Framing Responsibility for Political Issues

SHANTO IYENGAR

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By SHANTO IYENGAR

ABSTRACT: This article examines the influence of television news on viewers' attributions of responsibility for political issues. Television's systematic reliance on episodic as opposed to thematic depictions of political life elicits individualistic attributions of responsibility for national problems such as poverty and terrorism. These attributions emphasize the actions of private rather than governmental actors. By obscuring the connections between political problems and the actions or inactions of political leaders, television news trivializes political discourse and weakens the accountability of elected officials.

Shanto Iyengar is professor of political science and communication studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His principal publications include News That Matters *(coauthored with D. R. Kinder);* Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues; Explorations in Political Psychology *(coedited with William J. McGuire), and the forthcoming* Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate *(coauthored with Stephen Ansolabehere).*

THE concept of responsibility is an essential building block of all social knowledge. From the demeanor of one's next-door neighbors to the behavior of elected officials in the nation's capital, people spontaneously attribute responsibility for the behaviors they observe. Attributions of responsibility are known to exert powerful influence over a broad spectrum of interpersonal and social attitudes.[1]

The two principal types of attributions correspond to causal and treatment responsibility.[2] Causal responsibility concerns the origin of a problem, while treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the ability to alleviate the problem. Both types of attributions are especially relevant for understanding political life. Why political problems occur and recur and how they might be appropriately remedied are perennial themes in political campaigns. Do the poor prefer to remain wards of the state rather than to work for a living, or are they victims of circumstances and forces beyond their control? What course of action is likely to reduce poverty, and who are the persons or institutions with the ability to carry it out?

The importance of people's causal and treatment attributions for political issues has not been lost on those who seek public office. Since voters tend to punish or reward politicians depending upon the state of national—especially economic—conditions, incumbent officials from the president on down are quick to claim responsibility for outcomes deemed favorable and disclaim responsibility for events or decisions with negative implications.[3] The increasingly partisan and vitriolic debates over "who really did it" have, by some accounts, contributed to considerable public disillusionment with political leaders.[4]

How do people decide questions of responsibility? The dominant paradigm treats attributions as residues of political socialization and accul-

1. The psychological evidence is reviewed in David J. Schneider, Albert H. Hastorf, and Phoebe C. Ellsworth, *Person Perception* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Phillip Brickman et al., "Models of Helping and Coping," *American Psychologist*, vol. 37 (1982); James R. Bettman and Barton A. Weitz, "Attributions in the Board Room: Causal Reasoning in Corporate Annual Reports," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 28 (1983); James Lemkau, F. B. Bryant, and Phillip Brickman, "Client Commitment in the Helping Relationship," in *Basic Processes in Helping Relationships*, ed. T. A. Mills (New York: Aldine, 1982); Valerie S. Folkes, "Consumer Reactions to Product Failure: An Attributional Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 10 (1984).

2. Alan I. Abramowitz, David Lanoue, and Subha Ramesh, "Economic Conditions, Causal Attributions, and Political Evaluations in the 1984 Presidential Election," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 50 (1988); Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

3. Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Douglas A. Hibbs, *The American Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, and Adam Simon, "Good News, Bad News, and Economic Voting" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 1990); Donald R. Kinder and Roderick Kiewiet, "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 23 (1979).

4. Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

turation. In this view, an individual's political ideology or worldview provides the dominant influence over attributions of responsibility. Newt Gingrich holds the poor responsible for poverty; Bill Clinton attributes responsibility to societal forces and institutions. In short, how individuals assign responsibility is considered part and parcel of long-standing political predispositions.

While the influence of culture or ideology on attribution of responsibility cannot be denied, there is considerable evidence that short-term factors are just as important. Beliefs about who or what is responsible are likely to shift depending upon the information environment in which political issues and events are presented. Today, the most important of these contextual influences is television news.

FRAMING EFFECTS OF NEWS COVERAGE

The concept of framing refers to the effects of presentation on judgment and choice. In the psychological literature, it is well known that individuals' choices vary dramatically depending upon whether the options are presented as potential gains or losses. When faced with prospects that are presented as relative gains (such as winning $1), experimental participants exhibit risk aversion—they prefer a sure gain to a gamble. When faced with a prospective loss, however, they become risk seeking and prefer to gamble than to accept a certain loss.[5] Analogous framing effects have been obtained by public opinion researchers who elicit diverging responses by varying the form and wording of survey questions. For example, the stimulus "people on welfare" typically elicits more disapproving and less charitable responses than the stimulus "poor people."[6]

Given the widespread presence of framing effects associated with wording shifts in the presentation of choice problems or opinion questions, similar effects might be expected with media news presentations. Most people encounter the world of public affairs through the language of television, and television news coverage of political issues embodies two distinct frames or modes of presentation: the episodic news frame and the thematic news frame. The research that is summarized here was designed to investigate the effects of these alternative frames on viewers'

5. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Choices, Values, and Frames," *American Psychologist*, vol. 39 (1984); Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions," in *Rational Choice: The Contrast Between Economics and Psychology*, ed. Hillel Einhorn and Robin Hogarth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George A. Quattrone and Amos Tversky, "Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 82 (1988); Richard Thaler, "The Psychology and Economics Conference Handbook," in *Rational Choice: The Contrast Between Economics and Psychology*, ed. Einhorn and Hogarth.

6. Tom Smith, "That Which We Call Welfare by Any Other Name Would Smell Sweeter: An Analysis of the Impact of Question Wording on Response Patterns," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 51 (1987); Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser, *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Context* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

attributions of responsibility for political issues.

The episodic news frame depicts issues in terms of specific instances—for example, a terrorist bombing, a homeless person, or a case of illegal drug usage. Episodic reports are essentially illustrations of issues. The thematic frame, by contrast, depicts political issues more broadly and abstractly by placing them in some appropriate context—historical, geographical, or otherwise. A thematic report on poverty might present information about recent trends in the rate of poverty and the areas with the greatest concentration of poor people. In appearance, the thematic frame takes the form of a backgrounder report featuring a series of people talking.

In practice, of course, few news reports are purely episodic or thematic. A close-up portrait of an unemployed worker will invariably make reference to the national rate of unemployment. Conversely, a news story about congressional efforts to reform welfare programs might include an interview with a welfare recipient. Content analyses of television news coverage, however, suggests that in most cases one frame or the other predominates.[7]

The nature of television news and the increasingly competitive nature of the news business have combined to create a premium for episodic coverage of political issues. Episodic reports tend to provide good pictures; they do not require reporters with subject-matter expertise; and, being devoid of interpretive analysis, they are less likely to be labeled as biased by media critics. A number of content-analytic studies have documented the pervasiveness of episodic framing in broadcast news.[8]

With the support of the National Science Foundation, I was able to carry out a series of experiments designed to investigate how television's reliance on episodic framing affects the viewing public's understanding of political issues. The results showed that episodic framing breeds individualistic as opposed to societal attributions of responsibility; national issues are traced to private actions and motives rather than deep-seated socioeconomic or political conditions. Given the public's sustained exposure to episodic framing, these results suggest that the ultimate effect of television news is to protect elected officials from policy failures or controversies and thus strengthen their legitimacy.

RESEARCH METHODS

The experiments were aimed at two sets of national issues: issues concerning public order and issues concerning social or economic welfare. The former category consisted of crime and terrorism; the latter included unemployment, poverty, and racial inequality. These five issues have been at the forefront of political life in recent years and show no signs of abatement.

In each experiment, media framing of the target issue was manipu-

7. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?* chap. 3.

8. Ibid.; David L. Altheide, "Format and Symbol in Television Coverage of Terrorism in the United States and Great Britain," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1987); William A. Gamson, "News as Framing," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 33 (1989).

lated so that some participants were exposed to episodic news while others watched thematic coverage. To use the example of poverty, one set of viewers watched a news report that described the financial woes of an unemployed autoworker in Ohio; others watched a report that juxtaposed the national unemployment rate with the size of the federal budget deficit. Since participants were exposed to experimental conditions at random and since the conditions differed only with respect to episodic or thematic coverage of the target issue, differences in viewers' responses between conditions can be treated as evidence of framing effects.[9]

Participants in the experiments were residents of the Three Village area of Suffolk County, New York, who were recruited through newspaper and other forms of advertising that offered payment of $10. When potential subjects responded to the advertisement, they were screened to exclude noncitizens, college students, and people under the age of 18. Pooled across all experiments, the participants were generally representative of the local area in terms of their social background and political orientation.[10]

All studies were conducted at the Media Research Laboratory, an office suite located on the campus of the State University of New York at Stony Brook. When participants arrived, they were informed that the study concerned selective perception of television news and that they were to watch a videotape of randomly selected news stories broadcast by the three major networks over the past six months.[11] After receiving their instructions, participants completed a short pretest questionnaire concerning their personal background, degree of attention to politics, and media habits and tastes.

In order to reduce the aura of the research laboratory, participants were encouraged to come with a friend, spouse, or coworker. Typically, participants watched the videotape with someone they knew. In addition, the viewing environment was furnished casually to resemble a typical living room or family room, and participants could sip coffee or browse through newspapers and magazines.

Following completion of the pretest, participants watched a twenty-

9. Of course, this is a probabilistic argument. It is possible that despite the use of randomization, experimental conditions will still differ in composition. It is standard practice in experimental research to verify that random assignment of participants achieves the desired effect. In none of the framing experiments described here did the conditions differ significantly on any relevant background characteristic.

10. The nine separate experiments were administered between June 1985 and September 1987. The number of individuals who participated in each experiment ranged from 40 to 244. While the participants constituted a reasonable approximation of Suffolk County, New York, they were, in comparison with the American electorate, more affluent, more Catholic and more Jewish, more educated, and more likely to have voted in the last election. For further details on the sample participants, see Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?* chap. 3.

11. The instructions stated, "Today television news is the major source of information for Americans. This study is about how people evaluate, understand, and interpret television news stories. We are particularly interested in 'selective perception.' Do people's opinions about politics and government influence how they react to news? Do Republicans and Democrats really see the same news?"

minute videotape that included seven news stories. The fourth story on the tape was the experimental manipulation. This story framed the issue under investigation in either thematic or episodic terms. The treatment story was between two and three minutes in length.

On completion of the videotape, participants received the posttest questionnaire, which included a battery of open-ended questions probing attributions of causal and treatment responsibility for the target and other political issues. Specifically, individuals were asked, "In your opinion, what are the most important causes of _____?" They were then asked, "If you were asked to suggest ways to reduce ____, what would you suggest?" Each individual was allowed to answer freely, without prompting. Up to four separate responses were coded for each question.[12] In addition, participants completed numerous other questions concerning their attitudes toward groups, political leaders, and public policies. Once participants had completed the posttest, they were debriefed in full and paid.[13]

The experimental design described permits estimation of the effects of the treatment story—episodic or thematic—on viewers' attributions. However, because the experimental manipulations were based on actual news reports, they necessarily differ in many ways. These differences were minimized by editing (using studio-quality equipment) the episodic and thematic versions of the report so as to maximize the similarity of their content. For instance, they were edited to be of equal length, and when taken from the same network, the anchor's lead-in remarks were used in both cases.[14]

In short, the design used here is subject to the usual trade-off between realism and precision. The use of actual news stories created extraneous differences between the different news frames. By constraining the treatment stories to a high degree of visual and semantic similarity, however, the role of these differences was minimized.

RESULTS

Responses to the open-ended attribution questions were plentiful. On average, participants nominated two causes and two treatments for each of the five issues.[15] Causal responsibility for both crime and terrorism was assigned to the individual perpe-

12. Although these responses were unwieldy and coding intensive, they have the advantage of nonreactivity; unlike closed-ended questions, open-ended questions do not cue respondents to think of particular causes or treatments. Two coders read each questionnaire and classified each response. Despite the large number of raw categories, intercoder agreement indicated acceptable levels of reliability.

13. The experimental procedures adhered fully to the American Psychological Association's guidelines on the conduct of experimental research.

14. To guard against the possibility of confounded variables, the experimental tests of framing were always replicated with an entirely different set of news stories. To the degree that the observed framing effects appear across different sets of manipulations, the possibility that idiosyncratic differences between episodic and thematic reports are at work is minimized.

15. Crime elicited the largest number of causal and treatment attributions—2.7 and 2.1, respectively—presumably because of its relatively obtrusive nature.

trator (individualistic responsibility), to a variety of societal conditions including economic deprivation and political oppression (societal responsibility), or to the failure of the criminal justice process to mete out adequate retribution (punitive responsibility). Some 50 percent of the causal responses referred to societal responsibility; 36 percent suggested individualistic responsibility; and only 12 percent cited judicial leniency.

Treatment responsibility for crime and terrorism was reserved exclusively for society and government and took two forms—addressing the underlying political or economic grievances (societal treatment responsibility) or imposing more severe retaliation and punishment against terrorists and criminals (punitive treatment responsibility). Sixty percent of the responses called for more punitive policies, and 40 percent referred to economic and political change.

Turning to the issues of social welfare, causal responsibility was assigned either to individuals or to society at large. Attribution of individual responsibility referred to insufficient achievement motivation or inadequate training and education. Attributions of societal responsibility encompassed economic conditions, such as the changing nature of work; cultural and ideological values, such as racial prejudice; and unresponsive public policies, such as cuts in federal social welfare programs. For unemployment and racial inequality, societal causes outnumbered individual causes by a considerable margin, but in the case of poverty, the balance was relatively even.

Unlike crime and terrorism, the suggested cures for issues of social welfare were directed at actions by individuals and the collectivity (societal responsibility). Once again, poverty elicited an equal number of individualistic and societal prescriptions, whereas calls for societal action far exceeded references to individual action in the cases of racial inequality and unemployment. Relative to the unemployed and racial minorities, poor people are thought to have more control over their fates.

How did the relative prominence of individualistic and societal attributions change as a result of media framing? The most consistent framing effects were detected with news coverage of poverty and terrorism. Less clear-cut results, in which the effects of framing varied with the subject matter of the news, were observed with crime and racial inequality. Finally, attributions of responsibility for the issue of unemployment were unaffected by the experimental manipulations of framing.

Poverty and terrorism

Attributions of responsibility for poverty—both causal and treatment—became significantly more individualistic when news coverage was episodic. Conversely, thematic coverage elicited a greater preponderance of societal attributions. In effect, news that dwells on particular instances of poverty encourages viewers to blame the victim.

In addition to these significant framing effects, viewers' attributions of responsibility for poverty were also sensitive to the specific categories of

poor people depicted in the news. In one of the experiments, participants were exposed to one of four different episodic reports corresponding to different groups of welfare recipients: elderly widows, unemployed male workers, children, and single mothers. Within each of these categories, the treatment report varied the race of the poor person. Thus some participants watched a news report on hungry black children, while others watched the identical report, except that the children shown were white.

The results of this more elaborate study suggested that attributions of responsibility for poverty were not only contingent upon the news frame—in the sense that thematic coverage made viewers more societal in their reasoning, while episodic coverage had the opposite effect—but also sensitive to the particular class of poor people encountered in the news. The class that elicited the harshest responses—that is, the most numerous individualistic attributions of cause and treatment—was single mothers. In effect, compared with elderly widows, children, and unemployed males, single mothers are considered less deserving.

The race of the poor person depicted in the news also proved to be a meaningful cue. When viewers encountered black poor people, they often argued in favor of individual as opposed to societal treatment responsibility. Differences in causal attribution associated with the race of the poor person were in the same direction, but failed to achieve statistical significance. These racial differences were especially pronounced in the single-mother condition, where the black mother attracted more than double the volume of individualistic treatment responses of her white counterpart.

Turning to the issue of terrorism, two separate experiments yielded evidence of significant framing effects. When the news depicted terrorism in thematic terms—for instance, by noting recent changes in U.S. diplomatic policy toward countries suspected of fomenting international terrorism—viewers' causal and treatment attributions gravitated toward societal factors. When the news depicted a particular act of terrorism, however, attributions became significantly more individualistic and punitive in orientation. The effects were especially strong in the area of treatment responsibility; under the episodic framing of terrorism, the ratio of punitive to societal treatment attributions was 3:1; under conditions of thematic framing, the ratio was 1:1.

Crime and racial inequality

Unlike the experiments on poverty and terrorism, where the framing manipulation independently influenced viewers' attributions, the studies bearing on crime and racial inequality yielded more ambiguous and complex results. For both issues, the importance of the episodic versus thematic framing manipulation depended upon the particular subject-matter focus of the news. In the study on crime, participants were exposed to news coverage of violent crime (by far the most common theme in television news about crime), drug abuse, or the workings of the criminal jus-

tice process. The violent-crime category was subdivided into "black" and "white" categories depending upon the race of the individuals depicted as the perpetrators of criminal activity.[16]

The effects of framing in this experiment were weak and varied with the subject matter of crime news. The episodic conditions were characterized by significantly higher levels of individualistic causal attributions than the thematic conditions only when the report on crime concerned white violent crime or the criminal justice process.

While this experiment failed to generate a consistent pattern of framing effects, it did shed further light on the importance of racial cues conveyed in news coverage. Societal causes of crime were cited least frequently—29 percent of all causal attributions were societal—in the black crime condition. In this respect, the black crime condition deviated significantly from the three remaining subject-matter conditions. Not only did news about black crime divert attention from societal responsibility, but it also highlighted individual responsibility. More than 60 percent of all causal attributions were directed at individuals when the news reported on black violent crime, which was double the comparable percentage in the white-violent-crime condition.

The experiment featuring racial inequality as the target issue incorporated three subject-matter categories, which corresponded to the prevailing themes in network news coverage of this issue. Participants watched a news report on racial discrimination against blacks, on economic inequality between whites and blacks, or on affirmative action. The framing manipulation was confined to the affirmative action and economic inequality conditions.

The effects of framing were limited to news coverage of economic inequality. In the case of affirmative action, attributions of responsibility were unaffected by framing; societal attributions of responsibility were the dominant responses in both the episodic and the thematic conditions. When the focus of the news was black poverty, however, episodic framing significantly increased the prominence of individualistic attributions and reduced the frequency of societal attributions. By directing attention to a black poor person, the episodic report prompted a relative outpouring of individualistic accounts of racial inequality in American society.

Unemployment

Two separate studies were devoted to unemployment. In Study 1, two of the three conditions represented thematic framing. The news reports described trends in the recent unemployment rate and the difficulties facing the U.S. steel industry. The episodic framing condition described

16. The "black crime–episodic" condition described a violent gang-related confrontation in Los Angeles. The "black crime–thematic" condition described the extent of crime in inner-city neighborhoods in several major cities. The "white crime–episodic" condition focused on the well-known shooting incident in the New York City subway in which Bernhard Goetz, a white passenger, shot at four black teenagers who allegedly approached him in a menacing manner. The "white crime–thematic" condition detailed the growing importance of organized crime.

the economic difficulties facing an unemployed white male.

In all three conditions, attributions of societal responsibility overwhelmed all other responses. The level of societal responsibility was lowest in the episodic condition, but the magnitude of the differences was trivial.

The second effort to detect framing effects included one thematic condition—on regional differences in unemployment—and two episodic conditions on unemployed autoworkers, one of whom was black and the other, white. Once again, no significant framing effects emerged. Attributions of responsibility for unemployment were predominantly societal regardless of the news frame or the race of the unemployed worker.

Overall, with the exception of unemployment, the results suggest that media framing does shape attributions of responsibility for political issues.[17] Considering the relatively minute scope of the experimental manipulations (a single news report) and the fact that they addressed highly visible issues with which the participants had extensive familiarity, it is notable that any of the experimental effects proved significant. In general, the dominant episodic frame used by television news increased viewers' reliance on individualistic or nonsocietal constructions of political issues, in which the characteristics or motives of private citizens are the most relevant causes or cures. Prior efforts to explain the prominence of individualistic attributions in the public's reasoning about political issues have cited mainstream cultural values as the source. However, the well-documented tendency of Americans to consider poor people, minorities, or those who break the law as personally responsible for their actions may be due not only to cultural norms but also to a pattern of television news coverage in which the spotlight is directed at poor people, criminals, or terrorists.

17. The distinctiveness of unemployment may stem from the unusually high level of prominence accorded the issue during the period of this research. Thus people may have regarded unemployment as a particular instance of national economic problems.

Spillover effects

To this point, the tests of framing have been confined to particular issue areas. It is possible that framing effects may affect related issues. Episodic framing of poverty, for instance, may carry over to influence attributions of responsibility for unemployment or racial inequality. There were two tests of spillover effects. The first concerned the degree to which episodic or thematic framing of the target issue affects attributions of responsibility for a closely related issue. The second test addressed the degree to which episodic or thematic framing affects the consistency of viewers' attributions for related issues.

The first study investigated spillover between poverty and unemployment. If the two issues are psychologically connected, thematic framing of poverty should strengthen attribution of societal responsibility for unemployment, while episodic framing of poverty should strengthen attribution of individual responsibility for unemployment. The results demonstrated that, with one excep-

tion (thematic framing of poverty significantly increased the prominence of societal causal attribution for unemployment), the manner in which the news framed poverty had no relevance to individuals' understanding of unemployment.

As a second test of spillover, between-issue correlations between summary measures of causal and treatment responsibility were computed.[18]

These correlations were small (.22 for causal responsibility and .26 for treatment responsibility), suggesting that individuals did not attribute responsibility consistently. The level of between-issue consistency was uniformly low in both episodic and thematic conditions.

The second study of spillover focused on crime and terrorism. Of the five different categories of causal and treatment attributions (individual, societal, and punitive causal responsibility; societal and punitive treatment responsibility), only one showed traces of spillover; episodic framing of terrorism induced significantly fewer societal treatment attributions for crime. In all remaining cases, the framing effects were issue specific.

Unlike the earlier results on poverty and unemployment, this study showed that thematic framing significantly increased the consistency of the attributions across issues. When exposed to episodic framing, viewers tended to offer distinct attributions for crime and terrorism; when shown thematic coverage, their attributions became more convergent, suggesting that they linked the two issues. All told, the analyses of spillover showed that individuals tend to exhibit little consistency across issues when attributing responsibility to individual, societal, or other factors. People tend to consider issues discretely rather than developing an overarching schema for political responsibility. Attribution of responsibility is domain specific rather than general. These data thus confirm the classic findings of Lane and Converse that political belief systems are narrow rather than broad and that particular issue publics exhibit distinct opinion profiles.[19]

CONCLUSION

Two sets of implications can be drawn from the media-framing experiments. First, the evidence on framing suggests a circumstantially bounded process of political reasoning in which attributions of responsibility are buffeted about by the prevailing winds of news coverage. While core values such as individualism and the work ethic encourage citizens to hold individuals rather than society responsible for issues such as poverty or racial inequality, exposure to thematic framing of issues can and does override these dispositions. Therefore, the dominant dispositional model of public opinion and political behavior that grants monopoly status to stable personal

18. Each respondent's percentage of individualistic attributions was subtracted from the percentage of societal attributions to arrive at a net responsibility score.

19. Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology: Why the Common Man Believes What He Does* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964).

influences—most notably, party identification—must be revised to allow for circumstantial influence.

In addition to framing, the news shapes attributions of responsibility in other ways. Racial cues in the news proved significant in shaping viewers' responses to crime and poverty. It is possible that by depicting African Americans in the role of poor people or perpetrators of criminal activity, television may contribute to a reaffirmation of old-fashioned racial prejudice. That is, the frequent association of African Americans with economic failure and violent crime encourages and justifies the expression of racist attitudes.[20]

The second set of implications concerns the dominance of the episodic frame in television news and the resulting distortions in the political process. By reducing complex issues to the level of anecdotal cases, episodic framing leads viewers to attributions that shield society and government from responsibility. Confronted with a parade of news stories describing particular instances of national issues, viewers come to focus on the particular individuals or groups depicted in the news rather than historical, social, political, or other such structural factors.

Americans are not, however, intrinsically averse to structural accounts of responsibility for political issues. When the news presents a general frame of reference for national problems, viewers' reasoning about causal and treatment responsibility shifts accordingly. For example, following exposure to increases in malnutrition nationwide, poverty becomes a matter of inadequate governmental action; confronted with news about deteriorating economic conditions in inner-city areas, individuals cite increased economic opportunity as the appropriate remedy for crime.

Because the public's reasoning about responsibility is susceptible to framing effects and because the episodic frame is so predominant, television news, in the final analysis, is a significant resource for political elites. Instead of serving as a restraining or monitoring force, television news enables incumbent officials to distance themselves from any rising tide of disenchantment over the state of public affairs.

20. For experimental evidence that demonstrates this connection, see Franklin Gilliam, Shanto Iyengar, and Adam Simon, "The Intersection of Race, Crime and Television News" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Political Science Association, Chicago, 1995).