

# Nixon Was Framed

The Use of Framing in Political Communication  
And its Effect on Message Processing

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Decision Theory  
5/1/09

## **Statement and Relevance of Framing**

Framing is a hot issue in the study of communication. In fields like journalism and advertising, how a product or an issue is framed often affects how people perceive the product or issue. Telling stories in a certain manner may affect how audiences perceive messages, giving communicators enormous power to wield over message receivers.

For researchers who feel that framing is a part of the agenda-setting function of the media, this is less of an issue because, in their eyes, the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Others feel that framing can go further, manipulating how people perceive issues and pick sides in conflicts (Rill & Davis, 2008).

There is a debate is over how to define framing and operationalize it for study (Entman, 1993). It's often studied as a part of media effects – how the media's portrayal of issues affects people's opinions of those issues. Researchers often use research methods like qualitative content analysis to analyze news articles for use of frames. In looking at the past research, it is difficult to find studies in communication employing experiments to test the effects of framing in studies of journalism or advertising.

One communication genre where framing is exploited is political communication – specifically in campaign advertising. There have been several studies in psychology of how framing messages positively (focusing on gains) or negatively (focusing on losses) affects cognition. This approach of study is highly relevant to campaign communicators, as every election season audiences see an increase in negative political advertisements

and in the attention paid to this campaign strategy in the news. Research into how the framing of messages in political advertising – both in a positive/negative and simple/complex comparison – affect audience cognition would be beneficial to campaign communicators as they design advertising strategy.

### **Literature Review**

Baron introduced framing as a method of changing the wording of certain problems in order to influence people's assessments of them. His example, which came from Tversky and Kahneman's 1981 research, showed how this could work. Subjects were presented with a problem in which there was a disease outbreak expected to kill 600 people. By adopting one possible "solution," 200 people would be saved. Or, subjects could choose another possibility, in which there was a .33 probability that 600 people would be saved. Most subjects chose the first option.

Another group was given the same problem, except the solutions were phrased differently. For them, the first option would allow 400 people to die, while the second option had a .67 probability of allowing 600 people to die. Phrased this way, most subjects chose the second option.

The difference is in the framing of the options as gains in the first group (positive) and losses in the second (negative). According to Baron, subjects in the second group saw allowing 400 people to die or 600 people to die as almost the same thing. People are more sensitive to losses, so they picked the option with the possibility of sparing the greatest number of people.

The tendency of people to give greater weight to losses in similar situations is further proven in other research. Smith and Perry (1996) conducted an experiment to

measure how framing an issue positively or negatively affects an audience's processing of an issue. In their experiment, two groups of subjects were given a message about recycling. For one group, the message focused on the benefits of recycling. For the other, the message focused on the costs of not recycling. Each version of the message was augmented by five strong or weak arguments supporting the message. After reading their message, subjects were asked to respond by giving their attitude toward recycling on a seven-point scale ranging from bad to good. They were also asked to provide thought lists about the subject, which were used to measure how much weight each subject gave to the strong or weak arguments presented. If, within one frame, strong arguments were given more weight than weak arguments, the researchers concluded that the subjects used more cognitive processing on the message. If the weights were similar, the conclusion was that the subjects used less cognitive processing. The researchers found that when recycling was promoted by highlighting the costs of not recycling – the negative frame – subjects processed the message to a greater extent.

Smith and Perry concluded from this finding that influencing the cognitive capacity used in a message can affect its ability to persuade.

A further issue to consider is the audience's need for cognition (NC). NC is a measure of the desire to engage and enjoyment of engaging in critical thought. See, Petty and Evans (in press) conducted an experiment in which they found that telling subjects a message was complex, whether it was or not, stimulated subjects to think critically about those messages. This is true for subjects of varying NC levels. Simply framing a message as complex encourages people to use greater cognitive processing for the

message. Following Smith and Perry's conclusions, this means framing can further affect a message's ability to persuade, without changing the message itself.

People of lower NC run the risk of being easily manipulated by factors outside the message (See, Petty & Evans). This is crucial in areas like political communication because the kinds of simple outside cues that can persuade audiences include attractiveness of the communicator and humor of the message. Political communication historians would quickly point out that in the 1960 debate between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, people who listened to the debate on the radio thought Nixon won, while television viewers called Kennedy the victor (Bliss, 1991), with the assumption being that Kennedy's face for television was a major influence. Prior (2005) would argue that audiences with low NC would be the most susceptible audience to political advertising since those who are least likely to actively seek out political information are most likely to come into incidental contact with such information through television advertising.

### **Problem to be Addressed**

Who looks worse in negative political advertising – the candidate who is portrayed negatively or the candidate who sponsored the ad? Some wonder if engaging in attack advertising makes the attacker look worse than his or her opponent. So the primary research question here is to ask if negative political advertising is effective at making voters come out for politicians who engage in attack ads.

Further, does negative political advertising spur political knowledge? When a potential voter sees a negative ad, does the increased level of cognition increase his or her knowledge about issues or a candidate's positions on them?

### **Proposed Research**

The goal is to figure out how much information an audience will draw from negatively-framed ads versus positively framed ads. To accurately test this, subjects must be placed in an environment that would be similar to the context in which they would normally be exposed to political advertising. This research will focus on broadcast advertising, so subjects must be provided with a comfortable room to watch a television show. The commercial breaks of the show will contain political advertisements.

Subjects will be pre-tested to measure NC and political affiliations. Then they will be separated into two groups, each with an equal distribution of low- to high-NC subjects. Each group will also have to have an equal distribution of subjects based on political affiliations so as to mitigate the potential bias against opposite-party candidates.

Then, a sample of positive and negative political ads will be selected. The negative ads will be about a gubernatorial candidate for Nevada (a Republican for one group, a democrat for another), a state whose gubernatorial affairs would be largely unknown to most subjects from North Carolina. These ads will finish with the mandated tag which says the ad was sponsored by the featured candidate's opponent. The positively framed ads will be about a Senate candidate from Nevada (again, Republican for one group, Democrat for the other). The ads will be played in commercial breaks of a one-hour television show along with other advertisements for commercial products; no other political commercials will play.

To test the difference between high- and low-complexity messages, advertisements will be evenly divided between focusing on character issues and policy issues. In other words, subjects in group one will see an even number of positive messages about a Republican Senate candidate's good character and good stances on

policy issues. They will also see an equal number of negative ads about a Democratic governor candidate's poor character and bad stances on policies.

Subjects will be told they are observing the effects of increased advertising time given to one-hour blocks of television shows. This will ensure that they are not paying more attention to the content of the advertisements than they normally would.

After watching the program, each group will be given a questionnaire asking about their perception on the amount of advertising in the program. It will be measured on a seven-point scale ranging from too much to not enough. They will also be asked questions about the candidates. These will include questions as to the subject's impression of a candidate's character as well as tests of how well subjects remember a given candidate's stances on policy issues.

In questions measuring impression of a candidate's character, subjects will also be asked to give their impression of the candidate who sponsored the negative ads, even though the subject would not have seen a commercial about him. This will test whether or not engaging in negative advertising is detrimental to the candidate who launches the attack.

After checking subjects' responses on memory about candidates' policy standpoints and impressions about character, we can learn about how people of varying NC levels process simple or complex political messages. If we learn that people of low NC have trouble remembering policy standpoints, we may conclude that broadcast advertising on policy issues may be a waste of time, since people of low NC wouldn't be processing those messages.

The last question would be to ask how likely each subject is to vote for each candidate. This question would be of limited benefit because of potential partisan bias, but it would be of use in measuring the effects of the ads on subjects classified as moderate.

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