# 6 Competing Frames in a Political Campaign

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Nearly all framing studies examine whether contrasting frames, when considered individually, can shift public opinion on an issue.[2] The typical experiment randomly assigns individuals to receive *one* of two alternative representations of an issue. For example, in studies of people's willingness to allow hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to conduct a rally, individuals learn of the issue framed *either* in terms of free speech (e.g., all groups have a right to speak) *or* in terms of public safety (e.g., rallies often lead to violent confrontations between the hate group and counter-demonstrators). In this case, the relevant comparison is the difference of opinion between individuals in the two conditions. Such studies employ one-sided designs insofar as the exclusive focus is on how exposure to a single frame affects opinions.

Most framing studies find that contrasting frames nearly always have a statistically significant impact when compared to one another. For instance, individuals exposed to the free speech frame are significantly more willing to allow Klansmen to rally than are individuals who receive the public safety frame (e.g., Nelson et al. 1997). This research therefore suggests that, if one side can establish the relevant terms of debate over an issue, it can successfully persuade individuals to support its position.

Politics, however, is typically competitive, fought between parties or ideological factions, and debated issues are framed in opposing terms. The strategic use of framing to mobilize public opinion on a contested issue is a tactic available to all sides. Surprisingly, social scientists have little to say about which of many competing frames (e.g., free speech, public safety, opposition to racism) will shape public opinion. Sniderman and Theriault (2004, pp. 141–142) explain that "framing studies . . . have neglected the fact that frames are themselves contestable. They have instead restricted attention to situations in which citizens are artificially sequestered, restricted to hearing only one way of thinking about a political issue" (also see Entman 1993; Riker 1995; Wittman 1995).[3]

In this chapter, I build on the work of Sniderman and Theriault (2004) and Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) to explore how opinion formation works in competitive mass communication (framing) environments. I do so by first reviewing Chong and Druckman's (2007a, 2007b) approach to studying competitive framing. I then present a new study of competitive framing

that focuses on a publicly funded casino proposal. The results of the study show that not all frames are effective, that competition plays a critical role when it comes to framing, and that the key to being an effective frame lies in a frame's "strength."

## Framing and Campaigns

A large number of studies over the last 20 years show that framing effects have the potential to fundamentally shape public opinion. These studies demonstrate that for a given issue (e.g., a hate group rally request) the opinions of participants (randomly) exposed to one frame (e.g., free speech frame) significantly differ from those of participants (randomly) exposed to another frame (e.g., public safety frame). The problems with these studies, which have been carried out on a wide range of issues including affirmative action, welfare, and gun control, are that they (1) focus exclusively on frames that are effective (i.e., that successfully impact public opinion), and (2) expose individuals to just a single frame (e.g., either free speech *or* public safety). These features bear little resemblance to the reality of most political contexts. A number of factors have been shown to make a given frame *in*effective. For example, frames from non-credible sources (e.g., the *National Enquirer*) or that contradict strongly held values (e.g., a public safety frame to free speech advocates) do not affect public opinion (e.g., Brewer 2003; Druckman 2001a, 2001b). Not all frames work.

On the second point—concerning exposure to just a single frame—even a cursory glance at real-world political campaigns makes clear that individuals receive various frames from competing sides (e.g., the ACLU promotes a free speech frame while the NAACP emphasizes safety concerns or a racial prejudice frame). More systematic evidence on this point comes from Chong and Druckman's (n.d.) study of the framing of 14 distinct issues. The authors analyzed coverage of these issues in major newspapers over time, counting the number of frames put forth on each issue (as well as other features of the frames). They then computed a score to capture the "total effective number of frames," which amounts to a weighted score of the number of frames used on a given issue (e.g., frames employed more often receive greater weight).[4] (The term "effective" here does not refer to the success of the frame in affecting public opinion; but rather, to the extent of its presence in newspaper coverage on the issue.) Across the 14 issues, the average effective number of frames is 5.09 (standard deviation = 1.19). The issue for which the fewest effective frames were employed was coverage of a 1998 Ku Klux Klan rally in Tennessee (with 3.03 effective frames including free speech, public safety, and opposing racism). The issue with the most frames was coverage of the 2004 Abu Ghraib controversy concerning prisoner abuse by members of the armed forces (with 6.9 effective frames, including military responsibility, presidential administration responsibility, individual responsibility, military commander responsibility, negative consequences for international relations, positive consequences for international relations, negative domestic consequences, positive domestic consequences, etc.).



Importantly, on each issue—including the Ku Klux Klan rally and Abu Ghraib—many of the frames employed competed with another, meaning they came from opposing sides. As mentioned, a free speech frame of a hate group rally likely increases support while a public safety frame decreases it. Similarly, the Abu Ghraib individual responsibility frame suggests that fault lies with the individuals involved whereas the administration or military commander frames put the bulk of the blame on the culture established by higher-level actors. That opposing sides simultaneously employ competing frames also is evident in several of the chapters from the first part of this volume. Gerrity reveals how different sides offer competing interpretations of the partial-birth abortion debate, Harris shows how parties in Congress compete by providing alternative frames of the same issue, and Nelson describes how supporters of neo-creationist theories of evolution reinvented themselves by incorporating new values (e.g., a marketplace of ideas) in an effort to counter supporters of conventional evolutionary theories.

These chapters suggest that some frames succeed and others fail in affecting public opinion. Yet, as mentioned, little work has more systematically—that is, beyond offering impressionistic case studies—explored how competition between frames affects public opinion. One notable exception is Sniderman and Theriault (2004) who argue and demonstrate, with two experimental surveys, that when competing frames are presented with one another (e.g., a free speech and a public safety), they *cancel out* such that the frames do not affect individuals' opinions. Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) build on Sniderman and Theriault (2004). Specifically, they conceive of "competition" as the presence of frames aimed at supporting different sides of an issue (a "pro" side and a "con" side)—that is, the frames have distinct positional *directions*. For example, the free speech frame promotes the right to rally ("a pro frame") while the public safety frame implies opposing that right ("a con frame"). They then identify two dimensions of competition. One dimension concerns the number of frames offered from each side. Continuing with the example, the free speech frame (and/or other "pro frames") may be presented one time, two times, ten times, etc., while the public safety frame (and/or other "con frames") could be presented the same or any other number of times. There is variation in the *repetition* of each side's frame(s).

The other dimension is the *strength* of the frames—this gets at the likely effectiveness of the frame in actually influencing public opinion. (In this context, "effective" refers to a frame's impact on opinions and not its presence in media content.) Chong and Druckman (2007b, p. 640) explain that "(perceived) strength refer[s] to the extent to which a frame emphasizes relatively available and applicable considerations." *Availability* means that individuals are able to connect a given consideration (e.g., free speech) to the issue at hand (e.g., the hate group rally); they understand that it is a potentially relevant consideration. Availability is assessed by asking respondents to list what considerations come to mind when they think of the issue. *Applicability* refers to how compelling the frame is perceived to be, and is assessed by asking respondents to rate the relative "effectiveness" of a frame. (While this leaves unclear exactly why a given

frame is perceived as effective or not, it is nonetheless analogous to the widely used technique in psychology to assess argument strength.) Overall strength is a relative construct; a frame is deemed relatively stronger than another if it registers significantly higher availability and applicability scores (for detailed discussion, see Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Indeed, different frames on each side might be relatively strong or weak compared to one another. For example, individuals likely perceive the public safety frame to be stronger (both in terms of availability and applicability) than an alternative "con" frame that argues the rally should not be held because it will result in litter in the streets.

In short, competition between contrasting frames varies by how often each side is repeated and the relative strength of the frames used on each side. The result is a potentially infinite number of combinations that differ in terms of frequency of repetition and the strengths of frames from opposing sides. Chong and Druckman (2007b) test 16 combinations in two laboratory experiments (one on the issue of urban sprawl and the other on a hate group rally request), finding that *frame strength plays the most decisive role*; a frame's relative strength matters more than its repetition (regardless of the side of the argument endorsed by the frame).

In what follows, I build on Chong and Druckman's (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) efforts in two ways. First, I move outside of the controlled laboratory setting to implement an experimental framing study in the context of an Election Day exit poll (on the need to move outside the lab, see Kinder 2007). Second, I look at various combinations of frames that Chong and Druckman (2007b) do not explore. In sum, I explore framing outside of the lab with a heterogeneous sample of voters, exposing them to a novel combination of frames.

In the next section, I describe the issue on which I focus: a publicly funded casino. I present the relevant frames and present evidence about their relative strengths. I then turn to the study design which involved experimentally embedding various combinations of frames in an Election Day exit poll, implemented in the Chicago, IL, area. Next, I present the results, which show how various frames, in different combinations, impact public opinion. I conclude with a discussion of what the results imply for future studies of framing.

## Framing a Casino

I focus on a proposal for a state-funded land-based gambling casino with profit to be used for funding education and property tax relief. The overall attitude of interest, then, is the extent to which an individual supports or opposes a state-owned and state operated gambling casino. I put this issue in the context of the 2006 Illinois Gubernatorial election between Democrat Incumbent Rod Blagojevich, Republican Judy Topinka, and Green party candidate Richard Whitney.

The campaign's initial focus concerned the state of the economy. Illinois' economy was trending in a negative direction—as prominent state economist



J. Fred Giertz explained at the time, "the last three months are cause for concern . . . In 2005, Illinois made up some of the lost ground that took place in the three years that followed the 2001 national recession. 2005 was an encouraging year. So far, 2006 is not" (Reutter 2006). An August 2006 poll showed the economy was by far the most important issue on voters' minds with 37 percent citing it as the central issue followed by only 19 percent mentioning the war in Iraq and 14 percent saying national security (Rasmussen Report 2006). How the candidates would combat the failing economy and raise revenue appeared as if it would dominate the campaign.

Topinka's economic plan—as enunciated on August 23—revolved around the creation of a land-based state-owned Chicago casino with profit to be used for state spending on education and property tax relief. In contrast, Blagojevich proposed leasing the state lottery to generate revenue. (Both candidates opposed income or sales tax increases; Whitney's positions were nominally covered throughout the campaign.) An August 24 *Chicago Tribune* editorial stated that the candidates are "framing this contest for governor just as it needs to be framed: How can a grossly overcommitted state government bend the financial trend lines that point inexorably toward ruin?" Topinka's casino idea split the public—a mid-September *Tribune* polled 54 percent in opposition to the casino plan—and cut across partisan lines.[5] Indeed, while Blagojevich opposed the proposal, he had just a year earlier proposed to double gambling positions, and Chicago Democratic Mayor Daley was open to the plan (although would presumably have prefered that the city own the casino so as to receive most of the revenue).[6]

Just as in-depth discussions of the candidates' competing revenue plans began, however, the campaign took an unexpected turn. With little forewarning, a rash of corruption allegations were launched including accusations that Blagojevich traded state jobs for personal payoffs and improperly spent state money. Topinka also received scrutiny for her role in the administration of previous Governor George Ryan who was on trial for charges of corruption. These events became the focus of a fairly vicious negative campaign which led to the ascendance of corruption as the key campaign issue, overtaking the economy and casino plan, which virtually disappeared from the agenda. A content analysis of *Chicago Tribune* coverage of the campaign (from the date of the casino proposal until Election Day)[7] showed that the casino ended up receiving only 3 percent of the coverage while the budget in general received only 5 percent.[8] Initial expectations of more coverage were proven incorrect with the corruption charges becoming the major issue in the campaign; corruption received 45 percent of all coverage.

Thus, by the time the experimental survey was implemented on Election Day, the bulk of voters presumably had scant knowledge of the casino proposal, perhaps at most possessing a vague memory of the proposal.[9] As I will discuss, the Election Day exit poll experiment entailed (randomly) exposing voters to a description of the proposal using different combinations of frames. A first step in designing the experiment entailed identifying the possible frames for the casino issue and assessing their strengths.

I identified the set of possible frames for the casino proposal by examining coverage of proposals for state-owned casinos in various states and exploring advocacy group propaganda on both sides of casino proposals. This led to the identification of seven often-used frames, as presented in Table 6.1. On the pro side (i.e., support the casino), the frames include the economic benefits from the casino, the entertainment value of the casino, and the positive community effects. The con (i.e., oppose the casino) frames include the social costs of the casino, the morality of casinos, and the corruption and/or patronage that could come from the casino. Finally, the politics behind implementing a casino proposal served as a directionally neutral frame.

As mentioned, three key elements of frames include their positional direction, the number of times they appear (i.e., repetition), and their strength. To assess strength, I follow the pre-test approach used by Chong and Druckman (2007b); I also use the pre-test to confirm that the directional leanings of the frame (i.e., pro/con) are consistent with what I just described.

The pre-test involved a sample of 63 voting-age adults who did not reside in Illinois. It took place approximately one month prior to Election Day.[10] As explained, strength entails two dimensions—*availability* and *applicability*—and so I asked pre-test respondents to assess the availability and applicability of each of the seven frames. Like Chong and Druckman (2007b), I assessed the availability of different considerations by randomly asking about half of the respondents (n = 32) the following open-ended question: "Many states are considering proposals for the state to operate land-based gambling casinos. When it comes to such proposals, what types of ideas or considerations do you think people consider? List any ideas or considerations, even if you personally

*Table 6.1* Casino Frames

| *Frame* | *Description* |
|---|---|
| Economic benefits | Finances gained from state-owned casino will have positive economic benefits in terms of education, tax relief, job creation, development, etc. |
| Entertainment | Casinos are harmless entertainment, and people have been doing it for centuries. |
| Community building | Casinos give a community an identity and help to promote social capital. |
| Social costs | Casinos have severe social costs (e.g., addiction, debt, suicide, family impact, health). They also mostly adversely affect the poor. |
| Morality | Gambling is biblically immoral since it is a form of theft. |
| Corruption | A state-owned casino provides many patronage possibilities with concomitant corruption and crime problems. |
| Politics | A state-owned casino would need other political support (e.g., from the state legislature). |



do not think they are particularly important." The average respondent listed 1.78 ideas. I coded responses focusing on the aforementioned frames.

I randomly asked the other group of respondents (N = 31) to evaluate the applicability and direction of the considerations emphasized in each of the frames. Again, like Chong and Druckman (2007b), I listed each consideration and asked respondents to judge its effectiveness (i.e., perceived persuasiveness) (on a 1–7 scale with 1 being definitely not effective, 4 being not sure, and 7 being definitively effective), and its directionality (on a 1–7 scale with 1 being definitely opposed or "con," 4 being neither, and 7 being definitely supportive or "pro"). In Table 6.2, I report the availability, perceived applicability, and directionality scores. As discussed, strength requires *both* availability and applicability and is a "relative" concept—such that a frame might be relatively stronger than another if it has higher availability and applicability.

The results suggest a fair degree of availability of the economic benefits and social costs frames, and some availability for the entertainment and morality frames. The other frames appear to generally not be available: corruption is significantly less available than entertainment, and neither community building nor politics is listed by any respondents. Clearly, the economic benefits frame and the social costs frame constitute compelling frames in opposing directions. Both display significantly greater perceived applicability than all other frames (at the 0.05 level for all comparisons), but are nearly indistinguishable from one another in terms of applicability ($t_{60} = 1.33$, $p < 0.20$ for a two-tailed test).[11] They also significantly differ from one another in terms of direction ($t_{60} = 11.75$, $p < 0.01$)—social costs is a frame opposed to the casino proposal and economic benefits is a supportive frame. Thus, if I find differential effects of these frames, it clearly stems from direction and not strength variations. In sum, I use economic benefits as the pro-strong frame and social costs as the con-strong frame.

I also use three weak frames. On the weak pro side, I use the entertainment frame; it is significantly less applicable than both the economic benefits and social costs frames (respectively, $t_{60} = 3.30$, $p < 0.05$; $t_{60} = 4.30$, $p < 0.01$) and is significantly more pro than the social costs frame ($t_{60} = 8.03$, $p < 0.01$).[12,13] I use two weak con frames. One is the corruption frame, which has very low availability (6 percent), does not significantly differ from the weak entertainment

*Table 6.2* Pre-test Results (std. dev. in parentheses)

| *Frame (consideration)* | *Availability percentage (N = 32)* | *Perceived applicability score (N = 31)* | *Directionality (support) score (N = 31)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social costs | 59 | 4.55 (1.89) | 2.52 (1.03) |
| Economic benefits | 56 | 3.97 (1.54) | 5.81 (1.17) |
| Entertainment | 25 | 2.74 (1.39) | 4.97 (1.28) |
| Morality | 31 | 2.23 (1.15) | 1.90 (0.94) |
| Corruption | 6 | 3.00 (1.67) | 2.23 (1.15) |
| Community building | 0 | 1.97 (1.20) | 4.81 (1.28) |
| Politics | 0 | 1.84 (1.39) | 3.65 (1.43) |

*Table 6.3* Experimental Casino Frames

| | *Supportive (pro)* | *Opposed (con)* |
|---|---|---|
| **Strong** | Economic benefits | Social costs |
| **Weak** | Entertainment | • Morality<br>• Corruption |

frame in terms of applicability ($t_{60} = 0.67$, $p < 0.55$), and is significantly less applicable than the strong economic benefits and social costs frames (respectively, $t_{60} = 2.38$, $p < 0.05$; $t_{60} = 3.42$, $p < 0.01$).[14] In terms of direction, it significantly differs from the pro entertainment and economic benefits frames (respectively, $t_{60} = 8.87$, $p < 0.01$; $t_{60} = 12.15$, $p < 0.01$). The other weak con frame is morality, which is significantly more opposed than the entertainment and economics frames (respectively, $t_{60} = 10.76$, $p < 0.01$; $t_{60} = 14.51$, $p < 0.01$), and does not substantially differ in applicability from the weak entertainment frame ($t_{60} = 1.57$, $p < 0.12$ for a two-tailed test).[15,16] Table 6.3 summarizes the frames I employ in the experiment.

## Experimental Procedure and Design

I tested the impact of various combinations of competing frames by embedding experimental conditions in an Election Day exit poll. The exit poll makes for a relatively realistic context in which to assess framing effects since the respondents had just voted in an election where the issue at hand (i.e., the casino proposal) had at least some relevance.[17] I implemented the exit poll survey experiment by assembling 24 teams of two student pollsters. I then randomly selected polling locations throughout the northern part of Cook County, Illinois. Each polling team spent a randomly determined 2–3 hour daytime period at their polling place. A pollster asked every third voter to complete a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire in exchange for $5.

The main dependent variable asked "A proposal is being considered for the Illinois state government to operate a land-based gambling casino. What do you think—do you oppose or support the proposal for a state-run gambling casino? Circle one number on the following 7-point scale (where 1 = oppose strongly, 4 = not sure, 7 = support strongly)." I incorporated the framing conditions—which I will soon discuss—by altering the wording of this question.

The surveys included various other items meant to capture potential individual level correlates of casino support.[18] One question measured a respondent's values toward government regulation of business, with the expectation that increasing support for regulation would correlate with higher support for the casino. The precise question asked "In general, do you feel that government regulation of business: usually does more harm than good; or is necessary to keep businesses from engaging in practices that are harmful to the public?" with higher scores indicating increased support for regulation. Another measure asked respondents:



"How many times have you ever been to a casino?" Response options included "Never," "1–2 times," "3–5 times," "6–10 times," and ">10 times" (see Donahue and Miller 2006). Given the prominence of the corruption theme in the gubernatorial campaign, I also asked respondents: "In your opinion, to what extent, if any, has the Blagojevich administration engaged in corrupt practices?" with higher scores indicating increased perceptions of corruption. I imagine voters who see the current administration as more corrupt will be less likely to involve state government in running a casino. Along similar lines, I included a standard trust in government item, asking "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" (with choices being "just about always," "most of the time," or "some of the time"). The survey included standard demographic measures that asked for respondents' party identification (on a 7-point scale with higher values indicating more Republican), gender (0 = male, 1 = female), minority status, age, and a few other items.[19]

In Table 6.4, I report the descriptive statistics for the sample. (The Ns vary by variable because of non-responses.)[20] Impressively, the vote totals of 61 percent for Blagojevich, 19 percent for Topinka, and 18 percent for Whitney match almost perfectly the actual totals that the candidates received in the universe of the polling area (where they received 61 percent, 21 percent, and 18 percent respectively).[21] The table also shows that the respondents come from fairly diverse backgrounds; although, as would be expected in northern Cook County, the sample is skewed towards Democrats and voters who are both politically interested and involved.[22] Given the experimental approach, along with my ability to control for these variables, the focus on these voters is not problematic; moreover, it is a representative sample of actual, heterogeneous voters from the area (rather than being composed of the more homogeneous samples typical in laboratory experiments).

### *Experimental Conditions*

The experimental conditions introduced various mixes of frames that replicate and extend the conditions used in Chong and Druckman's (2007b) experiments. Table 6.5 lists the full set of conditions, to which respondents were randomly assigned.

The first listed condition is the control group that simply answered the main dependent variable question described above (N = 61). This group serves as a baseline for evaluating the effects of the frames in the other conditions. I randomly assigned another group to the strong pro economic benefits frame such that respondents answered the main dependent variable question with the added statement: ". . . Some say that the revenue from the casino would provide tax relief and help to fund education . . ." (N = 54).[23] A similarly one-sided group randomly received the strong con social costs frame that included: ". . . some say that a state-run casino will have severe social costs, such as addiction and debt . . ." A final one-sided condition randomly exposed respondents to the weak con corruption frame: ". . . Some say that a state-run casino would increase

*Table 6.4* Demographic and Political Profile of Sample

| *Variable* | *Scale (overall distribution %)* | *Average (std. dev.)* |
|---|---|---|
| Education (N = 555) | 1 = less than high school (1)<br>2 = high school (8)<br>3 = some college (21)<br>4 = year college degree (28)<br>5 = advanced degree (42) | 4.03 (1.00) |
| Household income (N = 504) | 1 = < $50,000 (32)<br>2 = $50,000–$100,000 (29)<br>3 = > $100,000 (39) | 2.07 (0.85) |
| Age (N = 548) | 1 = 18–24 (18) 2 = 25–34 (11)<br>3 = 35–44 (19) 4 = 45–54 (21)<br>5 = 55–64 (18) 6 = 65–74 (9)<br>7 = 75+ (4) | 3.53 (1.71) |
| Sex (N = 558) | Male (43)<br>Female (57) | n/a |
| Ethnicity (N = 560) | White (77)<br>African American (10)<br>Asian American (4)<br>Hispanic (2)<br>Other (3)<br>Prefer not to answer (4) | n/a |
| Party identification (N = 553) | 1 = strong Democrat (29)<br>2 (27)<br>3 (15)<br>4 = Independent (18)<br>5 (4)<br>6 (4)<br>7 = strong Republican (3) | 2.63 (1.59) |
| Interest in politics (N = 572) | 1 = not interested (1)<br>2 (3)<br>3 (4)<br>4 = moderately interested (19)<br>5 (18)<br>6 (27)<br>7 = extremely interested (28) | 5.44 (1.41) |
| Trust in government (N = 561) | 1 = just about always (2)<br>2 = most of the time (14)<br>3 = some of the time (84) | 2.83 (0.41) |
| Number of days a week watch the news (N = 555) | 0 days a week (14) 1 (10)<br>2 (10) 3 (11) 4 (8)<br>5 (13) 6 (7) 7 (27) | 3.93 (2.54) |
| Number of days a week read paper during campaign (last two months) (N = 544) | 0 days a week (9) 1 (5)<br>2 (8) 3 (9) 4 (12)<br>5 (12) 6 (5) 7 (40) | 4.66 (2.41) |
| Gubernatorial vote choice (N = 403) | Blagojevich (Democrat) (61)<br>Topinka (Republican) (19)<br>Whitney (Green) (18)<br>Other (2) | n/a |



*Table 6.5* Experimental Conditions

| *Condition* | *Frames* | *Predicted effect on overall opinion* |
|---|---|---|
| Control | None | Baseline |
| Pro-strong | Economic benefits | Increase support for the proposal |
| Con-strong | Social costs | Decrease support for the proposal |
| Con-weak | Corruption | No effect |
| Con-strong–pro-strong | Social costs–economic benefits | No effect (i.e., cancel out) |
| Con-strong–pro-weak | Social costs–entertainment | Decrease support for proposal |
| Con-weak–pro-strong | Corruption–economic benefits | Increase support for the proposal |
| Con-weak–pro-weak | Corruption–entertainment | No effect |
| Con-weak–con-weak | Corruption–morality | No effect |
| Con-weak–pro-strong–con-weak | Corruption–economic benefits–morality | Increase support for proposal |

patronage and corruption in state government . . ." (N = 58). The theory suggests that the strong economic benefits and social costs frames will significantly push respondents in pro and con directions, respectively, while the weak corruption frame will have no effect.

The six other conditions include various combinations of frames exposing respondents to two or more competing frames.[24] I explore the predicted canceling effect of two opposing strong frames by pairing the social costs and economic benefits frames (N = 55) (Druckman 2004; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). I also include a condition with the strong con social costs frame along with the weak pro entertainment frame, with the expectation that the strong social costs frame will exhibit a greater effect (N = 58) (Chong and Druckman 2007b).

The other conditions include the weak con corruption frame. One of these pairs the corruption frame with the strong pro economic benefits frame (N = 55). This is again a strong-versus-weak condition, and, thus, only the economic benefits frame should significantly affect respondents. I also included a condition that paired the weak con corruption frame and the weak pro entertainment frame (N = 57), and a condition that grouped the weak con corruption frame with a weak con morality frame (N = 60). In both these cases, I expect no effect since weak frames are predicted to not influence opinions. The final condition adds the strong pro economic benefits frame to the weak corruption and morality frames with the expectation of increased support (N = 60). The final column of the table lists the predicted effect on overall opinion (relative to the control group).[25]

## Results

I focus the analysis on how the different combinations of frames affect overall attitudes toward the casino proposal. Specifically, I estimate the relative impact of the frames by using a statistical technique called an ordered probit model; in so doing, I treat the control group as the point of comparison (Chong and Druckman 2007a), and include separate dummy variables for each of the nine treatment conditions.[26] I list the condition means in appendix A,[27] and report the specific regression results in Appendix B.

Using the results reported in Appendix B, I generated the probabilities that an average respondent from each condition would support the casino proposal. For example, holding all the demographic and political (control) variables at their means, I find that the average control group respondent has a 24 percent chance of supporting the casino proposal (I construe support as reporting a score of 5, 6, or 7 on the 7-point scale).

In Figure 6.1, I graph the probabilities, relative to the control group, that an average individual from each condition would support the casino proposal. The graph presents the *difference* between the probability of support in each group and the control group's aforementioned 24 percent likelihood of support.[28] The graph thus reveals the specific impact of the frame(s), relative to the control group, in moving respondents to be more or less supportive of the casino proposal. In the graph, each condition (abbreviated) variable name describes the specific frames to which respondents were exposed. (The abbreviations Cn = con, Pr = pro, Str = strong, and Wk = weak; the other abbreviation should be self-evident.)

The figure shows that, as predicted, only strong frames influenced opinions. Specifically, the two single strong frame conditions show substantial effects—the strong pro economic benefits frame moved respondents to be 24 percent more supportive the casino (compared to the control group—thus, the average individual in this group was 24 percent + 24 percent = 48 percent likely to be supportive), while the strong con social costs frame moved respondents to be 18 percent less supportive (or in total, 24 percent – 18 percent = 6 percent likely to be supportive). These single strong frame results replicate conventional framing experiments that expose respondents to one strong frame or another (e.g., free speech or public safety). The other single frame condition used the weak con corruption frame and, consistent with expectations, this had virtually no effect relative to the control group.

Similarly, simultaneous exposure to the two strong frames—social costs and economic benefits—did not significantly move respondents (the 5 percent decline is not statistically significant), suggesting that the frames counteract one another (consistent with Sniderman and Theriault's (2004) prediction). By contrast, when the social costs frame is matched with the weak pro entertainment frame, respondents react, as predicted, by becoming less supportive, with the probability of support dropping by 15 percent. The strong frame wins out. This is an important caveat to Sniderman and Theriault's (2004) theory that competing frames cancel out: frames cancel out only when both frames are strong.

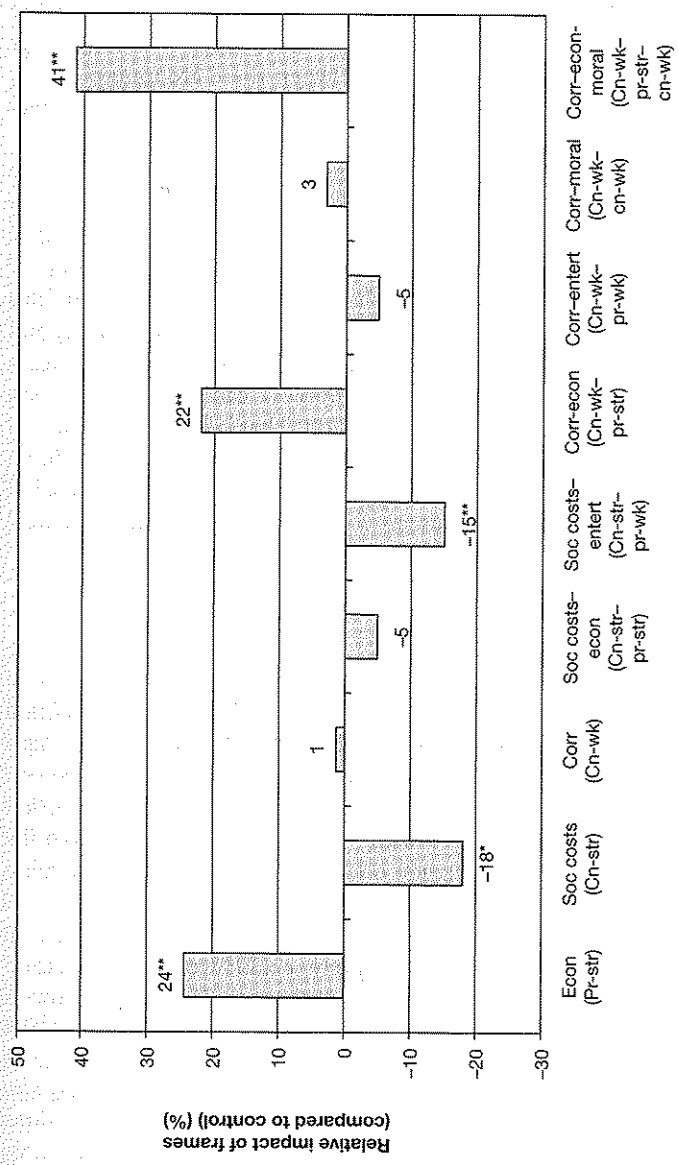


*Figure 6.1* Likelihood of Casino Support

The other three dual conditions match a weak con corruption frame with other frames. As expected, respondents who received the strong pro economic benefits frame along with the corruption frame become significantly more supportive (by 22 percent). The insignificance of both the weak con corruption–weak pro entertainment condition, and the weak con corruption–weak con morality condition further highlights the lack of impact from weak frames (neither condition significantly moves opinions), *even* when there are multiple weak frames in the same direction (e.g., in the case of the con corruption–morality combination).

The final condition shows that the one strong pro economic benefits frame overwhelmed the weak con corruption and weak con morality frames. This again accentuates that strength is more important than repetition. Moreover, notice the probability of support in this condition exceeded the control group by 41 percent which is substantially greater than the impact of the strong pro economic benefits frame alone (24 percent). This is evidence of what Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b) call a contrast effect, where the presence of a weak contrary frame (or in this case two weak frames) can backfire, pushing respondents even further in the opposite direction. That is, the con side would have been better off offering no frame (as in the economic frame only condition where there was no con frame and opinion increased by 24 percent) instead of offering the weak con frames (as in this last condition where opinion increased by 41 percent).

## Conclusion

Competing sides regularly seek to offer alternative frames for making sense of issues and events. Incorporation of competition into studies of framing is critical if we are to understand how frames work. The results concerning frame strength and contrast effects support Chong and Druckman's (2007a, 2007b) theory. Strength is more important than repetition, and the impact of a frame in isolation may differ from its effect when mixed with other frames (as evident from the contrast effect). The results also provide one of the few examples of framing effects among a heterogeneous group of voters in a campaign setting.

The obvious unanswered question concerns what makes for a strong frame (Chong and Druckman 2007c). Unfortunately, extant work on persuasion provides little guidance on the conditions of strength—for example, dual process models of attitude change (e.g., Petty and Wegener 1998) distinguish the origins of strength (e.g., cues or argument quality) but say little about what factors matter when, and what makes for a high-quality argument (or frame). There are, however, some recent studies in political science that isolate strength-promoting elements—for example, strong frames tend to comport with cognitive biases (Arceneaux 2007), highlight specific emotions (Aarøe 2008; Petersen 2007), include multiple, frequently appearing, arguments (Baumgartner et al. 2008), and/or have been used in the past (Edy 2006). This research offers a compelling baseline for future research that needs to identify not only the



elements of strength but also the conditions under which a frame might be strong or weak. This will enhance our understanding of public opinion formation, enable us to make sense of why some campaigns succeed while others fail, and reveal what makes for the most effective campaign strategy (e.g., Schaffner 2008).

## Appendix A

*Table 6.A1* Experimental Condition Means

| *Condition* | *Frames* | *Mean (std. dev.; N)* |
|---|---|---|
| Control | None | 3.10 (1.93; 59) |
| Pro-strong | Economic benefits | 4.20 (1.68; 54) |
| Con-strong | Social costs | 2.04 (1.28; 57) |
| Con-weak | Corruption | 3.07 (1.97; 58) |
| Con-strong–pro-strong | Social costs–economic benefits | 2.91 (2.01; 55) |
| Con-strong–pro-weak | Social costs–entertainment | 2.05 (1.49; 58) |
| Con-weak–pro-strong | Corruption–economic benefits | 4.20 (2.04; 55) |
| Con-weak–pro-weak | Corruption–entertainment | 2.37 (1.77; 57) |
| Con-weak–con-weak | Corruption–morality | 3.09 (2.05; 59) |
| Con-weak–pro-strong–con-weak | Corruption–economic benefits–morality | 4.42 (2.13; 58) |

## Appendix B

Table 6.B1 reports the regression result; it includes control variables that might plausibly affect casino attitudes.[29] The experimental condition variables appear on the left side and the control variables appear on the right. The text contains a discussion of the impact of the experimental conditions. Also of note are some of the effects of the demographic and political variables.

Those who have a greater distrust of government are less supportive of the proposal, presumably reflecting their general lack of trust in expanding governmental control. Also, older people and women exhibit significantly less support while minorities show more support. Politically, those who voted for Topinka are more supportive, which, even though it was her initial proposal, is mildly surprising given the lack of coverage of the casino (as discussed). The other variables including perception of corruption in the current administration, values regarding state regulation of business, frequency of going to a casino, and partisanship had no significant effects. Overall, it is interesting that demographics play a larger explanatory role than political values and partisanship, perhaps reflecting political ambivalence about casinos, which indeed makes people susceptible to framing effects in the first place. (That is, people are susceptible to framing in the first place because they are not sure how to weight alternative considerations; see Druckman 2001b).

*Table 6.B1* Experimental Framing Effects on Support for Casino Proposal (1 to 7 Scale)

| *Experimental condition* | | *Control variable* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Econ (Pr-str) | 0.78** | Administration corruption | −0.41 |
| | (0.21) | | (0.26) |
| Soc Costs (Cn-str) | −0.37* | Regulation value | 0.04 |
| | (0.22) | | (0.23) |
| Corr (Cn-wk) | 0.13 | Casino visits | 0.22 |
| | (0.21) | | (0.16) |
| Soc costs–econ | −0.05 | Distrust government | −0.50* |
| (Cn-str–pr-str) | (0.21) | | (0.26) |
| Soc costs–entert | −0.55** | Partisanship (Republican) | −0.38 |
| (Cn-str–pr-wk) | (0.23) | | (0.24) |
| Corr–econ | 0.88** | Age | −0.39* |
| (Cn-wk–pr-str) | (0.21) | | (0.19) |
| Corr–entert | −0.30 | Minority | 0.44** |
| (Cn-wk–pr-wk) | (0.22) | | (0.15) |
| Corr–moral | 0.08 | Female | −0.22* |
| (Cn-wk–cn-wk) | (0.21) | | (0.11) |
| Corr–econ–moral | 1.00** | Vote for Topinka | 0.26* |
| (Cn-wk–pr-str–cn-wk) | (0.22) | | (0.16) |
| $t_1$ through $t_6$ | See below | | |
| Log likelihood | −815.86 | | |
| Number of observations | 478 | | |

Note
Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. $^{**}p \leq 0.01$; $^{*}p \leq 0.05$ for one-tailed tests. The coefficient and standard errors for $t_1$ through $t_6$ are as follows: −1.41 (0.39), −0.82 (0.39), −0.47 (0.39), −0.10 (0.39), 0.34 (0.39), 0.93 (0.40).

## Notes

1. This chapter grew out of an ongoing collaborative project with Dennis Chong, who offered sage advice at all stages of the research presented here. I thank Jason Reifler for his generous contributions, and Toby Bolsen, Jaclyn Cheron, Caitlin Chester, Thomas Leeper, Lauren Matecki, Tommy Szalasny, Cara Walsh, and Jonathan Weber for research assistance. Support was provided by Northwestern University and the AT&T Research Scholar Fund.
2. This introduction was co-written with Dennis Chong.
3. Exceptions include Sniderman and Theriault (2004), Brewer and Gross (2005), Hansen (2007), and Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b, 2007c).
4. They also report a count of the total number of frames; however, this is of limited interest since some frames appear only a few times (and a strict count does not adjust for frequency of use).
5. The casino plan was not an issue on which voters would directly vote (e.g., an initiative) but initially appeared to be a critical campaign issue (e.g., Pearson 2006).
6. Interestingly, after being re-elected, Blagojevich expressed support for a casino plan (Meitrodt and Garcia 2007).
7. This covers August 24 through November 6.
8. Details on the content analysis are available from the author.
9. The main exception would be attentive voters who formed opinions early in the campaign, during the brief period when the casino proposal received substantial coverage. Indeed, these voters did behave differently, although I do not focus on these differences here. Detailed analyses of these voters as a distinct sub-group are available in Druckman (2009).
10. I used non-Illinois voters to ensure that the respondents had not been influenced by the ongoing campaign. It turned out that such exposure probably would not have mattered, given the lack of coverage of the casino proposal. However, when planning for the pre-test, I was not certain how the campaign would develop. The pre-test respondents closely resembled the Exit Poll respondents in terms of demographic backgrounds.
11. The "*t*-statistic" generates a probability indicating the likelihood of the two scores (e.g., economic benefits frame average and social costs frame average) being compared are the same—that is, that the differences between them is due to random chance and not "real" systematic differences. The $p < 0.20$ means that there is around a 0.20 chance that they are "really" the same (and the difference is just due to arbitrary chance). This is typically seen as too high to conclude "real differences." Typically, real differences are accepted as evident when the probability at least approaches 0.10.
12. I did not consider using the community building frame since it registered 0 percent availability and never appeared in the coverage, suggesting it may not be relevant to the issue (despite occasional references to it by advocacy groups). I also did not consider using the politics frame since it is directionally ambiguous.
13. One potential problem, however, is that, while entertainment is significantly more supportive than all others except economic benefits, I also find that economic benefits is significantly more supportive than entertainment ($t_{60} = 2.70$, $p < 0.01$ for a two-tailed test). This is a potential confound insofar as I will not necessarily know based on this pre-test if variance in the impact of economic benefits and entertainment stems from strength or directionality.
14. However, it is perceived as significantly more applicable than morality ($t_{60} = 2.11$, $p < 0.04$ for a two-tailed test).
15. The morality frame is significantly more opposed than the social costs frame ($t_{60} = 2.50$, $p < 0.05$ for a two-tailed test). This is in another potential confound in that differential effects of morality and social costs could stem from strength or directionality. This is similar to the confound between economics and entertainment.
16. The two potential confounds are between morality and social costs differing in terms of both strength and degree of opposition (although both are significantly more opposed than the support frames), and between entertainment and economics significantly differing in terms of both strength and support. In both cases however, I have confidence that differences between these frames will reflect strength variations rather than directional variations since in both cases the differences in terms of strength are much greater than the differences in direction. Also, overall, the set of supportive frames are significantly different from the opposed ones, and the set of strong frames are significantly stronger than the weak ones.
17. Even if voters did not recognize the connection to the election itself, they were still voting on state office which would ultimately decide whether or not to pursue the state-owned casino proposal.
18. The survey included a series of belief importance measures that read "Listed below are several considerations that people might weigh when thinking about the proposal for a state run gambling casino. Please rate how unimportant or important each consideration is to you where: 1 = very unimportant . . . 5 = very important." I listed considerations that correspond with the main frames: economic benefits, corruption, morality, social costs, and entertainment. In this chapter, I do not analyze the belief measures; however, the results garnered by using various belief importance measures as the dependent variable (instead of overall opinion) are consistent with the results reported below.
19. The survey also included various other items pertaining to the gubernatorial campaign that are not relevant to the casino proposal.

20. A total of 575 respondents were assigned to the main experimental conditions, as described below; not surprisingly, given the context of the survey, a number of respondents did not answer all questions.
21. Data on vote totals come from Cook County Election Department website at http://www.voterinfonet.com/.
22. In 2004, 82 percent of these voters opted for Kerry. I also note that the apparent high degrees of cynicism presumably reflects the times and location (i.e., a Republican president with low approval, among largely Democratic respondents).
23. I faced severe space limitations since participation was solicited on the spot, meaning the survey had to be kept short (see Traugott and Lavrakas 2000). To ensure a reasonable number of respondents, then, I could not ask them to read lengthy, framed articles about the casino issue and then answer various questions. I followed typical practice on survey experiments, which is to embed alternative frames in the question itself.
24. I did not implement an exhaustive set of conditions because of the nature of using an exit poll. Specifically, all data had to be collected in one day and I could only estimate the number of respondents (given the number of pollsters I had hired). Also, I could not use the experiment to test repetition effects directly, since it would have meant repeating the same consideration in very close succession which would be awkward (i.e., I could not embed them in alternative longer articles, given time limits).
25. There were two other conditions in the exit poll that I do not discuss here. These conditions asked exit poll respondents to assess the availability and applicability of the frames (similar to the pre-test). Based on these results, there is some evidence that the corruption frame was stronger than the pre-test indicated, and that the constant corruption theme of the campaign in general may have affected voters' interpretation of the casino. This evidence, however, is speculative and, for the analyses reported below, I continue to infer from the pre-test data that the corruption frame is weak. Further details are available from the author.
26. This differs from the Chong and Druckman's (2007b) analysis because, unlike their data, these data include a non-exhaustive set of framing conditions.
27. Across conditions, the mean casino support score is 3.14 (2.01).
28. I compute these probabilities using "Clarify" (Tomz et al. 1999). I do not report standard deviations because "Clarify" provides probabilities for each dependent variable value (1 through 7), and I sum the probabilities for 5, 6, and 7 (which signify support). The results are consistent using different breakdowns.
29. This was not necessary given successful random assignment (which was confirmed); however, it is worthwhile to have a better understanding of casino attitudes. Also note that when I include other control variables, as listed in Table 6.4, none is significant and none of the results presented below changes. In the presented analysis, I include variables that either had theoretical relevance or were found to be significant in preliminary analyses.

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# 7 Taxing Death or Estates?

## When Frames Influence Citizens' Issue Beliefs

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### Introduction

Many of the chapters in this volume focus on how the way a policy proposal is framed can influence public support or opposition for that proposal. For example, in Chapter 2, Nelson et al. show that framing science as a "marketplace of ideas" leads to more support for the teaching of intelligent design than when science is framed as the "progress of ideas." In Chapter 6, Druckman shows that "strong" frames influenced support for a publicly funded casino. Framing effects are also prominent when it comes to citizens' evaluations of tax policies. For example, citizens express significantly less support for tax cuts when the question is framed in a way that emphasizes the services that would have to be sacrificed to pay for those cuts (Welch 1985).

While studies of framing effects have demonstrated that frames can influence the public's support or opposition for policies, less attention has been paid to whether frames can also influence the public's beliefs about the content of policy proposals. In this chapter, we document just such an effect in the debate over whether to repeal the inheritance tax. While this tax applies to only about 2 percent of Americans, Republicans framed it as a "death tax" to suggest that the tax affected a much larger share of the public. Using a survey experiment conducted in 2003, we demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy by demonstrating that citizens exposed to the "death tax" were more likely to think that most Americans were subject to the tax.

We begin this chapter by introducing the inheritance tax debate and outlining how Republicans came to employ the "death tax" frame to change the way the public viewed the tax and ultimately attract support for a repeal. We then introduce the survey experiment we use. We find that employing the "death tax" frame led some respondents to think that the tax applied more widely than with those who were not exposed to that frame. Furthermore, these beliefs had important effects on whether citizens supported or opposed a permanent repeal of the inheritance tax. The chapter concludes with our discussion of the consequences of these findings for broadening our understanding of framing effects.