Even without providing new information—but merely emphasizing existing considerations—frames can matter because citizens often possess a mix of considerations that could be used to form an opinion on a given issue. These considerations might point in different directions, each pushing the individual to support or oppose the issue (Chong 1993; Feldman and Zaller 1992), thus "leaving citizens often confused and conflicted about where to stand … Frames help to resolve this confusion by declaring which of the many considerations is relevant and important, and which should be given less attention" (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1058). Accordingly, a framing effect on opinion "occurs when in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker's *emphasis* on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions" (Druckman and Nelson 2003, 730; emphasis added).

This practical distinction between mere emphasis and information has been used to argue that framing should be understood as emphasis only, in contrast to other processes of media effects such as persuasion effects that work through the transmission of new information. Using the distinction between emphasis and information, it is clear that framing stands in sharp contrast to the traditional direct influence theory of persuasion. Indeed, persuasion means changing people's opinions by "the supply of arguments and evidence through which people are induced to change their minds about some aspect of politics" (Kinder 2003, 367; see also Chong and Druckman 2007a, 115; Zaller 1992, 118).

## The Expectancy-Value Model as a Framework for Mass Communication Effects

To appreciate the distinction between emphasis framing and information-based persuasion, we suggest using the expectancy-value model of attitude formation (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) as a general framework for understanding mass communication effects. This psychological theory was first introduced to the framing literature by Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997, 225–228) and further elaborated by Chong and Druckman (2007a, 105–106; also see Jerit 2009, 412; Slothuus 2008). Despite drawing on the expectancy-value model, framing scholars have maintained a focus on the emphasis component while doing less to illuminate the component regarding the content of information. In the expectancy-value model, an opinion toward an object (e.g., a policy) reflects the weighted sum of a set of evaluative beliefs about that object:

$$\text{opinion} = \sum_{i=1}^{\text{I}} \text{consideration}_{\text{i}} \times \text{weight}_{\text{i}}$$

where $consideration_i$ is the evaluative belief on dimension $i$ and $weight_i$ is the subjective weight or importance the individual attaches to that consideration. The first component of opinion is considerations, that is, "any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other" (Zaller 1992, 41). The second component of opinion

is *emphasis*: the weight of importance or salience attached to particular considerations. Using this model, an opinion toward, for example, a healthcare policy might be the result of a positive consideration that the policy will improve patients' health (i.e., a reason to support the policy) and a negative consideration that it will increase costs (i.e., a reason to oppose the policy). Depending on the relative weight or importance an individual attaches to each of these considerations, opinion on the policy might be positive, negative, or neutral. And while these examples of considerations are cognitive in nature, such considerations might also be purely affective or running tally evaluative summaries of previously encountered information (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989).

This psychological model highlights that there are necessarily two processes by which opinions might change: change in the content of opinion-relevant considerations (i.e., information) and change in the weights attached to considerations already in memory (i.e., emphasis). Indeed, persuasion theory explains opinion change to occur when, "*in light of new information*, people come to think that the president is smarter than he first seemed, or that school segregation is ineffective and should be abandoned" (Kinder 2003, 367; emphasis added). In the previous example, persuasive information might alter the content of considerations to make an individual think that the specific policy will do little to improve the health of patients and, in turn, decrease policy support.

We suspect research on media effects using related concepts or different theoretical approaches will benefit from using the expectancy-value model as an integrative framework. First, using the expectancy-value model to distinguish between emphasis framing and persuasion effects highlights why it might be problematic that the majority of studies of mass communication effects in politics have focused on framing, or at least have been presented as framing studies. Even though changing opinions by altering the content of citizens' considerations might be as important as changing opinions by altering the emphasis on each consideration, the dominance of framing means that we know much more about one half of the model—the emphasis framing component—than about the other half involving persuasive information to change content of considerations. To the extent that "framing studies" are indeed only about the emphasis component of this model, comparatively fewer studies have explicitly studied the role of arguments (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997), although some recent work studies the influence of policy information (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011). Consequently, we still need to know much more about how arguments can be used to change citizens' opinion and behavior and what the comparable effects of attempts to frame and persuade are.

Second, bearing the logic of the expectancy-value model in mind can help scholars be more consistent not only in conceptualization but also in the empirical testing of media effects. Rather than merely emphasizing a dimension in order to activate existing considerations, many experimental framing studies as part of their "framing stimulus" provide new information that could modify the content of considerations. An example from our own work is the study by Druckman and Leeper (2012) on opinion toward the Patriot Act. In their experiment, the policy was framed as either about "weakening the protection of citizens' civil liberties" or a way "to identify terrorist plots on American soil and to pre-

vent attacks before they occur." In addition to emphasizing these alternative dimensions of the issue, however, the experimental manipulations presented study participants with different information about policy content—either, in the former framing condition, that under the Patriot Act, "the government has access to citizens' confidential information from telephone and e-mail communications" or, in the latter framing condition, that "the government has more resources for counterterrorism, surveillance, border protection, and other security policies." This combination of framing and information creates an experimental confound that muddles the means through which opinions in the study changed.

This operational confounding of framing and information in many political communication experiments is further confused by the sometimes casual use of "frames" and "arguments" as interchange synonyms (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007b, 641; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013, 57). Such design features make extant emphasis framing studies vulnerable to the alternative interpretation that their results showcase effects on opinion that are, at least partly, caused by variation in the content of information, not emphasis alone. That is to say, they might manipulate the persuasive information along with the framing, blurring the two causes of opinion formation. As a way forward, we hope revitalizing the expectancy-value model can help to call attention to the persuasive information component of mass communication as well as lead to more careful experimental and observational research designs.

# Improving Fit between Theoretical Concepts and Empirical Design

As we have explained, emphasis framing effects are theorized to occur through changes in the weights individuals put on their existing considerations about an issue. Yet there has been a remarkable lack of clean empirical testing of framing effects on opinion formation. The empirical testing of framing has rarely, if ever, followed the strict definition of framing as purely about changing the emphasis or importance of a belief, not the content of beliefs. Instead, existing framing studies—whether experimental or observational—have assessed the impact of framing by varying *both* information (e.g., factual policy information and persuasive arguments) *and* emphasis. Hence, it is difficult to know if what we have taken from extant literature to be framing effects are really caused by the framing alone and *not* by the provision of information and arguments embedded in stimuli meant to induce emphasis on a subset of those considerations.

Our solution has been experimental designs that cleanly separate the communication of new information from the communication of emphasis on a subset of issue-relevant considerations. One possible strategy for doing so would be to measure individuals' pre-existing beliefs about an issue and then later randomly assign participants to experiences that emphasize distinct subsets of those considerations. That strategy, however, suffers from numerous limitations. For one, considerations may be affective or contain a mix of affective and cognitive elements, leading people to express few beliefs about a given dimen-

sion even though it may factor in their subsequent opinions. Another is that information about issues is not likely to be evenly or arbitrarily distributed in the public—individuals who have particular beliefs about an issue are likely to be different from individuals who hold other beliefs about the same issue, due to previous media experiences or deliberation.

To overcome these limitations, we have developed a two-stage experimental design that manipulates beliefs through the provision of information and separately manipulates emphasis on different issue dimensions through a later stimulus that provisions no new information (Leeper and Slothuus n.d.). In one of our experiments, we provide information about an issue by randomly exposing individuals to different combinations of information about the cost and impact of an electronic medical records policy. Specifically, we tell respondents:

> The first study you will participate in is about the quality of journalism. We are interested in how well journalists write about the news. You will read a few short excerpts from a news article and then we will ask you some questions to see how well you understood what was written.
>
> We are asking different people to read articles on different topics. You are being asked to read excerpts from an article about electronic medical records.

We then expose them to one of five informational conditions that describe the policy as (1) Low Cost/Low Impact, (2) High Cost/Low Impact, (3) Low Cost/High Impact, or (4) High Cost/High Impact; we also include a control condition that receives no information about the policy. Thus respondents in conditions 1–4 all have been exposed to the same set of issue dimensions but the belief content along each of those dimensions is randomly varied.[4]

We then later, independently, assign respondents to either a “cost emphasis” or “impact emphasis” condition, creating a 5x2 full factorial design. In the cost emphasis condition we lead respondents to think about the issue in terms of costs *without providing any information about those costs*:

> Some support the proposal. Others are opposed because they say that we should judge the proposal based on whether it is costly. Indeed, much of the debate over the proposal now revolves around the question of costs.
>
> Based on whether you think the proposal will mean higher or lower costs, to what extent do you favor or oppose this proposal?

The manipulation emphasizing patient impact is similar:

> Some support the proposal. Others are opposed because they say that we should judge the proposal based on whether it will affect the health of average Ameri-

cans. Indeed, much of the debate over the proposal now revolves around the question of the proposal's impact on patients' health.

Based on whether you think the proposal will have a large or small impact on patients' health, to what extent do you favor or oppose this proposal?

In each case, the emphasis manipulation simply and cleaning asks respondents to emphasize and give weight to the cost (or impact) considerations related to the policy, without providing them information about that dimension. We thus obtain a clean estimate of the emphasis framing effect, stratified by all possible combinations of beliefs individuals might hold about the policy. Figure 1 displays treatment group means and standard errors for all conditions.

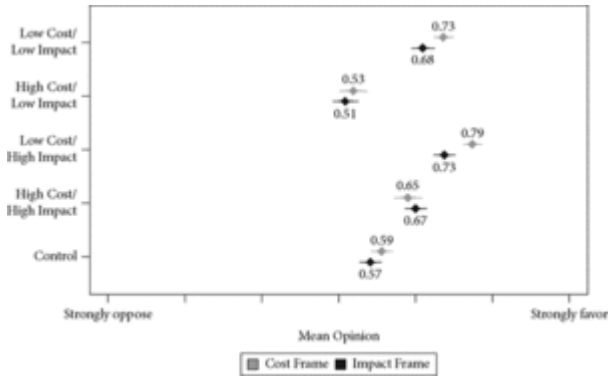


*Figure 1*. Mean opinion by information and emphasis condition

Note: Points are mean levels of policy support, by information and framing conditions. Gray points represent cost frame conditions and black points represent impact frame conditions. Bars represent one and two standard errors of the treatment group mean.

The results are strikingly clear, along the vertical axis are the five informational conditions, with the gray dot corresponding to respondents assigned to the cost emphasis condition and the black dot corresponding to the respondents assigned to the impact emphasis condition. While the treatment group means vary considerably across the various information conditions—with those in the high cost/low impact condition being particularly unfavorable to the policy, and those in the low cost/high impact condition being particularly favorable—the variation *within* each informational condition across the cost versus impact emphasis is small. Indeed, in the control condition and the two high cost information conditions, there is no difference whatsoever in opinions between those framed to emphasize cost and those framed to emphasize impact. Only in the low cost conditions is there an apparent framing effect, but the differences in each case are 0.05–0.06 on a 0–1 scale, the equivalent of one-third of a response scale category.

This experiment—and several others like it reported in Leeper and Slothuus (n.d.)—demonstrate both the inferential limitations of traditional framing experiments and the value of cleanly conceptualizing and operationalizing the expectancy-value model of opinion formation. Whereas past work is typically unable to disentangle any impact of emphasis alone from any impact of information alone on opinion formation, our experimental design separately manipulates each, while holding emphasis constant in the informational manipulation and providing no new information in a separate emphasis manipulation. This approach shows that "framing" as typically discussed and studied in the experimental literature likely works through the transmission of new information rather than through emphasis alone (Leeper and Slothuus n.d). Indeed, given that almost any political message is likely to contain both emphasis framing and the transmission of new information, the traditional view of framing as emphasis only is less useful than it might seem. Taking account of both components of the expectancy-value model of framing effects is likely to be a much more fruitful empirical foundation for future research than treating framing as a stylized, emphasis-only process.

# What is Next for Research on Framing and Beyond?

The concept of framing has powered a significant theoretical and empirical advancement in the study of both media effects and opinion formation. The next generation of framing research has many questions left to answer and we discuss some of these possible directions next. We have already suggested one clear step forward: better conceptualization and experimental design that cleanly disentangles the information and emphasis components of framing's underlying expectancy-value theory. This will require much more careful experimental work, more serious attention to the impacts of specific information and arguments apart from any emphasis they entail, and perhaps a greater reliance on a mixture of methods for understanding how communication processes are used in real-world politics. More broadly, the most important next directions for framing research relate to efforts to improve the realism of framing experiments and the degree to which framing theory can explain the political realities that surround and accompany framing processes. We suggest framing researchers should focus on four main avenues for improved realism: generalizability of results, over-time dynamics, competitive and partisan framing, and the strategic construction and dissemination of frames.

## Generalizability of Results

Some of the most important questions related to empirical research on framing effects address questions of how well existing results generalize beyond the particular contexts, individuals, issues, and frames used in past research. While framing constitutes a general theory of media effects and framing effects should materialize in a broad array of political contexts, there is little reason to believe that a set of frames will all have similar sized effects on individuals with different sets of beliefs or ideology or similar sized effects across

different issues. These questions are profoundly important because the answers tell us about how politically important framing effects can be regardless of how large the effects of some frames appear to be in laboratory-like settings.

Indeed, there is remarkably little research on framing effects across political contexts. With a few exceptions—like Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley's (1997) classic hate rally experiment—few published framing studies have been replicated in other geographical locales, on different populations, or amid different political contexts. This may not matter if effects are relatively homogeneous across these various contextual variations but lacking evidence, we simply do not know whether that is the case. Similarly, while framing research has traditionally been performed mostly on convenience samples, national populations of survey-experimental respondents are now commonly used for studying framing. At broad glance, it does not appear that the sample characteristics used in framing experiments have dramatically affected the insights gained from these experimental studies (see, for example, Mullinix et al. 2015) but again lacking more systematic research on the question, we do not know much framing effects vary across types of samples.

More interesting questions about the generalizability or replicability of framing effects results relate to variation in effects across issues and across frames themselves. Given most framing research examines a single frame—or two alternative frames—on a single issue, there is markedly little research examining how frames affect opinion across types of issues. Observational research (Bjarnøe 2016; Boydstun 2013; Chong and Druckman 2011; Hänggli 2020; Hopkins 2018) has shown that on most issues, relatively few frames tend to quickly come to dominate most debates. As a result, the set of applicable and broadly recognizable frames for any given issue tends to be quite small. It is these frames that are typically used in experimental studies or pilot tests to determine the even smaller set of frames used. As a result, there are substantial gaps between the set of frames that appear to emerge organically in political debates, the sets of frames studied experimentally, and the universe of possible frames that might be applied to any given issue. Systematic attempts to map the political issue space provide a potential basis for identifying the set of issues that might be studied in framing research, but it is comparatively much more difficult to identify the set of *frames* that might possibly be relevant to a given issue. As a result, research—both observational and experimental—will necessarily tend to examine frames that are in some sense *strong*, leading us to believe that framing is quite impactful when in reality we only know that *strong* frames are quite impactful.

Yet despite our knowledge being limited in this way, we tend to lack insight into what makes frames strong. To know that, we would need to study a broader set of frames across a wide array of issues in order to assess which combinations of frames and issues (and people and contexts) generate large framing effects as opposed to smaller effects. Yet even this hypothetical issue-by-frame matrix of experiments will only generate a pattern of experimental results—it will not answer the essential question of why particular frames are strong for particular issues. Indeed, that question invites tautological answers: strong frames produce large effects because they are stronger than weak frame. An alternative would be to use a theory-driven approach that deductively arrives upon

likely strong frames and evaluates whether theoretical expectations about features of strong frames hold empirically.

## Over-Time Processes

A second area of framing research in need of considerably more theoretical and empirical attention relates to how temporal dynamics influence framing processes. While Chong and Druckman (2010, 663) pointed out that "[w]e know little about how the public processes sequences of messages received at different points in time rather than simultaneously," there has been remarkably little subsequent research examining such processes. Druckman and Leeper (2012) showed that once exposed to messages, individuals respond to subsequent information exposure in different ways conditional on the strength of the opinions formed initially. Lecheler and de Vreese (2013) prominently used experimental manipulations of message exposure embedded within long-running panel surveys to measure the durability of framing effects and the degree to which repeated exposure impacts opinions. Those studies demonstrated that repetitive exposure to messages alone does not increase opinion shifts while any effects that do emerge in response to media exposure decay over relatively short periods of time.

Yet this constitutes a relatively small body of theoretical and empirical work that only scratches the surface of possible over-time dynamics associated with opinion formation. More complex interplays between message exposure, message selection (see, for example, Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012), and opinion formation are not well understood. The reasons for this are obvious: it is costly and difficult to repeatedly interview the same individuals and to design experimental stimuli that play out over multiple, time-separated sessions. Yet the increasingly—indeed almost universal—reliance on online survey panels mitigates many of the logistic challenges involved in such research, albeit with potentially high costs. Logistical challenges aside, framing researchers should also work to develop richer theoretical explanations of over-time framing processes where new information is received in sequences rather than simultaneously, where considerations are emphasized by different actors in a strategic interplay, and where opinions are allowed to evolve in more naturalistic ways.

## Acknowledging Partisan Competition

This realism with respect to over-time dynamics of framing is also likely to naturally invite what we see as a third key direction for framing research: greater attention to competitive framing, particularly competitive framing between partisan actors. As Leeper and Slothuus (2014, 130) argued, *political* psychology must be understood as *partisan* political psychology. Our efforts to understand how citizens think, reason, and feel about politics is necessarily inseparable from the partisan nature of politics. Framing theory should be viewed in the same light. Bullock (2011, 511) notes that political parties "rarely take a position without trying to frame it in a way that will garner support for it." Thus, it is difficult to talk of "framing effects" without considering how those influences might vary

across different (typically partisan) sources and across different (typically partisan) message recipients.

Some studies have begun to explore how framing effects are conditioned by the political parties sponsoring the frames (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Others show how citizens' prior issue beliefs might constrain the ability of political parties to frame opinion even among their own supporters (Slothuus 2010) or how the structure of partisan competition might help citizens connect their values to specific policies (Petersen, Slothuus, and Togeby 2010). Another strand of research explores how party cues interact with policy information and arguments to influence opinion (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011), and how the degree of elite partisan polarization will determine the relative influence of these types of communication in citizens' opinion formation. Messages from political parties might also shape how partisans interpret factual information about real-world developments (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). All of these recent studies point to important interactions between partisan sources and their attempts to influence opinion by the emphasis they put on various considerations and the persuasive information they provide. Drawing on the expectancy-value model might help highlight differences and similarities between these studies and further their integration.

While political parties are not the only sources that compete in politics—interest groups, think tanks, corporations, and other entities may also act to frame issues—attention to the sources of frames, the reasons behind their strategic choice of frames, and variation in responses to frames across partisan audiences, will rightly steer attention toward the kinds of real political competition that occurs outside experimental laboratories. Indeed, research into the sources of frames and variation in framing effects across partisan audiences, will naturally invite important questions about framing competition more broadly, a topic that despite making waves in the mid-2000s (Chong and Druckman 2007b; Sniderman and Theriault 2004) has led to little published research. A possible takeaway from research into competitive framing is that, in the face of rival frames, no frame is particularly strong or influential. Yet the evidence base supporting this stylized fact is remarkably small. Ultimately, we know little about how frames interact with one another.

## Strategic Frame Construction

A final avenue for future framing research relates to the supply side of frames and the processes that lead particular frames to be used by different actors and to become salient in public debate. As we already noted, much observational research shows that political debates rarely involve more than a few key arguments or dimensions. Abortion balances considerations of rights of women and rights of fetuses. Minimum wage laws balance considerations related to well-being of workers and well-being of enterprises. Antiterrorism policies balance considerations of national security and individual rights. While almost any political issue might be debated and thought about along a wide array of dimensions of competition, most issues come to be debated along relatively few. Moreover, partisan actors deploy information and emphasis in a manner meant to influence public opinion in a strategically beneficial way. Yet, aside from research by Hänggli and Kriesi (2010, 2012;

Hänggli 2020), there is remarkably little work on how the set of frames that come to be prominent—and thus come to be used in observational and experimental studies of framing processes—come into being or how they are chosen by key political actors to be deployed.

Our ignorance about these processes of frame construction highlight the lack of realism in extant framing research. While we know about the effects of frames on a wide array of issues (because framing experiments are relatively easy and cost-effective to deploy), we know little about the political contexts about which those experiments are meant to lead to inference. This is all the more important in the twenty-first century where it is not only political elites who are engaged in process of frame construction and dissemination but also political amateurs operating on social media who construct, debate, and disseminate information to one another without the involvement of political parties or traditional media.

Framing effects research to date largely presupposes that a relatively narrow set of nonpartisan frames can be studied in a one-off setting to understand opinion formation on a given issue. Yet the realities of the twenty-first century media and political landscapes mean that frames may emerge much more organically and be distributed in much more complex and diffuse manners than those emulated by stylized framing experiments. The framing concept has been essential to our current understanding of political communication and political psychology. In order for it to continue to be relevant, researchers need to adapt framing theory and framing research to the realities of modern political framing.

# Conclusion

Framing has become and is likely to remain among the most important concepts in contemporary media effects research, with good reason: framing is an intuitive concept and research on framing effects has generated considerable insight into the apparent ease with which media and political actors can use framed communications to influence public opinion. Yet there is also much that we do not know about the limits of framing effects, the generality of framing effects, or the processes by which frames come to dominate particular issues and particular ways of thinking about those issues.

In this chapter, we have advanced the argument that framing remains a useful theory of media effects, indeed one so useful it should generate considerably more research moving forward. Rather than being discarded, framing theory should be renewed in light of the expectancy-value model’s capacity to encompass a broad area of communication and psychological processes of interest to multiple social sciences. We have suggested a number of paths that research might take: for example examining generalizability across a range of factors, pursing more theoretically driven research into competitive framing, and investigating processes of frame construction and diffusion. We have also, perhaps implicitly, suggested some directions that we think media effects research should not take, namely, the pursuit of isolated research into different processes of such effects. Priming, framing, agenda-setting, persuasion, cueing, and learning all entail processes of

either information transmission or emphasis or both; that is to say all of these processes involve the two mechanisms theorized in framing research to impact upon opinion. Rather than pitting these processes as theoretical rivals, we think a synthesis is in order whereby processes of information transmission and processes of emphasis are, respectively, theoretically unified and empirically integrated. Much more progress can be made in understanding media effects when the semantic differences between these processes are set aside in favor of a thorough investigation of how information and emphasis work together and separately to shape public views.

Our argument is therefore that framing theory provides an umbrella for encompassing a disparate array of media effects theories. While Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2016) are right to argue that the concept of "frame" has become muddled, we feel that the expectancy-value model of opinion formation at the core of framing theory shines through. Rather than debate what precisely is a "frame," we feel we can advance our understanding of political communication much more by focusing on separate influences of information and emphasis and studying the generality of any results. Rather than limit framing to the narrow notion of mathematical equivalence (e.g., Kahneman and Tversky 1984), we believe framing theory retains considerable value. Rather than abandon theory, we suggest that researchers should attempt to be particularly clear about what information and what emphasis is at stake in any particular experimental manipulation or any observational measurement of media content.

One final concern worth noting about framing is the risk that the collective enterprise of framing research generates a considerable file drawer, limiting our ability to generate theoretical and empirical progress. As a mature academic theory, it is easy for new research into framing to be seen as trivial or lacking the novelty necessary for publication. If that view of new framing studies leads to publication bias, then much of our call for new research into the generality of framing effects will be for naught. Of course, simple extensions of existing work are just that, extensions; but social science disciplines need to reckon with how to publish and accumulate bodies of research in this kind of mature field without leaving "null effects" and replications in the file drawer. This may require innovative forms of publishing, greater space for note-length articles, and much more systematic accumulation of new experimental findings through meta-analysis.

Ultimately, we feel that we have learned a considerable amount from existing framing research and yet there is much left to be learned. How media and elites transmit information to the public and thus shape the views of those whom they are meant to represent constitutes one of the most important and normatively interesting problems of contemporary politics. Now is the time for more rather than less framing research.

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## Notes:

(1.) Portions of this section first appeared as part of a working paper (Leeper and Slothuus n.d.).

(2.) Taken to an extreme, a frame is a *heresthetic* device that makes only one side of an issue publicly palatable (Riker 1986).

(3.) In fact, equivalence frames are emphasis frames in the sense that they emphasize gains or losses, for example, but the frames contain the same factual information.

(4.) Even those these two dimensions—cost and impact on patients' health—have been implicitly emphasized, individuals in every experimental condition have had the same dimensions evenly emphasized.

**Thomas J. Leeper**

Thomas J. Leeper, Associate Professor in Political Behaviour, Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science

**Rune Slothuus**

Rune Slothuus, Professor, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University