Chapter 4

Strategy and game framing

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Introduction

The news media's tendency to cover politics as a strategic game has long been a key concern among many political communication scholars (see, e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Farnsworth and Lichter 2011). When news coverage is focused on winners and losers, politicians' and parties' performances, and campaign strategies and tactics, scholars have argued that these frames 'deprive' the public of quality journalism, which provides political substance and insight into real issues.

Several studies have demonstrated a strong tendency on the part of the news media to frame politics as a strategic game rather than to focus on political issues. Be that as it may, our recent review revealed large variations in how scholars conceptualize and operationalize strategic game frames (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). Most previous research is based on single-country studies, which represents a major problem since different operationalizations make comparisons across time, countries, or studies highly problematic.

Based on the main findings from previous research, we suggested a synthesis of how the framing of politics as a strategic game should be conceptualized and operationalized to increase conceptual clarity and greater comparability across studies and countries. Against this background, the purpose of this chapter is to compare and investigate some of the possible antecedents to the game and strategy framing that dominates ordinary political news journalism across 15 European countries and the United States. The previous lack of systematic comparative research has obscured the more general determinants of strategy and game frames in political news coverage. A major contribution to current research, therefore, is investigating what *drives* this type of political news coverage during ordinary periods across a number of Western democracies.

The strategic game frame

The growing literature about the media's framing of politics as a strategic game typically shares a common theoretical framework. It states that traditional descriptive and issue-oriented news coverage has been replaced by a game-oriented

approach (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Fallows 1997). The rise of the strategic game frame, it is often claimed, can be linked to changes in the political system and the news business. Modern styles of campaigning rely on increasingly sophisticated strategies to manage party political platforms and party images (Esser and Strömbäck 2012a). As strategic political communication has become more professionalized, many news journalists see it as their job to uncover and interpret the strategies behind political actors' words and actions. This line of action is also a defense mechanism against continually being 'spun' by parties or candidates since most journalists want to protect their autonomy and avoid being accused of taking sides politically. By focusing on the strategic aspects of the political game, political reporters maintain an apparent stance of both independence and objectivity (Zaller 2001).

Meanwhile, the rise of television, new technologies, and commercialism may also have increased the focus on politics as a strategic game. Not only does the strategic game frame allow journalists to more easily produce stories on deadline, but it also demands fewer resources than research into the substance of complex public policy debates (Fallows 1997). The proliferation of polling allows news media to cover the state of the 'horse race' quickly and efficiently, and news organizations are consequently among the most important commissioners in the polling business (Brettschneider 1997; Holtz-Bacha and Strömbäck 2012; Sonck and Loosveldt 2008). Moreover, an additional bonus is that a poll provides the news story with a scientific touch and a sense of objectivity compared to a story relying only on the journalist's observations or references to political messages (Lavrakas and Traugott 2000; Strömbäck 2012). Finally, some evidence suggests that a focus on celebrity candidates, their backgrounds, and their successes or failures might draw larger audiences, at least in the case of the United States (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004).

Changes in the political system and the news industry are used to explain the rapid increase in framing politics as a strategic game, and the attractiveness of this frame is additionally related to its newsworthiness. At the most basic level, it fits many of the key news values that have been prevalent in the news business for decades (Galtung and Ruge 1965). For instance, framing politics as a strategic game reflects journalism's enduring focus on drama, conflict, and negativity, typically involving elite individuals or political groups (McManus 1994). Use of the strategic game provides reporters with the currency and novelty that they need for their daily news material and corresponds well with media logic (Skewes 2007), whereas analysis of policy visions and issues may appear stale and repetitive. This framing has thus been linked to the mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömbäck 2014)

One of the most important reasons for people's concern about game and strategy framing has to do with the assumed *effects* of these frames. It is assumed that horse race news – focused on opinion polls and interpretations of who is winning and losing – is distracting citizens from the substance of politics (Patterson 1993). Research shows that the framing of politics as a strategic game (including spotlighting politicians' self-interest) increases political cynicism,

depresses knowledge gains about policies and substance, and depresses political engagement (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; de Vreese and Semetko 2002; Shehata 2014), although some evidence suggests that the effects of this particular framing is mixed (de Vreese and Semetko 2002). It is also assumed that 'meta news frames' – focusing on the media's role in politics and on how politicians try to influence the media – worsens public perceptions of politics, the media, and communication professionals (de Vreese and Elenbaas 2010).

One key shortcoming of much research on the game and strategy framing of politics and its effects is the focus on election campaigns. While election campaigns are of key importance in democracies, these time periods are hardly representative, and that observation holds for both media framing and its effects. In fact, our knowledge about the framing of politics and its effects during regular political times is scarce. So what are the main determinants of strategy and game frames in political news coverage? Based on previous research, we have certain expectations in this regard.

First, some issues are more likely than others to be framed in terms of a strategic game, and some news outlets are more likely than others to use this frame. Lawrence (2000a), for example, specified that the game frame (beyond its wide application during election times) is most likely to be applied to public policy issues when they feature in national election news but is less likely when they are discussed either at the state level or during the implementation phase. Based on this research, which complements Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) initial observations, we expect the following:

> H1: The use of game and strategy frames is more frequent with issues that are related to elections, internal party politics, and such, compared to news stories that focus on policy areas, such as the economy, education, and the environment.

Second, we focus on the potentially different use of the strategy and game frames by different media. In Europe, Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2010) found commercial broadcasters to be more likely to use the game frame than their public service counterparts (see also Cushion 2012). One reason is that this type of framing is cheaper to produce and the entertainment value is higher. This observation has also been made of tabloids or mass-market newspapers vis-à-vis broadsheet or upmarket newspapers, although Schuck, Boomgaarden, and de Vreese (2013) found no systematic difference between different outlets during elections for the European Parliament. Nevertheless, based on extant research, we expect:

> H2: The use of strategy and game frames is higher in mass-market newspapers and commercial broadcasters compared to upmarket newspapers and public broadcasters.

While we expect the pattern described earlier to hold across all the European countries and the United States, there is also reason to expect some variation

between the different countries included in this study. In this context, we expect that the cross-national variation in the use of strategy and game frames may be explained by factors that are related to the political context, the media system, and the political system.

Our third expectation pertains to the use of the game and strategy frames in relation to a country's proximity to a major election. Cappella and Jamieson (1997), as well as Patterson (1993), found frequent usage of strategy and game frames in the lead-up to elections, and Lawrence (2000a) confirmed a greater likelihood of media using these frames during elections. The evidence from other countries has mostly centered on election periods, but that timing only corroborates our expectation:

> H3: The amount of game and strategy frames is higher the closer in time the country is to a major election.

We next focus on the impact of journalistic culture. Previous research has illustrated that journalists may respond to political professionalism and spin attempts by focusing on political strategies and games (Brants and van Praag 2006; Zaller 2001). Such an approach by journalists is generally seen to be indicative of a professional journalistic culture (rather than, for example, a partisan culture; see van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012). Therefore, we expect:

> H4: The amount of game and strategy frames is higher the more professional the national journalistic culture.

Regarding the composition of the media landscape, we believe that the strength of a country's public broadcaster(s) is especially pertinent. As has been documented in several studies (e.g., Aalberg and Curran 2012; Albæk, van Dalen, Jebril, and de Vreese 2014; Cushion 2012), a strong public broadcaster is associated with higher public knowledge levels and higher levels of satisfaction with the media (see also Albæk et al. 2014). It is also clear that, in countries that have a strong public service broadcasting (PSB) news organization, new commercial competitors have tended to base their news products on their public counterparts' successful formulas. This trend leads to an overall expectation that the stronger the role of public broadcasting in a country, the more the news culture is likely to focus on political substance rather than on politics as a strategic game:

> H5: The amount of game and strategy frames is higher, the lower the market share of public service broadcasters.

Turning to the political system, we expect the competitiveness of the party system to be one important antecedent to the framing of politics as a strategic game. On the one hand, if fewer parties take part in elections, the competition is straightforward, and the main focus will be on who is leading the game. On the

other hand, if more parties are part of the equation (and if a coalition govern-ment is a likely outcome), strategic considerations should be higher. Jointly, these expectations lead to the following hypotheses:

> H6a: The amount of game and strategy frames is higher the lower the number of political parties. Clear-cut, obvious competition will lead to a higher focus on the *game*.
> H6b: The amount of strategy frames is higher the larger the number of politi-cal parties. More complex competition will lead to a higher focus on *strategy*.

Conceptualizing and operationalizing game and strategy framing

While research shows that game and strategy frames have become important features of news coverage around the world (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008a), how much they are used and under what conditions they are used remains to be com-prehensively investigated. The main reason is that most research on these frames to date is based on single-country studies. Although a small number of compara-tive studies exist, most include only a few countries. Another barrier to cumula-tive knowledge within this field is that few studies measure game and strategy in a similar way. This lack of uniformity is one of the reasons why Aalberg and colleagues (2012) suggest that the research community should apply and use a set of standardized variables and coding instructions, not unlike what is done by cumulative survey research (Esser, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). By standard-izing, we may compare insights and generate new knowledge from various stud-ies conducted in many countries and over different time periods.

Game and strategy frames belong to the notion of generic news frames (de Vreese 2009), which implies that they can be used in relation to different issues, that they have been identified in different political contexts and media systems, and that they are inherent to the work routines of journalism. Aalberg and colleagues' review (2012) suggested two important dimensions in the study of strategic game frames: the game frame and the strategy frame. The *game frame* refers to news stories that portray politics as a game and are centered around who is winning or losing elections in the battle for public opinion, in leg-islative debates, or in politics in general; expressions of public opinion (polls, vox pops); approval or disapproval of particular interest groups, constituencies, and publics; and speculations about electoral and policy outcomes and poten-tial coalitions. The *strategy frame* refers to news stories that are centered on interpretations of candidates' or parties' motives for their actions and positions, their strategies and tactics for achieving political or policy goals, how they cam-paign, and choices regarding leadership and integrity (including personal traits). It also involves different types of media strategies, including news coverage of press behavior.

Given that the game and the strategy frames are seen as two equal but separate dimensions of an overall macroframe, we include a variable that taps the dominant framing of politics in a news story, making an overall distinction between strategic game framing and the coverage of politics in terms of substance, issues, or policies. This dominant frame is identified according to the duration, frequency, and order of appearance of the various elements. Moreover, the headline and lead are given extra weight when determining a news story's dominant frame. In addition to this general frame, we also include a set of 2 × 3 items that distinguish the game and strategy frames. The three variables that measure the game frame refer to (1) the coverage of opinion polls, (2) the coverage of political winners and losers, and (3) the usage of the language of sports and wars. To measure the extent to which the media apply a strategy frame, we measure three variables pertaining to references to (1) campaign strategies and tactics, (2) performance, and (3) the media's role in the political process.

In addition to these dependent variables, we also have a set of independent variables. These latter are measures of (1) the topic or issue that was the main focus in the news story and (2) the type of news outlet that the news story was published in (type of broadcaster, newspaper, or webpage). Finally, we have a set of national-level variables that measure (3) election proximity, (4) journalistic professionalism, (5) the market share of public service channels, and (6) the number of political parties in the political system.

Results

Let us start by taking a closer look at the concept of strategic game frames. In Table 4.1, we present an overview of the distribution of the strategic game and issue frames. The total column at the bottom of the table indicates that a minority

Table 4.1 Presence of strategic game frames in U.S. and European news (percentages)

	Macroframe	
	Strategic game	Issue
Include game elements:		
Public opinion	28	12
Winning and losing	45	15
Sport language	43	18
Include strategy elements:		
Strategy and tactics	61	18
Performance	62	41
Media	18	8
Macroframe total	22	78
N	1,746	6,047

(22 percent) of the news stories sampled in this study framed politics as a strategic game, whereas a majority (78 percent) focused on issues or issue positions. Thus, we do not find evidence to suggest that an issue-oriented approach in ordinary political news coverage across Europe and the United States has been replaced by a game-oriented approach. Apparently (and unsurprisingly), the level of game and strategy framing is lower during ordinary political news coverage than during election campaign news coverage.

Nonetheless, news stories where the issue macroframe is dominant might also include game or strategy frame elements but typically at a much smaller scale than news stories where the strategic game macroframe is dominant. For instance, 12 percent of the issue-dominated news stories referred to opinion polls, compared to 28 percent of the strategic game–framed news stories.

Looking at our descriptive findings cross-nationally, we see cross-national differences in the degree to which the different game and strategy frame elements are present. Many of them are frequently found in German, Greek, and Swedish news and much less so in Danish, Portuguese, and Spanish news. Looking across the different indicators, we see that references to politicians' performances are by far the most frequently featured element of the strategy frame (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Presence of game and strategy frames across countries (percentages)

Country	(N)	Game frames			Strategy frames		
		Public opinion	Winning and losing	Sport language	Strategy and tactics	Performance	Media
Austria	(477)	11	25	43	50	62	17
Belgium	(487)	8	19	17	27	31	7
Denmark	(483)	14	5	14	5	26	8
France	(534)	22	33	51	46	47	1
Germany	(498)	25	33	18	24	61	12
Greece	(547)	14	32	39	43	61	4
Israel	(519)	16	11	12	23	54	12
Italy	(496)	14	17	25	20	23	21
Netherlands	(475)	33	17	19	16	35	14
Norway	(437)	15	21	21	27	26	2
Portugal	(555)	9	31	30	25	50	5
Spain	(563)	7	4	13	7	50	3
Sweden	(303)	18	18	13	19	63	17
Switzerland	(391)	14	37	12	36	49	7
United Kingdom	(510)	16	21	15	46	39	22
United States	(518)	19	21	27	26	59	8

Our empirical analysis does not support constructing two separate dimensions for game and strategy frames. We therefore move forward with a single game/strategy dimension.[1] A factor analysis (not shown here) indicates that the best dimensional structure is a single index consisting of five of the six game- or strategy-specific variables in Table 4.1. (The 'media' variable has been excluded.) The index yields a Cronbach's alpha of .612. The new index runs from 0 through 1, where 0 indicates that there are no strategic game elements in the news story and 1 indicates that the news story includes all the five frame elements. The average score on this new index is .21 for news stories that were coded as issue dominated and .48 for news stories where the strategic game macroframe was dominant.

If we compare the use of the strategic game macroframe and the score on the strategic game index cross-nationally, we find significant variations across countries (see Table 4.3). The strategic game macroframe is most common in France (47 percent) and Italy (41 percent) and least common in Portugal and Spain (4 percent). The countries that score highest on the strategic game index is France (.40), followed by Austria and Greece (.38). The countries that score lowest are Spain (.16) and Denmark (.13). Interestingly, considering that most research has focused on the United States, the results show that the United States is *not* an outlier.

When it comes to the magnitude of strategic game frames in ordinary political coverage, the considerable differences between the European countries and

Table 4.3 Presence of game macroframe and strategic game frames (means) across countries

Country	(N)	Game macroframes	Strategic game frames
Austria	(477)	15	.38
Belgium	(487)	33	.20
Denmark	(483)	16	.13
France	(534)	47	.40
Germany	(498)	12	.32
Greece	(547)	24	.38
Israel	(519)	16	.23
Italy	(496)	41	.20
Netherlands	(475)	11	.24
Norway	(437)	25	.22
Portugal	(555)	4	.29
Spain	(563)	4	.16
Sweden	(303)	33	.26
Switzerland	(391)	33	.30
United Kingdom	(510)	20	.27
United States	(518)	34	.27

the United States are hardly surprising. But the results also show that how the strategic game frame is measured matters for country ranking – and also for the comparison across countries (see Aalberg et al. 2012). The relationship between the strategic game macroframe and the strategic game frame index is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Let us now turn to our first hypothesis, which predicted that the use of game and strategy frames would be higher with issues that are related to elections, internal party politics, and such like. As Figure 4.2 demonstrates, this hypothesis is
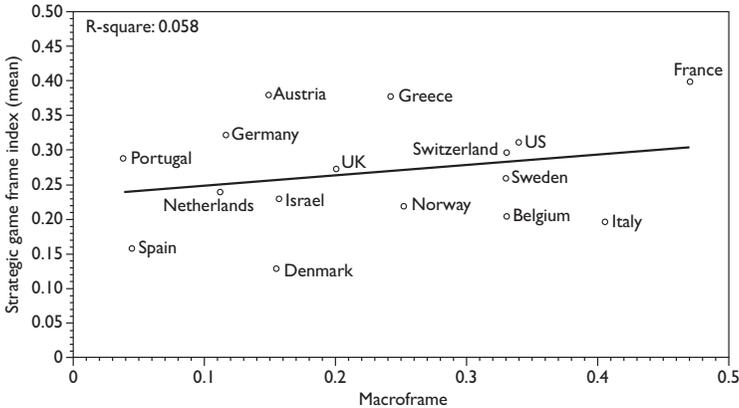

Figure 4.1 The presence of strategic game frames across countries. Percentage of macroframe and mean on strategic game index.
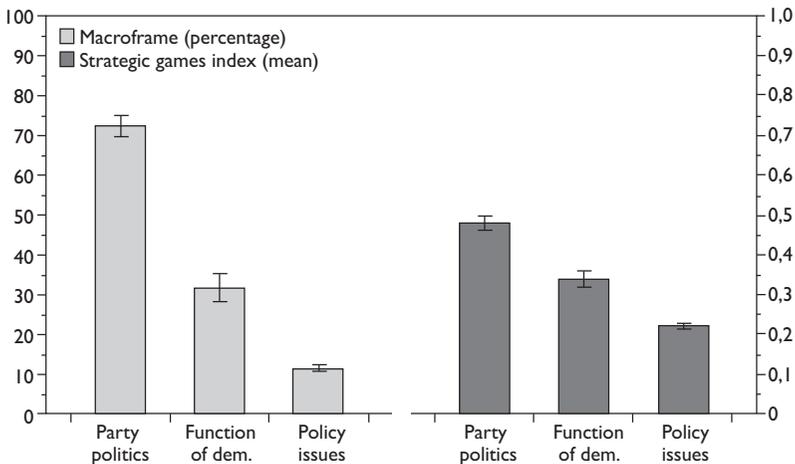

Figure 4.2 The presence of strategic game frames according to dominant issues in news items. Percentage of macroframe and mean on strategic game index. Macroframe: $p < .001$; Strategic game index: $p < .001$.

supported. The framing of politics as a strategic game – regardless of how it is measured – is higher in news stories focusing on issues that are related to party politics and elections and to the functioning of democracy (e.g., state reforms). News stories that focus on issues that are related to policy areas (e.g., the economy, the environment, education) are least likely to frame politics as a strategic game. This finding holds when we look both at the game strategy index and at the macroframe that measures the dominance of issue frames versus strategic game frames, respectively.

Our second hypothesis suggested that the use of strategy and game frames would be higher in tabloid newspapers and commercial broadcasters compared to elite newspapers and public broadcasters. This hypothesis is *not* supported by our data (see Figure 4.3). Generally, we see small variations between types of news outlets, and the only significant difference is between newspapers, where elite papers frame politics as a strategic game more often than mass-market newspapers. This result may indicate that strategy and game frames are primarily for the more educated and very politically interested audience. It is also worth mentioning that this pattern holds across 14 of our 16 countries; Sweden and the United States are the only countries where the mass-market press uses this frame more (cross-national findings not presented here). Within this pattern, there are of course also considerable variations between countries; in several countries, the differences are small, whereas in others, they are extensive.
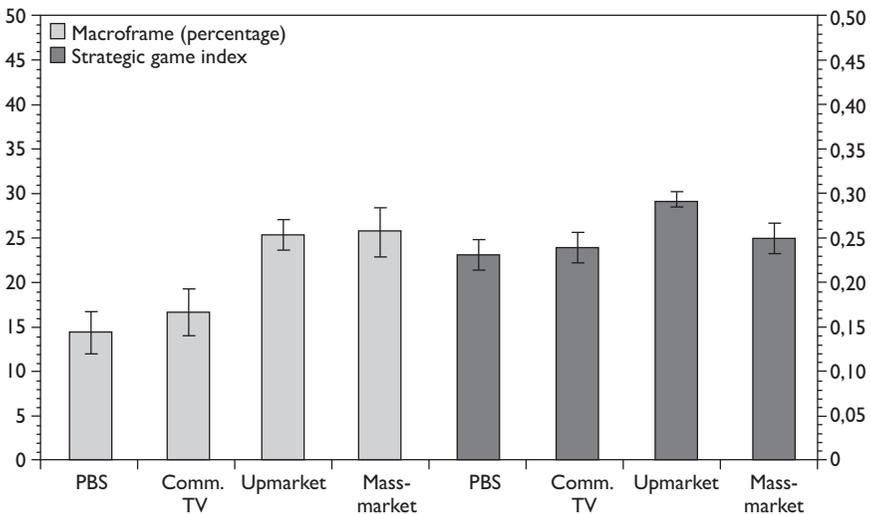

Figure 4.3 The presence of strategic game frames according to media outlet type. Percent of macroframe and mean on strategic game index. Measurements of the broadcasters and newspapers include their websites. The difference between the two types of broadcasters is not significant: macroframe, $p = .209$; strategic game index, $p = .506$. The difference between the two types of newspapers is only significant when measured as a strategic game index: $p < .001$. The difference is not significant for the macroframe measure: $p = .444$.

Table 4.4 Correlations between strategic game frame measures, type of media outlet, and national factors related to context, media, and political system[a]

	Macroframe	*Strategic game index*
Public service TV	−.067**	−.155*
Commercial TV	−.024	−.066
Upmarket newspaper	.113	.246**
Mass-market newspaper	.053	−.080
Online website	.057	.081
Months since last election	.113	.059
Months before next election	−.068	.085
Journalistic Professionalism Index	−.134	−.091
Public service market share	−.041	−.265**
Number of parties in parliament	−.119	−.350**
Number of parties in government	.96	−.019
N	160	160

a Entries are Pearson's R.
* p < .05, ** p < .01.

Our third hypothesis suggested that the amount of game and strategy frames is higher the closer in time the country is to a major election. We have therefore looked at the relationship between the use of strategic game frames and the number of months both since the last national election and until next national election. In Table 4.4, we present simple bivariate correlations (Pearson's *R*) on aggregated data across media outlets ($N = 160$). The coefficients do not reveal a systematic pattern providing support for our hypothesis. Only one of the coefficients is negative, as expected; the three other coefficients are positive, suggesting that increased time since the last election or until the next election corresponds with a higher level of strategic game frame coverage. None of these relationships are significant, however.[2] We recall that none of our countries were in campaign mode, but closeness in time to a large national election does not seem to explain much of the cross-national variation in the use of strategic game frames outside of election campaigns. Whether this result means that the closeness to an election does not matter at all or that it has a threshold (e.g., one or two months to the next election) is an open question.

We also expected that cross-national variation might be explained by the national journalistic culture. More specifically, our fourth hypothesis suggested that the amount of game and strategy frames would be higher the more professional the journalistic culture. We assumed that the driving mechanism might be an attempt by professional journalists to avoid being spun by political spin doctors. Comparative data on national professional culture is scarce, but one measurement is provided by Popescu, Gosselin, and Pereira's (2010) elite survey on
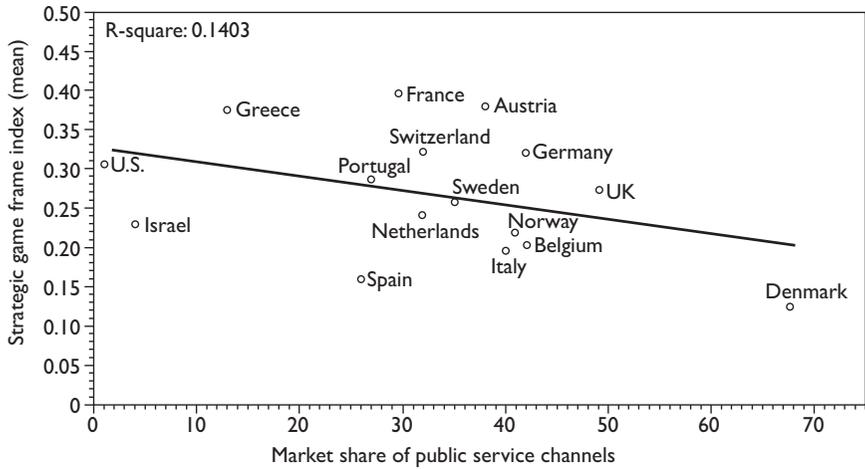
Figure 4.4 The relationship between country score on strategic game frame index and national market share of public service channels.

media systems. In Table 4.4, the correlation between the level of strategic game frames and the Journalistic Professionalism Index is presented. Again, we do not find a significant strong positive relationship as expected. Rather, although this relationship is not significant, it seems as if the strategic game frame is used more in less professional cultures.[3]

Another media system factor that was expected to explain cross-national variance was the public service market share. We assumed that the role of public broadcasting in a country would influence the news culture and increase the emphasis on political substance over a focus on politics as entertainment and a strategic game. When strategic games are measured as an index, the results show a significant negative relationship between the market share of public service channels and the use of these frames (see Figure 4.4 for a visual illustration). The same relationship is not equally evident, however, when games are measured as a percentage of the game versus issue macroframe. Nevertheless, our overall conclusion is that strong public service broadcasting appears to inhibit the use of strategic game frames.

Finally, our last hypothesis suggested a relationship between the use of strategy and game frames and the number of political parties in a country. Therefore, we also ran correlations between our dependent variables and the number of parties in (1) parliament and (2) government. The results presented in Table 4.5 provide somewhat mixed results. Three of the four correlations are negative, but only one is strong and significant.[4] Apparently, there is a consistent negative relationship between the number of parties in parliament and the tendency to frame political news as strategic games. In other words, and as suggested by H6a, the lower the

number of parties, the higher the level of strategic game framing. See Figure 4.5 for a visual illustration on the national level.

On the other hand, Table 4.4 revealed one positive (although insignificant when $N = 160$) relationship between the percent of the strategic game macroframe and the number of parties in government (as suggested by H6b). Indeed, we expected that the number of parties might have a different effect on the frequency of the game and the strategy frame. We assumed that the clear-cut competition that occurs more often in political systems with fewer parties would increase the use of the game frame, whereas more complex competition (i.e., with a higher number of parties) would lead to a stronger focus on strategy. Based on the results from our initial factor analysis, we did not construct separate game and strategy indexes, but in Table 4.5, we present the relationship between the separate game
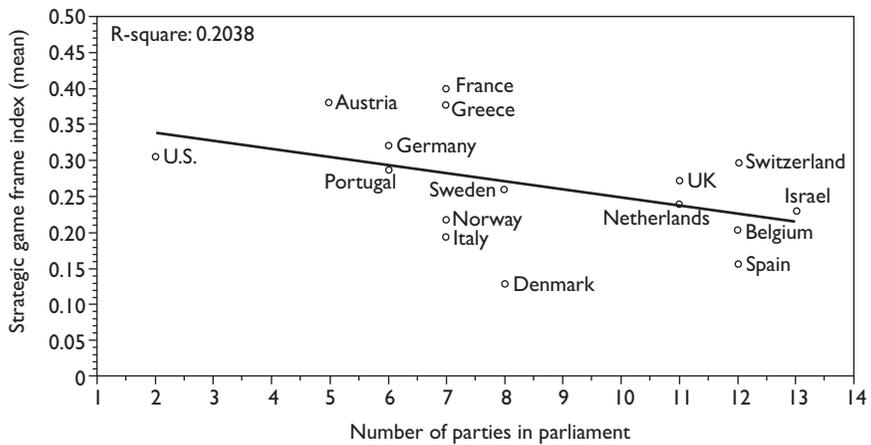

Figure 4.5 The relationship between country score on strategic game frame index and the number of parties in parliament.

Table 4.5 Correlations between game frames, strategy frames, and number of parties in parliament/government[a]

	Game frame			Strategy frame		
	Public opinion	Winning and losing	Sport language	Strategy and tactics	Performance	Media
Number of parties in:						
Parliament	−.106	−.253**	−.512**	−.146	−.202*	−.015
Government	−.061	.064	−.268**	.071	.087	−.100
N		160			160	

a Entries are Pearson's R.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

and strategy frame variables and the number of parties in parliament and in government, respectively.

When it comes to the strategy frames, the pattern is mixed, and there is no general support for Hypothesis 5b. Four out of the six correlations are negative (and only one significant when $N = 160$), indicating that more complex competition with a higher number of parties does not systematically lead to a higher focus on strategy. It is worth noting, however, that there is a weak but positive relationship between two of the strategy frames and the number of parties in government. These relationships were not significant when the analysis was based on media output level ($N = 160$), but they were significant when similar analyses were run on individual news items ($N = 7793$). The results in Table 4.5 confirm, however, that there is a general negative relationship between the number of parties and the tendency to cover politics as a game. This relationship is particularly evident for the use of sports language.

In our final analysis, we model the score of the strategy game index in a regression analysis including the different explanations that we earlier discussed individually. This multivariate analysis (see Table 4.6) shows that the general trends from the bivariate analyses hold up. The coefficients reveal that only upmarket

Table 4.6 OLS regression of strategic game frame controlled for type of media outlet and national factors related to context, media, and political system[a]

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	Robust standard error	B	Robust standard error	B	Robust standard error
Commercial TV	.018	.015	.018	.015	.018	.016
Upmarket newspaper	.063**	.013	.063**	.013	.063**	.013
Mass-market newspaper	.015	.017	.015	.017	.015	.017
Online website			.016	.016	.016	.016
Months since last election					.003	.002
Months before next election					.005**	.002
Journalistic Professionalism Index					−.010	.015
Public service market share					−.001	.001
Number of parties in parliament					−.021**	.005
Number of parties in government					.024**	.007
Constant	.238	.022	.233	.022	.221	.148
R^2	.064		.071		.437	
N	160		160		160	

a Public service TV is used as the reference category.
* p < .05, ** p < .01.

newspapers are significantly different from public service broadcasters (set as the reference category). In a different model where upmarket newspapers are set as the reference category (not shown here), PSB news, commercial television news, and news presented in mass-market newspapers all differ significantly from news presented in elite papers. When it comes to national-level factors, we see that the distance to the next election has an independent positive impact on the level of strategic games in the news. Similarly, the relationship between the level of strategic game framing and the number of parties in parliament remains negative and significant, while the positive relationship persists between the use of the strategic game frame and number of parties in government.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has revealed that political news across Europe and the United States *is* framed in terms of game and strategy, even in regular time periods that are not characterized by political campaigns. Close to a quarter of the political news covered in this study emphasized the strategic game. Importantly, however, the main focus is on substantive political issues. In that respect, our study does *not* suggest that the European and U.S. publics are deprived of journalism that focuses on political substance and real issues. The traditional issue-oriented news coverage has not been replaced by a game-oriented approach, as some scholars have warned (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Fallows 1997; Patterson 1993). Notably, however, game and strategy elements do occur in news that predominantly covers political issues. The share of these frames in nonelection news is only half as high as Lawrence (2000a) reported for the United States; while we found that about a quarter of the news carries this framing, she documented between 31 percent and 56 percent. An important and related point is that we did *not* find any evidence to suggest that the United States is a clear outlier in its extensive use of strategic game frames. Indeed, regardless of how this frame was measured, the United States was never on the extreme end of the scale but rather was well-placed in-between the European countries included in this study.

Most common are the frame elements related to performance and strategy, but game elements, such as using sports language and focusing on winners and losers, are also popular. Some topics, typically related to political parties and democracy as such, are more likely to be framed as a strategic game than more policy-oriented topics. This result corroborates Lawrence (2000a), who also suggested that some topics are more prone to game and strategy framing.

Contrary to our expectations, elite newspapers were more prone to frame politics as a strategic game than mass-market newspapers. We found no significant difference between types of broadcasters. The latter finding dovetails with Schuck and colleagues (2013) – who also reported a similar amount of strategy framing in public and private broadcasters – but deviates from other research comparing framing across public service television and commercial television (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2010). Crucially, most previous

research has focused on election news, and the dynamics of media framing of politics might very well differ between ordinary political times and election campaigns. The absence of differences between outlets might also be a function of the relatively low levels of strategic game framing in regular political news. Concerning the former finding, however, we tentatively conclude that broadsheet elite newspapers not only typically have longer articles but also cater to an audience that is particularly interested in 'the game of politics' – namely, the more educated and highly politically interested audiences. In fact, in this light, recent research is perhaps not so surprising in suggesting that the politically savvy and knowledgeable, in particular, respond to strategic news framing (Jackson 2011).

The presence of strategic game frames varied somewhat between the 16 countries included in this study. In an attempt to explain this variation, we looked at different contextual factors. What seemed to matter most was the role of public service broadcasting. In countries where the market share of public broadcasting is high, the news culture seems to emphasize political substance more and reduce the focus on politics as a strategic game. Another national-level factor that seems to matter is the number of parties in parliament: the fewer political parties, the greater the use of strategic game frames, suggesting that more clear-cut competition might lead to a stronger focus on the game.

In sum, our study documents only moderate levels of game and strategy framing in ordinary political news. The level of this type of news framing is up to 50 percent less than that found in a nonelection period in the United States almost two decades ago (Lawrence 2000a). While this finding may invite caution about the pervasive nature of this type of political framing, it does not change some of the critical observations regarding election time. Lawrence (2000a, p. 109) reflects on the moderate use of the frame in nonelection time, aptly commenting that a

> 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.

Our study has a number of caveats. One of them concerns the lack of empirical support for the hypothesized two dimensions of game and strategy framing. While we have argued in favor of this distinction at a theoretical level, it was not upheld. One reason might be the limited use of the frames, and it is thus conceivable that the two dimensions do appear when investigated during elections. The difference between game frames and strategy frames may be more evident in nonroutine periods. A second caveat has to do with the scope of the study and our analyses. Our explanations are considered at a bivariate and correlational level and in a regression model with robust standard errors. With a larger sample of countries, we could do even more justice to the nested structure of the data (e.g., using

multilevel modeling strategies; see, e.g., Boomgaarden et al. 2013), but such techniques typically require additional leverage at the contextual level.

These caveats notwithstanding, the chapter has shed new light on the prevalence and antecedents of one of the most commonly defined types of news frames in the literature on political news. Not least, it has also drawn attention to the danger of generalizing results from particular countries (i.e., the United States) or particular time periods (i.e., election campaigns). From this perspective, this chapter strongly underscores the key importance of comparative research.

Notes

1 The factor analysis did not support that game and strategy should be treated as two separate dimensions. If we do create two indexes, they are highly correlated (Pearson's $R = .62$). Focusing on one single dimension rather than two does not influence the main conclusions of this study. The ranking of countries is quite similar, as is the effect of the explanatory variables.

2 Correlations based on $N = 7,793$ (individual news stories) suggested a significant positive relationship between months since last election and the macroframe, and months before next election and the strategic game index. It is also worth noting that time since last election has a different effect on game and strategy frames. When analyses are run on two separate dimensions (game index vs. strategy index), a strong positive relationship appears between strategy frames and months since last election, whereas the effect is negative but insignificant for game frames.

3 The coefficients were significant when analysis was run on $N = 7,793$.

4 Correlations based on $N = 7,793$ (individual news stories) suggested a significant negative relationship between number of parties in parliament and the strategic game index, whereas the impact of number of parties in government was significant and positive.