



Game-Framing the Issues: Tracking the Strategy Frame in Public Policy News

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Scholars and journalists have argued that the “game” frame—reporting politics primarily in strategic terms—is predominant in mainstream news reporting of politics. Game-oriented reporting is problematic, according to its critics, because it crowds out issue-based reporting. But as of yet we know little and have theorized little about the specific contexts in which the game frame is likely to be reporters’ primary emphasis. While numerous studies have documented the predominance of the game schema in election news, the empirical record on public policy news is quite limited. Accordingly, the content of national news about the issue of U.S. welfare reform during 1996 is analyzed to illustrate three theoretical propositions about game-framed news coverage: that the game frame is most likely to be applied to public policy issues when they are discussed in national election news, that the game frame is also particularly likely to be applied when Washington policymakers are engaged in conflict that promises a clear outcome (i.e., the passage or rejection of legislation) over key issues in electoral politics, and that the game frame is less likely to be applied to public policy issues when they are discussed in news about state-level political debates and the implementation phase of policy-making.

Keywords elections, framing, game frame, game schema, issues, journalism norms, news coverage, public policy

Critical attention has for some time been focused on the ways in which the mainstream U.S. media “frame” the news.¹ News frames are of particular interest because they constitute an exercise (intentional or, quite often, unintentional) of journalistic power; frames can draw attention toward and confer legitimacy upon particular aspects of reality while marginalizing other aspects. Recently, scholars and journalists have grown increasingly concerned with the “game” or “strategic” news frame. Patterson (1994), Fallows (1997), and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) all have argued that journalists habitually tell stories about politics as if they were simply stories about political competition. According to Fallows, reporters typically “present public life as a contest among scheming political leaders” (1997, p. 7). Cappella and Jamieson call this the “strategy frame” that “emphasizes

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who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead" (1997, p. 33). Patterson calls it the "game schema" of political reporting. "The dominant schema for the reporter," he argues, "is structured around the notion that politics is a strategic game [in which] candidates compete for advantage" (1994, pp. 57–58).

The main problem with this approach to covering politics, according to these authors, is that when politics is represented as a game, the actual substance of politics may be relegated to the sidelines. When journalists concentrate on who is up or down in the latest poll or primary, the policy issues that politicians presumably are elected to grapple with fall out of focus. What suffers, according to Fallows, is "the essence of real journalism, which is the search for information of use to the public" (1997, p. 7). The game schema, critics contend, offers the public a pinched, one-dimensional view of politics, and the substantive political information that citizens could use to understand public policy issues, formulate informed opinions, and hold politicians accountable is lost. The media's relative lack of focus on substantive issues thus can undermine informed citizen engagement (Graber, 1994) and, by inviting the public to view politicians' actions and utterances as nothing more than self-interested gambits for votes and power, can activate public cynicism about politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

As of yet, close empirical study of game-oriented news reporting has been somewhat limited, especially in nonelectoral contexts. Scholars generally agree with Patterson's (1980, 1994) conclusion that election news is too often framed around winning, losing, and strategizing—the long-bemoaned "horse race" style of election coverage (Jamieson, 1992; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). Patterson (1994, p. 74) also shows that this style of election news has increased dramatically over the past three decades; his data indicate that the proportion of strategically oriented election stories appearing on the front page of *The New York Times* has risen substantially since 1960 (see also Mendelsohn, 1993; Miller & Denham, 1994).

The empirical record regarding news coverage of other political contexts, such as policy-making, is more limited. Cappella and Jamieson contend that "the strategy frame is being generalized by journalists from campaigns to governance and discussions of public policy issues" (1997, p. 33), and this contention is, in large part, what leads them to study how the strategy frame activates public cynicism about politics. They report that game-framed news predominated in news coverage of the health care reform debate of 1993 and 1994, with 67% of news items framed primarily in terms of political strategy and only 25% framed in terms of the substantive content of various reform proposals (1997, p. 34). Yet, as content analysis of the news is not the main purpose of their study, they offer few details of how this finding was arrived at. More important, it remains unclear whether the health care reform debate was unique in ways that invited unusually heavy strategic news coverage. Thus, empirically speaking, we do not really know the degree to which game-framed news has become the norm in nonelectoral news contexts or whether the health care reform debate provides a good basis for generalizing about the prevalence of the game frame in public policy news.

Our understanding of the game frame has also been theoretically limited. We have a good basis for understanding the developments in the news industry and in politics that have given rise to the game frame, thanks to the works of authors reviewed more fully later. And in terms of outcomes, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) provide suggestive evidence for the effects of strategically framed news on the public. What we lack, however, is a midlevel theory explaining why journalists might emphasize the game of politics in some news contexts and not others. When reporting on most public policy issues,

after all, journalists generally have both strategic and substantive angles available to them. As the research cited thus far implies, the news does not always represent politics as a game but continues at times to focus on issues and substance. How, then, can we explain which angles reporters emphasize at different times?

This study offers and illustrates some basic propositions that can serve as the basis for a fuller theory of game-framed news. The findings reported here draw from a particularly rich case study—news coverage of welfare reform during 1996—to suggest that game-framed news about public policy issues is more likely in some political contexts than in others and that there may be a relatively predictable structural flow to the framing of news about public policy issues.

The Rise of the Game Frame

The game frame thrives in today's news for many reasons. At a most basic level, it fits many of the key criteria of "newsworthiness" prevalent in the news business for decades. Game-framed coverage reflects journalism's enduring focus on drama and conflict (Bennett, 1996; Gans, 1979; Paletz & Entman, 1981), placing political actors and events into a framework of simple, two-sided conflict, with the drama generated by the expectation of "winners" and "losers." It also reflects American journalism's tendency to "personalize" the news (Bennett, 1996) by treating politics as a series of discrete conflicts among individual politicians or parties. As Patterson (1994), Fallows (1997), and others have observed, changes in the political system and in the news business in the past two decades have created an even more favorable climate for game-framed news. Modern styles of campaigning in which entrepreneurial candidates rely increasingly on their strategists to manage their platforms and their images increase politicians' focus on strategy while encouraging reporters to view the candidates' every move as a campaign ploy. The long shadow of Watergate also continues to color reporters' perceptions of politics. The post-Watergate culture in Washington journalism encourages reporters to seek out the next big story of official deceit and to "deconstruct" politicians' strategies as a defense mechanism against continually being "spun" or, worse yet, against any perception that they are too easy on the politicians they cover (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 31).

Meanwhile, the rise of television and of celebrity journalism have influenced the nature of the profession by encouraging ever more dramatized, assertive, and interpretive reporting. At the same time, paradoxically, treating politics like sports allows journalists to maintain an apparent stance of objectivity. By focusing on the "technical" aspects of the political game—strategies, tactics, and wins and losses—journalists can more easily avoid appearing to take sides politically (Hallin, 1994, p. 25). They thereby also claim a particular kind of expertise that does not require laborious research into the substance of complex public policy debates. Focusing on the game thus allows reporters to more easily produce stories on deadline (Fallows, 1997)—an increasingly important skill in an industry increasingly focused on the bottom line (Underwood, 1993).

These trends and enduring features in politics and journalism account both for reporters' powerful attraction to the game schema and for its increasing prevalence. By themselves, however, they do not tell us why or in what circumstances news organizations continue to produce issue-framed, substantive news as well as strategic, game-framed news. Instead, the factors that explain news organizations' choices about which frame to emphasize in which circumstances are likely to be context dependent. This article will suggest that the political contexts that encourage game-framed news include

structured elite conflicts that correspond to an idealized "phase structure" that journalists often apply to politics; it will also suggest that the contemporary culture of the national news media makes the game frame more likely in coverage emanating from congressional and White House beats than in other news contexts. Finally, the article considers the factors that may vary from congressional debate to congressional debate which make game-framed news more likely in coverage of some policy issues than others.

Elite Conflict, Phase Structure, and Journalistic Culture

Elite conflict is, of course, the most basic and crucial element of game-framed news. Without it, journalists would have little to recognize as a "game." Yet, the key to game-framed news may not be conflict in and of itself. Not all conflict lends itself equally well to the game schema, nor do reporters apply the game schema equally to all types of political conflict. Rather, the game frame is most likely in situations variously described as "controlled conflict" or "conflict with movement."²

As several observers have recognized, journalists often judge the newsworthiness of events by their implicit relationship to a larger, narratively linked series of ongoing events. Political scientist Timothy Cook has argued that many "daily news stories are episodes of larger continuing sagas. . . . Simply put, for news to be produced routinely, journalists must be able to visualize events as part of a larger, broader storyline and must move the plot along from one episode to the next" (1996, p. 474). And those sagas, as Mark Fishman (1980) has theorized, are often understood by journalists to have a predictable "phase structure," with "news" being marked by the passage of a story from one phase to the next. Cook (1989) finds, for example, that reporters on the congressional beat often define the newsworthiness of daily happenings in Congress by whether or not they move the lawmaking process forward to the "next" step: from committee hearings to a floor debate, for example, or from a floor vote to the president's desk. Institutional decisions such as these, he observes, are "considered the most newsworthy occurrences in Congress" (p. 47), and other congressional activities draw their newsworthiness from how they contribute to those decisions. In this way, news about policy-making mirrors news about elections. Reporters often treat elections as if they fit into a "master narrative" much like the "Road to the National Championship" coverage so common in the sports pages. According to this narrative, election day is the goal line, and everything that happens during the campaign is significant only as it pertains to a politician's (or a party's) chances of getting across the line (Fallows, 1997, pp. 170-173). Each daily installment of the election story, each gaffe or revelation or endorsement, acquires significance because of its implicit relationship to the larger story of who will win.

Policy-making is most newsworthy, therefore, when it is marked by clear conflict that promises a resolution, what Cook describes as "conflict with movement." Conflict without movement, in contrast, offers little that beat reporters recognize as news, since "the *sine qua non* of news is not conflict in and of itself, but an endless series of conflicts and momentary resolutions" (1996, pp. 474-475) that move through the phases of the idealized policy-making process. Indeed, reporters are less likely to report on elite conflict that seems unlikely to "go anywhere." As shown later, for example, journalists at major news organizations barely took notice of the early congressional committee debates on welfare reform, over which hovered President Clinton's promise to veto Republican welfare reform legislation, even though these debates were highly consequential to the ultimate shape of welfare reform. When the veto threat lifted, however, the news focused closely on the policy-making process.

Significantly, as this article will show, this implicit, idealized phase structure can suggest to journalists not only what is newsworthy but also how it should be framed. Situations of “controlled conflict” in elections and in lawmaking lend themselves well to game-framed news because they provide clear chronological markers of their idealized phase structure, analogous to quarters, time-outs, halftime, and the two-minute warning in American football games: key primary dates like the Iowa caucuses and Super Tuesday, for example, or the ritualized dynamics of the late-summer party convention, or, in the legislative setting, the floor vote that marks the passage of a piece of legislation from one phase to the next. These political contexts offer reporters not just elite conflict but the virtual guarantee of some kind of identifiable outcome—win, lose, or, as is sometimes the case in policy-making, draw. While outcomes are somewhat less predictable and constrained in the policy-making than in the electoral context, reporters have a simple metric by which to judge them: Was a bill defined by the president, the Senate majority leader, the speaker of the House of Representatives, or some other key political figure as politically crucial? If the president promised to pass the bill in the last election, or party leaders have identified the issue as key to winning an upcoming election, then the potential “winners” and “losers” of a policy debate, and the importance for both sides of a legislative “win,” are clear.

Reporters are clearly drawn to conflict of many kinds, and not all political conflicts will conform easily to the idealized phase structures of campaigning and lawmaking. Journalists’ implicit expectations about the structure of political conflict may make the game frame seem most appropriate in certain phases of the political process. When political elites are locked in a contest for votes, either from the public or from their fellow policymakers, reporters are inclined to focus on their strategies and their chances for success. In other phases of the political process, however, reporters may be less inclined to resort to the game frame and more inclined to focus on the substance of political issues. Once a bill successfully runs the gauntlet of the legislative process and leaves the president’s desk, for example, the structure of political conflict around it becomes less controlled and predictable. Conflict may well continue both in federal and local arenas, but that conflict is not as likely to be structured around clear-cut outcomes and markers of narrative “movement” or political “success.”³ Conflict may be less organized at the opening stages of the policy-making process as well, when problems are being defined and the institutional agenda ordered around particular national priorities. Like the implementation phase of policy-making at the end of the policy-making process, the “primeval soup” in which policy proposals and alternatives first arise at the beginning of the process (Kingdon, 1995) offers reporters fewer of the markers so prevalent at other phases of the “game.”⁴

The implicit phase structure for reporting on politics is not entirely problematic. It offers journalists a useful rule for judging the newsworthiness of various events, particularly in the policy-making setting: The more likely a bill looks to become a law, and the more important it is to the political futures of politicians, parties, and administrations, the more attention should be paid to it. This rule makes sense from the perspective of the limited “carrying capacity” of the news, helping news organizations to focus their limited space or time resources on the most consequential policy issues. What can be problematic about this decisional rule is that when the news media turn their attention to public policy debates, they often bring them into focus through the prism of the game schema.

These dynamics are most likely in news originating from Washington, for a reason highlighted by many critics of the game schema: the culture of Washington journalism.

Reporters for all sorts of news organizations are inclined to focus on conflict, but according to Patterson (1994), Fallows (1997), and Cappella and Jamieson (1997), it is the Washington press corps that has become particularly prone to treating politics as a game. Cappella and Jamieson acknowledge that while the evidence of a cynical national press corps abounds, the predominant framing of policy-making in local settings is not clear (1997, p. 32). This suggests a final, additional dimension to a theory of game-framed news: The game frame should be most prevalent when the news focuses on *national* policy-making. When the news focuses on state and local politics, by contrast, it may be less strategically framed. A key question remains, however, concerning whether Washington reporters bring a cynical, strategic perspective with them when they are assigned to cover state-level politics—a question that the case study reported subsequently sheds light on.

Three propositions based on the foregoing can summarize a tentative theory of strategic news coverage of public policy issues in the leading national news media:

- The game frame is most likely to be applied to public policy issues when they are discussed in national *election* news.
- Game-framed coverage of public policy issues is also particularly likely when Washington policymakers are engaged in legislative “conflict with movement” that promises a clear outcome (i.e., the passage or rejection of legislation) on issues that are highly consequential politically (i.e., issues that key political figures have designated as crucial to fulfilling past campaign promises or winning future elections).
- The game frame is less likely to be applied to public policy issues in other settings, such as in news about the implementation phase of policy-making or state-level political debates.

The 1996 Welfare Reform Debate

Before presenting details of this study and findings, a brief review of some key points from the history of the 1996 welfare reform debate is in order. In a well-remembered tag line, Bill Clinton campaigned for the presidency in 1992 with a promise to “end welfare as we know it.” But welfare reform took a back seat first to Clinton’s health care reform proposals and then to his more cautious stance on social policy following the demise of health care reform and the 1994 Republican sweep of Congress. Congressional Republicans took the lead on the issue in 1995, producing two welfare reform bills that Clinton vetoed, saying they “punished children” without “getting tough on work.” With his second veto in January 1996, Clinton paved the way for Republicans to use welfare reform against him in the 1996 election. The welfare issue was complicated, however, by its entanglement both with Medicaid reform and with the federal budget impasse that shut down the federal government in late 1995 and early 1996. Meanwhile, states across the country took advantage of federal “waivers” and experimented with their own versions of welfare reform.

Following a proposal by the National Governors Association that sought to end the budget impasse while reforming the federal welfare and Medicaid systems, congressional Republicans unveiled a slightly revamped welfare bill in May of 1996 (HR 3507, S 1795). The bill contained very similar provisions to the earlier versions Clinton had vetoed: It turned Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into a system of block grants to the states, ending the legal entitlement of the poor to welfare benefits; it

required recipients to begin working within two years of receiving aid; it provided financial incentives to states to move recipients off of welfare and into work and to reduce their rate of out-of-wedlock births; and it narrowed the scope of public assistance for disabled children and barred legal immigrants from receiving supplemental security income (SSI) and food stamp benefits until they became citizens or worked in the United States for a substantial period of time. Unlike the earlier bills, however, the new proposal also included provisions to convert Medicaid into a block-grant program Clinton had indicated he would not support. The Republican bill therefore reflected a collage of competing motivations: to fundamentally reform federal public aid programs, to enable Republican candidates to claim election-year credit for the highly popular feat of “ending welfare,” and to present the president with a Hobson’s choice of either signing Medicaid legislation with which he deeply disagreed or again vetoing welfare reform, the very idea he had helped to popularize, in an election year.

House and Senate committees debated the proposals in June and early July. But even as these debates were being waged, it became clear that welfare reform stood less chance of becoming law as long as it was linked to Medicaid. Eventually bowing to pressure from those Republicans who wanted to claim credit for enacting welfare reform, and responding to broad hints from the White House that Clinton might be willing to acquiesce on welfare reform if not on Medicaid, the Republican leadership announced on July 8 that Medicaid and welfare reform would be delinked and treated as separate bills. This announcement redoubled the debate in Congress, during which Clinton capably refused to send clear signals about what specific provisions of the emerging legislation he would support or oppose, thus denying Republicans the chance to load the bill with further “poison pills.”

On the campaign trail, meanwhile, congressional Republicans and presidential candidate Bob Dole continued to apply pressure on the welfare issue, repeatedly charging that Clinton had reneged on his promise to “end welfare as we know it.” Clinton announced piecemeal executive-branch welfare reform initiatives and continued to vaguely criticize the emerging legislation as “too harsh.” But after meeting with his policy and political advisers, Clinton finally announced on July 31 that he would sign the congressional conferees’ bill. On August 22, on the eve of the Democratic convention, he did so, announcing that the reforms would “re-create the nation’s social bargain with the poor.” “Today,” the president declared, “we are taking a historic chance to make welfare what it was meant to be: a second chance, not a way of life.”

Methodology

The question of interest here is, Of the many substantive and strategic angles available in this story, which did reporters highlight? As a means of answering this question, coverage of welfare reform in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News and World Report* was analyzed. This sample of media provides a relatively comprehensive look at print news coverage of welfare reform in 1996. It includes both newspapers and newsmagazines and captures news reporting about welfare reform on both national and state levels (in 1996, state-level welfare reform efforts were being launched in New York, Maryland, Virginia, and California, developments covered extensively in the three newspapers included here).

News articles were gathered from these media with an eye toward both comprehensiveness and focus. The full text of these news organizations’ coverage was accessed via the Nexis database, and all news items mentioning welfare reform in 1996 were retrieved.

From these 823 articles, 591 were culled that focused on the subject of welfare reform (rather than merely mentioning it tangentially) or focused on the 1996 presidential and congressional elections but included some discussion of welfare reform.⁵ The distribution of these articles across the six news organizations and across these two news foci is illustrated in Table 1.

Each news article was then coded for its frame. (While the news "focus" of each article refers to the general topic of the news story—either welfare reform or the elections—the news "frame" refers to whether that story is told from a primarily strategic or substantive angle.) Following the methodology employed by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), the news frame of each article was coded as one of three general types⁶:

- **ISSUE:** stories about public policy problems and solutions; descriptions of the substance of legislation or proposed legislation or other government programs; descriptions of politicians' stands or statements on policy issues; stories about the general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public.
- **GAME:** stories about politicians winning or losing elections, legislative debates, or politics in general; stories about politicians' (or other groups') strategies for winning (e.g., campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers); stories about the implications of elections or legislative debates for politicians and parties; stories focused narrowly on specific legislative or implementation developments (e.g., who did what yesterday on the welfare reform bill), on the "tone" of legislative debates, or on the implications of these developments for the ultimate passage or implementation of legislation.
- **MIXED:** roughly equal predominance of the ISSUE and GAME frames.

Table 1
News articles discussing welfare reform, 1996, by news organization

	Across media		Within medium			
	Total number of articles	% Articles in all media	Number of welfare-focused articles	% Welfare focused articles	Number of election-focused articles	% Election focused articles
<i>New York Times</i>	179	30	125	70	54	30
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	245	42	128	52	117	48
<i>Washington Post</i>	114	19	85	75	29	25
<i>Newsweek</i>	32	5	8	25	24	75
<i>Time</i>	9	2	3	33	6	67
<i>US News & World Report</i>	12	2	4	33	8	67
Total	591	100	353		238	

Note. Data represent all news articles mentioning welfare reform included in the sample. The second column displays percentages of the total number of articles appearing in all six news media. The fourth and sixth columns display percentages of the total number of stories appearing in each newspaper or newsmagazine, categorized by their focus either on the subject of welfare reform or the 1996 presidential elections.

Categorizing news articles in this way offers rough but useful generalizations about news coverage of welfare reform. Extensive examples of the distinctive characteristics of these frames are supplied in the text to follow; brief examples of each type of frame are supplied in Table 2, which shows the distribution of frames across the sample of news articles.

Table 2 indicates that, overall, the coverage of welfare reform produced by these six news organizations was not predominantly framed in terms of the game of politics,

Table 2
Distribution of news frames, by news organization

	News frames (%)			
	Issue	Game	Mixed	Total
<i>New York Times</i>	50	41	9	100
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	46	44	11	101
<i>Washington Post</i>	54	31	15	100
<i>Newsweek</i>	24	55	21	100
<i>Time</i>	33	56	11	100
<i>US News & World Report</i>	25	33	42	101
All news organizations combined	47	41	12	100

Note. Of the 591 articles analyzed, 29 were not clearly codable with the coding scheme employed here and are not included in this table or in the figures. Some rows do not total to 100% because of rounding. Examples of frames found in lead paragraphs are as follows:

ISSUE (welfare focus):

"The Senate voted today to deny most Federal benefits and social services to legal immigrants who have yet to become citizens, and it blocked Democratic efforts to aid children in families who lose public assistance under a welfare bill moving swiftly through Congress. Senators also defeated a proposal that would have required the Secretary of Health and Human Services to study whether the legislation, if passed, causes an increase in poverty among children in the next two years. The proposal would have required the Secretary to suggest ways of halting any such increase."

GAME (welfare focus):

"President Clinton, faced with a choice between signing a welfare reform bill he views as deeply flawed and giving his Republican foes a powerful issue to use against him, on Wednesday opted to embark upon the social policy experiment rather than endanger his reelection prospects. . . . Although Clinton and his aides have spent hours debating the substance of the bill as it emerged from a legislative conference committee, there was virtual unanimity about the political merits of signing it."

MIXED (welfare focus):

"President Clinton endorsed a revolutionary Wisconsin plan to abolish welfare yesterday, moving to preempt a major welfare address the presumptive Republican nominee, Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), has scheduled Tuesday in the same state. Clinton's embrace of the most radical of the state-welfare plans left Republicans scrambling to respond. Wisconsin's new program, which needs Clinton administration approval, would eliminate Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the main welfare program. It would require every adult recipient to work—if necessary, in community service jobs or sheltered workshops, workplaces for handicapped or disadvantaged employees. It has the makings of a 'solid, bold welfare reform plan,' Clinton said in his weekly radio address.

although game coverage did run a close second to issue-framed coverage. Issue-framed stories predominated (47% of all articles), with game-framed articles composing 41% of all articles and mixed-frame pieces composing 12%. Some notable differences are evident across news organizations, however. The three newspapers provided the most substantive discussions of welfare reform, while the newsmagazines were more game oriented, most notably *Newsweek* and *Time*. These findings reflect in part the greater interpretive license of magazine journalists and also reflect the fact that newsmagazines discussed welfare reform much more often in election stories than in stories devoted to the topic of welfare reform itself. Newsmagazine coverage of welfare reform was predominantly game framed, therefore, because the game frame was particularly prevalent when welfare reform was discussed in news filed from the campaign trail.

Framing Welfare Reform: The Electoral Versus the Policy-Making Context

In fact, there is a strong correlation between the focus and the frame of welfare reform news. As illustrated in Figure 1, when welfare reform was itself the focus of a news article, that article was likely to be framed in terms of substance: 65% of welfare-focused news articles were ISSUE framed. But when reporters discussed welfare reform in the context of the elections, they tended to frame it in terms of strategy, as seen in the fact that 73% of election-focused articles were GAME framed. This finding confirms those of other scholars that, in election news, "issues of public policy . . . are frequently placed within a 'strategic frame' and presented within the overarching context of the campaign as a strategic contest" (Wells & King, 1994, p. 653).

Thus, campaign trail discussions of welfare reform were rarely presented in a way that served to deepen the public's understanding of the issue; instead, the aim of coverage seemed to be to deepen their understanding of the strategic reasons that politicians supported or opposed welfare reform. Consider the following excerpt from election-focused news items:

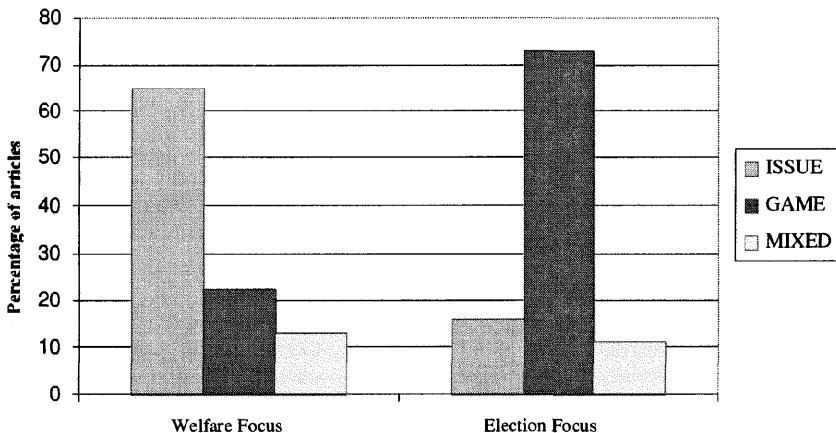


Figure 1. Framing of welfare-focused versus election-focused news. Data reflect all articles in the six print media analyzed for which a frame could be identified ($n = 562$). $\chi^2 = 151.59$ ($p < .000$).

As he stumped through the Midwest, in states that are likely to be central battlegrounds for the presidency, Sen. Bob Dole beat one of the same drums that helped rouse the region to Bill Clinton in 1992: welfare reform. . . . But while Dole the candidate plays the issue boldly on the trail, Republicans back in Washington express growing concern about how Dole the Senate leader will handle the matter in Congress. How, they ask, will Dole manage to pass some form of welfare reform legislation this year without giving the issue to Clinton? (La Ganga & Shogren, 1996, p. A11)

This is not to say that election news never told readers about politicians' substantive stands on the welfare issue, but, as the data in Figure 1 indicate, the number of these articles was very small. A very few election-focused articles also allowed voters to speak in their own words about how candidates should address welfare reform.⁷ Despite these occasional glimpses of the substantive issues at stake for citizens in welfare reform, however, the predominant framing of welfare reform in election coverage was clearly strategic.

In contrast, when reporters focused on the subject of welfare reform itself, they were more likely to tell a story about substance than about strategy. Under careful analysis, however, a more subtle point is revealed, for the "welfare focus" stories included in Figure 1 are of three major types: stories about the efforts in Washington to overhaul federal welfare programs, stories about state-level welfare reforms, and stories about efforts to implement both state and federal welfare reforms and the reactions to those reforms by agencies, individuals, and communities.⁸ It turns out that two of these categories of news stories were predominantly framed in terms of substance, while one of them—the policy debate in Washington—was framed in more strategic terms.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of ISSUE versus GAME frames among these three categories of welfare reform news. It indicates that news stories about state-level policy debates and implementation efforts and reactions were overwhelmingly framed in terms of substance—82% and 85%, respectively. In contrast, coverage of the Washington debate

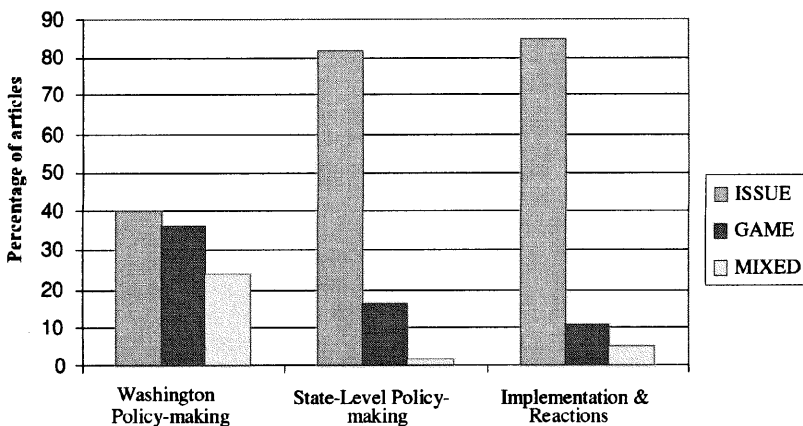


Figure 2. Framing of welfare reform news across news context. Data reflect all articles for which a frame could be identified and that were focused on the subject of welfare reform ($n = 341$). $\chi^2 = 75.141$ ($p < .000$).

was nearly equally divided between ISSUE- and GAME-framed stories: 40% of articles were issue framed and 36% were game framed, while the other 24% exhibited a mix of these two frames.

As these figures suggest, much of the Washington reporting on efforts to enact welfare reform was highly substantive and examined the issue in depth. The following excerpt illustrates how the news from Washington explored the details of the pending legislation, the stands that politicians had taken on the issue, the probable impacts of welfare reform on the poor, and the difficult trade-offs involved in ending federal subsidies:

When President Clinton delivered on his campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it,” he also led millions of Americans who depend on federal assistance into a new world that nobody knows. . . . Not only prototype “welfare families”—those headed by young, single mothers—will feel the new law’s sting. So will many others, including unemployed middle-aged people, children with disabilities and legal immigrants of many descriptions. . . . The legislation’s supporters said its tough-love provisions will make self-respecting and productive citizens out of the millions of Americans now trapped by their dependency on the federal dole. Many people on the receiving end of the programs, by contrast, are terrified of what the future might hold. (Fulwood, 1996, p. A1)

Yet, roughly as many stories filed from Washington did not portray welfare reform primarily as a challenging public policy issue; rather, they portrayed the subject as a challenging strategic matter whose difficulties lay in its implications for the careers of politicians and the electoral prospects of parties:

If he signed the bill, Mr. Clinton would infuriate many liberals in his own party. But if he vetoed it, he would disappoint voters hoping that he would fulfill his campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it.” For members of both parties, the decision about how to proceed is complicated by election-year politics and full of peril. (Pear, 1996, p. A1)

As the data in Figure 2 suggest, however, this more game-oriented Washington coverage was numerically outweighed by news stories emanating from statehouses, agencies, courthouses, and communities around the country. And significantly, governors, state legislators, state agencies, community advocates for the poor, and other local groups were almost never portrayed using welfare reform as a strategic political weapon. Indeed, the strategic costs and benefits of supporting or opposing welfare reform were rarely discussed when journalists reported on state-level welfare reform debates. Instead, news from state and local settings highlighted substantive questions surrounding the reforms politicians supported, what their proposed reforms would mandate, how the financial and social costs of those reforms would be weighed and distributed, and how effective those programs were likely to be at moving recipients from welfare to self-sufficiency. Thus, while the same issues in welfare reform were being discussed at both the state and national levels, with the same political benefits presumably accruing to politicians at either level who could show voters they favored “ending welfare as we know it,” the strategic angle was almost exclusively reserved for news emanating from inside the Beltway.

For example, *The New York Times* coverage of New York Governor George Pataki’s

welfare reform plans, unveiled in November of 1996, contained little of the strategic framing so prominent in the *Times*' coverage of the Washington debate over welfare reform (discussed in more detail subsequently). Although Pataki's plan was strongly criticized even before it was unveiled by liberal politicians and advocates for the poor, and although Pataki presumably stood to gain the same political benefits as other politicians seeking to be on the right side of the welfare reform issue, the strategic angle on the story was sidelined and the substantive angle highlighted. Only one *Times* story about Pataki's plan exhibited a clear game frame; it highlighted the difficulties Pataki plan would encounter in the state legislature at the hands of Democrats who, "since [they] control the Assembly by a comfortable 95–54 margin, . . . have virtual veto power over most of the Governor's welfare agenda" (Dao, 1996b, p. A1). In contrast, the following lead paragraph illustrates the flavor of the bulk of the *Times*' coverage of welfare reform in New York. Note how even as it focuses on political conflict, the article highlights the *substantive* disagreements among politicians rather than their strategic calculations or the chances for passage of their preferred bill:

Releasing a sweeping welfare plan that includes new restrictions on benefits, Gov. George E. Pataki said today that he was not trying to balance the state budget on the backs of the poor and vowed to reinvest all savings from his proposal into day care, job training and other programs intended to end welfare dependency. But an array of Democratic officials and advocates for the poor said that the 300-page bill the Governor presented to the Legislature today is filled with harsh measures that seemed intended solely to save the state money. (Dao, 1996a, p. A1)

Similarly, news coverage of state and local-level implementation efforts and the reactions of local communities to welfare reform (the third category of news illustrated in Figure 2) was highly substantive. When reporters ventured into these political settings, they concentrated on the difficulties of actually implementing welfare reform as well as the impacts of welfare reform on poor individuals and communities. They also allowed the general public to hear the perspectives of the low-income citizens who would be most directly affected by welfare reform—perspectives largely absent in other news contexts⁹:

"We're on quicksand between two countries here," said Ruben Cavazos Sr., the owner of Ruben's Grocery, a market that has been something of an institution for more than 20 years in a poor neighborhood in South McAllen [Texas]. More than half the customers routinely buy their groceries there with food stamps. "We've been here for a long time, and our customers are loyal. . . . And you think, well, people will always have to eat. That seems like a basic thing. But what if they simply have no way to pay for their food?" (Verhoek, 1996, p. A1)

Thus, the game frame was not prevalent in coverage of welfare reform overall but was prominent in coverage of Washington politics. This illustrates, consistent with the propositions presented earlier, that news frames vary with political context and that the game frame seemed most appropriate to journalists in the "controlled conflict" settings of electoral politics and Washington policy-making. It is important to note that this was not because conflict was lacking in other settings. Indeed, both state and federal welfare

reform plans were bitterly opposed by many advocates of the poor, leading to protests, interest group lobbying, court battles, and blocked implementation efforts; as the earlier-cited example of New York State suggests, welfare reform was as divisive a political issue at the state level as at the federal level. Yet, coverage of these political conflicts was notable for its substantive rather than strategic framing.¹⁰

This returns us to a key question raised earlier about the culture of Washington journalism, for it appears that neither local nor national reporters were prone to apply the game frame to state-level political conflicts. Data from the three newspapers analyzed here indicate that the game frame was no more likely to occur in stories originating from the national desk than in stories filed by "metro" desk reporters. Of the 44 stories in this sample focusing on state-level policy-making, 85% of those filed by national reporters were issue framed, versus 81% of those filed by metro reporters. These data are not conclusive, since the number of these stories is small enough to make statistically significant differences unlikely. But the very similar percentages do suggest that the key differences lie not only in the culture of Washington journalism but also in the way reporters approach national versus state-level policy-making.

There are several possible reasons why the game frame thrives in Washington reporting but not in state-level reporting. It is possible that the higher demands for daily news from Washington and the highly competitive nature of Washington reporting make the game frame more useful to reporters covering the national policy-making scene. Competition probably creates a higher premium on novelty, which the game frame can more easily supply. As both Fallows (1997) and Patterson (1994) have observed, it is much easier to put a new twist on the day's news by focusing on the game than by researching issues of substance. In contrast, since state-level policy-making is covered more sporadically, the need for such "fresh" angles may be less. It is also possible that Washington reporters approach state-level politics with a less jaundiced eye than when they approach their regular beat, because national reporters' contacts with state-level politicians and other sources are less structured by the hothouse atmosphere and daily grind of beat reporting that, as Fallows and others have observed, breeds national reporters' cynicism toward Beltway politicians and presidential candidates. Whatever the reason, it is clear that in the news about welfare reform, the game schema was reserved for policy-making in Washington.

Approaching the Goal Line: Strategic Versus Substantive Coverage in Real Time

We have seen that the game frame predominated in election coverage, which presented welfare reform primarily as an electoral weapon used by politicians in their pursuit of office (or as a political liability should a politician be on the "wrong" side). We have also seen that substantive and game-oriented coverage competed for predominance in news about the Washington welfare reform debate, while substantive coverage predominated in news stories filed from statehouses and localities. But an important piece of the analysis is still missing, one that has to do with the chronological ordering of these data: *When* during 1996 was each kind of frame predominant?

Giving attention to chronological ordering is crucial to demonstrating the relationship between the game schema, the "controlled conflict" of congressional policy-making, and reporters' idealized "phase structure" of the policy-making process. The present tentative theory of game-framed news predicts that strategic public policy news is most likely when policymakers are in the most heated "conflict with movement" and suggests

that game-framed news becomes more likely as a bill moves toward its final floor vote and the president's desk. Cook (1989, p. 51) observes that,

if the legislative process is presumed to operate in an inexorable progress toward enactment, the most newsworthy moment would be a bill's final passage. . . . Editors and producers and, to a lesser extent, reporters see earlier stages as opportunities for political posturing, delay, and obstruction of the quasi-natural unfolding of the process. Moreover, issues and battle lines are too vague then to allow crisp reporting. Final passage enables the newsworthy institutional action to be reported: what Congress did.

For the same reasons, the game frame should become even more appealing as the policy-making "game" moves toward its culmination, when winners and losers can be predicted and pronounced, and their effective or ineffective strategies as they vie for position can be analyzed.

Figure 3 shows the relative predominance of ISSUE and GAME articles across each month of 1996. It includes all articles shown in Figures 1 and 2 but displays those articles in terms of raw numbers rather than percentages. It shows that one peak in game-framed coverage came in March—not surprisingly, since every article analyzed here appearing in March focused on that month's primary elections rather than on the topic of welfare reform. But the highest amount of both issue-framed and game-framed news mentioning welfare reform appeared in a four-month period between July and October, with August marking the high point for both types of news. GAME articles reached a high of 40 that month, and ISSUE articles a high of 66. These data, particularly the dramatic increase in issue-oriented coverage over previous months, tell an intriguing story of how the national news media covered welfare reform. Put simply, when Congress was completing the federal welfare reform bill in July, the news more readily emphasized strategic angles; in August, after Clinton signed the bill, the news emphasized the issues.

A close look at *The New York Times* illustrates how news coverage of the Washington debate in the months leading up to the bill's passage focused on the strategic angle

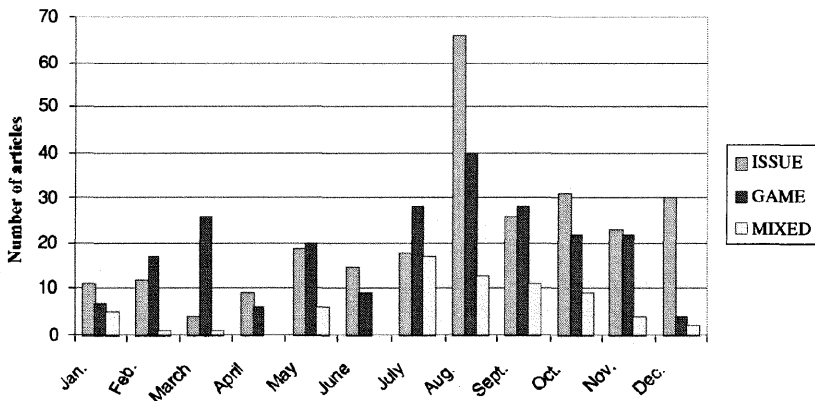


Figure 3. News frames across months of 1996. Data reflect all articles for which a frame could be identified ($n = 562$). Columns represent raw numbers of articles appearing each month.

of whether or not President Clinton would cry uncle and sign the Republicans' welfare reform bill, rather than the substantive angle of what that signature would mean for national policy. From May 22 through July 7, Republican and Democratic members of Congress debated the specifics of welfare reform legislation, but the *Times* covered very little of that debate. On June 5, for example, the House Human Resources Subcommittee wrangled over whether to supply vouchers for social services to recipients who exceeded the proposed 5-year limit on welfare benefits. On June 12, the House Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee debated for eight hours over how to structure work requirements for welfare recipients. And on June 13, the House Agriculture Committee approved legislation that would scale back the food stamp program by cutting individual allotments and requiring all able-bodied childless adults between the ages of 18 and 50 to work ("After 60 Years," 1996). None of these developments were reported in the *Times*. When Republicans announced on July 8 that they would delink welfare and Medicaid reform, however, the welfare reform story became big news in the pages of the *Times*.

From a substantive perspective, it would seem that the June committee debates over how to design federal welfare reform might be newsworthy. But from the perspective of the game schema, those debates were important only if they would culminate in the equivalent of a political "score": the passage of legislation. Since Clinton had stated that he would not sign welfare reform legislation that also turned Medicaid into block grants, the mid-June congressional debates were not newsworthy, from the perspective of the game schema, because they were unlikely to lead directly to signed legislation. In contrast, the delinking of Medicaid and welfare put the congressional welfare reform debate on the news map because, as the *Times*' front-page headline put it, "White House Is Optimistic About Chances of Welfare Bill With New G.O.P. Moves." The delinking of welfare reform and Medicaid thus signaled the onset of a major news story throughout the remainder of July—a story largely about political process rather than policy substance: Would Republicans really produce a welfare reform bill, would Clinton really sign it if they did, and what were the political stakes for each side? Of 21 news items the *Times* published about the congressional welfare reform debate during July, six were clearly issue framed, while nine were clearly game framed, with the remainder emphasizing a mix of both strategic and substantive concerns. The other newspapers analyzed here produced very similar coverage: Of 21 additional July stories focusing on the Washington debate, nine were game framed, five were purely substantive, and seven exhibited both strategic and substantive angles. Thus, the bulk of coverage in July, while it did not entirely ignore substantive issues, focused heavily on the progress and political ramifications of the bill moving toward Clinton's desk.

Yet, the *Times*, along with the other news organizations analyzed here, shifted frames when Clinton's signature was assured. Indeed, as Figure 3 illustrates, the bulk of issue-framed news about welfare reform appeared in August—the month in which Clinton's intention to sign the bill was first reported in the print media (on August 1) and then acted upon (on August 22). Comparatively few issue-framed articles were published in July, when news organizations' attention was focused on the legislative process in Washington and on the question of whether Clinton *would* sign the bill. In August, however, stories about the states' ability to implement the reforms suddenly became much more newsworthy, as did stories about the lives of welfare recipients and the probable impacts of welfare reform upon them. Therefore, to return to findings reported earlier, while issue-framed news about welfare reform was roughly as prominent as game-framed news when the coverage is analyzed as a whole (see Figure 1), the bulk of

issue-framed coverage appeared during one month, cued by the finale of the political game in Washington.

It is, of course, reasonable that the news would focus more on Congress and the White House when legislation was being debated and these institutions were the key players and that, when the legislation was assured of becoming law, the news would turn its attention to the implementation and impacts of that law. But what is significant is how the framing as well as the content of stories shifted in response to developments in Washington, again indicating that reporters typically apply certain frames to certain news contexts: When bills are being debated, news stories emphasize the strategy and progress of the political game; when bills become law, the substantive issues at stake are more fully explored. News frames follow the idealized phase structure of policy-making, and as the story moves out of Washington, the frames become more substantive. Well-endowed news organizations such as *The New York Times* could (and did, to some degree) tell stories about the probable impacts of welfare reform before Clinton's announcement; little became clear about the likely content and impact of federal welfare reform on August 1 that was not already clear on July 15. Yet, news organizations reserved the bulk of their substantive reporting until after the political game in Washington reached its final phase.

These findings suggest that the question of the timing of news frames may be as important as the question of their overall predominance. The link between elite conflict and the game schema suggests as well that highly consequential elite conflict can increase the newsworthiness of public policy issues but also crowd out or delay substantive coverage of those issues. In the case of welfare reform, the bulk of substantive news coverage came after the federal reform bill was a *fait accompli*.

Conclusion

The findings reported here suggest that concerns about the game schema being generalized from election news to news about public policy have merit. Put simply, as the Washington policy-making process nears its "finish line," and when a "score" is highly consequential for one or both "teams," news coverage not only increases in volume but shifts in frame to emphasize political process and strategy. These dynamics are most evident in particular contexts (national rather than state-level policy-making or local-level implementation) and take on a particular chronological ordering, with strategic concerns edging out substantive concerns at the most heated and consequential stage of policy-making.

One intriguing upshot is that news coverage of state- and local-level politics—the likely setting of a host of major policy initiatives in the coming decade, if the current trend of "devolution" continues—may provide greater opportunities for citizen learning and engagement with the issues. But as major policy issues are increasingly transferred to state and local arenas, a key question will be whether national and local news organizations devote adequate resources to covering issues such as welfare reform at all—issues that often prove, for a variety of reasons, particularly difficult to cover in any depth (see, for example, Gish, 1999). Another less sanguine implication is that news organizations are most likely to approach the political world with the superficial and cynical game schema at precisely those times when public opinion is most likely to be formulated, mobilized, and listened to by politicians: during elections and highly consequential legislative debates. In the case of welfare reform, much of the "information of use to the public" came too late to help the public participate meaningfully in that debate.

What remains to be considered is whether game-framed news is more likely during some congressional policy debates than others. Because the findings presented here are based on a single case study, they cannot be generalized to news coverage of all policy debates, but they do offer some basis for further theorizing, especially in combination with Cappella and Jamieson's observations about the health care reform debate of 1994.

These two debates, both of which were framed heavily (if not predominantly) in terms of the game schema, suggest that the consequences of elite conflict for the news may be double-edged: While elite conflict prompts news organizations to focus greater attention on particular issues, it also licenses journalists to treat that conflict as a game, emphasizing the strategic angles of the conflict as much as the substantive. Scholars of the news have long recognized that political elites powerfully influence the agenda and the framing of the news (Bennett, 1996). More recently, attention has turned to the indirect impact that officials have on news frames. The "indexing hypothesis," for example, has posited that the presence and degree of conflict among political elites can influence not only the prominence of particular issues on the news agenda but also the range of ideas presented in the news about those issues (Bennett, 1990). The welfare reform and health care reform debates suggest that elite conflict indirectly influences the framing of the news in yet another way by encouraging journalists to report that conflict with game-framed news. Thus, while elite conflict may license journalists to include a wider range of perspectives on contentious political issues in their substantive reporting, it may at the same time make substantive reporting less likely, as journalists turn their attention to the political game.

If the findings of both this study and Cappella and Jamieson's study are correct, however, it appears that the health care debate was more decisively framed in terms of strategy over substance, suggesting contextual differences between the two debates. One variable that may have shaped the framing of the two debates lies in the simple fact that one culminated in the passage of legislation, while the other ended in disarray. The fact that Clinton's comprehensive health care reform was never enacted may have boosted the overall proportion of game-framed news about it, since, as we have seen here, the news about policy issues may become most substantive once a bill becomes a law.

A second difference between the two debates was that health care reform, at least as proposed by the Clinton White House, involved establishing a vast new set of government programs whose shape and implications were not easily forecast. In contrast, welfare reform, at least of the sort envisioned by Congress, involved ending or scaling back well-established programs. The welfare reform debate therefore offered reporters different story possibilities. While the costs and benefits of proposed health care reforms were more difficult to project, the costs, at least, of curtailing entitlements for single and teenage mothers, immigrants, and disabled children were more easily tallied. Thus, issue-framed stories, especially of the sort that personalized the possible impacts of legislation, may simply have been easier to write about welfare reform than about health care reform.

Beyond these empirical and theoretical questions lie additional normative questions. If a relatively predictable set of news frames is applied to different stages of the political process, as the findings presented here suggest, this indicates that much political journalism "implicitly contains an entire series of assumptions about how the world works, and how the world should work, that bring with it a limited set of political interpretations" (Cook, 1998, p. 166). This conclusion would support the arguments of media critics that the game frame marginalizes the substance of political conflicts, undercuts the ability of politicians to communicate their policy positions to the public, and encourages the public to view all politics as self-interested calculation and cynical manipulation.

It is worth considering, however, that the game schema might offer the public a useful, if one-dimensional, picture of politics. Politics *is* often about battle and strategy and winning and losing, after all, and the motives of politicians *are* at times cynical. Indeed, it is far from clear that the national debate over welfare reform was entirely high-minded and substantive. In fact, it seems clear that between Clinton's 1992 campaign pledge to "end welfare as we know it" (which itself may have been born as much of political expediency as serious thought about how to address problems with the old welfare system¹¹) and his 1996 signature on the Republican welfare bill, "welfare reform" became a symbol manipulated by both Republicans and Democrats seeking electoral advantage with a public that is notoriously negative toward the very term *welfare* (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995; see also Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes, 1994; Public Agenda, 1996).

Thus, when the *Los Angeles Times* reported, for example, that "President Clinton, faced with a choice between signing a welfare reform bill he views as deeply flawed and giving his Republican foes a powerful issue to use against him . . . opted to embark upon a social policy experiment rather than endanger his reelection prospects" (Broder, 1996, p. A16), it was highlighting a dynamic crucial to understanding the politics of welfare reform. In fact, it was in game-framed news that citizens were likely to be confronted with the question of how far Bill Clinton would go to inoculate himself against Republican attempts to wield the symbol of "welfare reform"—not an unimportant question in terms either of public policy or electoral choice. Thus, future study should consider more seriously to what degree journalists "impose" the game frame on political reality versus to what degree strategically framed news reflects the highly strategic and sometimes cynical environment of Washington politics.

Nevertheless, if the findings of this study are replicated in other policy contexts, serious normative questions remain about the usefulness of much political news to citizens wishing to participate meaningfully in public policy debates. If the public learns the most about the substantive issues at stake only after legislation becomes law, as was the case with welfare reform, then the public may be less able to sharpen its understanding of the issues, formulate reasoned opinions, and intelligently influence the legislative debate. The framing of welfare reform in the news was in many respects highly substantive, yet the news did relegate some important aspects of this policy issue to the sidelines at crucial moments, with potentially serious consequences for the quality of public discussion about the fate of the welfare state.

Notes

1. While the concept of framing has been used in a variety of ways, scholars generally agree that, in a news context, frames are journalistic devices that bring certain elements of political reality into focus over others (Edelman, 1993; Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). Frames are not the exclusive province of journalists, of course; politicians, interest groups, social movements, and audiences all use frames to communicate (Gamson, 1992; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Indeed, scholars generally agree that frames are so essential to communication that the key question about news frames is not whether or not the news is framed, but *how* it is framed.

2. Fallows contends that elections offer the quintessential case of the "controlled conflict" that lies "at the heart of every sport. Electoral politics is the same way—someone is going to win the race and someone will lose, and the interest lies in the contest between them" (1997, p. 163).

3. One exception, in the implementation phase, may be court battles on which the implementation of new policies may hinge; however, as findings described later suggest, even heated court battles over welfare reform were not reported in terms of the game frame.

4. While the notion that policy-making proceeds through linear, ordered stages has been criticized by public policy scholars as too simplified (Sabatier, 1991), most policy scholars agree that the notion of "stages" in the policy-making process is heuristically useful, even though "problem definition, agenda setting, policy adoption, and implementation . . . take place constantly, often overlap, and may often lead to dead ends" (Birkland, 1997, pp. 5–6).

5. The search term used was "(welfare w/10 reform) w/in 30 (welfare or AFDC or aid) and date is 1996." By requiring that welfare-related terms be mentioned at least twice and in close proximity, this terminology helped to screen out articles that mentioned welfare reform only tangentially. Other items eliminated from the sample were excerpts of speeches or interviews, voters' guides to elections, and non-news desk items, such as those from the entertainment page. Editorials and op-ed pieces were also excluded, because concern with the game frame has focused on the framing of *news* stories by journalists.

6. The coding scheme used here is based on the coding scheme used in Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) study, with some minor modification. For convenience, I used the label "game" rather than "strategy." (This terminological choice reflects no substantive difference between the two concepts [see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 33].) As in Cappella and Jamieson's study, this study includes in the "GAME" category stories that emphasize political strategy and stories that emphasize political process. Unlike Cappella and Jamieson's study, this study involves content analysis of a large number of news articles rather than the careful selection of a few highly representative articles to serve as stimuli for audiences. Therefore, it was necessary to add a third category of "mixed" items to the coding scheme, comprising stories that exhibited no dominant strategic or substantive tendency but, rather, a roughly equal mix of the two frames; coders were instructed to identify a dominant tendency if possible.

Coding was done by the author; a random sample of news items was coded by two graduate student coders unfamiliar with the hypotheses of this study, yielding an intercoder reliability of 90% between the author and each coder. The predominant framing of the headline and the first four paragraphs (rather than the full text) of each news article was coded; coding of headlines and lead paragraphs was supplemented by reading and coding the full text of a random sample of articles. For each article, the headline and lead paragraphs were coded individually, and the overall coding of the article was determined by "summing" or "averaging" these codes.

While coding the headlines and leads made the coding of a large number of news articles manageable, it runs the risk of losing some relevant data if the dominant tendency of the headline and lead is consistently different from that of the rest of the text. This risk appears unlikely to seriously affect the findings reported here, however, for several reasons. First, coding headlines and lead paragraphs has been shown to yield little deviation from the coding of full news texts (see Althaus, Edy, & Phalen, 1998). Second, the technique of coding headlines and lead paragraphs appears less potentially problematic in light of the fact that those employed by *The New York Times* to construct its daily index of news stories are trained to "read only the top paragraphs thoroughly while skimming later paragraphs" (Althaus et al., 1998, p. 8), indicating that the lead paragraphs do generally summarize the main narrative and thematic elements of news stories. This practice confirms Benjamin Page's observation that "framing is often accomplished at the very outset of a news story, in an opening interpretive sentence or sentences, organizing the first facts and quotations that are presented" (1996, p. 115). Finally, the methodology employed in this study appears to be more systematic than that employed in other studies of news frames. Patterson does not report whether his data on game-framed news were based on the full text of news articles (1994, p. 73), nor do Cappella and Jamieson report how they arrived at their estimates of the proportion of strategically framed news about the health care reform debate (1997, pp. 33–34).

7. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* story reported that

Delaine Eastin, state schools chief, would take the three men who are running for president to schools in Los Angeles, Lynwood and Compton to teach them about the three Rs—the fact that California schools Really, Really Really need federal support. "We have among the poorest children in America living in California," she says, children

who need Head Start money, subsidized lunches, free breakfast programs. "There are schools I could take you to show you the physical plant, the absence of computers and audiovisual materials, and class size." (La Ganga, 1996, p. A5)

8. The following headlines provide a sense of the differences among these three types of welfare-focused articles:

Washington:

"Senate Votes to Ease Work Requirement in Welfare Overhaul Bill"

"Clinton Recalls His Promise, Weighs History, and Decides"

State-level:

"Michigan Moves to Untie Joblessness and Welfare"

"Job Trainees Support Whitman on Welfare"

Implementation and Reactions:

"Burden of Welfare Changes Falls to State Case Workers"

"Discontented Welfare Laborers Murmur 'Union'"

9. Indeed, the perspectives of citizens were rarely included in the election-focused news discussing welfare reform. Consistent with the assumptions of the game schema, strategically framed election news seems to leave little place for citizens to express their views on electoral issues unless those citizens are crucial to the outcome of an election. Thus, campaign-trail news rarely focused on the citizens targeted by welfare reform laws, although it did occasionally consider how welfare reform would "play" with swing voters and other groups targeted in the parties' election strategies. Although welfare recipients were virtually invisible in game-framed election news, however, they appeared fairly regularly in issue-framed news filed from local communities. For example, none of the game-framed articles appearing in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, or *Newsweek* profiled, interviewed, or cited the views of welfare recipients, while 42% of issue-framed articles in these publications quoted welfare recipients explaining their views on welfare and welfare reform.

10. For example, advocates for the poor in California attempted in 1996 to use the courts to block implementation of state welfare reform initiatives backed by Governor Pete Wilson. News coverage of that conflict, although sparse, was substantively framed by both the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*. Never did the coverage speculate on the impact of the court battle on Wilson's political career, for example, or on political strategizing by either side; instead, coverage stressed the high stakes the battle held for California's poor, as well as substantive arguments made by both sides for or against the state's reforms.

11. See Whitman and Cooper (1994).

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