

Fractured Frames: Left-Right Media Portrayal of the 2023 Government Shutdown

Content analysis of left-right media coverage on the averted government shutdown

Abstract

This paper examines the agenda-setting and framing in the context of news coverage surrounding the 2023 government shutdown. By examining the media's role in shaping public perception and policy discourse, this paper aims to shed light on the intricate processes that influence the public's understanding of political events. Through a comprehensive analysis of 252 news articles from Left, Right, and Centrist media outlets, I compare how each venue frames the event by sorting the articles into the six generic framing categories: conflict, human-interest, economic impact, morality, responsibility, and nationalization. Results show that the *responsibility* and *conflict* frames are most prominent across all political orientations, collectively occupying half of the thematic space. Surprisingly, right-wing venues emphasized the *conflict* frame, challenging expectations of a focus on the economic impact. Additionally, I observed a notable absence of the *morality* frame and limited coverage of the *human-interest* frame. In contrast, left-leaning venues prominently featured the *morality* and *human-interest* frames, mirroring the economic ideology that most leftists adopt.

Introduction

Approaching October 2023, Congress narrowly avoided a government shutdown by passing a temporary spending bill. The passage of this measure was a result of a dramatic political showdown and negotiations between the former Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy, and the Democrats. The bill was ultimately approved on a vote of 335 to 91, with a majority of both Democrats and some Republicans voting in favor, and a smaller number of Republicans in opposition (Iyer, 2023). While the temporary spending bill has forestalled an immediate government shutdown, it represents only a temporary solution. The broader spending conflict between the two parties and chambers still looms large, and both the House and Senate are grappling to approve the yearlong spending bills. The gulf between the parties regarding spending priorities and funding levels remains substantial, foreshadowing a renewed “spending battle” in the near future.

Review of Literature

Overview of agenda-setting and framing

Media outlets are fundamental in keeping the public informed on current affairs. However, the large degree of freedom in what the writers and editors deem “newsworthy” gives rise to the concept of “agenda setting” and “framing”. According to Godefroidt, Berbers, and d’Haenens, agenda setting is the press’ ability to shape readers’ perception of the importance of an issue through the selection of topics they cover. Framing refers to how the information is presented, through the use of stylistic choices such as keywords, stock phrases, adjectives, repetitions, etc.

In framing, there are *issue-specific* and *generic* frames. Issue-specific frames apply to a certain issue, subject, or topic, which makes it incomparable. Generic frames, on the other hand, describes the structural aspects and general features of news that can be applied to a variety of topics, times, and cultural context. There are six distinguished frames that this paper will focus on: *conflict*, *human interest*, *economic impact*, *morality*, *responsibility*, and *nationalization* frames. The *conflict* frame focuses on conflicts between individuals, groups, or countries to capture the audience’s interest. The *human interest* frame focuses on an individual’s story or an emphasis on emotions, bringing a “human face” to the news. The *economic impact* frame concentrates on the economic consequences of an event, clearly showing the public the breadth of that event’s impact. The *morality* frame assesses the issue under the lens of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. The *responsibility* frame assigns blame or credit to political entities and individuals for causing or resolving issues. The *nationalization* frame emphasizes a national perspective on foreign issues (Godefroidt, Berbers, & d’Haenens, 2016, pp. 781-782).

Causes and consequences of the Government shutdown

According to the Congressional Research Service Report, from the fiscal year 1977 to the present, funding gaps and government shutdowns have occurred as a result of disagreements between Congress and the President on budgetary issues. Each year, before October 1, or the new fiscal year, Congress and the President must pass a new appropriation bill. The interval in which agency appropriations are not passed is called “funding gaps”. These funding gaps, if continued for a full calendar day or longer, will result in the shutdown of the federal government and affected activities (Brass, 2018).

An immediate consequence of a government shutdown is a “shutdown furlough” of certain federal employees, meaning they will be put in a temporary nonduty, nonpay status. Further consequences involve government operations and services to the public, such as law enforcement and safety, health, parks/museums/monuments, visas and passports, etc (Brass, 2018).

Comparing Left vs Right-wing perspectives on a government shutdown

The left and right-wing diverge considerably in their views on the role of government and the market. Liberals, often associated with the left, are more inclined to hold anti-free market views compared to conservatives on the right (Beinhocker, 2007). This can be seen in their support for wage and price controls and their belief in a Keynesian economy, where the government holds a crucial role in job creation through monetary and fiscal policies, stabilizing unemployment over the business cycle (O’Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2022). Additionally, they tend to favor state ownership of key industries like power production, banking, and steel, reflecting a preference for government control over these sectors. On the other hand, the Right-wing generally lean towards free-market principles, promoting limited government involvement and

emphasizing business and profit as essential drivers of economic growth (Miller, 2007). They are also in favor of more limited government spending. This is evident in former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's debt-limit-and-cuts bills – a failed trickle-down economics - which would cut a broad array of public services such as schools, childcare, public health, environmental protection, college aid...making it more difficult for vulnerable individuals to afford necessities. Simultaneously, these proposals allowed for more tax cheating and reduced taxes for the wealthy (Acosta, 2023).

In the context of government shutdowns, based on the generalizations made above, I would expect that right-wing individuals often view government shutdowns as a strategic tool to control government growth and curb excessive spending. They likely argue that such shutdowns are necessary measures to rein in government excess, compelling policymakers to make tough decisions about spending and prioritize essential functions. From their perspective, government shutdowns can serve as a means to pressure the government into reducing its budget deficit and debt, aligning with their core belief in limited government involvement and fiscal responsibility. Conversely, left-wing individuals tend to perceive government shutdowns as harmful disruptions that can undermine the government's ability to fulfill its responsibilities in crucial areas like social welfare, healthcare, and education. They contend that these shutdowns can have counterproductive effects on fiscal responsibility. This perspective aligns with their belief in the government's crucial role in providing essential services and safety nets for society. The leftwing's emphasis on maintaining government functions to support social welfare programs stands in contrast to the right-wing's drive to limit government involvement and spending.

News on the government shutdown and media bias

Because political shutdowns are events that can spark extensive public discourse, there have been various studies examining the nature of news and media regarding this issue. Agur and Gan's (2021) study that analyzes new discussions on Twitter during the 2018-2019 shutdown shows how opposing views are displayed through the selective retransmissions of news stories. These echo chambers, in turn, will shape readers' responses to news stories, ultimately reinforcing existing political divisions (Agur, & Gan, 2021).

Outside of the topic of government shutdown, the presence of media bias has long been a widely debated topic, with a lot of signs pointing to its blatant existence. Some studies present data that suggests liberal biases, some others conservative (Eisinger, R. M., Veenstra, L. R., & Koehn, J. P., 2007). This gives rise to the practice of putting media institutions along a continuum of most liberal and most conservative viewpoints, used by Pew Research Center and fact-checking websites such as Media Bias/Fact Check (Agur, & Gan, 2021). This framework will be crucial in the process of evaluating news venues in this paper, but also in helping the public understand the ideological positioning of various media institutions.

In writing about the averted government shutdown, a journalist can choose to focus on the political discord leading to the shutdown and the contrasting viewpoints of major political figures, or they can highlight the personal stories of individuals directly affected by the shutdown, such as government employees facing furloughs, small business owners losing contracts, or families struggling with disruptions in essential services like healthcare and education. They can also choose to focus on the financial consequences of the shutdown on the national economy, examining sectors like tourism, stock markets, federal contractors, etc., or they can discuss the moral obligations of various stakeholders or the impact on vulnerable

populations. They can also point fingers and analyze the blame game or explore how the shutdown shapes perceptions of national unity and identity. Thus, this paper aims to address 2 questions:

RQ1a: Which news frames do the left-wing, right-wing, and centrist venues frequently apply?

RQ1b: To what extent does the framing of a government shutdown by differing news venues align with or deviate from the priorities and concerns of their respective ideologies?

Methods

In order to study the difference between agenda setting and framing of left-wing versus right-wing news outlets on the issue of the government shutdown that was expected to happen on October 1, I will conduct a qualitative content analysis on news published by 6 sources: 2 left-leaning, 2 right-leaning, and 2 centrists, to calibrate.

I will begin by clearly defining the criteria for categorizing news venues into left-wing, right-wing, or centrist sources. The selection criteria were based on factors commonly associated with political orientation, including editorial stance, ownership and affiliations, endorsements, reporting style, and specific issue priorities. My criteria aimed to align with the prevailing definitions and characteristics of these categories within the context of American media.

A comprehensive search and review process was conducted to identify potential news venues that matched my selection criteria. During the process, to take into consideration public perception and consensus on the political orientation of the news venues, I consulted media watchdog organizations, specifically the AllSides Media Bias Chart and Ad Fontes Media to identify commonly recognized left-wing, right-wing, and centrist news venues. I also observed discussions on online forums, social media groups, and community boards where people debate

the political orientation of the news outlet. Ethical considerations also played a significant role in my selection process. I excluded news venues with a history of spreading false or misleading information and engaging in unethical journalism practices. This is done by consulting factchecking organizations and skimming the news outlet's published ethics guidelines and codes of conduct.

Based on the above processes, I selected two news venues for each of the three categories: left-wing, right-wing, and centrist. The chosen news venues are as follows:

- Left-wing news venues: New York Times, CNN
- Right-wing news venues: Wall Street Journal, Fox News
- Centrist news venues: USA Today, ABC News

Articles containing the following words were collected: *government shutdown, federal government shutdown, funding crisis, spending bill*. I will collect articles that were published a week before October 1 (from September 24 to October 1), the day the government shutdown was anticipated to happen but eventually avoided. Leading up to a scheduled government shutdown, there is often a heightened sense of uncertainty and anticipation regarding the potential outcomes. This uncertainty stems from the possibilities that could unfold, including budget negotiations, legislative actions, political maneuvering, etc. During this period of anticipation, a wide range of stakeholders, including politicians, experts, analysts, and the media, express diverse opinions and predictions about what may transpire. Therefore, collecting articles at this stage will provide access to a wealth of opinions, forecasts, and analyses.

With all the collected articles, I sorted them into 6 generic frames: *conflict, human interest, economic impact, morality, responsibility, and nationalization* (Godefroidt, Berbers, & d'Haenens, 2016), using the 21 yes/no questions by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and Van

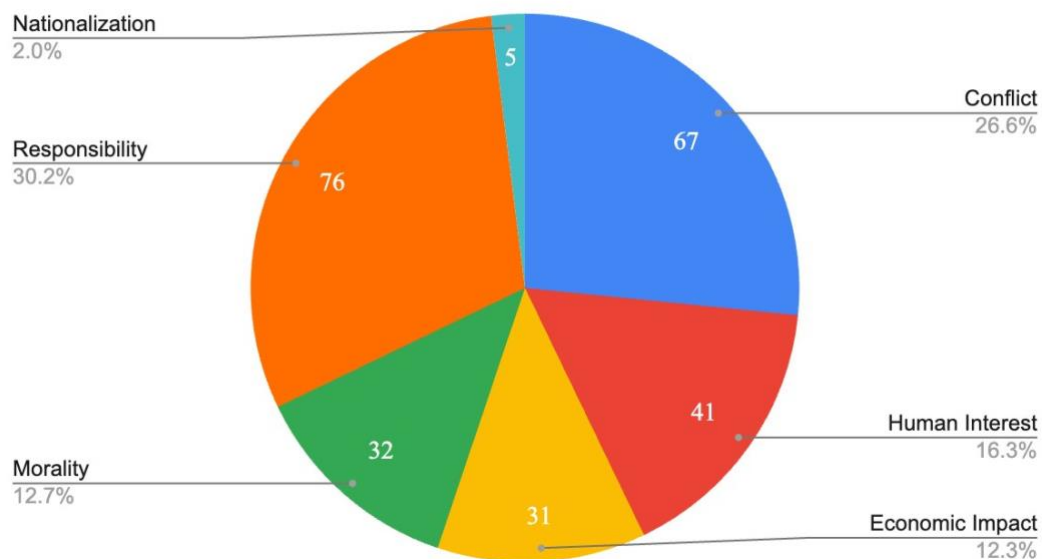
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Findings

Framing Analysis by individual news venues

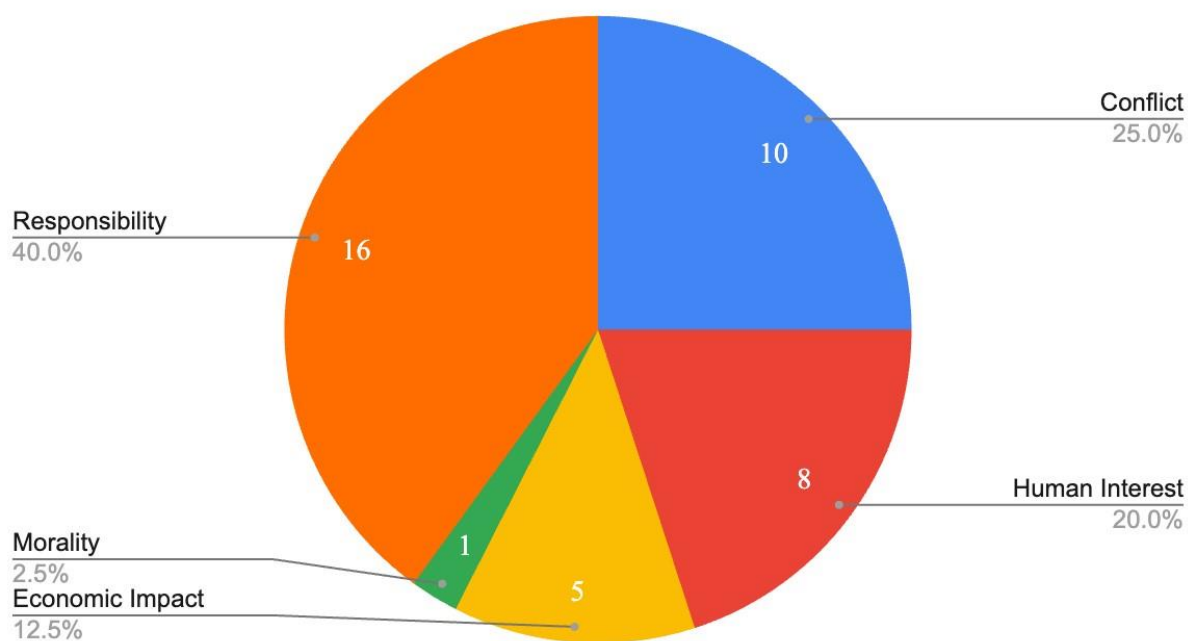
From September 24th to October 1st, the six news venues published a total of 252 articles, news segments, and podcasts. The New York Times published 40 articles, 3 of which were video news reports; CNN published 46 articles, 12 of which were rebroadcasted TV news segments; The Wall Street Journal published 30 articles with 9 in video news report format; Fox News published 27 articles; USA Today published 54 articles, with 8 being video news segments; ABC News published 55 articles, 38 of which were rebroadcasted live news segments. Within this array of content, the dominant thematic frame was *responsibility*, with 76 articles. Following that, the *conflict* frame appeared in 67 articles; *human interest* in 41, *morality* in 32, *economic impact* in 31. Notably, the least explored frame was *nationalization*, featured in only 5 articles.

Framing Analysis by Generic Frames

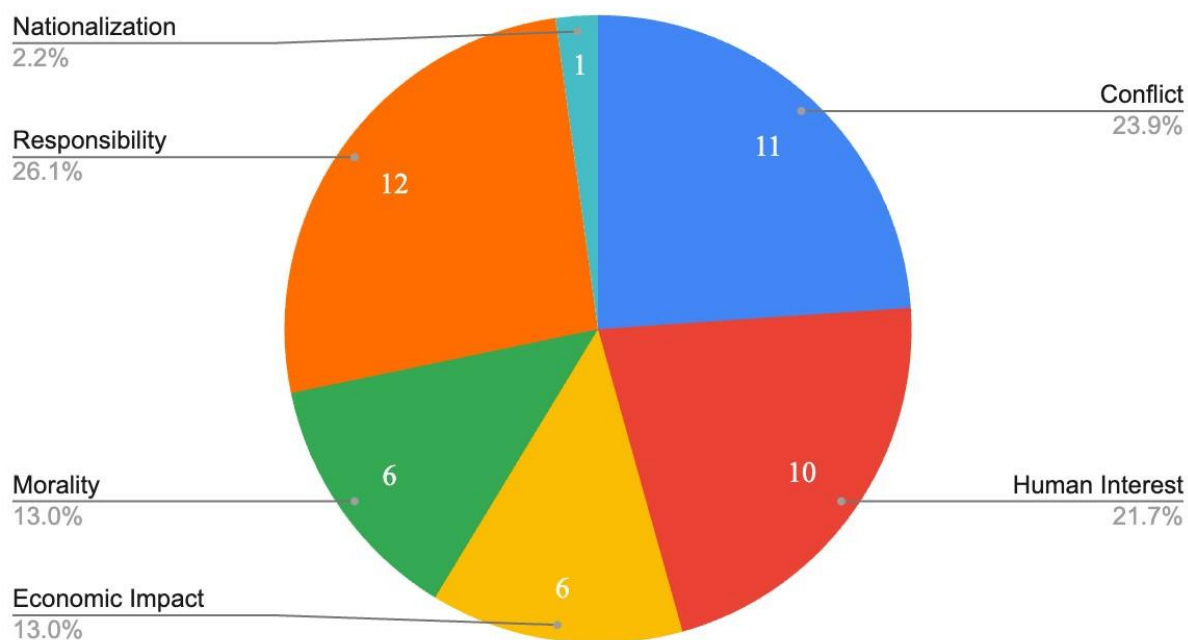


Below are the specific framing of each news venue.

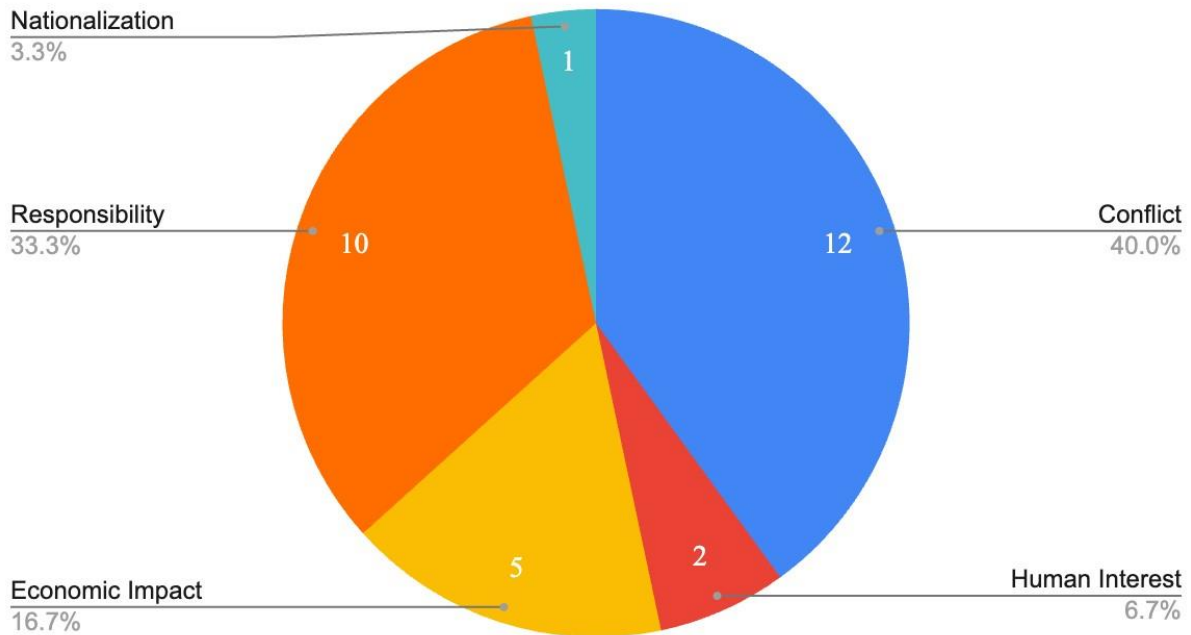
New York Times framing



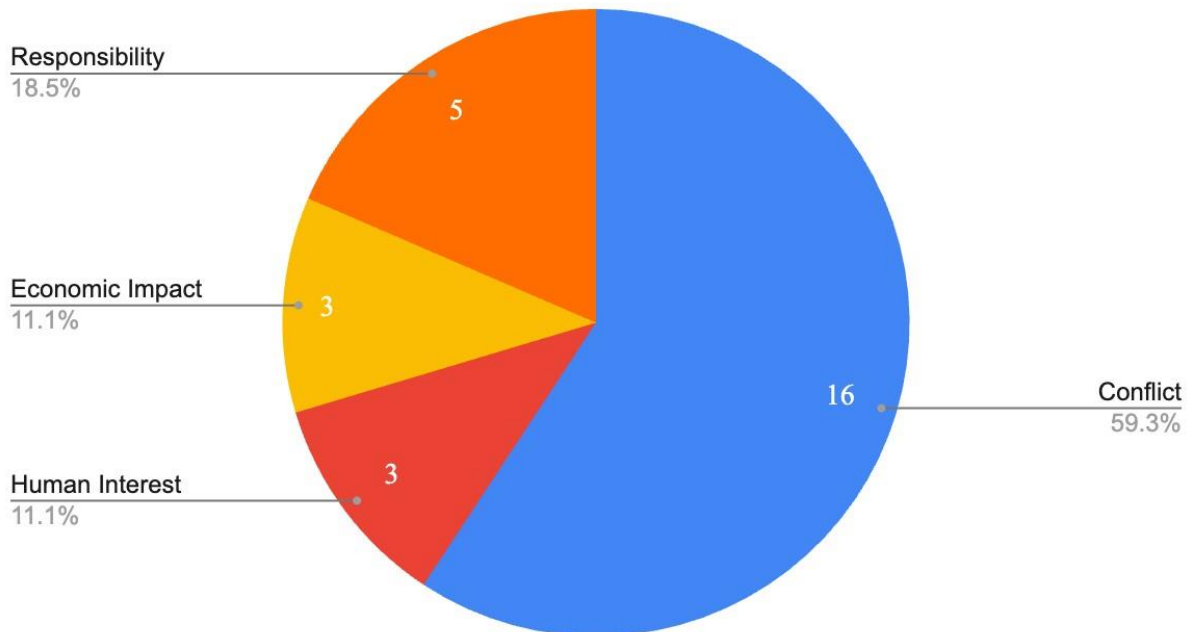
CNN framing



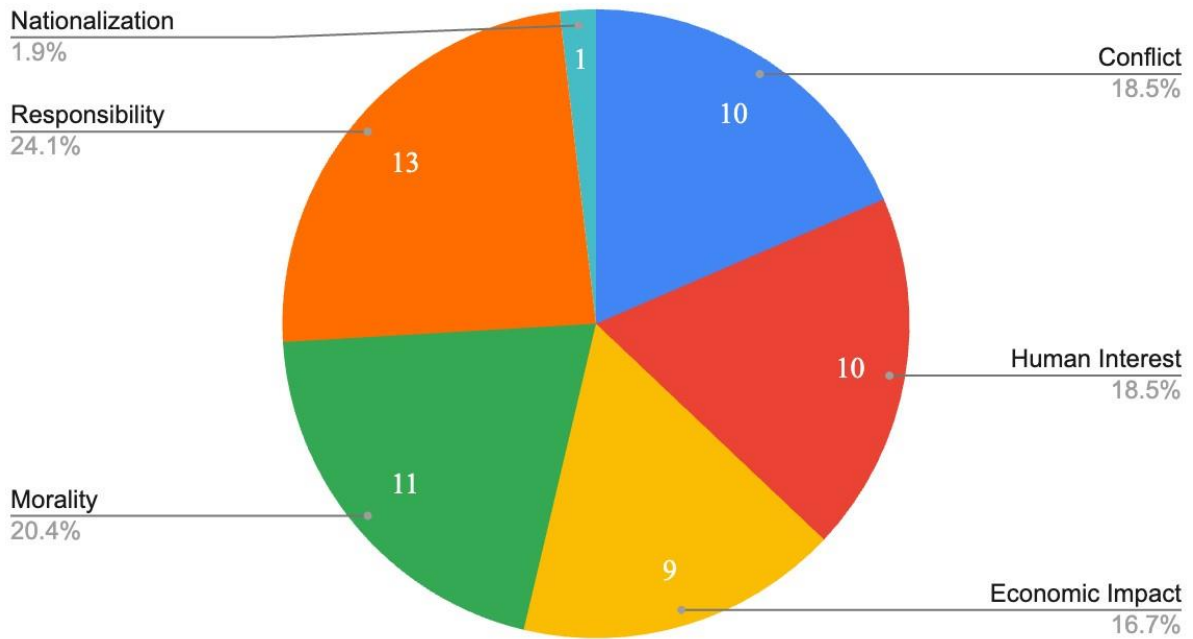
Wall Street Journal framing



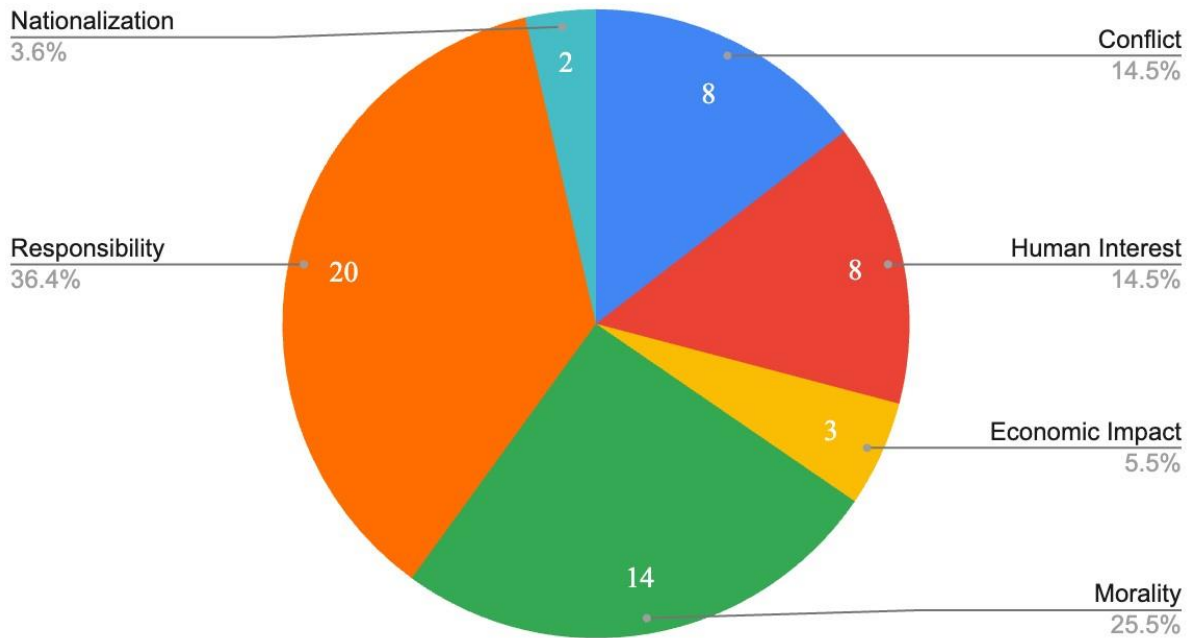
Fox News framing



USA Today framing

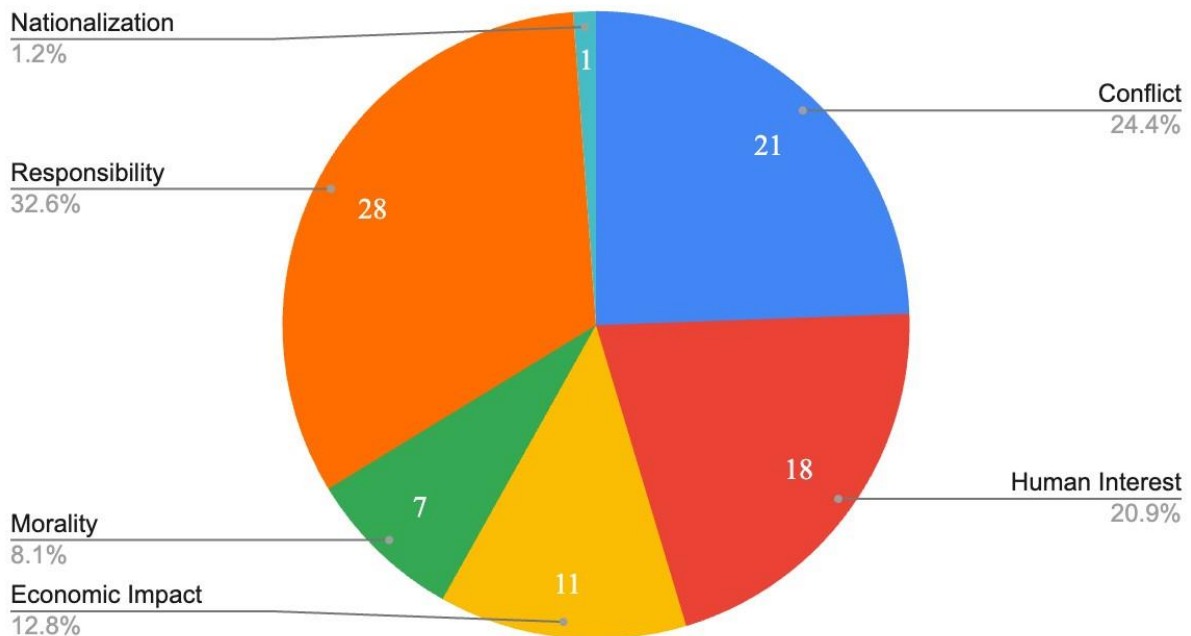


ABC News framing

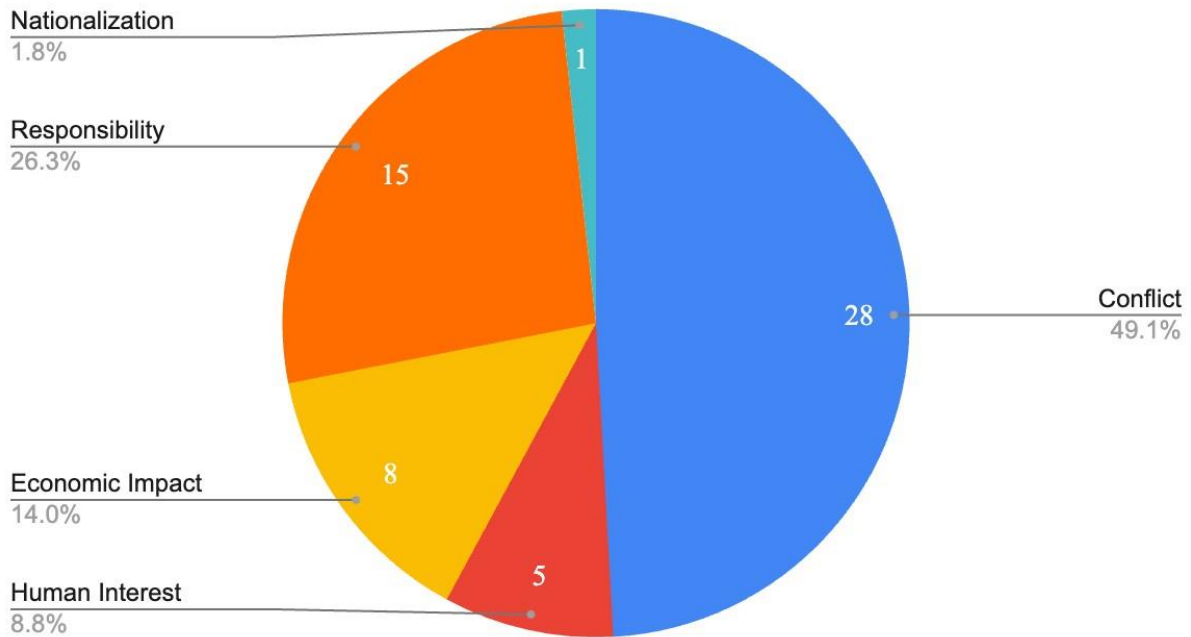


Framing analysis by political orientation

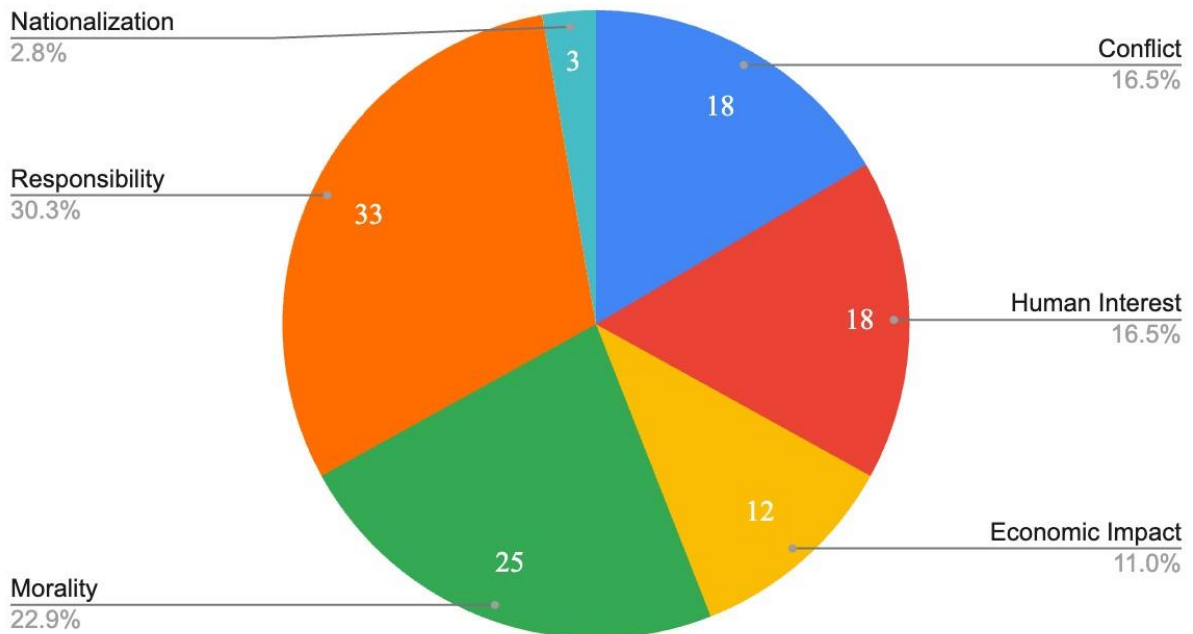
Centrist venues had the fairest distribution of generic frames, followed by left-leaning venues, and lastly right-leaning venues. A shared characteristic across all three categories is the prominence of the *responsibility* and *conflict* frame, collectively occupying half of the thematic space. Notably, in right-leaning venues, those two frames take up three-fourths of the overall framing landscape.

Framing of Left-leaning Venues

Framing of Right-leaning Venues



Framing of Centrist Venues



Discussions

It is important to acknowledge that distinguishing between the *human interest* and *morality* frames can be challenging because these frames often intersect. For example, in stories that evoke strong emotions, such as the loss of essential services for vulnerable populations, the human-interest element inherently brings up moral considerations about societal responsibility. To ensure consistency in my data-collection process, I've developed a set of criteria that can help me distinguish between these two frames. For the *human interest* frame, I consider whether the article primarily focuses on the micro-level, highlighting individual experiences and personal narratives. I also determine whether the primary intent of the article is to evoke empathy and connection with the individuals involved. For the *morality* frame, I look for articles that take a macro perspective that examines the broader societal and ethical implications of the events. I consider whether the piece goes beyond individual stories to address the larger moral questions at play.

After establishing the framework that will help me distinguish between the two frames, I analyzed 252 articles, and rebroadcasts of live TV news, and concluded that the *responsibility* frame is most common amongst left-wing, right-wing, and centrist news sources. This is likely because government shutdowns often result from political deadlock or disagreements over budgetary issues. Therefore, news covering the government shutdown will inherently involve discussions on which political parties or leaders are deemed responsible. The *responsibility* frame naturally emerges, and the blame attribution becomes a central theme in coverage. Another possible explanation is public sentiments – if there is a perception that elected officials are not fulfilling their responsibilities to ensure the smooth operation of the government, news outlets are likely to reflect and amplify the dominant sentiment (Al-Rawi, 2016).

Another notable observation is the absence of articles employing the *morality* frame in right-leaning venues, whereas the left-leaning venues published a collective 7 articles, and centrist venues published 25. A similar discrepancy is also evident when considering the *human-interest* frame. Right-leaning venues published a total of 5 articles that employ this frame, in stark contrast to left-leaning and centrist venues, which both had 18 articles. Articles that fall into these two frames, especially the *human-interest* frame, tend to center around an individual's story. This pattern of framing within the media landscape can be interpreted as a manifestation of episodic framing, wherein the emphasis on individual stories takes precedence over a more comprehensive analysis of systemic issues. Journalists usually employ this technique in writing about financial problems or poverty to bring ordinary citizens into their stories, allowing them to “[break] through the hegemony of elite sources”. Like cultural differences, this method will resonate with different cognitive schemas for those on the left versus right side of the political spectrum (Boukes, 2021). In this case, citizens with a left-wing ideology, or those who favor income distribution (economically left) will perceive this technique as more appealing than those on the right (Skovsgaard & Hopmann, 2020). The numbers from this investigation align with this assertion and support my hypothesis—left-leaning news venues will primarily see the government shutdown as a detriment to low-income and vulnerable citizens. Albeit not directly related to the research question this paper aims to address, it is worth noting that this journalistic technique can be harmful because by simplifying complex issues to the level of anecdotal cases, episodic framing leads views to focus on the individuals or groups depicted in the news rather than structural factors, such as historical, social, or political contexts (Iyengar, 1996). On the other hand, the lack of articles with a *morality* frame in right-leaning venues could be attributed to partisan messaging, where the journalists try to appeal to the political values of their audience.

The second half of my hypothesis suggests that the most prominent frame in right-leaning news venues is the *economic impact* frame. However, the findings did not substantiate this claim, with the *economic impact* frame accounting for 14%, while the *conflict* frame dominated with 49%, almost half of the identified frames. This anomaly could be attributed to many factors, some of which could be the influence of nonmedia actors or high authorities in frame-building (Wichgers, Jacobs, & van Spanje, 2020), or political strategy, where journalists may believe that emphasizing the political gridlock aligns better with their political agenda and resonates more effectively with their audience, etc. Given the various potential influencing factors at play, more research is needed to answer the question of why this anomaly occurred, highlighting the importance of further investigation into how media frames political events.

Conclusion

This paper examined the framing of left-wing, right-wing, and centrist news venues when reporting about the 2023 government shutdown. After analyzing 252 articles, news segments, and podcasts from The New York Times, CNN, The Wall Street Journal, Fox News, USA Today, and ABC News, I concluded that the *responsibility* and *conflict* frame is the most prominent across all three categories. Notably, right-leaning venues exhibited a pronounced emphasis on the *conflict* frame, alongside an absence of the *morality* frame and a limited presence of the *human-interest* frame. Conversely, left-leaning venues displayed a strong presence of the *morality* and *human-interest* frame. The findings from this investigation align with the hypothesis positing that left-leaning venues would place great emphasis on the *human-interest* and *morality* frame, reflecting historical tendencies rooted in a belief in government intervention and its role as a social safety net. However, the prominence of the *conflict* frame in right-leaning venues diverged from expectations, challenging the anticipated emphasis on economic impact. This unexpected pattern

prompts a re-evaluation of assumptions regarding the framing within right-leaning news venues, inviting further exploration into the factors shaping media framing in the context of political events.

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Appendix

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“How Each Member Voted on the House Stopgap Spending Measure”, *The New York Times*

CNN

The government remains open – for now. Here’s what happens next”, *CNN*

“U.S. shutdown crisis averted, but polls show Americans are disillusioned with elected officials”,

CNN

“U.S. averts government shutdown, but leaves out aid to Ukraine”, *CNN*

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“Janet Yellen warns shutdown would be ‘dangerous and unnecessary’”, *CNN*

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“Sen. Coons: Government shutdown would damage the U.S.'s global standing”, *CNN*

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“US government shutdowns don’t send markets tanking, but the coast is far from clear”, *CNN*

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“With shutdown looming, Carter library moves up birthday celebration for 39th president”, *CNN*

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