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Framing politics

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English Summary

How the news “frame” politics has been the subject of a great number of theoretical and empirical investigations by political communication scholars over the past two decades. Among those, the study of framing effects has received particular attention and a large number of empirical studies have helped to explain in what ways subtle differences in the presentation of a particular political issue can lead to changes in interpretation, attitudes, and behavior. However, perhaps because news framing effects theory proved to be so valuable for studying different political issues and contexts, many scholars have made instrumental use of framing, but have failed to explicitly evaluate its theoretical as well as empirical framework. Thus, while extant studies have unquestionably provided a solid empirical basis for the existence of news framing effects in political communication, they have also left several fundamental questions unanswered.

This dissertation takes some of these questions as its starting point. First, we investigate the intermediary psychological factors that enable or limit a news framing effect on political attitudes. The study of these processes is essential for our understanding of how news framing effects actually work in an individual’s mind, but the literature is still full of debate about the range of mediators a news framing effect can go through. We also examine whether a news framing effect depends on the particular issue at stake, and how the importance of an issue alters susceptibility to framing effects. In doing so, this study enables a more fine-grained understanding of the limits of news framing effects, and also further introduces the socio-psychological notion of “attitude strength” into framing literature. Third, we study how long news framing effects last over time and, fourth, if their persistence depends on whether news framing is repetitive or competitive in nature. To date, only very few scholars have investigated duration and persistence of news framing effects. Yet, testing these leads framing effects theory on the way to understanding how influential news framing effects really are in politics and political communication.

In *Chapter 1*, we test a multiple-mediation model of news framing effects on political attitudes. In a survey experiment, we investigate two mediation processes: belief importance change and belief content change. Our analysis shows that news framing effects are mediated by both processes. However, in terms of explanatory power, belief content change matters more than belief importance change. We also test whether this mediation model depends on differing levels of political knowledge. Our results indicate that participants with higher levels of political knowledge were affected to a greater extent via both mediation processes. The results of this study show that a news frame can cause different types of effects on political attitudes. They also corroborate recent findings that indicate the ability of news frames to add previously inaccessible or unavailable content to a person’s beliefs about an issue.

In *Chapter 2*, we hypothesize that news framing effects depend on the importance of an issue. In two survey experiments, we examine to what extent different levels of issue importance moderate the processing of a framed message and the magnitude of a news framing effect. Our

findings show no news framing effects for a high contextual-importance welfare issue, and rather large effects for a low contextual-importance trade issue. However, news frames in the “low importance” issue experiment caused effects across the board, almost independently of how important an individual found the issue personally. We also find that if individuals attached higher personal importance to an issue, they were more affected by belief importance changes whereas if they attached lower importance to an issue, they were affected more via belief content changes. High personal importance did, moreover, increase the elaboration of belief importance considerations. This chapter is one of the first to present variation in framing effects between different issues within a single experimental study. Moreover, the results indicate that not only personal but also contextual levels of importance are likely to matter for the individual-level analysis of news framing effects.

In *Chapter 3*, we investigate how long news framing effects last over time. We conduct a “classic” framing experiment, but augment it with three delayed measurement points (after one day, one week, and two weeks). Our results show a news framing effect that is surprisingly resistant to dilution. We also analyse whether the rate of decay of a news framing effect depends on different levels of political knowledge. We find no immediate moderating effect of knowledge, but can show that individuals with more moderate levels of political knowledge were affected most persistently over time. This chapter adds to only a handful of empirical studies that combine a framing experiment with delayed opinion measurements, and is the first to include more than one delayed measurement. Our results challenge previous assumptions regarding the short-term nature of news framing effects.

In *Chapter 4*, we again test the duration of news framing effects, but this time at four delayed time points (after 15 minutes, one day, one week, and two weeks). Moreover, we add multiple exposures to repetitive and competitive news frames over time to our experimental design. Our analysis shows that repetitive news framing has a consolidating effect on political attitudes. This means that additional exposure to news framing does not for the most part intensify the framing effect, but leads to more or less consolidated opinions across time. Yet, news framing effects can become stronger, if the time span between the first and second frame exposure is relatively short. Competitive news framing show strong recency effects, i.e., the last news frame exposure is more influential for opinion formation. Yet, for one of our framing scenarios, this effect only took place when the delay was longer than one week. We also find that political knowledge has a short-term influence on both consolidation and recency effects. When the delay between first and second exposure was relatively short, individuals with higher levels of knowledge displayed more pronounced consolidation effects and weaker recency effects. The experiment in this chapter is the first to test both consonant and dissonant news framing across multiple delayed time points. The results contribute to our understanding of the real influence news frames have on political attitudes.

In sum, this dissertation supplies a number of research findings that add to a theory of news framing effects, and also to the understanding of the role media effects play in political

communication. We show that researchers must think more about what actually constitutes a “framing effect”, and that a dissociation of framing from other media effects concepts is not necessarily the ideal way to go in creating a more advanced framing theory. We also provide the first contours of a theory of news framing effects over time. Our results initially support the notion of a long-term influence of news frames on political attitudes, but also prompt questions about how stable these effects really are. Future research must continue to determine in what ways and to what extent our daily life is affected by how the news “frame” politics.