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When Can Political Parties Lead Public Opinion? Evidence from a Natural Experiment

RUNE SLOTHUUS

Research on framing effects has demonstrated how elites can influence public opinion by the way they present and interpret political issues. However, these findings overwhelmingly stem from experimental settings that differ from how issues are typically discussed in real-world political situations. This study takes framing research to more realistic contexts by exploiting a natural experiment to examine the neglected role of political parties in framing effects. Examining the effects on public opinion of a sudden shift in how a major political party frames a salient issue, I demonstrate that parties can be powerful in shaping the policy preferences among their supporters. Yet, even strong partisans do not follow the party line uncritically. Rather, they judge the party frame according to their own beliefs about the problems surrounding the issue. Thus, party elites face the challenge of developing frames that resonate with their voters' pre-existing beliefs if they want to shape policy preferences, even among their otherwise most loyal supporters. These dynamics have important implications for understanding interactions between political elites and the public.

Keywords issue framing, political parties, party cues, beliefs, natural experiment

Citizens often base their political opinions on what they hear from others. In particular, how elites choose to *frame* an issue—the way they present and interpret it—appears to frequently exert a powerful influence on how citizens understand issues and, in turn, how they form policy preferences (e.g., Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Druckman & Nelson, 2003). For example, a social welfare proposal might be framed as fighting poverty or putting strains on public deficits, hence causing citizens to rely on alternative considerations and, in turn, form different policy opinions (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Slothuus, 2008). Framing is considered so important, in fact, that it has been described as the “essence of public opinion formation” (Chong, 1993, p. 870).

Recently, however, scholars have questioned how representative much of the work on framing effects is of the way issues are typically discussed in real-world political contexts. For example, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) noted that in most framing studies, “citizens are artificially sequestered, restricted to hearing only one way of thinking about a political

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issue” (pp. 141–142), even though in many real situations citizens are exposed to competing frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Others have examined framing under conditions with low credible sources (e.g., Druckman, 2001) or when people are encouraged to discuss the frames with peers (e.g., Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2005).

This article addresses another obstacle in the current literature to understanding framing effects in more realistic contexts: how citizens react toward issue frames explicitly sponsored by a political party, what I refer to as *party frames*. Despite the fact that political parties are among the most frequent and visible sponsors of issue frames in policy debate (e.g., Sniderman, 2000), parties have been almost absent in previous studies of framing effects (Slothuus & de Vreese, in press). Because people most likely respond differently toward frames, depending on which party sponsors them, the absence of parties in extant research means that our understanding of how frames work in more realistic situations is limited.

This study also expands previous research by disentangling the relative influence of frame content and party sponsor on opinion. In most real situations, the parties promote issue frames reflecting their ideological position and, in effect, it is difficult to determine if citizens follow (or reject) a frame because of the party sponsor or because of the actual content of the frame (i.e., because they identify with the party or because they share its ideological position; see Zaller, 1996). The present study provides a rare opportunity to isolate the effect of a shift in framing when the party sponsor is unchanged and is thus able to challenge previous work on party cues (e.g., Zaller, 1992).

To address the influence of party sponsors on framing effects, I exploit a natural experiment to conduct one of the first examinations of framing effects in a real-world political context (cf. Kinder, 2007).¹ I study a rare and illuminating situation where a major political party, in the wake of the election of a new party leader, literally reversed its framing of and position on a major welfare issue. By analyzing a nationally representative survey collected before and after the sudden change in framing, I can illuminate the effects on opinion of different frames from the same party source. The present study thus overcomes two major shortcomings of traditional framing experiments—that experimental participants are forced to be exposed to the frames, even if they would never have paid attention to them in the real world, and that frames in an experiment are typically presented without the many disturbing, competing messages characterizing most real debates (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Kinder, 2007). “A more balanced reading of frame effects requires methodological diversification, experiments *and* studies oriented to the world outside,” Kinder (2007, p. 157) recently urged.

By studying actual framing processes, I find that political parties matter to framing effects: People are more inclined to follow a frame if it is promoted by a party they identify with. However, even strong partisans do not follow the party line uncritically. Rather, they appear to judge the party frame according to their own beliefs about the problems surrounding the issue. Thus, party elites face the challenge of developing frames that resonate with their voters’ preexisting beliefs if they want to shape policy preferences, even among their otherwise most loyal supporters.

Political Parties and Framing Effects

Issue framing is a process in which a communicator “defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 567) by “emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman, 2004, p. 672). Issue frames not only help receivers to make sense of problems and events by identifying what is “the essence of the

issue”; often the frame “implies a policy direction or implicit answer to what should be done about the issue” and thus has the potential to influence policy opinions (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143; see Entman, 2004).

The growing literature on framing effects has demonstrated numerous examples of issue frames influencing public opinion formation (see Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Kinder, 2003), but extant research has virtually neglected that, in politics, issue frames are often crafted and promoted by political actors who, by themselves, might elicit positive or negative reactions among receivers. The political parties are among the most frequent and visible sponsors of issue frames in policy debate (Carmines & Wagner, 2006; Sniderman, 2000). For example, Jacoby (2000) noted that the predominant frames in political discourse on public spending in the U.S. come from the two major political parties, just as the Republican and Democratic parties have been center stage in major “framing battles” like the one surrounding the Clinton Health Security Act in the 1990s (Jerit, 2008; Koch, 1998). Likewise, representatives of political parties generally dominate the news coverage of both election campaigns (Schoenbach, de Ridder, & Lauf, 2001) and everyday politics (Binderkrantz, 2008). The policy literature has even argued that the degree to which welfare reforms succeed depends, in part, on which political parties propose and interpret (i.e., frame) them (Green-Pedersen, 2002; Ross, 2001).

Nevertheless, because of the absence of political parties in extant framing research, our understanding of how people respond toward issue frames explicitly sponsored by political parties is sparse (Slothuus & de Vreese, in press). This is a major limitation because parties are not universally perceived as either credible or noncredible. Studies of framing have found that people do not just follow whatever frame they encounter; rather, people might critically assess how *applicable*—or relevant—the considerations emphasized in the frame are to their opinion formation (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Nelson et al., 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Factors that shape perceptions of applicability “include the quality or logic of the argument, source credibility, and other features of source and message” (Chong & Druckman, 2007a, p. 640; see O’Keefe, 2002).

Given what we know from a large literature in political behavior, the party sponsor should be particularly likely to influence how citizens judge the applicability of a party frame. Partisanship is a fundamental and enduring political predisposition (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002), more stable than core political values (Goren, 2005), that has been demonstrated to shape policy opinions (e.g., Carsey & Layman, 2006; Jacoby, 1988) and perceptions (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007). Thus, people’s feelings toward or identification with political parties will likely influence how they form opinions in response to party frames. Indeed, the party label might spark a biased assessment of the frame. Accordingly, the present study extends the phenomenon that citizens use partisanship to filter political information to the domain of framing by investigating the following hypothesis:

Partisan bias hypothesis: Citizens will be more inclined to follow a party frame if they feel attached to the party sponsor than otherwise.

This expectation is consistent with many studies of public opinion that have pointed to the crucial role of parties’ position-taking as a shortcut that citizens, lacking motivation or ability to dwell on the details of public policy, can use to decide which side of an issue they prefer (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002; Kam, 2005). As Zaller (1996) summarizes, “individuals do not attempt to think for themselves about the communication they receive. Rather, they attend (whether consciously or not) to the elite and ideological sources of the messages” (p. 49).

But will people always follow the party line? Or are there conditions under which even loyal partisans reject a frame sponsored by their party? In contrast to the dominant view among public opinion researchers, as noted, extant framing studies suggest that citizens, at least to some extent, engage in a deliberative assessment of the relevance or applicability of the frames they encounter. In particular, previous studies have found people to judge frames by relying on their political core values and beliefs. Thus, individuals tend to be more inclined to base their opinion on considerations emphasized in a frame if the frame resonates with their preexisting beliefs (Brewer, 2003; Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 111; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996; Shen & Edwards, 2005).

That citizens can draw on their values and beliefs to limit their susceptibility to framing effects suggests that people do attempt to think for themselves in assessing elite messages. Although partisanship is clearly a crucial political predisposition to many people, it is not the only motivation that could matter in judging a frame. Thus, whether citizens accept a party frame might depend not just on the party sponsor of the frame but also on the extent to which the frame emphasizes considerations that resonate with preexisting beliefs of the receiver. This expectation is captured in the following hypothesis:

Prior belief hypothesis: Citizens will be more inclined to follow a frame from their party if the frame is consistent with their own beliefs about the problems surrounding the issues and more reluctant to follow their party if the frame is at odds with their beliefs.

Yet, because parties have been almost absent in the framing effects literature, we have a sparse understanding of the extent to which citizens will rely on their partisanship or their beliefs in responding to party frames. The present study is among the first to clarify the relative influence of the party sponsor and frame content on citizens' opinion formation.

Studying Party Framing Effects in a Real-World Setting

To investigate the effects of party framing, I exploit a rare opportunity to disentangle the relative influence of frame content and party sponsor in a real-world political context. Studies of framing have been criticized for relying too heavily on laboratory and survey experiments in which participants are exposed to frames different from how political debates often take place in the real world (e.g., Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Recently, Kinder (2007) noted that "we [are] still waiting for compelling demonstrations of framing effects in natural settings," and he advised scholars to take advantage of situations where "a decisive shift in the deployment of frames in some real-world setting [is] taking place in such a way that the putative effects on opinion—if such effects there be—are fortuitously captured" (p. 158).

This is exactly what I do in this study. Data from the 2005 Danish National Election Study enable an assessment of how citizens reacted toward a major political party, the Social Democrats, who suddenly reversed their framing of and position on a welfare issue salient in Danish politics: the early retirement benefits (*efterlønnen*). The election survey was collected before and after this marked change in framing and thus provides a rare opportunity to isolate the effects of the variation in framing on citizens' policy opinion while holding the party sponsor of the frames constant (see Zaller, 1996, p. 58).

The Shifting Framing of the Early Retirement Benefits Issue

Early retirement benefits have been a sensitive political issue in Danish politics since 1998, when the Social Democratic prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, became unpopular on

a reform that restricted access to the benefits. Many voters believed the Social Democrats broke their promise from the 1998 general election campaign that the government would not make any changes in existing early retirement policies. Consequently, following the reform, support for the Social Democrats dropped in opinion polls (Andersen, 1999). After this experience, the Social Democrats and most other parties in the Danish parliament did not dare to make any further changes in the early retirement benefits system. As late as in the campaign leading up to the general election on February 8, 2005, the Social Democratic party leader at the time, Mogens Lykketoft, emphasized that the party would not tighten the conditions of the early retirement benefits but rather would improve the system.

However, as a consequence of the Social Democratic defeat in the 2005 election, Mogens Lykketoft announced his resignation as party leader during election evening. After a historical vote among the roughly 52,000 members of the Social Democratic party, Helle Thorning-Schmidt was elected as new party leader on April 12, 2005. She represented the right wing in the party and wished to push the Social Democrats, since 2001 the major opposition party, to the political center, seeking influence and taking part in political compromises and reforms (Bille, 2006, p. 1089). As one of her first policy announcements, she proclaimed that it was time to discuss a major reform of the early retirement schemes and the pension system more generally. Thorning-Schmidt said that access to the early retirement benefits should be restricted and that citizens under the age of 40 years should not take the benefits for granted.

This new position literally represented a U-turn of Social Democratic policy on the issue and immediately became front page news in the leading newspapers and was also widely covered by the national prime time television news. Figure 1 shows a simple count of the weekly numbers of articles in seven national newspapers covering the early retirement benefits and simultaneously referring to the Social Democrats, conducted by searching the full-text article database Infomedia. While this search does not tell whether the Social Democratic policy on the issue was specifically discussed in each article, from week 15 on these data clearly indicate the massive attention Helle Thorning-Schmidt's

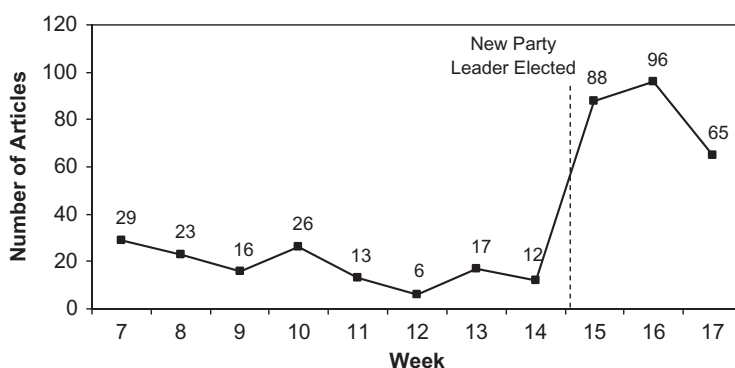


Figure 1. Media coverage of the Social Democrats and the early retirement benefits issue. Entries are weekly numbers of articles containing both of the words “*efterløn*” and “*socialdemokrat*” published in seven Danish national daily newspapers (*Berlingske Tidende*, *B.T.*, *Ekstra Bladet*, *Information*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken*) in week 7 to week 17, 2005. All kinds of articles (e.g., news stories, feature articles, editorials, letters to the editor) are counted. Source: Infomedia database (www.infomedia.dk).

U-turn of the Social Democratic position on the early retirement benefits received. The new party leader got her message out.

The policy change was accompanied by a shift in how the party framed the issue. Prior to Thorning-Schmidt's takeover as party leader, the Social Democrats framed the early retirement benefits issue by emphasizing the necessity of this scheme to assist worn-out workers who could no longer continue to work or find a job at all, what could be described as a *social frame*. After the Social Democrats shifted to their new position, in contrast, the issue was framed by emphasizing the general economic pressure on the welfare state due to demographic changes over the ensuing decades relating to a growing number of people retiring and a decreasing number of people in the labor force. Thus, a reform of the early retirement benefits system was framed as necessary in order to afford some kind of early retirement benefits at all in the future, what could be described as an *economic frame*.

To provide more tangible evidence of this shift in framing, Figure 2 presents the results of a content analysis of how the Social Democrats framed their policy in the two most widely read Danish newspapers, the center-right *Jyllands-Posten* and the center-left *Politiken*, before and after the new party leader was elected. Following the guidelines in Chong and Druckman (in press), all news articles from the two newspapers referring to the Social Democrats and the early retirement issue from January 1 through May 1, 2005, were identified in the Infomedia database. All relevant articles were coded for the Social Democratic party's policy position and how this position was framed.² Party framing when Lykketoft was party leader was analyzed in the period January 1 through April 12, while party framing under the new party leader, Thorning-Schmidt, was analyzed from April 13 through May 1. The social and economic frames were described in a detailed coding document that also provided examples of how the frames might be invoked in the articles

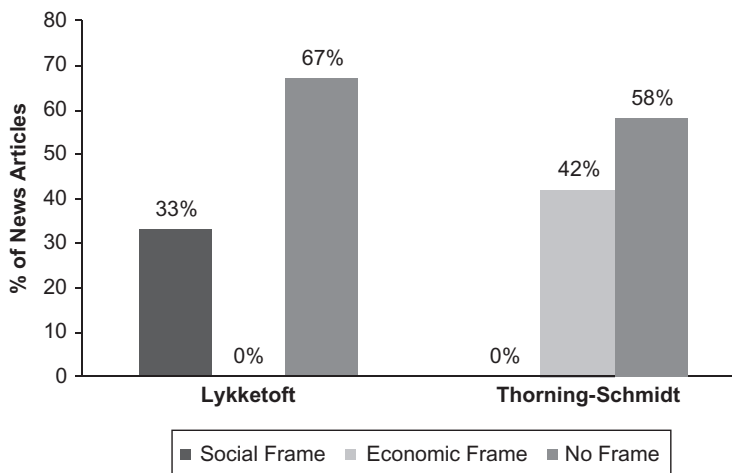


Figure 2. Social Democratic framing of the early retirement benefits issue. Entries are percentages of articles in *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken* covering the Social Democratic policy on the early retirement benefits from the perspective of the social frame, economic frame, or without a specific frame, respectively. To gauge framing when Lykketoft was party leader, articles from January 1 through April 12, 2005, were analyzed ($n = 21$); framing under Thorning-Schmidt as party leader was analyzed from April 13 through May 1, 2005 ($n = 50$). For description of the frames and codebook, see the text and the Appendix.

(Chong & Druckman, in press). Details on coding and reliability statistics are provided in the Appendix.

Figure 2 documents a marked change in how the Social Democrats framed the early retirement benefit issue. While not all articles referring to the Social Democratic policy contained a clear frame, it is evident that when they did, Lykketoft discussed the issue within the perspective of the social frame (33% of the articles), whereas Thorning-Schmidt discussed the issue in terms of the economic frame (42% of the articles); they never used the opposite frame. In other words, the changing Social Democratic position was accompanied by a shift in framing. Hence, this sudden change in Social Democratic framing of the early retirement benefits issue, immediately communicated to the public as indicated in Figure 1, provides an opportunity to test the effects of changing frames on the same issue promoted by the same political party.

Data

While the 2005 Danish National Election Survey was intended to study voter decision making, by coincidence it was collected over the weeks when the Social Democrats changed their party leader. Hence, it is possible to exploit these data to examine how citizens responded to changing party frames. The survey was conducted in the form of personal interviews with a random sample of 2,008 Danish residents above the age of 18. The field work was carried out by Gallup from February 19 through May 19, 2005. The minimum response rate was 47% (AAPOR RR1; see <http://www.aapor.org>), and the respondent-level cooperation rate was 57% (AAPOR COOP3).³

This data set is analyzed as a quasi-experiment where the “treatment” is which party framing of the early retirement benefits respondents have received: the Social Democratic framing of the issue before (i.e., social frame) or after (i.e., economic frame) Helle Thorning-Schmidt was elected as party leader. A major analytical challenge is to make sure that respondents interviewed before and after the experimental intervention are comparable, such that possible differences between the groups in the outcome variable can be confidently attributed to the experimental intervention (Cook & Campbell, 1979, p. 6). In contrast to real experiments, where random assignment of participants to experimental treatments ensures full comparability, within statistical limits, between experimental groups, it is difficult in a natural setting to rule out definitively alternative explanations of the cause of change in the dependent variable.

However, it is possible to measure whether respondents differ on the attributes measured in the survey. Preliminary analyses of the 2005 Danish National Election Survey revealed that respondents interviewed in the “tail” of the survey differed markedly from the other respondents as well as from the adult Danish population in general. Specifically, respondents interviewed in the last 3 weeks of the field work were much younger, had less education, and a lower proportion were in the labor force. Thus, respondents in this tail are neither representative of the electorate nor comparable to the other respondents interviewed over the course of the survey. Moreover, the number of cases in the last few weeks is quite low (e.g., only 26 and 12 Social Democratic respondents were interviewed in weeks 19 and 20, respectively), making week-by-week comparisons more uncertain. Therefore, the analyses focus on respondents interviewed from February to May 1 (week 7 to 17, 2005), excluding respondents interviewed in weeks 18 through 20. This reduces the overall number of respondents to 1,636. In effect, the analysis is only able to examine whether opinion change occurred in the few weeks immediately following the Social Democratic shift in framing (see also Note 6). There are only minor group-by-group differences between

the remaining respondents; to control for these differences, several control variables are included in the analyses (see below).

Measures

To investigate the partisan bias and prior belief hypotheses, it is necessary to measure party framing, policy opinion, partisanship, and people's own prior beliefs about the issue.

Party Frame. The new Social Democratic framing of the early retirement benefits issue was announced on April 12 (i.e., the beginning of week 15) and widely covered over the following weeks. Therefore, the experimental treatment variable *party frame* is simply coded 1 if a respondent was interviewed from week 15 onward (i.e., exposed to the economic frame) and coded 0 if the respondent was interviewed before week 15 (i.e., exposed to the social frame).

Policy Opinion. Because the Social Democratic policy reversal was unexpected, the data set does not contain a question asking directly about support for the policy proposed by the Social Democrats. However, another question comes close: Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "In the long run, it is necessary to abolish the early retirement benefits," answered on a 5-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. In order to investigate whether, and how many, citizens could be moved to support the policy advocated by the new Social Democratic party leader, as compared to how many supported this policy position before, a simple measure of *policy support* was created (coded 1 if a respondent agreed, somewhat or strongly, with the statement; coded 0 otherwise).

Partisanship. To investigate whether Social Democratic voters were more likely to follow the changing Social Democratic framing of the issue, the dummy variable *Social Democratic voter* was created, coded 1 if the respondent voted for the Social Democrats in the 2005 general election and 0 if the respondent did not vote for that party.⁴ Including this variable enables a test of the partisan bias hypothesis. However, a stronger indicator of partisanship is party identification. Hence, to see if Social Democratic voters who identify with the party are more inclined to follow the party frame than Social Democratic voters not identifying with their party, the variable *Social Democratic identifier* was created based on the following question: "Do you generally feel attached to a party? If yes, which party is that?" Respondents identifying with the Social Democrats (either feeling "very strongly" or "quite strongly" attached) were coded 1, and others were coded 0.

People's Own Beliefs on the Issue. The Social Democrats framed their position to reform the early retirement benefits in terms of a necessary policy due to economic pressure on the welfare state from demographic changes. To investigate whether Social Democratic voters followed the Social Democratic framing of the issue, regardless of their own perception of the issue, respondents' beliefs about the economic pressure on the welfare state were measured by responses to the statement "In the long run, we cannot afford to keep up the welfare state as we know it today," answered on a 5-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The variable *welfare belief* was coded 1 if respondents agreed, somewhat or strongly, with the statement (i.e., their preexisting beliefs were consistent with the new Social Democratic frame) and coded 0 otherwise. To be a meaningful moderator of party framing effects, it is crucial that the welfare belief variable not vary between the two

Table 1
Welfare beliefs by party frame among Social Democratic voters

	Welfare belief		Total (%)	<i>N</i>
	Can afford (%)	Cannot afford (%)		
Social frame				
All Social Democrats	67	34	100	248
Non-identifiers	69	31	100	87
Identifiers	65	35	100	161
Economic frame				
All Social Democrats	65	35	100	157
Non-identifiers	63	37	100	59
Identifiers	66	34	100	98

Note. Entries are percentages and numbers of cases. “Cannot afford” includes respondents who agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement “In the long run, we cannot afford to keep up the welfare state as we know it today”; “Can afford” contains other respondents. “Social frame” denotes the Social Democratic framing of the early retirement issue in the period before the new party leader was elected; “Economic frame” denotes the Social Democratic framing of the issue after the new party leader was elected.

periods investigated (i.e., under the Social Democrats’ framing of early retirement benefits within the social frame and the economic frame, respectively). As Table 1 displays, distributions of this variable were virtually unchanged among Social Democratic voters over the course of the study. Thus, before the new party leader was elected, 34% believed “we cannot afford” welfare, whereas 35% expressed this belief after the new party leader was elected. The same pattern is evident if results are broken down by whether Social Democratic voters identify or do not identify with their party. Therefore, in this context *welfare belief* can be treated as a relatively stable predisposition that might moderate possible party framing effects.

Control Variables. To control for possible differences between experimental groups, the analyses include *gender* (1 = female), *age* (continuous), *education* (years of basic schooling, ranging from 7 through 12 years), and *income* (16 categories; not answered or don’t know coded in median category) as control variables. These sociodemographic characteristics have been found to influence welfare opinion in prior Danish and comparative studies (e.g., Andersen, 2008; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003). Furthermore, *political awareness*, as measured by seven factual knowledge questions summed to an index and divided into three categories (low, medium, and high), is included in all analyses to control respondents’ tendency to be attentive to politics and understand the political messages they encounter (see Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Zaller, 1992).

Findings

The marked and widely communicated shift in the Social Democratic position on the early retirement issue provides a rare opportunity to study the effects of a sudden shift in party framing of a major political issue. The question is how public opinion responded to this change in party framing. According to the partisan bias hypothesis, citizens should be more inclined to follow a party frame if they feel attached to the party sponsor. Therefore, if the

shifting Social Democratic framing of the early retirement benefits issue had any impact on public opinion, Social Democratic voters should be the most likely to follow the new framing of the issue.

Figure 3 presents how public support for abolishing the early retirement benefits varied over the course of the spring of 2005, separately for Social Democratic voters ($N = 405$) and other respondents ($N = 1,231$). Most striking in these trends of opinion is the marked change in policy support among Social Democrats in the weeks following the election of the new party leader. Thus, before the new party leader was elected—and the Social Democrats discussed the early retirement benefits within the social frame—on average 34% of Social Democratic voters supported abolishing the early retirement benefits. After the party leader took office—and launched the economic framing of the early retirement benefits issue—47% of the Social Democrats supported abolishing. Among other respondents, 46% supported abolishing the early retirement benefits before the election of the new Social Democratic party leader, and 49% in the following weeks. Thus, non-Social Democrats were apparently not entirely unaffected by the changing framing of the early retirement benefits issue, but the largest effect obviously occurred among the Social Democrats. Thus, whereas Social Democratic voters in the first period were clearly less supportive of abolishing the early retirement benefits than voters from other parties, this gap almost disappeared after their party changed its position on and framing of the issue.

These trends lend support to the partisan bias hypothesis. To test this hypothesis more formally, Table 2 presents logit models estimating the effect of party frame on

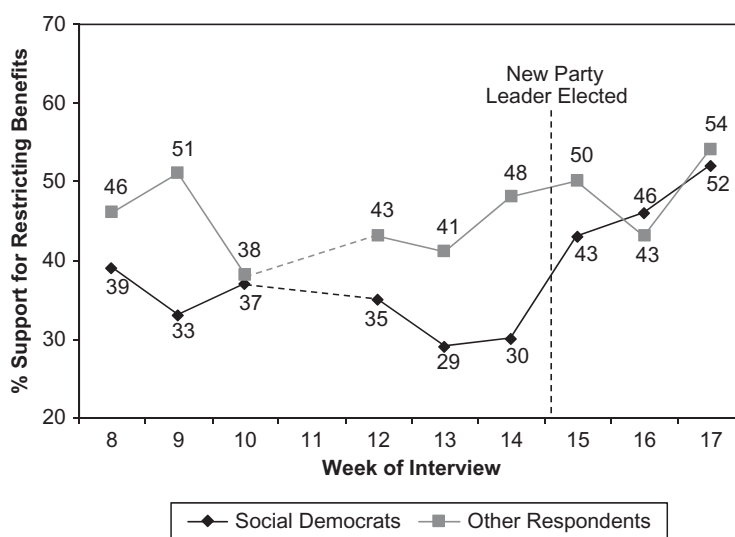


Figure 3. Effects of party framing on policy support by voting preference. Entries are the proportion agreeing (strongly or somewhat) with the statement “In the long run, it is necessary to abolish the early retirement benefits” by week of interview and partisanship. Respondents not indicating a party preference are excluded. Due to the low number of interviews in week 7, the first week of the survey, weeks 7 and 8 are combined. In week 11, an unusually low number of interviews were accomplished (11 among Social Democrats, 26 among other respondents), which coincided with unusually high support for restricting benefits, deviating from the general trend (55% support among Social Democrats, 54% support among other respondents); the figures for this week are considered outliers and therefore the dotted lines in the presentation.

Table 2
Effects of party framing on policy support by voting preference

	Model 1: All respondents	Model 2: Social Democrats	Model 3: Other respondents	Model 4: All respondents
Party frame	0.210** (0.110)	0.580*** (0.220)	0.130 (0.120)	0.110 (0.120)
Social Democratic voter				-0.470*** (0.160)
Party Frame × Social Democratic Voter				0.410* (0.250)
Female	-0.150 (0.110)	0.060 (0.220)	-0.200 (0.130)	-0.130 (0.110)
Age	0.008** (0.004)	0.018** (0.008)	0.006 (0.004)	0.009** (0.004)
Education	0.050 (0.040)	0.200*** (0.080)	0.010 (0.040)	0.050 (0.040)
Income	0.060*** (0.020)	0.030 (0.040)	0.060*** (0.020)	0.050*** (0.020)
Political awareness	0.490*** (0.070)	0.240 (0.150)	0.560*** (0.080)	0.490*** (0.070)
Constant	-2.390*** (0.450)	-4.190*** (0.970)	-1.940*** (0.510)	-2.320*** (0.450)
Log-likelihood	-1,073.090	-258.750	-804.700	-1,068.550
Probability	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000
N	1,631	405	1,226	1,631

Note. Entries are maximum-likelihood estimates of logit models (coefficients and standard errors). The dependent variable is policy support (coded 1 for support); see note to Figure 3 for question wording.

* $p \leq .05$ (one-tailed); ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed); *** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

policy support among all respondents, Social Democratic voters, and other respondents, respectively, controlling for various sociodemographic factors and political awareness. The positive coefficient of party frame in Model 1 indicates that overall the shifting framing of the early retirement benefits issue promoted by the Social Democrats increased public support for abolishing the early retirement benefits. This effect on policy support, however, is confined to Social Democratic voters. Thus, there is a clearly significant and substantial effect of party frame among Social Democratic voters (Model 2), whereas the shift in party framing had no significant impact among other respondents (Model 3). This differential response is substantiated by the Party Frame × Social Democratic Voter interaction, which is both statistically significant ($p = .05$, one-tailed) and positively signed (Model 4). This result indicates that as the framing of the issue shifted, policy support changed more among Social Democratic voters than among other respondents. These results thus suggest a clear partisan bias in how citizens responded to the party framing of the issue.

But did all Social Democratic voters tend to follow their party's framing of the issue to the same extent? Following the partisan bias hypothesis, Social Democratic voters identifying with the party should be particularly motivated to yield to the shifting framing

promoted by the party and thus be more inclined to change their policy opinion in response to party framing compared to Social Democratic voters who do not identify with the party. Model 1 in Table 3 tests whether Social Democratic identifiers were more likely to change their policy preference in response to the Social Democratic shift from the social to the economic frame. The significant and positively signed Party Frame \times Social Democratic Identifier interaction suggests that Social Democratic voters identifying with their party did indeed become more supportive of restricting the early retirement benefits compared to non-identifiers.

The substantive meaning of the Party Frame \times Social Democratic Identifier interaction is illustrated in Panel a of Figure 4. The figure presents probabilities of policy support for an “average” respondent who is a female with average age and median levels of education, income, and political awareness. As Panel a reveals, among Social Democratic non-identifiers there is virtually no difference in policy support before the new party leader

Table 3

Contingent effects of party framing on policy support among Social Democratic voters

	Model 1: Soc Dem ID	Model 2: Welfare belief	Model 3: ID and belief
Party frame	0.030 (0.360)	0.320 (0.280)	−0.340 (0.420)
Social Democratic identifier	−0.420 (0.300)		−0.460 (0.300)
Party Frame \times Identifier	0.870* (0.450)		1.020** (0.470)
Welfare belief		0.690** (0.290)	0.710** (0.290)
Party Frame \times Welfare Belief		0.770* (0.470)	0.810* (0.470)
Female	0.110 (0.220)	0.050 (0.230)	0.110 (0.230)
Age	0.020** (0.008)	0.019** (0.008)	0.020** (0.008)
Education	0.200** (0.080)	0.210*** (0.080)	0.210** (0.080)
Income	0.030 (0.040)	0.020 (0.040)	0.020 (0.040)
Political awareness	0.270* (0.150)	0.290* (0.160)	0.320** (0.160)
Constant	−4.030*** (0.980)	−4.610*** (1.020)	−4.450*** (1.040)
Log-likelihood	−256.870	−247.380	−244.980
Probability	0.001	0.000	0.000
<i>N</i>	405	405	405

Note. Entries are maximum-likelihood estimates of logit models (coefficients and standard errors). The dependent variable is policy support (coded 1 for support); see note to Figure 3 for question wording.

* $p \leq .05$ (one-tailed); ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed); *** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

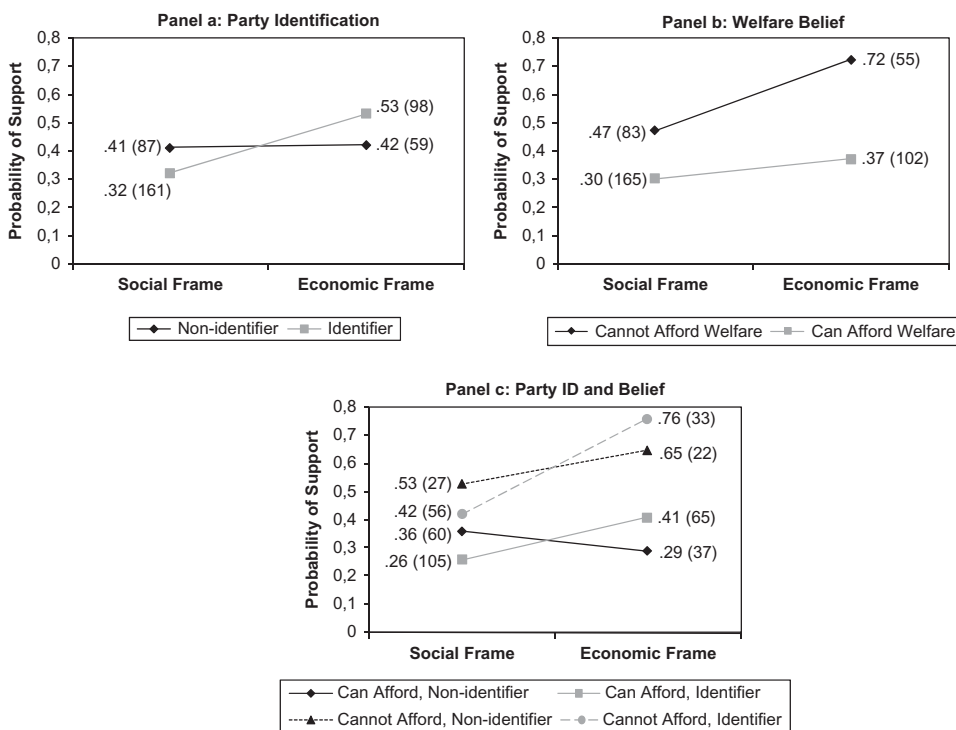


Figure 4. Effect of party framing on policy support among Social Democratic voters by party identification and welfare belief. Entries are predicted probabilities for policy support with number of cases in parentheses. Probabilities are calculated from Model 1 (Panel a), Model 2 (Panel b), and Model 3 (Panel c) in Table 3. Control variables are held constant at female, age = mean, education = 10 years, income = median, and political awareness = median.

changed the framing of and policy position on the issue compared to after this shift took place. Specifically, the probability that our “average” respondent supports abolishing the early retirement benefits was .41 before and .42 after. In contrast, Social Democrats who identify with the party showed a marked increase in support for the new party position: the probability of policy support changed from .32 before to .53 after, or an increase of 66%. These findings substantiate the empirical support for the partisan bias hypothesis: The stronger citizens feel attached to the party sponsor of the frame, the more likely they are to follow the position implied by the frame and change their policy preference.

The findings so far show that identification with the party sponsor of a frame clearly motivates citizens to follow the frame and in turn alter their policy opinion. This result, if it stands alone, might question how much partisans think for themselves about the communications they receive. They would appear as if they accept whatever framing of the issue their party happens to promote. However, as the prior belief hypothesis suggests, people might have other motivations than partisanship. In judging the applicability of the frames they receive, citizens might also rely on their own beliefs about the issue. Thus, people might reject a frame at odds with their own perception of the issue, even if it is sponsored by a party they support.

Specifically, the prior belief hypothesis implies that Social Democratic voters would be more inclined to follow the changing Social Democratic framing of the early retirement

issue if they find the economic frame consistent with their own beliefs about the problems surrounding the issue than if the frame is inconsistent with their beliefs. This expectation is supported by Model 2 in Table 3. The analysis shows that the Party Frame \times Welfare Belief interaction is significant, while the coefficient of party frame is small and statistically insignificant. This indicates that the shifting Social Democratic framing of the early retirement benefits issue only influenced policy support among Social Democratic voters who shared the fundamental interpretation of the issue that the welfare state is under economic pressure. Recall that this belief by itself was not affected by the shifting framing (see Table 1).

The substantive meaning of the Party Frame \times Welfare Belief interaction is illustrated in Panel b of Figure 4. Again, probability of policy support is reported for our “average” respondent. Virtually no opinion change occurred among Social Democratic voters who did not share the belief about economic pressure on the welfare state (probabilities of support are .30 before and .37 after). Conversely, there is a large difference in opinion among Social Democratic voters believing that the welfare state is under pressure, where probability of policy support changes from .47 when the Social Democrats framed the issue in terms of the social frame to .72 when the issue was presented within the economic frame. These findings clearly support the prior belief hypothesis.

Thus, responses among Social Democratic voters to the shifting Social Democratic framing of the early retirement issue were moderated both by party identification and citizens’ own prior beliefs about the issue, but these factors are apparently unrelated to each other. Thus, the coefficients and levels of significance of the interaction terms are almost unchanged if interactions are included in the same regression analysis (Model 3 in Table 3) as compared to analyzing the interactions separately (Models 1 and 2). Moreover, further analyses indicate no interacting effects between Social Democratic identifier and welfare belief on policy opinion, and a three-way Party Frame \times Social Democratic Identifier \times Welfare Belief interaction is far from being significant (data not shown).

Rather, the moderating effects of citizens’ partisanship and issue-relevant prior beliefs on party framing effects seem to be independent, additive effects. This is illustrated in Panel c of Figure 4, where Social Democratic identifier and welfare belief are combined into four groups. As Panel c shows, party framing had hardly any effect on policy opinion among Social Democratic voters if they neither identified with the party nor shared the belief that the welfare state is under economic pressure (probability of policy support changes from .36 to .29). A moderate change in support can be observed among Social Democratic voters who identified with the party but did not share the belief that the welfare state is under pressure (probabilities change from .26 to .41) and among Social Democratic voters not identifying with the party but sharing the belief of pressure on the welfare state (probabilities change from .53 to .65).⁵

These results imply that even voters who thought there is no economic pressure on the welfare state could, to some extent, be persuaded by the economic frame and the accompanying policy solution if they identified with the party, just as voters who did not identify with the party could be persuaded by it to some extent if they shared the belief emphasized in the frame.

What is striking, however, is that really big opinion change only occurred among Social Democratic identifiers sharing the belief that the welfare state is under economic pressure. Thus, for the Social Democrats to be able to frame policy opinion on the early retirement issue, receivers must both share the belief about the issue and identify with the party sponsor, but then policy support, in return, changed remarkably (probability of support changed from .42 to .76, or an increase of 81%).⁶

Discussion

This natural experiment of party framing effects provided a rare real-world situation for assessing the effects of changing framing of a major political issue while holding constant the party sponsor of the frames. Analyzing public responses to this marked change in party framing advances our understanding of framing effects and public opinion formation in several important ways. First, despite the fact that the frames surrounding political issues are often crafted and promoted by political parties, very few studies have actually examined to what extent political parties can frame opinion. This study addressed the neglected influence of the party sponsor on citizens' reaction to issue frames. The findings clearly suggest that people are more inclined to follow an issue frame if it is explicitly sponsored by a party they feel attached to. Thus, Social Democratic voters changed their policy preferences on the early retirement benefits issue whereas other respondents collectively did not during the shifting framing of the issue in April 2005. This partisan bias was pronounced especially among Social Democratic voters who also identified with the party. The analyses could not clarify whether this partisan bias is mediated by citizens paying more attention to what their own party says (see Taber & Lodge, 2006) or whether they judge the frame as stronger if it is promoted by their party (see Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Druckman, 2001); in any case, however, these findings suggest that parties can play a vital role as opinion leaders, at least among their own supporters, and parties thus matter to framing effects.

Second, however, the analyses also pointed out that parties might face constraints in framing opinion, even among their own voters, because citizens might draw on their own preexisting beliefs about the issue. The analyses showed that the Social Democratic shift in framing of the early retirement benefits issue influenced opinion, but only among Social Democrats who, at the outset, shared the belief that the welfare state is under economic stress. In other words, real-world framing effects can be large but might be confined to specific segments of the public. Thus, a party can move opinion to some extent among its loyal supporters, regardless of their own perception of the issue. But if a party frame should really sway opinion, the considerations emphasized in the frame must resonate with the preexisting beliefs of receivers.

These findings were reached within a more realistic design examining actual framing processes as they unfolded in the real world. While such a larger degree of realism is much needed in extant framing research (cf. Kinder, 2007), the present design also has some limitations. First, compared to the typical experimental setting, controlling the independent variable (i.e., party framing) was more complicated. In particular, the fact that the Social Democrats not only changed their framing of the issue (i.e., from the social frame to the economic frame) but also their policy position might complicate the interpretation of what actually caused opinion change: a change in framing or a change in position? With the data available, it is difficult to rule out that opinion change could have been, and to some extent probably was, driven by change in the party's policy position rather than change in framing of the issue. The strong effects of party identification might be an indication of this possibility. Nevertheless, the finding that Social Democratic voters' opinion change was clearly conditioned by their welfare beliefs (i.e., by whether the economic frame resonated with their preexisting beliefs) is reassuring to the conclusion that change in the actual framing of the issue mattered to opinion formation. Future studies in real-world contexts should go further to establish framing by including measures of underlying mechanisms, such as changes in the subjective importance citizens attribute to competing considerations (Nelson et al., 1997).

Second, the present design is also unable to answer for how long the observed party framing effects lasted. Data only allowed gauging opinion over a period of a few weeks following the election of the new Social Democratic party leader. Over this period, framing effects appeared to be substantial, but the longevity of such effects remains unclear (see Chong & Druckman, 2008). Finally, to study the effects of frames promoted by political parties, it would be particularly helpful to draw on panel data in order to examine to what extent people change parties rather than change opinions. There is, however, no indication in the present study that party shifting was a major response to the shift in Social Democratic framing (e.g., Table 1 provided fairly stable marginals on welfare beliefs before and after the change).

With these caveats in order, the present study challenges existing literature on political parties and public opinion. Conventional wisdom is that most people, due to their lack of interest in policy affairs and limited political knowledge, simply follow the policy positions suggested by their party or other credible leaders without paying much attention to the actual substance of issues (e.g., Zaller, 1996). This study corroborated that cues are important to opinion formation, but also pointed to the importance of citizens' preexisting beliefs and (lack of) identification as limiting the freedom political leaders have to lead public opinion.

These findings are consistent with framing researchers who suggest that citizens do not necessarily follow all of the considerations put forward in a communication, but instead engage in "a more deliberate integration process" whereby they "consider the importance and relevance of each accessible idea" to their opinion formation (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 578; see, e.g., Slothuus, 2008; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). This study adds to these investigations by emphasizing that citizens not only assess issue frames with an explicit sponsor based on its perceived credibility (e.g., Druckman, 2001) but, in addition, use their own interpretations of the issue.

This means that political elites face important constraints on their abilities to frame public opinion. But at the same time political parties can act as important landmarks in the political landscape for the citizenry (see Sniderman & Bullock, 2004). Thus, even those Social Democratic voters concerned about strains on public welfare budgets did in no way support abolishing the early retirement benefits to the extent they did after their party changed policy. Not until the Social Democratic shift to an economic framing of the issue—and the concomitant policy solution—did these voters see that an answer to their concern might be restricting the early retirement benefits. In this way, political parties are important in structuring public opinion, while party leaders simultaneously are constrained by citizens' prior beliefs.

Notes

1. The term "natural experiment" has been used in recent studies of communication effects (e.g., Huber & Arceneaux, 2007), but is somewhat controversial because there is no random assignment to conditions (Barabas & Jerit, in press). An alternative term would be "quasi-experiment" with an "interrupted time-series design" (see Cook & Campbell, 1979).

2. An initial sample of articles ($N = 111$) was selected through a keyword search in the Infomedia database by using the words "efterløn*" and "Lykketoft"/"Thorning-Schmidt." Articles explicitly relating to the Social Democratic policy on the issue were analyzed further. As expected, in the Lykketoft period ($N = 21$), the party advocated to maintain/improve the early retirement benefits in 86% of the articles and never advocated restricting the benefits (the remaining articles provided no clear position). Conversely, in the Thorning-Schmidt period ($N = 50$), the party advocated to restrict

the benefits in 44% of the articles and never advocated to maintain/improve the benefits (the remaining articles presented no clear position). These figures clearly reflect the party's U-turn on the issue. (See the Appendix for details on coding.)

3. In fact, additional interviews were collected from June 24 through August 31, 2005, but these additional cases ($N = 256$) only relate to the 2001–2005 panel component of the survey; these cases are not included in the current analyses because they are too few, and interviews occurred too late to meaningfully track over-time reactions to the Social Democratic message. The response and cooperation rates are calculated based on the total number of interviews completed by August 31 (combined for the 2005 probability sample and the 2001–2005 panel). The response rate (RR1) for interviews completed by May 19 was 46%; due to incomplete information in the technical report from the Danish National Election Survey, it has not been possible to only calculate the cooperation rate for interviews completed by May 19. For further details on sampling, data collection, and so forth, see Andersen, Rathlev, Andersen, and Pedersen (2005).

4. The results would be virtually the same if nonvoters were excluded from the analyses.

5. The survey asked respondents about media exposure in the election campaign (January–February). Using these measures, there is no indication that exposure to television news or newspaper reading (or combined) moderated party framing effects. Neither does political knowledge, as a general tendency to follow politics, appear to have any consistent moderating effects, except that the moderating effect of prior beliefs is more pronounced among the most politically aware; however, this finding is based on a small number of respondents and should be considered suggestive.

6. The moderating effects of party identification and prior beliefs are robust to inclusion of the “late” respondents interviewed in weeks 18 through 20. However, the overall opinion change among Social Democratic voters in response to the shift in party framing is smaller, but still significant, if the late respondents are included in the analysis. This suggests that the framing effect faded after 3 weeks; however, this result should be interpreted with caution because the composition of the late respondents differed from the overall sample.

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Appendix: Framing Analysis in Figure 2

All articles in the sample ($N = 111$) were coded to determine whether the article referred to the Social Democratic policy on the early retirement benefits issue, even if the actual position on the issue was not clear (yes, no, not sure). This variable was denoted *presence*. Party leader candidates did not count as representing the party line. If the articles referred

to the Social Democratic policy ($N = 71$), the party's position on the issue and framing of it was further coded.

Position was coded by answering the following for each article: What is the party's/party leader's attitude toward the early retirement benefits? ("to restrict/retrrench the early retirement benefits," coded 1; "to maintain/leave unchanged the early retirement benefits," coded 2; "to improve/expand the early retirement benefits," coded 3; none of these/not sure, coded 4). Coders were instructed that to gauge the policy position expressed it might be necessary to interpret the position in connection with which frame is provided to support/justify it. For example, in some cases the party wants to "change" the early retirement benefits, which in itself has no clear direction, but in conjunction with the economic frame it is clear that "change" here means "restrict" (e.g., "the early retirement benefits should be changed for people under the age of 40 years").

Frame was coded by answering the following for each article: Does the article tell from which perspective or rationale (that is, frame) the party/party leader discusses the early retirement issue? ("yes, within the social frame," coded 1; "yes, within the economic frame," coded 2; "yes, within another frame," coded 3; "no frame is invoked," coded 4; not sure, coded 9). The *social frame* discusses the early retirement benefits by emphasizing social welfare rights and taking care of people who need benefits. Specific examples include "The early retirement issue is linked to social welfare rights"; "Worn out people should have the opportunity to withdraw from the labor market"; "There should be better opportunities for people receiving early retirement benefits to work part-time"; "The importance of showing consideration for the aged employees and/or the work environment of senior workers"; and "Unemployment/need for more jobs to aged people."

The *economic frame* discusses early retirement benefits by emphasizing strains on public budgets and concerns about being able to afford public welfare in the future. Specific examples include: "In the coming years there will be a growing number of people retiring and fewer people in the labor force"; "If we are to afford public welfare in the future, we need to restrict the early retirement benefits"; and "Taking the public deficits into account, we need to restrict the early retirement benefits." Coders were instructed that at the time of the media coverage, one or a few catch words or symbols might have been enough to refer to either frame, as is indicated by the examples above (e.g., "for people under the age of 40").

All articles were coded by the author. To assess reliability, a second coder coded a random selection of approximately 25% of the articles in the sample. Using the kappa statistic, reliability reached satisfactory levels across the three variables: presence, kappa = .83 ($SE = .11$); position, kappa = .87 ($SE = .09$); and frame, kappa = .74 ($SE = .14$). On the latter variable, the second coder had coded one article as 3 (other frame), and this was merged with code 4 (no frame) to calculate the kappa statistic.