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# Assessing the Democratic Debate: How the News Media Frame Elite Policy Discourse

KAREN CALLAGHAN and FRAUKE SCHNELL

*This article examines the way in which the news media frame public policy issues and the extent to which other political players (e.g., interest groups, politicians) influence this issue framing process. Our analysis focuses on the issue of gun control, comparing the rhetoric generated by interest groups and public officials on the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban with actual network news coverage of this legislation from 1988 to 1996. Results indicate that both sets of political players employed several interpretative issue frames and worked hard to put their preferred themes on the agenda. However, at times, the media intervened in the framing process, especially as the debate matured. Specifically, the news media (a) structured the overall tone of the gun control debate, (b) adopted a distribution of framing perspectives different from that of politicians and interest groups, and (c) packaged policy discourse more often than not in terms of the "culture of violence" theme. These findings point toward previously ignored media effects and attest to the potential role the media play in shaping public policy debates.*

**Keywords** congressional opinion, gun control, interest group politics, issue framing, media autonomy, news media

In a democratic society, the exchange of information and ideas through a free press as well as free and open public debate is a crucial element of mass participation and a requirement for democratic responsiveness to public preferences (Sartori, 1987). However, as a massive amount of scholarly work has underscored, the average citizen is neither an active consumer of information nor a consistent political participant (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991). But even when citizens do engage in "good democratic" practices like attending to political news or linking their vote choices to candidates' issue positions, they are often, whether politically sophisticated or not, at the mercy of the media and other key political agents who meet as combatants in the policy arena and determine how issue debates and policy alternatives will be structured and defined.

Just what role do the media play in policy debate? How far do their powers extend? Clearly, politicians and pressure groups try to control the shape and tone of debates

Karen Callaghan is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Frauke Schnell is Associate Professor of Political Science at West Chester University (Pennsylvania). This research was support by a 1999 Goldsmith Research Award from the Joan Shorenstein Center at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The authors thank Paul Blackman, Research Director of the National Rifle Association, and Nancy Hwa, Communications Coordinator for Handgun Control, Inc., for providing the data on their respective organization's press release activity.

Address correspondence to Karen Callaghan, Department of Political Science, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Boston, MA 02125, USA. E-mail: karen.callaghan@umb.edu

because they seek to structure outcomes favorable to their political interests. But are the media different? Do they seek to convey the essence of a policy debate and alter the message only to fit journalistic norms and the structural constraints of news presentations? Or are they more active participants who shape and alter the presentation of an issue? We argue that for strategic reasons (e.g., reelection, passage of legislation, defense of the status quo, profit, norms, ease of communication), all political participants—the media, interest groups, and politicians—purposely seek to cap the range of policy information and alternatives, and therefore attempt to control public opinion. Because citizens and pundits alike rely heavily on a "media-constructed" version of reality, it is critical to determine who controls public policy debates. Control over political rhetoric is an essential tool to influence public opinion, and the "entrenchment of some terms, and the disappearance of others, is often a signal of political triumph and defeat" (Kinder & Sanders, 1990, p. 1).

This article analyzes the interdependent yet competitive relationship between the news media, pressure groups, and elected officials in structuring and interpreting political issues. The jockeying among political elites for message control creates three general scenarios or possible outcomes in which the final presentation of news that citizens consume is (a) dominated by one side's message spin, (b) an amalgamation of all players' views with the media acting as the final arbitrators for inclusion, or (c) a communiqué that abandons other players' message inputs and creates a purely media-generated version of the debate, unique from the others players' rhetoric. Clearly, which of these message presentations consistently materializes tells us a great deal about who leads public policy debates. If the story that sees print is dominated by one player's message, then that group or individual has been able to successfully navigate the media gauntlet and thus has the potential to influence public opinion by receiving mass exposure for their message and maintaining control of the definition of the problem. However, if either the second or third scenario plays out—a "media-generated" blend of messages from different players or pure media rhetoric—then the media emerge as more active shapers of policy messages than previously documented (i.e., the media repackage other players' frames and/or create their own issue spins).

Of course, due to changes in the news business itself (e.g., the emergence of television, the commercialization of the press, and the decline in partisan sponsorship), journalists may now have more narrative license to mix facts and analysis and build story reports around their own interpretative themes. Indeed, research has increasingly pointed to the expansion of an interpretative reporting style, especially journalists' intervention in policy discourse at the expense of sources (e.g., Bennett & Manheim, 1993; Hagen, 1993; Hallin, 1992; T. Patterson, 1980, 1994, 1998). However, this journalistic or editorial autonomy in the formation of issue frames has not been empirically demonstrated. Prior work on the processes of public debate formation has focused either on the mechanisms of public policy formation (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Kingdon, 1984), the influence of changing problem definitions on public opinion (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Zaller, 1990), or interest group competition for media access (Danielian & Page, 1994; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986). Common to these analyses is the tendency to treat the media as transmitters of other players' messages, not as originators of policy debates. In contrast, we conceptualize the media's role as a dual one: as institutional players who construct and promote unique frames of their own, as well as a conduit for the dissemination of others players' frames (for a similar view, see Cohen, 1963; Cook, 1998; T. Patterson, 1998).

Within this conceptualization, we examine the ability of interest groups and politicians to effectively promote their unique policy message and penetrate media reports on an issue (i.e., get their message across to the public in an unedited form). In doing so, we move the discussion of policy debate formation away from the static or unidirectional models common in contemporary research to a "politics-as-game" framework (Ettema et al., 1991) that assumes that the activities of the media and other political actors constrain and define one another as moves are played, countered, and anticipated (see Schudson, 1995). In the world of public policy debate, as in the world of politics, elites win only at the expense of their opponents. And rhetoric is the key to winning the policy war.

We examine these relationships using a content analysis of media coverage of the gun control issue. Gun control is an ideal public policy issue to examine the intricate dynamics of the issue framing process. It is one of the most salient and long-standing debates in U.S. politics, relevant not only at the national level but for virtually all state electorates. Furthermore, the issue of gun control is clearly understood by the "average" citizen; it requires no particular expertise to form an opinion; it is an issue that is closely followed by the mass public; and, like many policy issues in the political arena, it generates a political conflict that is intense and highly emotional, fueled by tradition, fears, and widely divergent concepts of personal liberty and the limits of government responsibility (see Edel, 1995). In addition, the issue has been "reduced and polarized into two identifiable interest groups" (Moore, 1994, p. 435; S. Patterson & Eakins, 1998) each of which offers fundamentally different rhetoric. The National Rifle Association (NRA) frames gun control as a threat to liberty and any governmental regulation as the beginning of a "slippery slope." In contrast, Handgun Control Incorporated (HCI) portrays gun control legislation as sensible laws that will save lives by reducing crime and violence (see Kleck, 1991). Thus, with gun control the stage is set for a classic political conflict with two clearly discernible and divergent messages widely touted in an effort to win "the hearts and minds" of the public.

## Theoretical Background

The political process has often been defined as the struggle over whose definition of social, political, or economic phenomena will prevail (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). "If policy-making is a struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives" (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994, p. 9). The process by which all political players define and give meaning to issues and connect them to a larger political environment has come to be known as framing. Frames define the problem, diagnose its cause, offer and justify treatments for the problem, and predict their likely effects (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing effects occur whenever an issue can be presented using multiple packages or thematic slants. Since most public policy issues are inherently multidimensional, the potential for framing abounds. For instance, the nuclear power issue can be packaged as "society's commitment to technological growth" or as a "Faustian bargain with the devil" where we will inevitably pay a terrible price for the inexhaustible supply of energy we enjoy today (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). In a similar vein, a Ku Klux Klan march can be presented as a disruption of the political order or as an exercise in free speech (Nelson et al., 1997). Such frames can promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, or moral evaluation (Entman, 1993) and thus define policy debates and structure political outcomes.

Much evidence suggests the power of frames to shape citizens' policy support and

related political perceptions (e.g., Callaghan & Schnell, 2000; Iyengar, 1991; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Kinder & Nelson, 1990; Kinder & Sanders, 1990, 1996; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Nelson et al., 1997; Zaller, 1990). As Entman (1993) has pointed out: "If the text frame emphasizes a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full, the evidence of social science suggests that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty" (p. 56). By promoting a particular frame, political elites, the media, and other players can alter how an issue is understood and thus shift public opinion. In other words, political elites can effectively use frames to promote their own political ends.

Unfortunately, we know less about the ability of political elites to put forth and promote their frames than we do about the influence frames exert on public opinion. While frames can be generated by a variety of political actors seeking to either change or protect the status quo by configuring or reconfiguring issues to their advantage, their efforts to influence policy debates are often at cross purposes. They must compete against each other for issue leverage and to obtain their desired ends. This strategic dance is typically defined by a high level of conflict and well organized opposition on both sides of the debate (see Schattschneider, 1960; Walker, 1991).

One avenue for the communication of frames is direct contact between political players and the citizenry. Direct forms of communication accessible to policy players include venues such as newsletters and official correspondence that, while effective for elite communication to highly motivated or strongly ideological voters, are less likely to produce mass awareness or mobilization. To expand the scope of the conflict, all political agents, interest groups, and politicians alike need the mass media to convey information to the general public and to expand their visibility (Cigler & Loomis, 1995). Unlike direct communication between political actors and the citizenry, information provided by the mass media is second-hand knowledge—or, as Walter Lippmann (1920) described it, the "pseudo-environment of reports, rumors, and guesses" (p. 54)—and as such provides the press with a tremendous influence over the flow and shape of policy debates.

### *The Dual Role of the Media*

Scholars often describe the qualities or norms by which media performance in a democratic state may be judged (e.g., Bennett, 1990; McQuail, 1992). Ideally, the media are expected to serve as political watchdogs or "guardians of the public interest" (Janowitz, 1975; Schudson, 1998; Sparrow, 1999) who champion truth, pluralism, objectivity, balance, and accuracy (Bennett, 1990, p. 105). Beyond anecdotal evidence, however, there is little to sustain such normative expectations (see Chomsky & Hermann, 1988; Parenti, 1986). Some researchers (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996) take as a basic assumption that need of journalists to quote authoritative sources and argue that as a result news outputs are a function of "official" views on a given issue. In other words, reporters "index their coverage to the range of opinion that exists in the government" (Zaller & Chiu, 1996, p. 392). However, we think that at least some of the time, the media themselves drive the political debate. Given the ratings-driven environment in which the news is packaged and conveyed, journalists frequently exploit the personality, sensationalism, drama, and conflict of stories, thereby downplaying the larger social, economic, or political picture (Bennett, 1996; Sparrow, 1999). The market-based environment in which the media operate places them alongside other strategic actors in their attempts to redefine and alter political rhetoric (Cook, 1998; Hallin, 1992). Thus, the role that the media play is more complex than that of other actors. That is, the media

simultaneously may act as constructors of unique frames as well as a conduit for the public communiqués of others.

By selectively choosing to cover one side or both sides of an issue, putting forth their own interpretation, simplifying events or stories, or by simply allocating greater coverage to one issue over another, the media act as gatekeepers, advocates, and interpreters of political themes and information. Journalists and editors draw maps or internal story patterns for their readers, and these maps or frames cognitively serve to structure the public debate, influence readers' level of information, and attribute policy responsibility (see Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Kinder & Sanders, 1990, among others). Whether from journalistic norms (Graber, 1993; Tuchman, 1980; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991), media dependency on sources (Bennett, 1990), the desire to adhere to public preferences (Sahr, 1993), the desire to earn profits (Bennett, 1988; Parenti, 1986), the value preferences of journalists (Gans, 1980), or the accessibility of spokespersons and other practical considerations (Tuchman, 1980), the media shape how issues are framed, either directly or through the choice of which players' messages they highlight. From the perspective of strategic politics, the media are a mine field that needs to be carefully negotiated in order to successfully put forth issue frames. At the very least, the relationship between the media and other elites is a symbiotic one, based on the reciprocal give and take of information (Gans, 1980; Hess, 1984). Just as policy actors need the media to put forth their message to the public, so too do the media need political elites to serve as spokespersons, fill news holes, provide drama, and add issue balance.

### *The Reciprocity of the News*

There are two phases of the dynamic relationship between the news media, pressure groups, and politicians that we seek to test: players' inputs into the debate and the issue outputs that the media report.

*Interest Groups.* Interest groups' attempts to pressure for political change include insider and outsider strategies. Insider strategies such as providing expert testimony to the legislature, contributing to campaigns, or promoting an issue among elite circles are often only the first step in a complex process of policy competition. Often, interest groups will decide "to go public" (Schattschneider, 1960) to enlarge the scope of the conflict.[1] Successful interest group politics is contingent on a group's ability to expand or contain an issue and its related policy discourse (Altheida & Gilmore, 1972; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Schattschneider, 1960; Turner & Killian, 1957). Defining an issue over time and adapting those definitions to fit the changing political and social climate determines the activists' ability to inspire and mobilize support for their policy campaigns. To achieve this on a mass level, interest groups need to insert their language and symbols into media coverage of an issue, which can increase an issue's visibility, potentially tip the political balance in a group's favor, generate momentum to overcome the status quo, and convince the public and policymakers that an immediate resolution is necessary (see also Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Craig & O'Brien, 1993; Robertson & Judd, 1989; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994; Schattschneider, 1960).

However, the strategy of "going public" does not guarantee that the media will attune to a group's specific message, let alone promote it to the public. Even if the media do pick up an interest group's theme, the position advocated by the group may not be transmitted in its totality, or the message may be placed in an unfavorable context, or, in the worst case, the interest group's rhetoric may be substantially altered. In

other words, once pressure groups put forth their issue spin, the media's subsequent actions are beyond the groups' control.

*Politicians.* Interest groups are not the only players who seek media visibility to influence politics. The mass media have also become an important vehicle for politicians to gain influence among their colleagues (Cook, 1989; Kendrowski, 1996) and sway the opinions of their constituents (Elving, 1994). Similar to the relationship between interest groups and the media, members of Congress are at the mercy of journalists and editors who decide how to portray their institution, themselves, and the policies they are trying to enact.[2] Thus, there is much to be gained by examining how politicians attempt to shape policy debates through issue frames and the manner in which the media respond to and interpret these messages for the public. Of course, the ability of elites to frame and structure issues for the public via the media is influenced by a political actor's status, credibility, and organizational resources. Some actors by virtue of their perceived influence on the policy process (e.g., U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Dennis Hastert) or expertise and "positioning" in a specific issue domain (e.g., U.S. Senator Charles Schumer as patron of the gun control movement) are able to easily attract the media attention that allows them to put forth their desired issue frames. The president as the most visible national actor is in a position to do so on a consistent basis. In addition, the messages put forth by more "powerful and accessible" political elites may be less likely to be qualified by the media and more likely to flow unedited directly to the public. As these skillful media manipulators impose their dominant issue frames and symbols on the media, the "outputs" (issue coverage) may not deviate in any significant way from the "inputs."

*The Media.* A good deal of evidence suggests the power of the media to influence public opinion and related political perceptions. First, by deciding which issues to cover, the media set the public agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; MacKuen, 1981; McCombs, 1981). Second, by elevating certain issues over others (i.e., priming), the media influence voters' subsequent evaluations of political actors and alter the criteria by which political players are judged (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). However, agenda setting and priming are not the media's only powers. Policy issues can be framed or presented in multiple ways, and the media's choice of which frame to use can influence citizens' and political elites' issue considerations and levels of policy support (Callaghan & Schnell, 2000; Nelson et al., 1997; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). The opportunity to frame issues arises from the media's ability to pick and choose from the rhetoric offered by pressure groups and politicians. In the most extreme case, the media could abandon all message inputs by other players and create a purely media-generated version of the debate. The extent to which coverage of an issue is dominated by interest groups and political actors versus a media-generated version of reality represents another indicator of the media's political power.

### *Summary*

While media professionals assert that they just report the news with truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance, the research evidence suggests that journalists and editors exert considerable power over the media's construction of reality. In line with this research, we contend that the media's role is, at times, a relatively independent one. We use the

gun control issue to specify the conditions under which a media-generated version of the debate is likely to occur. Of course, political players can always maximize the media's responsiveness to their themes by creating frames that fit the conventional news narrative and appeal to journalists' own personal values. Criteria of newsworthiness include drama, conflict, novelty, timeliness, and visual appeal (Gans, 1980). News frames that fit these criteria will be more likely to be used by the media. In particular, stories focusing on crime seem to fit journalistic standards nicely. They satisfy the criteria of event-oriented reporting, include drama, and usually provide stunning visuals. Thus, frames involving crime and violence are expected to be favored by the media, perhaps even disproportionate to their actual use by interest groups or politicians or the prominence of crime and violence in the minds of most Americans.

In addition, reporters' own views on gun control may influence their choice of frames. While reporters assert that they strive to report the news as free from biases as is humanely possible, their personal values and ideology may sometimes influence their framing judgments (see Gans, 1980). Journalists may—consciously or not—resist transmitting the gun lobby's proposed themes and language, thereby closing a linguistic opportunity within the evolving policy debate. Given journalists' aggregate tendency toward liberal views that some scholars and analysts have identified (e.g., Bozell & Baker, 1990; Christian, 1982; Lichter & Rothman, 1981; Rusher, 1988; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991), favoritism toward pro-gun control frames may not be unexpected. By the same token, public opinion may play a more significant role in journalists' decision calculus. As Sahr argues (1993, p. 157), journalists make judgments about what might be called the public "climate of opinion," and their perceptions about this climate guide their journalistic choices (see also Epstein, 1973). Given that most Americans tend to support strict crime control measures, but not an outright abolition of guns (see S. Patterson & Eakins, 1998), journalists may refrain from advancing frames on the right side of the ideological spectrum. Consequently, news stories with a decidedly "pro-control" slant may be falsely attributed to journalists' own ideological coloration rather than their responsiveness to the tenor of public preferences. While we cannot test all of the complexities of these relationships, we will analyze whether public opinion has distinct consequences for journalists' framing choices.

## Methodology

In order to analyze the factors that influence media framing, we conducted multiple content analyses with interest groups' and politicians' rhetoric (inputs) and media discourse (outputs). We tested the dynamic interplay between the media, elected officials, and interest groups by comparing media outputs (i.e., the national broadcast media's coverage of the gun control issue) with interest groups' and politicians' initial inputs (i.e., their actual statements on the subject). The extent to which final outputs deviate from the original input messages of interest groups and politicians allows us to determine the power of the media in shaping the policy debate relative to that of other players in the political process

We examined news coverage of the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban from 1988 to 1996, a 9-year span that includes the origins of the contemporary debate beginning in 1988 when Representative Feighan first introduced a bill named in honor of Sarah Brady, as well as the proposed ban on assault weapons introduced at the federal level one year later. The 9-year span covers numerous congressional attempts to revise

and pass the bill, the enactment of the two bills into law, the post-law discussions of efficacy, and finally the 1995–1996 reconfiguration of the conflict as it played out in the federal court system. We chose these two issues because they represent the bulk of the contemporary conflict over gun control during this time span and therefore should allow for an ideal test of the media's influence on the debate during varying stages of the policy process.[3] Since our goal is to assess whether media framing of public policy issues is influenced by the frames introduced by politicians and interest groups, we analyze specific news stories on the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban rather than the larger set of gun violence stories that often permeate the news.

In order to test the relationship between the media and political players, we collected a total of 403 evening newscasts involving the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban that were aired by the three major broadcast networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, from 1988 to 1996. Videotapes were supplied by the Vanderbilt Television News Archives.[4]

These newscasts, while not the only form of media-related coverage, do make available the dominant issue frames people draw on to construct meaning. Although the audience has diminished in the last few years, at least half of all Americans rely on television for their news (e.g., Sparrow, 1999; Stanley & Niemi, 1994). Moreover, television news is more likely than newspapers to assist citizens in forming opinions on the candidates and the issues (Hennessey, 1985), especially because of its visual content (Garramone, 1985). In addition, broadcast news is often reflective of other media sources (newspapers, radio news, news magazines). Furthermore, some analysts assert that newspapers follow the lead of television news stories (Nyhan, 1999). Thus, the broadcast media's coverage of a policy issue has the potential for substantial influence on citizens' attitudes and preferences.

To assess the inputs made by various political players and interest groups, we collected two sets of data. First, we examined gun control passages printed in the *Congressional Record*, accessed on-line through the Library of Congress Web site.[5] Second, we conducted a content analysis of the press releases issued by the two dominant interest groups on each side of the debate, the NRA and Handgun Control, Inc.[6]

Press releases, congressional records, and network newscasts were coded for the dominant issue frames by two individuals working independently who were unaware of the study's hypothesis.[7] In general, issue frames were operationally defined as "how the policy debate was thematically structured," that is, what arguments were stated or implied by the items' topical organization. Thus, we follow William Gamson's (1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) approach. After thoroughly reviewing each item, coders were asked to make an initial judgment as to whether or not a frame was present.[8] Coders were instructed to evaluate journalists' own words on the issue and exclude from their assessment the visual content of the story (e.g., logos, inserts, caption headings) as well as statements attributed or derived from other sources. Thus, coders were trained to identify issue frames, and their list of frames was later compared with a "blueprint" of possible frames that we assembled by analyzing the scholarly literature on gun control (Godwin & Schroedel, 1998, in press; Kates, Schaffer, Lattimer, Murray, & Cassem, 1995; Kessler, 1983; Kleck, 1991; McBurnett, Kenny, & Bordau, 1995; S. Patterson & Eakins, 1998; Spitzer, 1995).

The extensive nature of our data set, particularly the inclusion of the universe of both inputs and outputs, affords us a unique opportunity to examine the success of each set of players in shaping public policy debate. The Appendix provides illustrations of our coding scheme and gives examples of the frames used in this study.

## Results

### *Input: Political Players Crafting the Debate*

Looking first at the interest group rhetoric, unquestionably, both the NRA and HCI made a serious attempt to play a role in structuring the gun control debate. As shown in Table 1, each group generated a large number of press releases during this time period (135 and 158, respectively).[9] Further, press reporting for each group peaked between 1993 and 1994 when debate about the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban reached the

**Table 1**
Interest group frames

| Time | NRA frames | | Time | HCI frames | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frame | % Reports | | Frame | % Reports |
| Overall ($N$ = 135) | Feel-Good Laws | 49.6 | Overall ($N$ = 158) | Sensible Legislation | 43.7 |
| | Constitutional Rights | 33.3 | | Culture of Violence | 17.7 |
| | Guns Deter Crime | 5.9 | | Will of the People | 13.3 |
| | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 5.2 | | Special Interest Problem | 9.5 |
| | States' Rights | 3.7 | | Right to Public Safety | 5.1 |
| | Will of the People | 1.5 | | Political Contest | 4.4 |
| | Fascist State | 0.7 | | Constitutional Limits | 2.5 |
| | | | | Public Health Problem | 1.9 |
| | | | | States' Rights | 1.3 |
| | | | | Court Burden | 0.6 |
| Phase I, 1988–1992 ($N$ = 34) | Feel-Good Laws | 41.2 | Phase I, 1988–1992 ($N$ = 30) | Sensible Legislation | 33.3 |
| | Constitutional Rights | 38.2 | | Culture of Violence | 26.7 |
| | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 8.8 | | Political Contest | 16.7 |
| | States' Rights | 5.8 | | Special Interest Problem | 13.3 |
| | Will of the People | 5.8 | | Will of the People | 10.0 |
| Phase II, 1993–1994 ($N$ = 82)[a] | Feel-Good Laws | 54.9 | Phase II, 1993–1994 ($N$ = 77)[a] | Sensible Legislation | 36.4 |
| | Constitutional Rights | 29.3 | | Culture of Violence | 18.6 |
| | Guns Deter Crime | 8.5 | | Will of the People | 15.6 |
| | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 4.9 | | Special Interest Problem | 14.3 |
| | States' Rights | 2.4 | | Constitutional Limits | 5.2 |
| | | | | Public Health Problem | 3.9 |
| | | | | Right to Public Safety | 3.9 |
| | | | | Political Contest | 2.6 |
| Phase III, 1994–1996 ($N$ = 19) | Feel-Good Laws | 42.1 | Phase III, 1994–1996 ($N$ = 51) | Sensible Laws | 60.8 |
| | Constitutional Rights | 42.1 | | Will of the People | 11.8 |
| | States' Rights | 5.3 | | Right to Public Safety | 11.8 |
| | Fascist State | 5.3 | | Culture of Violence | 9.8 |
| | Guns Deter Crime | 5.3 | | States' Rights | 3.9 |
| | | | | Court Burden | 2.0 |

[a]This time frame ends with the passage of the Brady Bill (February 2, 1994) and the Assault Weapons Ban (September 13, 1994), a provision of President Clinton's Omnibus Crime Bill.

floor of Congress, indicating the groups' desire to play a more active and deliberate role in defining the issue of gun control as the debate heated up. However, each group maintained a distinctive style of contact with the media. For instance, the NRA worked more on favorable publicity, reflecting the growing political hostility to opponents of gun control that developed during this time period (see Spitzer, 1995, for a historical perspective). In particular, the NRA focused on "alternative solutions" to the crime problem, arguing that the key to reducing gun violence in society is not more legislation but "real" solutions. HCI's tactic was more direct: They chastised the NRA for "its millions of dollars and its intimidation tactics" (HCI Press Release, March 15, 1993) and publicly challenged political candidates to clarify their position on the issue of gun control in light of the NRA's financial contributions to their war chests (HCI Press Release, March 24, 1992).

Both groups attempted to linguistically and intellectually connect gun control to their preferred issue frames. The predominant frame used by the NRA was "Feel-Good Laws" (49.6%), followed closely by the "Constitutional Rights" argument (33.3%). The essence of the "Feel-Good Laws" frame is that gun control legislation is inadequate in fighting crime in the United States; the laws simply don't work, but politicians use them to make people feel good about crime control. Furthermore, the NRA asserted that a buying frenzy and black market for guns often emerge after such "feel-good" laws are passed. As described by the NRA: "Gun bans are the epitome of the false promise of gun control. Only meaningful criminal justice reform measures can bring a stop to the violence" (NRA Media Advisory, May 4, 1994). The "Constitutional Rights" frame—that is, the linguistic variant that primarily appealed to Second Amendment rights and the sacredness of the Constitution[10]—gained slightly more exposure as the debate advanced.

On the other hand, HCI used one theme in particular during this time period: gun control as sensible legislation that is able to stem the tide of violence in the country (43.7%). This frame shifted to a more specific discussion of the laws' efficacy once the legislation had been enacted in Phase III of the debate period (1949–1996). Several counter themes also emerged as the debate evolved. Whereas the NRA interpreted the language of the Second Amendment to protect the rights of individuals to keep and bear arms for self-defense and other purposes (hunting, collecting, and sporting competition), gun control advocates argued that the government can limit the personal right to be armed for private purposes unrelated to service in a government-organized militia ("Constitutional Limits" frame). Both sides used the "Will of the People" theme to advance their cause. While HCI argued that strict gun control is the will of the American public—that is, "the people have spoken" (HCI Press Release, March 8, 1995)—the NRA asserted that "a clear majority of Americans have considered and rejected gun control laws" (NRA Media Advisory, March 30, 1995).

Surprisingly, HCI rarely framed the gun control issue in terms of a "Public Health Emergency" (1.9% of all HCI themes). Research by Godwin and Schroedel (1998, in press; see also Kates et al., 1995) suggests that this theme, which is often accompanied by quotations from trauma surgeons and hospital statistics on the number of gun deaths and injuries, plays a more prominent role in gun discourse at the state level.

By comparison, politicians typically pursued their goals of structuring the issue debate in different ways. Their issue arguments were more complex, possibly because their ability to insert statements verbatim into the *Congressional Record* allowed them an opportunity for elaboration. Furthermore, control advocates frequently mentioned gun victims from their district, adding drama to the debate and creating a more personalized

framework to define the issue. Obviously, moving the issue from an intellectual plane to an emotional one makes this kind of rhetoric more likely to be included in the media's construction of the conflict. Table 2 displays the content analysis of politicians' rhetoric.

Clearly, pro-control arguments prevailed in the discourse of politicians on the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban (71% of all frames). Of those, gun control as "Common Sense Legislation" which will reduce crime and violence in America was the predominant theme (45.6%), followed by the "Culture of Violence" theme (33.2%). However, the "Sensible Laws" theme gained slightly less exposure as the debate evolved. The dominant anti-control themes used by politicians when referencing this legislation were "Feel-Good Laws" (41.5%) and the "Constitutional Rights" argument (34.0%). Other more radical arguments evaporated quickly as the debate matured (e.g., "Fascist State") or appeared intermittently (e.g., "Guns Deter Crime"), indicating politicians' attempt to

**Table 2**
Politicians' frames

| Time | Gun control advocates | | Time | Gun control opponents | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frame | % Records[a] | | Frame | % Records[a] |
| Overall ($N$ = 259) | Sensible Legislation | 45.6 | Overall ($N$ = 106) | Feel-Good Laws | 41.5 |
| | Culture of Violence | 33.2 | | Constitutional Rights | 34.0 |
| | Will of the People | 11.2 | | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 9.4 |
| | Right to Public Safety | 3.0 | | Guns Deter Crime | 2.8 |
| | Special Interests | 2.7 | | Fascist State | 1.9 |
| | Constitutional Limits | 2.3 | | States' Rights | 0.9 |
| Phase I, 1988–1992 ($N$ = 136) | Sensible Legislation | 50.7 | Phase I, 1988–1992 ($N$ = 30) | Feel-Good Laws | 46.5 |
| | Culture of Violence | 34.6 | | Culture of Violence | 36.2 |
| | Will of the People | 10.3 | | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 10.3 |
| | Constitutional Limits | 2.2 | | Fascist State | 3.4 |
| | Special Interests | 2.2 | | Guns Deter Crime | 3.4 |
| Phase II, 1993–1994 ($N$ = 73)[b] | Sensible Legislation | 42.5 | Phase II, 1993–1994 ($N$ = 19)[b] | Feel-Good Laws | 57.9 |
| | Culture of Violence | 41.1 | | Constitutional Rights | 31.8 |
| | Will of the People | 8.2 | | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 5.3 |
| | Right to Public Safety | 4.1 | | Guns Deter Crime | 5.3 |
| | Constitutional Limits | 2.7 | | | |
| | Special Interests | 1.4 | | | |
| Phase III, 1994–1996 ($N$ = 50) | Sensible Laws | 28.0 | Phase III, 1994–1996 ($N$ = 29) | Constitutional Rights | 31.0 |
| | Culture of Violence | 26.0 | | Feel-Good Laws | 20.7 |
| | Will of the People | 18.0 | | Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 10.3 |
| | Right to Public Safety | 10.0 | | States' Rights | 3.4 |
| | Special Interest Problem | 6.0 | | | |
| | Constitutional Limits | 2.0 | | | |

[a]Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding and use of double frames (see Note 7). These results do not include the percentage of politicians who utilized the neutral "Political Contest" frame (2.4% of all records).

[b]This time frame ends with the passage of the Brady Bill (February 2, 1994) and the Assault Weapons Ban (September 13, 1994), a provision of President Clinton's Omnibus Crime Bill.

monitor themes that are unlikely to fit successfully with media norms and practices. For example, the "Fascism" frame appealed to fears about excessive government power aimed at disarming citizens in order to take away their fundamental rights. From this view, gun control laws infringe on people's ability to defend themselves against an authoritarian or fascist state. Meanwhile, the "Guns Deter Crime" theme highlighted the significant role that people who are armed can play in preventing crimes, the logic being that potential crime victims could be spared if more law-abiding citizens would agree to carry guns:

> More than two million times a year, a firearm is used to deter a potential crime. The question citizens face is how many innocent lives will be lost—how many crimes completed—because a gun ban prevented a law-abiding citizen from obtaining a firearm for protection. (NRA Media Advisory, March 22, 1994)

### *Output: Patterns of Media Coverage*

As seen in Table 3, 11 conceptually distinct frames were employed by the news media to structure discussion of the gun control debate throughout this time span: Culture of Violence, Political Contest, Sensible Laws, "Feel-Good" Laws, Special Interests, Will of the People, Constitutional Rights, Court Challenge, States' Rights, Constitutional Limits, and Right to Public Safety.

A comparison of the input provided by pressure groups and politicians (Tables 1 and 2) and media output reveals that four of these frames ("Culture of Violence," "Sensible Laws," "Feel-Good Laws," "Constitutional Rights") are rooted in terminology or policy positions that can be traced to a specific interest group or politician. Two frames—"Court Challenge" and "Political Contest"—are politically neutral "media-generated" frames. The "Court Challenge" theme included factual discussions about the bill being challenged in court. The "Political Contest" theme focused on the legislative process as a contest where partisan bickering, "gridlock," strategic posturing, and divisiveness are paramount and the policy aspects of the legislation are ignored.

*Pro-Control Frames.* Overall, pro-control frames dominated the debate. More than 47% of network coverage of the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban used the highly evocative "Guns and the Culture of Violence" package, capitalizing on the fear of crime that engulfs the nation and tapping into broad popular support for strict gun control laws. For example, when a reporter like NBC's Tom Brokaw reminds us in his lead-off segment headed "Society Under Siege" that "society, of course, is under siege from gang guns and violence" (*NBC Nightly News*, November 22, 1993) or that "bloodshed is no stranger to many American cities and towns as they try to cope with the rise in violent crime" (*NBC Nightly News*, January 23, 1994), he is employing the crime angle to capture viewers' attention.

News stories highlighting the "Culture of Violence" frame tended to focus on a subtext about youth/gang violence and Black crime in urban neighborhoods. Of the 38% of newscasts in which a crime scene was depicted, 56% of these portrayed a Black crime scene (Blacks as perpetrators of crime or as the victims) and were accompanied by evocative visual images (e.g., Black criminals being handcuffed, Black gunshot victims, police cruisers with flashing lights). These findings fit with Romer, Jamieson, and

**Table 3**
Media frames

| Frame | % Newscasts | Frame | % Newscasts |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Overall ($N$ = 347)[a] | | |
| Culture of Violence | 46.7 | Constitutional Rights | 2.3 |
| Political Contest | 14.4 | Court Challenge | 1.1 |
| Feel-Good Laws | 13.3 | States' Rights | 0.6 |
| Sensible Legislation | 11.2 | Constitutional Limits | 0.3 |
| Special Interests | 7.5 | Right to Public Safety | 0.3 |
| Will of the People | 2.9 | | |
| | Phase I, 1988–1992 ($N$ = 116) | | |
| Culture of Violence | 52.5 | Special Interests | 6.0 |
| Feel-Good Laws | 14.6 | Will of the People | 6.0 |
| Sensible Legislation | 10.3 | Constitutional Rights | 1.7 |
| Political Contest | 7.8 | Constitutional Limits | 0.9 |
| | Phase II, 1993–1994 ($N$ = 161)[b] | | |
| Culture of Violence | 53.4 | Will of the People | 2.7 |
| Political Contest | 16.8 | Constitutional Rights | 1.9 |
| Special Interests | 9.3 | Right to Public Safety | 0.6 |
| Feel-Good Laws | 8.7 | States' Rights | 0.6 |
| Sensible Legislation | 6.2 | | |
| | Phase III, 1994–1996 ($N$ = 70) | | |
| Culture of Violence | 25.7 | Court Challenge | 5.7 |
| Sensible Legislation | 24.3 | Special Interests | 2.9 |
| Political Contest | 20.0 | States' Rights | 1.4 |
| Feel-Good Laws | 20.0 | | |

[a]Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding and use of double frames (see Note 7).
[b]This time frame ends with the enactment of the Brady Bill (February 2, 1994) and the Assault Weapons Ban (September 13, 1994), a provision of President Clinton's Omnibus Crime Bill.

de Coteau's (1998) research which confirms the greater presence of persons of color, especially Black Americans, in stories about crime (see also Entman, 1993; Lester, 1994). Other visual fillers used to boost the "Crime and the Culture of Violence" package came from a series of random massacres that have occurred during the last decade, from the Long Island Railroad incident to the much-discussed California law office killings. A less prominently used pro-control frame described the legislative efforts as "Sane and Sensible Legislation" that will control the spread of violence in society (11.2% of the frames). These newscasts often highlighted factual data about the efficacy of the law, particularly in the post-law enactment phase (Phase III).

*Anti-Control Frames.* Frames rooted in NRA terminology received significantly less exposure in the news. The total number of NRA-friendly frames comprised less than 17% of all newscasts. The major NRA argument that gun control legislation results in nothing but "Feel-Good Laws" that do nothing to prevent crime in America emerged in only 13.3% of the broadcasts. The second major gun lobby theme that gun control violates individual freedoms and constitutional rights received hardly any exposure (2.3%). Other NRA themes (e.g., "Guns Deter Crime" and "Guns Don't Kill/People Do") were completely ignored by the broadcast media. The "Guns Deter Crime" theme argued that firearms save lives and that gun ownership is "a rational mainstream response to a national disgrace over the proliferation of violent crimes against men, women and children" (NRA Media Advisory, April 15, 1994). The logic behind the "Guns Don't Kill/People Do" theme is that the "real assault weapons are the armed criminals, not the century-old gun technology" (NRA Media Advisory, April 15, 1994).

Although the media rarely used the "States Rights" theme (6% of all broadcasts), when they did, they chose to adopt a "pro-control" stance that argued for the right of states to accept the constitutionality of gun control laws established by Congress. Meanwhile, the "States Rights" theme promoted by the NRA objected to gun control as "unwarranted federal intrusion upon what should be a state issue." The NRA argued that states could nullify gun control laws because they are unconstitutional and that "a majority of states have considered and rejected such federal schemes" (NRA Media Advisory, September 1995).

*Media-Generated Frames.* The remaining two frames—"Political Contest" and "Court Challenges"—represent media attempts to repackage the conflict, present the issue neutrally, and boost drama. Overall, the "Political Contest" frame, the second most prominent media package, was used in 14.4% of all newscasts and emphasized the conflict surrounding the issue. Here newscasters frequently used words like the "game plan," "political logjam," "gridlock," "political battle," and "full blown political war" to augment the political conflict theme. As Schudson (1995) has argued, political reporters tend to be "politics-wonks" rather than "policy-wonks," absorbed in "inside baseball" rather than more important questions of how government should run the country (p. 10). Jamieson and Cappella (1998) have observed a similar style of reporting on health care reform where the "conflict frame" along with reporters' focus on the strategy of the political players in the debate rather than on substance "deprived the public of useful information about health care reform alternatives" (p. 111). Unfortunately, when policy debates are characterized as a conflict between contending groups, not only is public understanding of the issue curtailed but also competing groups may find it difficult to reach a policy compromise.[11]

*Ebb and Flow of Frames Over Time.* Table 3 also highlights the ebb and flow of media coverage over time. Coverage of gun control peaked during 1994 (Phase II) when the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban reached the floor of the House and Senate, followed by relatively little coverage during the post-law enactment period in Phase III (1994–1996). One factor in particular stands out: The networks displayed a desire to select the same issue rhetoric as the policy debate matured, consistently framing the issue in terms of the "Culture of Violence" (at least 52% of all broadcasts prior to bill passage) or focusing on the media-generated "Political Contest" frame. Furthermore, little attention was paid to the court challenges that questioned whether the federal government can require local law enforcement agencies to check the records of prospective

handgun buyers (20.7% of all broadcasts in Phase III). Moreover, fewer than 2% of these broadcasts actually addressed the state's rights issue underlying the court challenge. For the most part, newscasters refrained from discussing the various state court rulings that would eventually lead to the declaration of the Brady law as unconstitutional, simply stating that "the battle was not over" and that "the court fight had begun." Thus, there is an important similarity between the "Court Challenge" and "Political Contest" themes—both frames are devoid of policy substance.

### *Comparison*

A comparison of the rhetoric produced by interest groups and politicians and the dominant frames used by the media reveals dramatic differences between political actors' attempts to frame the issue and media output. Several aspects of these relationships are worth noting: Although the number of network newscasts about the Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban generated over the 9-year period (quarterly data) is correlated with the escalating intensity of the passages in the *Congressional Record* ($r = .32$, $p < .06$) and the interest group press releases ($r = .60$, $p < .01$), the analysis of frames shows that the media heavily favored the pro-control "Culture of Violence" theme. Still, the emphasis on this thematic package is not exactly a public relations victory for gun control advocates, assuming that their goal is to see their issue frames represented proportionally in the news media and move the discussion beyond a simplified emotive framework to a more reasoned policy debate.[12] Gun control as a mechanism to stem the tide of violence was used in only 17.7% of all HCI press releases and in less than 33% of congressional speeches, but it dominated network coverage of the issue (47.6%). Furthermore, the media sensationalized the crime theme by focusing on youth/gang violence and Black crime. Moreover, gun control supporters advocated the "Sensible Crime Legislation" theme (43.7% of press releases and 45.6% of the *Congressional Records*), yet this theme rarely appeared in media coverage (11.2% of the broadcasts), possibly because that would have created the impression the media were overt advocates of gun control.

Not only were some interest group themes ignored, congressional opinion also did not lead media coverage of the issue. Although congressional proponents explicitly and repeatedly framed the gun control issue in terms of domestic terrorism (the "enemy within") and made frequent references to the killing fields in Somalia (23 of 86 "Crime and Violence" records), these subtexts, which provided legislators with a captivating story to illustrate the policy need, did not penetrate media coverage. As one congressman pointed out, people are "dying in Somalia as a result of gunpowder and the proliferation of weapons in society" and "the message from the voters is that they do not want to wreck our neighborhoods and create little Somalias all across America" (Rep. M. Owens, *Congressional Record* 1993, 103:357, p. 1819).

Yet, the media were not totally unresponsive to politicians' rhetoric. During Phase II of the debate (1993–1994), the media shifted attention away from the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan to the Oklahoma City bombing, linking it to a new "domestic terrorism" story which left America looking to prevent terrorist assaults on innocent victims (e.g., *NBC Nightly News,* April 19, 1995, *CBS Evening News,* April 29, 1995). For either professional or ideological reasons, or responsiveness to the public mood, the media consciously refused to utilize the frames espoused by the gun lobby, no matter how hard these groups worked to put their preferred themes on the agenda. Overall, the media transmitted anti-control frames in a mere 16% of its "framed" newscasts, as

compared with 70% for pro-control frames. The remaining 14% of all frames were media-generated themes.

To examine the question of media autonomy further, we ranked the issue frames of interest groups and politicians according to their frequency and compared them with their prominence in media coverage (see Tables 4 and 5). Following standard procedures, scores that are tied in rank are assigned the average of the ranks that would have been assigned had no ties occurred (see Siegal, 1956). The degree of media independence in the issue framing process is determined by the Kendall coefficient of concordance ($W$), which is approximately distributed as a chi-square statistic for sample sizes of $N \geq 8$. A low probability in this case would indicate a high degree of correspondence between ranks and thus support for the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the media's distribution of framing choices relative to that of other players.

However, the results show that the media differ significantly in the ranking of their issue frames from both politicians ($W = .049$; $\chi^2 = .690$, $p < .41$) and interest groups (HCI: $W = .011$, $\chi^2 = .111$, $p < .739$; NRA: $W = .062$; $\chi^2 = .500$, $p < .479$). The very high probabilities associated with the observed values of $W$ enable us to reject the null hypothesis.

Thus, we conclude that the media's choice of issue frames is significantly different from other political players. Importantly, our analysis seems to indicate that the media is less likely to depend on official government views than previously thought (e.g., Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996).

### *The Role of Exogenous Factors*

While the rank analysis provides a sufficient, albeit gross, test of media independence, we have not examined these relationships in a multivariate context. Beyond interest

**Table 4**
Prominence of politicians' issue frames in network news coverage of gun control

| | Politicians' frames[a] | | Network news frames[b] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frame | % | Rank | % | Rank |
| Sensible Legislation | 47.9 | 1 | 11.2 | 4 |
| Culture of Violence | 23.0 | 2 | 47.6 | 1 |
| Feel-Good Laws | 20.8 | 3 | 13.3 | 3 |
| Constitutional Rights | 13.9 | 4 | 2.3 | 7 |
| Will of the People | 11.2 | 5 | 2.9 | 6 |
| Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 3.9 | 6 | 0.0 | — |
| Political Contest | 3.5 | 7 | 14.4 | 2 |
| Right to Public Safety | 3.1 | 8 | 0.3 | 10.5 |
| Special Interests | 2.7 | 9 | 7.5 | 5 |
| Constitutional Limits | 2.3 | 10 | 0.3 | 10.5 |
| Guns Deter Crime | 1.2 | 11 | 0.0 | — |
| Fascist State | 0.7 | 12 | 0.0 | — |
| States' Rights | 0.3 | 13 | 0.6 | 9 |
| Court Challenge | 0.0 | — | 1.1 | 8 |

[a] $N = 374$ including the neutral "Political Contest" frame.
[b] $N = 347$.

**Table 5**
Prominence of interest group frames in network news coverage of gun control

| | Group frames | | Network news frames | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frame | % | Rank | % | Rank |
| Pro-gun control group[a] | | | | |
| Sensible Legislation | 43.7 | 1 | 13.3 | 3 |
| Culture of Violence | 17.7 | 2 | 56.1 | 1 |
| Will of the People | 13.3 | 3 | 3.4 | 5 |
| Special Interest Problem | 9.5 | 4 | 8.8 | 4 |
| Right to Public Safety | 5.1 | 5 | 0.3 | 7.5 |
| Political Contest | 4.4 | 6 | 17.0 | 2 |
| Constitutional Limits | 2.5 | 7 | 0.3 | 7.5 |
| Public Health Problem | 1.9 | 8 | 0.0 | — |
| States' Rights | 1.3 | 9 | 0.7 | 6 |
| Court Burden | 0.6 | 10 | 0.0 | — |
| Anti-gun control group[b] | | | | |
| Feel-Good Laws | 49.6 | 1 | 43.0 | 2 |
| Constitutional Rights | 33.3 | 2 | 7.0 | 4 |
| Guns Deter Crime | 5.9 | 3 | 0.0 | — |
| Guns Don't Kill, People Do | 5.2 | 4 | 0.0 | — |
| States' Rights | 3.7 | 5 | 0.0 | — |
| Will of the People | 1.5 | 6 | 8.8 | 3 |
| Fascist State | 0.7 | 7 | 0.0 | — |
| Political Contest | 0.0 | — | 43.9 | 1 |

[a] $N = 158$.
[b] $N = 135$.

groups and politicians, there are other influences on journalists' framing choices. For instance, exogenous factors may play an important role in shaping public opinion (Kingdon, 1984). Exogenous shocks or dramatic events such as airline crashes or nuclear disasters may focus media attention on a specific issue or issue definition. The 1996 ValueJet crash in the Florida Everglades is a case in point. Here media attention focused on FAA standards, giving proponents of air safety a special window of opportunity to go public with their views. Similarly, dramatic events such as mass shootings can serve as an issue framing catalyst by illustrating the potential costs and negative consequences of the proliferation of guns in society. For example, the Stockton schoolyard killings in California sharply defined public debate about the assault weapons ban by focusing media attention on stricter gun control laws as a mechanism to avert such catastrophes in the future. Obviously, within such a context, pro-gun control groups are advantaged.

In addition, media frames may be responsive to public opinion. That is, journalists may chose frames with an eye toward how public preferences on this issue are distributed. Given the receptive "pro-control" public mood in the U.S., journalists may select frames with a decidedly pro-control slant. In sum, these two critical components of issue framing—exogenous events and public opinion—must be evaluated to assess whether they set the terms of public policy debate.

In order to test these relationships, we estimated a multivariate regression model. The dependent variable is media framing of the gun control issue (measured as a 3-month average). For each quarter year, we computed the following measure of media framing: [(# pro-control frames – # anti-control frames)/total # of items].

The independent variables include a measure of congressional opinion, computed in the same manner as the media measure, and interest group activity, computed by subtracting the number of NRA press releases from those of HCI, divided by the total number of press releases. Public opinion is operationalized as the proportion of adult Americans naming crime and violence as the "most important problem facing the country today."[13] We also included a dichotomous measure of major violent "focusing" events, that is, those dramatic incidents of gun violence, usually a mass shooting, that riveted public attention (coded 1 for event, 0 otherwise).[14] For comparison, all continuous level variables were rescaled to the 0-1 range. The model is specified as follows:

$$\text{Media Framing} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Congressional Opinion} + \beta_2 \text{ Public Opinion} + \beta_3 \text{ Interest Group Activity} + \beta_4 \text{ Violent Events} + e$$

As Table 6 shows, neither Congress nor interest groups are the primary source of media frames. Focusing "events" also have no statistically significant impact on media framing ($\beta = -.05$, *ns*). However, public opinion does appear to influence media framing, but only moderately ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$), although its influence may be more complex than is specified here.[15] Thus, media frames on gun control are in line with the predominantly "pro-control" cues journalists receive from the mass public, while reporters pay

**Table 6**
Regression model of media framing

| Variable | Coefficient | *SE* |
|---|---|---|
| Congressional frames (0–1) | –.194 | .179 |
| Public opinion (0–1) | .323* | .172 |
| Interest group activity (0–1) | .023 | .122 |
| Events dummy (1, 0) | –.052 | .103 |
| Constant | .714** | .131 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .098 | |
| *SE* of regression | .192 | |
| *DW*[a] | 1.913 | |
| No. of cases | 36 | |

*Note*. Coefficients were estimated using ordinary least squares regression.

[a]The critical values of the *Durbin-Watson* statistic at the 5% level of significance provide no evidence of first-order positive or negative autocorrelation ($d_L = 1.24$ and $d_U = 1.72$).

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$ (one-tailed *t* test).

scant attention to the pro-control rhetoric of politicians. As shown previously (Table 2), politicians favored gun control themes by more than a 2-to-1 margin.

In short, there is little evidence that media framing of the gun control issue was shaped by congressional opinion or interest group sources. Therefore, these findings do not support the indexing hypothesis which, extended to issue framing, would predict a close relationship between the range of congressional frames and media representations. Instead, they suggest a more politically independent role of the media in the debate formation process.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this study was to provide a systematic link between the strategic attempts made by political actors to gain media visibility and the media's actual coverage of the gun control issue. The data we collected allowed us to compare all relevant inputs (i.e., interest group press releases and politicians' statements) with media outputs. Our underlying theory rested on the assumption of a "politics-as-game" framework (see Ettema et al., 1991) in which the activities of all actors mutually define each other. The results of the study contribute to disentangling the competitive yet interdependent relationships between interest groups, politicians, and the media.

To reiterate our core assumptions, we predicted a certain degree of media intervention in the issue framing process. Further, we argued that pro-control frames are more likely to dominate media coverage of the gun control issue, not necessarily because of journalists' ideology but because these frames fit journalistic news criteria of drama, conflict, and good visuals. We also considered the possibility that a "pro-control" public mood would drive journalistic framing decisions. Overall, our results provide some evidence of media intervention in the issue framing process. First, we discovered that the NRA was virtually locked out of the framing battle. Thus, HCI and gun control advocates were the big winners, not necessarily with their intended message ("Sensible Legislation") but because of their secondary frame ("Culture of Violence") and its fit with media norms or public preferences.

Furthermore, the media sometimes structured the debate by generating their own frames; they disproportionately favored one side over the other, and they disproportionately coopted or pushed one frame—"Crime and the Culture of Violence"—for nearly half of all the news stories. In addition, there is evidence that, at times, the media shaped the framing process. Once the other political players had staked out their positions and the issue of gun control had become stale (i.e., in Phase III, the post-law enactment phase), some of the frames used by the media were of their own construction (25.7%) or again stressed the "Culture of Violence" theme (25.7%), although by that time HCI rarely used this frame in their media reports. Moreover, the media injected subtexts of their own creation (e.g., the Black crime theme) into the debate.

The results from the regression analysis also have something to say about media intervention and autonomy. In contrast to previous researchers (Bennett, 1990; Bennett & Manheim, 1993; Zaller & Chiu, 1996), network coverage of the gun control issue did not seem to follow official (i.e., congressional) opinion. In a similar vein, interest group input did not influence media frames. However, public opinion mattered somewhat. While these findings seem to contradict the hypothesis that reporters "index" their coverage to the "official" government view (Zaller & Chiu, 1996), we wish to point out that previous findings are based on foreign policy coverage. As Bennett (1990) has pointed out, indexing might be expected to operate most consistently in military and foreign

affairs and trade and macroeconomic policy matters because of their easy indexing capabilities. These types of issues have distinct divisions among institutional power blocs as well as consequences for the corporate economic order which may give journalists "common normative guidance for developing a story" (p. 122). While the indexing model of press-state relations appears to be informative about news coverage of these issues, a different model—one of relative media autonomy or, at least, a dual role in which the media sometimes drive the debate—seems to be more appropriate for a social issue such as gun control.

Yet, gun control may actually be a very easy issue to index. Whereas foreign policy crises such as the Iraqi-Gulf War sustained little elite opposition (e.g., Bennett & Manheim, 1993), the political parties have staked out divergent positions on this issue (e.g., Spitzer, 1995), giving the press an important institutional power bloc for representing congressional opposition.[16] In short, despite the range of interpretive elite frames surrounding the debate on gun control, the media, perhaps due to a desire to operate competitively in a ratings-driven environment in which drama and sensationalism sells, chose to selectively adopt other players' message inputs or create their own media-generated version of the debate.

Why else besides market pressures might the media intervene in the debate formation process? And why was the NRA, one of the most powerful and well-financed pressure groups, not able to exert more leverage over the media's portrayal of the gun control issue? While our data allowed us to systematically compare the inputs provided by interest groups and politicians with media outputs, they do not enable us to make firm conclusions about the motivations of journalists and editors. Given that there is much less ideological variation among reporters than there is within the general public (e.g., Bozell & Baker, 1990; Christian, 1982; Lichter & Rothman, 1981; Rusher, 1988; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991), we cannot ignore the possibility that reporters' personal values may account, at least partially, for the exclusion of the NRA in the issue framing process, although no systematic evidence to date supports such a hypothesis.[17]

It is also plausible that journalists allocated more media exposure and "compensatory access" (Danielian & Page, 1994, p. 1058) to HCI and gun control advocates to counterbalance their weakness at traditional lobbying.[18] Yet, we speculate that these patterns are probably not the result of an often alleged anti-NRA media conspiracy but rather the consequence of the media's bottom-line orientation toward increasing ratings and the competition for advertising revenues. In other words, we are left with situational factors. We suggest that the media's emphasis on the "Crime and Violence" theme and its sensationalistic aspects is due to journalistic norms of event-oriented reporting, the availability of good visuals that come with this frame, and media assessments, whether accurate or not, about audience preferences. Thus, Kaniss's (1993, p. 20; see also Underwood, 1998) appraisal of local television news as "if it doesn't bleed or choke with emotion, it doesn't air," seems to be an appropriate description of ratings-oriented network news as well. But Epstein's (1973) conclusion that journalists make decisions based on the "climate of opinion" also fits with our data. In sum, although the personal ideologies and beliefs of journalists might have had some impact, we think that ratings, economics, and journalists' reading of public opinion are more plausible explanations than mere sympathy for HCI and its cause. This is further supported by the fact that the media simplified the complex gun control issue and ignored most of the rhetoric favored by gun-control advocates.

While it is always dangerous to extrapolate from the results of a single case study to a general theory of public policy debate formation, the results of other studies under-

score the independent role of the media in structuring issue debates (see Callaghan, McGie, & Schnell, 2000; Jamieson & Cappella, 1998; Schnell, Terkildsen, & Callaghan, 2000; Terkildsen, Schnell, & Ling, 1998). These studies reveal the significant influence of the media when covering issue domains such as abortion, immigration policy, and health care reform. Like gun control, these issues constitute major, relatively long-standing policy debates. Thus, within this particular context, our argument suggesting a more independent role for the news media seems to be supported. However, in situations where journalists face equally supported opposing interests on the issue (i.e., public and elite preferences follow a bimodal distribution), the likelihood that reporters pursue one side of the debate over the other may be significantly diminished. For instance, journalists may produce a broad range of abortion-related news frames, given the different divisions in politicians' preferences and public opinion. Thus, our case analysis of the gun control issue, while contributing to theory development and hypothesis generation, does not allow us to speculate about the nature of issue framing for other less visible or evolving policy debates (e.g., domestic terrorism, tort reform, bioethics) or when the public mood on the issue is slanted in a politically conservative direction (e.g., the death penalty, gay marriages). Therefore, in order to develop a common theoretical frame, future research should expand upon the type of issue domains being studied. As Bennett (1990) pointed out, "only by exploring different cases can we see the general tendencies of press state relations and thus begin to profile the operations of U.S. democracy across different issue areas" (p. 20).

In this study, we have presented evidence that illustrates the role the media play in contemporary public policy debates relative to that of other players. Beyond agenda setting and priming, the media have the power to actively shape public discourse by selecting from many available frames offered by interest groups and politicians. Further, if this rhetoric becomes stale and/or fails to fit with journalistic norms, media professionals are free to create and emphasize their own thematic spins on an issue and thus can alter the prevailing definition of a conflict. To maximize coverage, successful political players must work within the known set of media-imposed constraints. They need to provide drama and good visuals, simplify arguments, communicate through events, and generally fit conventional news narratives (Tuchman, 1980; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991).

What does this imply for democratic politics? As Sartori (1987) has pointed out, a free and open public debate is the key to democratic political culture (p. 32), and the vehicle for such discourse is the mass media. Yet, as we have seen, the media are not simply intermediaries between political actors and the mass public. Journalists can actively limit the public's right to access and evaluate different policy platforms and thus diminish the quality of political dialogue. Such actions have the potential to inhibit pluralism by blocking out the preferred themes of interest groups and politicians. When complex policy issues are reduced to a single issue frame, regardless of the complexity of the issue, the public is shortchanged, policy solutions are ignored, and a window of opportunity is closed.

## Notes

1. Of course, some groups are more likely to "go public" than others. For example, public interest groups and those without resources needed for direct access to policymakers are the most likely to seek media access (Danielian & Page, 1994). More powerful groups might employ strategies that allow them to achieve their goals through the quiet compromises of consensual politics among a limited number of key players.

2. There is an increasing amount of research testifying to the news media's negative portrayal of Congress (Graber, 1989; Lichter & Amundson, 1994; Robinson & Appel, 1979; Rozell, 1994) and linking this coverage to increased public skepticism (Fallows, 1996). Further, research suggests that people who rely fairly regularly on the electronic media for their news react to Congress more negatively and from more of an emotional point of view than those who rely on other news sources (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998).

3. The Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act and the Assault Weapons Ban were the first major gun control policies to emerge since the Gun Control Act of 1968, which banned the sale of handguns to felons and fugitives from justice (see Spitzer, 1995).

4. The key search words used to select items were Brady Bill and Assault Weapons Ban. Since these two bills were not referenced by name in the early stages of the policy process, we used additional search terms to select items (e.g., waiting period, handguns, semi-automatic rifles). Overlapping items or those unrelated to the specific bills under study, such as those that dealt with more general gun violence stories, were excluded during the search process. The newscasts were coded in the same manner as the press release and congressional data. However, coders listened to the tapes rather than viewing them to focus on what the newscaster actually said. Some of the lengthy newscasts and congressional records were reviewed more than once to ensure coding accuracy.

5. Following Zaller and Chiu (1996) and Bennett (1990), we use Congress as the primary indicator of the government's view on the issue. While Congress is not the only source of government opinion reporters may reflect in their coverage of public policy issues, the openness and ideological diversity of congressional views are roughly representative of official opinion (Zaller & Chiu, 1996, p. 388).

6. Obviously, interest group press releases do not always constitute an accurate representation of a group's framing preferences. Interest groups may try to anticipate what reporters will find interesting and strategically design their press releases to attract media attention. Furthermore, interest groups may adopt other "outside" strategies (e.g., staging events, media interviews) or less public techniques (e.g., campaign financing) in order to influence media framing and activate support for their policies. In some circumstances, these efforts may be more influential than communicating directly with the media (Kollman, 1998). Still, we believe that interesting questions about the relationship between interest group strategies and the media environment can be addressed with the press release data.

7. Intercoder reliabilities were computed for each data set (i.e., interest groups, *Congressional Record*, newscasts) by randomly selecting and recoding one third of the total items. When averaged, the three sets of ratings produced a measure of reliability that indicated a reasonable level of agreement (Pearson's $r = .87$).

8. Sometimes there was no dominant issue frame, just straight facts or information. Typically, these items included technical discussions about bill provisions, upcoming votes, or, in the case of interest groups, announcements about future events. The numbers of "non-framed" items were as follows: newscasts, 56; congressional records, 22; press releases from HCI, 30; and the NRA, 55. Not surprisingly, the number of framed items increased markedly during the intense debate activity surrounding key votes in Congress (Phase II). Given that journalists' choices about which stories to frame or not to frame are linked to the political climate, we include nonframed items in our final empirical analysis.

9. The percentages shown in our tables do not always equal 100% because some passages used more than one issue frame at a time.

10. The majority of the NRA's "Constitutional Rights" themes (89%) stressed the Second Amendment right to bear arms. Other rights included the Fourth Amendment right to be secure in persons and property (6%), the Tenth Amendment delegation of power to the states (2%), and the Fifth Amendment right of due process (3%). In the latter case, the gun lobby argued that banning a weapon like the Colt AR-15 without banning other companies' rifles with identical functions (caliber, rate of fire, etc.) violates the due process clause which requires that all gun manufacturers be treated equally and that any inequalities in the law must have some rational basis (NRA Media Advisory, February 6, 1995).

11. This style of reporting also characterizes election news where game frames or "horse-race" themes dominate rather than more issue-oriented themes (e.g., Hallin, 1992; T. Patterson, 1980; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). As Hallin (1992) explains, media coverage of election campaigns has become increasingly preoccupied with campaign techniques rather than substance, a kind of inside "dopester" approach that "pushes real political debate to the margins" (p. 20).

12. We do not wish to imply that framing is effective only to the extent that a group's frames are represented proportionately in the news. Groups can still be successful in framing if the media pick up only one of their preferred themes. Still, our reading of the press release data suggests that HCI was not simply aiming for favorable media attention; the group wished to see the media focus on its more policy oriented "Sensible Laws" theme. From this perspective, an interest group is successful in framing when the media adopt its preferred issue themes.

13. The most consistent survey data available for this question come from the Gallup Opinion Organization, so monthly Gallup polls were collected and averaged into quarterly data. These data were obtained from the Gallup Opinion Organization, the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut, and the Lexis-Nexis database on the World Wide Web. Polls from other major survey organizations (e.g., *CBS* and *ABC* News Polls, and the Cambridge Reports/Research International) were inserted for missing Gallup data.

14. The dummy "events" variable was coded 1 for each of the following events: the Stockton, California, schoolyard shootings (January 1989); the Long Island train massacre (December 1993); the California Law office shootings (July 1993); the mass shootings in Killeen, Texas (October 1991); and Atlanta, Georgia (October 1991); and a series of Florida tourist murders (September 1993 and February 1996).

15. The impact of mass shootings on media framing may be underestimated if the effect is more indirect. Subsequent analyses revealed a significant impact of violent events on congressional frames ($\beta = .15$, $p < .06$) and public attitudes toward the crime issue ($\beta = .13$, $p < .06$). Additional testing revealed that media framing also influenced public opinion ($\beta = .26$, $p < .02$). The optimal approach to modeling reciprocal effects would be to estimate a simultaneous equation model. However, given the size and nature of our data set, grappling with this estimation problem would detract from the central purpose of this paper. Thus, we chose a basic regression model that although not perfect, can still enhance our understanding of the media framing process.

16. Furthermore, opposition votes in Congress have been plentiful and House and Senate floor debates have been politically polarized. Anti-gun control cues have also been available from the presidential administration at least up until 1992 when President George Bush, an NRA member who received a plurality of votes from gun owners and typically framed gun control as a "Constitutional Rights" issue, decided to support restrictions on assault weapon imports.

17. Groups like the NRA that are viewed negatively by the media may prefer to take the issue off the public agenda. As Kollman (1998) notes, interest groups appeal to the mass public only when their issue positions have widespread popular support. Thus, given the pro-control mood that dominates contemporary public thinking, the NRA tends to operate through campaign financing and voter mobilization rather than opinion mobilization (see the discussion of "strategic public diplomacy" by Manheim, 1994, 1998). Still, the group's outsider strategies such as the television ads featuring Charlton Heston have not gone unnoticed (Shaiko & Wallace, 1998). Moreover, our own data indicate that the NRA and HCI disseminated a similar number of press releases during the period under study. Thus, we conclude that both groups strategically aimed for favorable media attention.

18. For many years, there were no effectively organized pressure groups to counterbalance the political influence of the NRA. Although HCI first emerged in the 1960s, it did not wield much power or influence until Sarah Brady joined the group in the 1980s. Moreover, HCI has relatively few resources in comparison with the NRA (S. Patterson & Eakins, 1998). Consequently, HCI's issue frames may have been given more media exposure in order to give the group a fair chance to activate its public constituencies and offset the seemingly advantaged position of the NRA.

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## Appendix: Coding Scheme

The following excerpts convey the nature of issue framing.

### *Special Interest Problem Frame*

PETER JENNINGS: And now gun control. . . . Just one day after the House of Representatives passed the Brady Bill both sides are planning their battle in the Senate.

COKIE ROBERTS: One convert to the Brady Bill claims the Rifle Association's strong-arm tactics contributed to its defeat.

REP. LESS AUCOIN (D–Oregon): Boy, I'll tell you, this place can be accused of a lot of things—weak knees and all the rest. But there comes a point when they push too hard.

COKIE ROBERTS: It was not just the television ads and the platoons of lobbyists dispatched to the capitol, it was the bluntness of the NRA's message, "vote with us or you'll lose the next election," that offended many House members. Ex-members of Congress serve as reminders that the Rifle Association's threats to defeat its enemies have succeeded. "It certainly happened to me," said former U.S. Representative Peter Smith. "The NRA will pick its targets, absolutely, and they will go after them."

COKIE ROBERTS: The gun lobby will still be formidable when the Senate takes up the Brady Bill but the Rifle Association's power has been based on its invincibility. Yesterday that image was shattered and many here believe that the NRA, like the Wizard of Oz, will never seem so scary again. (*ABC World News Tonight*, May 5, 1991)

### *Constitutional Rights Frame*

SECOND AMENDMENT ATTACK: ALL SPUTTER, NO SCHOLARSHIP

That was the reaction of the chief lobbyist of the National Rifle Association of America to a television advertising campaign mounted by the gun ban movement. "Crushed at the polls and abandoned by scholars, the gun ban movement has resorted to desperation tactics to deceive the American people," said Mrs. Tanya Metaska. "Americans weren't fooled, and they won't be fooled today. The U.S. Constitution means exactly what it says. Overwhelmingly, constitutional scholars and other academics have affirmed that the framers of the Bill of Rights intended the Second Amendment to safeguard an individual right. Even the American Bar Association published in 1965 an award-winning article titled "The Lost Amendment" which concluded that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms." (NRA Media Advisory, December 8, 1994)

### *Sensible Legislation Frame*

MR. STARK: Mr. Speaker, I speak today on behalf of the Brady Bill, H.R. 1025, introduced by my colleague, Mr. Schumer. This bill establishes a 5-day waiting period before the purchase of a handgun to allow the police to conduct a background check of the purchaser. The NRA and enemies of responsible gun laws say that waiting periods don't work. They are wrong. In California, we have a 15-day waiting period that stopped

over 11,000 illegal handgun sales during 1991 and 1992. According to the California Department of Justice, the waiting period stopped: 71 convicted murderers, 14 convicted kidnappers, 203 convicted rapists and sex criminals, 1,283 convicted drug dealers, and 5,772 people convicted of assault. I urge my colleagues to support sensible gun control. Support the Brady Bill. (*Congressional Record*, February 24, 1993)

***Will of the People Frame***

MR. SYNAR: Mr. Speaker, I rise to strongly support today's introduction of the Brady Bill. . . . The good news is that most Americans, most members of Congress and the President want to see the Brady Bill enacted. In poll after poll an overwhelming majority of Americans support a federally mandated waiting period. Not surprisingly, organizations representing more than 400,000 rank and file police officers support the Brady Bill. Additionally, both the House and Senate have voted for passage of the Brady legislation. And most importantly, just last week, President Clinton told Congress in his State of the Union speech, "If you pass the Brady Bill I will sign it." The time for debating the Brady Bill is over. The majority of the country agrees that the Brady Bill is the way to end violence. (*Congressional Record*, February 22, 1993)

***Crime and the Culture of Violence Frame (With a "Youth Violence" Subtext)***

MR. SCHUMER: Mr. Speaker, the carnage in our schools continues unabated. Yesterday, in New York, on the first day back to school, four young people were shot, stabbed or slashed. And at a Los Angeles high school yesterday for the second time in a month one teenage student shot and killed another. Mr. Speaker, how long are we going to continue to watch the slaughter of our children? How many of our sons and daughters must die because elected officials are paralyzed by the culture of violence that grips too many of our schools? Yesterday, we introduced the Brady Bill that calls for a mandatory waiting period for the purchase of hand guns. It's time to stop the killing. (*Congressional Record*, February 23, 1993)

***Feel-Good Laws Frame***

VICTIMS OF GUN BANS LOBBY THE CONGRESS: THEIR TARGET—THE SCHUMER GUN BAN

"Gun bans are the worst sort of practical joke," said Mrs. Tanya Metaska, NRA chief lobbyist. "Citizens are fooled into thinking that bans protect them while law-abiding gun owners are threatened with imprisonment. Only criminals and politicians exit laughing." Mrs. Metaska will be joined in Washington, D.C., next week by a number of victims of gun bans.

STATEMENT BY WAYNE LAPIERRE, NRA EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

Today a narrow majority of the U.S. House has led Americans down a blind alley of make-believe crime control. At the end of the alley lies the city of Washington, D.C.; where honest citizens are prohibited from owning firearms. Today's House vote to ban semi-automatic firearms is just another example of politicians taking the easy way out, rather than addressing the real problem of violent criminals. It is nothing more than

pretend crime control that leads to more victims—innocent people victimized by repeat violent offenders. As concern over criminal violence increases, Americans are demanding that Congress confront violent criminals directly, rather than throw another futile gun law at the law-abiding. The NRA will continue to promote meaningful criminal justice reforms across the country to truly crack down on repeat offenders. (NRA Media Advisory, April 22 and May 5, 1994)

***Political Contest Frame***

BRIAN WILLIAMS: On Capitol Hill today another day of gridlock and partisan bickering over the crime bill and the byproduct of that fight is fading hopes that health care reform will pass in any form this year. NBC's Lisa Myers has the day's developments and disappointments.

LISA MYERS: Democrats called Republicans hypocrites and pawns of the gun lobby which wants to kill the bill because of its ban on 19 assault weapons. . . . Finally, one Senator had enough of the display of partisan trench warfare.

SENATOR HOWARD METZENBAUM: Have you no pride? Have you no character? What kind of sense of responsibility do you have that you want to play this political game?

LISA MYERS: Tonight Democrats do not have enough votes to free the bill. (*NBC Nightly News*, August 24, 1994)

***Guns Don't Kill, People Do Frame***

CITIZENS PROTEST GUN BANS—RALLY FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Gun bans do nothing to stop criminals who routinely obtain illegal guns on the black market. Our schools are a reflection of society as a whole. Root causes [of crime] must be addressed at their socioeconomic sources. Gun control efforts only obscure these real solutions. Dr. Norman Clinkscales from the county medical society stated: "While the medical community abhors the criminals' violent behavior, it is beyond logic to expect that gun control laws will curb criminal violence. One more law will have no effect on those who have chosen to break existing laws." Polls show Americans are steadily rejecting gun bans and gun control. Americans don't believe that gun control laws reduce criminal violence. (NRA Media Advisory, March 31, 1994)

***States' Rights Frame***

ON INTRODUCTION OF THE LATEST ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN REPEAL BILL

It is unfortunate that since Speaker Gingrich has finished his Contract with America he has chosen to take out a contract "on" America. This dangerous bill flies in the face of states' rights. It will serve as a tool by which pro-gun forces can wipe out state and local laws by simply filing a lawsuit. Moreover, the legislation conflicts with the Contract with America's tort reform—since it invites lawyers to burden our court system with suits challenging state gun regulations vital to public safety, such as waiting periods for the purchase of handguns, child access prevention laws, and other state licensing systems. (HCI News Release, April 7, 1995)

# The Future of Political Communication Research: A Symposium in Honor of the Research Contributions of Steven Chaffee

*Editor's Note.* Professor Steven Chaffee retired from his position as Janet M. Peck Professor of International Communication at Stanford University at the close of the 1999–2000 academic year. On October 27, 2000, the Stanford Department of Communication held a symposium on "The Future of Political Communication Research," honoring Professor Chaffee's important contributions to the study of political communication over four decades. The following articles by Professors McLeod, Iyengar, and Mutz are adapted from presentations made at the symposium. Professor Chaffee's comments were written for publication here.