

FRAMING LEGISLATIVE DEBATE:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS COMPARING COVERAGE
OF TWO TOPICS IN TWO NEWSPAPERS

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh J. Martin)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the legislative coverage of two issues as framed by two newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*. Using a content analysis the researcher examines whether coverage favored or opposed pending legislation depending on the newspaper or the issue. The researcher found *The New York Times* framed welfare reform legislation negatively and campaign finance reform positively. The opposite was found in coverage from *The Washington Times*.

INDEX WORDS: Journalism, newspapers, bias, hostile media effect, frames, framing, objectivity, liberal, conservative, campaign finance reform, welfare reform, McCain-Feingold, content analysis

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Ann, and children, Lydia and Jake.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If the U.S. Congress proposes raising the minimum wage, reporters and editors can cover the story in two different ways. They may decide to find a minimum-wage worker and detail her daily trials and tribulations living on a paltry salary. Or, the journalists could find a small business owner who employs several workers and inquire about the effects of a minimum wage hike on his business and his ability to hire extra help. The two newspaper articles would be equally valid, yet framed in opposite manners.

According to various scholars, framing refers to the assumptions made by the producers of mass media that control the boundaries of debate regarding a news topic (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Numerous studies have shown that mass media report the news in a manner consistent with a dominant frame, a preconceived set of notions that was agreed upon almost unconsciously (Entman, 1996; Entman 1994; Kerr, 2003; Lawrence, 2004.)

This thesis investigates this subtle act of framing. A frame analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* searches for differing frames for differing topics. Two pieces of legislation are examined – the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act. Tenets of objective journalism would suggest that a newspaper approach all pending legislation in the same manner, with both sides presented in a straightforward, balanced manner (Schudson, 2001). A content analysis will reveal whether this occurred. If one piece of legislation received more favorable coverage than another, the result will point to the existence of a frame.

This researcher believes the examination of frames carries great importance because many journalists aren't aware that they exist. Reporters and editors may often believe erroneously in their own objectivity because they are blind to the quiet infiltration of their beliefs into the way their stories are framed. As Fico and Soffin (1995) put it, journalists "may be unable to discern the personal and group biases that may be distorting their reporting of an issue" (p. 622.)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing became important in media research as part of a broader examination of how news stories influence public opinion about issues of the day. Much of this line of inquiry over the last 30 years has examined how press coverage influences what is on the public agenda. Framing research takes this one step further by examining how highlighting particular information about an issue influences the way the issue is perceived.

This chapter will begin with an overview of agenda-setting theory, which preceded framing theory. Conceptual and operational definitions of framing will then be examined. An overview of framing analysis will include brief descriptions of various academic studies while also visiting other works that correspond to the definitions of framing, but don't actually cite the theory. A historical account of the debate surrounding both welfare reform and campaign finance reform will be followed by the arguments supporting and opposing both those issues. An examination of the two newspapers will introduce readers to the differences between *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*. The chapter will conclude with the research questions that serve as the foundation for this thesis.

Agenda setting

Any discussion of framing must start with agenda-setting theory. Indeed, some scholars refer to framing as second-level agenda-setting (Ghanem, 1996; Hester, 2003).

Agenda-setting theory states: “The media, over time, by featuring some issues prominently and some issues less prominently and still other issues not at all, give us a sense of what issues are important, or in the research literature, senses of the issue’s salience” (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998, p. 346). The authors defined salience as “the amount of public or political importance an issue possesses” (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998, p. 347). To find evidence of agenda setting, researchers measure levels of media salience and compare it to levels of public salience.

Walter Lippmann first discussed the notion of agenda setting when he declared that the media were responsible for the “pictures in our head” (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 1). Lippmann set the groundwork for all studies of media effects when he wrote: “The analyst of public opinion must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action” (1922, Chapter 4, para. 1).

Scholars have built continuously upon Lippmann’s work. Cohen argued that the media don’t necessarily tell the people what to think, but they do tell the people what to think about (Cohen, 1963). Lang and Lang expanded further by noting that “the mass media force attention to certain issues ... They are constantly presenting objects, suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about” (1966, p. 468).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) gave agenda setting its formal name and its foundational work. The authors found support for the agenda-setting hypothesis after studying news coverage of the 1968 presidential election. They found a strong correlation between the topics that the media stressed during the campaign and the topics that the public believed were important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972.) The authors concluded that

“voters tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 184.)

To conduct agenda-setting research, a common method is to group news coverage into broad topics – education, crime, government – and measure the amount of time (on television news) or space (in newspapers) dedicated to each topic (Grossberg, *et al.*, 1998). A survey is conducted to determine which topics the public considers important. Correlations between the prominence of topics in the media and the importance of those topics to the public are interpreted as evidence of agenda setting (Grossberg, *et al.*, 1998).

Determining the time between when information appears in the media and when the public reacts to that information is a slight point of contention. One study (Gormley, 1975) suggests no delay is required before media coverage influences public opinion. However, another study (McLeod *et al.*, 1974) suggests a five-month delay produces the best assessment of how the media affected public opinion. A third study (Wanta & Hu, 1994) argued that the time lag differs with type of media.

All of these studies and many others (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986; Rogers & Dearing, 1988) have found support for the basic agenda-setting hypothesis.

Definition of framing

Entman (1993) identified a “scattered conceptualization” (p. 51) of framing and attempted to clarify the definition in his aptly titled essay “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” He noted that the concept of framing spanned several fields including the social sciences and humanities, but that no “general statement of framing theory” (p. 51) had yet been formulated. Entman also said part of the trouble stemmed from casually defined definitions since the terms “*frame*, *framing* and *framework* are

common outside of formal scholarly discourse” (p. 52). Entman thus offered his own conceptual definition: “The concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communication text” (1993, p.52).

The operational definition, Entman continued, involves selection and salience. He defined salience as “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (p. 52). To frame is to select certain aspects of a “perceived reality” (p.52) and give it more prominence in a communicating text. By increasing the salience of certain aspects of a news story, a journalist can promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the issue. Entman said that really successful frames operate “by selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (p. 54.)

He pointed to research (in a psychology journal) by Kahneman and Tversky (1984) that illustrated how the ability to shape the message affected how the audience thought about a topic. The researchers found that subjects responded differently to a hypothetical virus outbreak depending on how the potential responses were framed. Identical options were presented, but one frame stressed the lives that would be saved and the other stressed the likely deaths. The response showed that the audience listened to the frame, not the message (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984).

Entman’s essay described how a dominant frame excludes certain viewpoints. A later study (Entman, 1994) agreed by concluding that the media only covered the possibility of two options during debate about the 1991 Gulf War: Allow more time for sanctions against Iraq to work or outright war. No other views – such as negotiation with Iraq – were allowed into the debate. “The power to frame,” Entman writes, “can be as great as that of language itself” (1993, p.55).

This power has great implication for political communication since frames spotlight some aspects of a reality while obscuring others. The effect could potentially lead audiences to have different reactions (e.g., support different candidates or policies.) Politicians often battle with each other and journalists to win the battle of frames (Entman, 1989; Riker, 1986). Gamson (1992) noticed that winning this battle of framing can help win the war. The term “affirmative action” was encoded early into the debate over racial-preference legislation. “Once a term is widely accepted,” Entman observed, “to use another is to risk that target audiences will perceive the communicator as lacking credibility – or will even fail to understand what the communicator is talking about” (1993, p. 55).

Many scholars used Entman’s conceptualization of framing as a basis for their research (Scheufele, 1999; Kerr, 2003; Lawrence, 2004; Fico & Cote, 2002).

Frame analysis

Frame analysis looks at the “spin” that news media give an issue by choosing the way to cover it. As mentioned earlier, journalists select and give salience to parts of the news in a way that promotes a potential problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). Scheufele (1999) said these media frames are dependent on factors such as reporters’ values and non-media factors such as the political advocacy of interest groups.

Fico and Cote expanded on this notion:

Reporters may themselves directly frame stories when they lead with their own assertions rather than use assertions attributed to some source. To an unknown extent, reporters may also indirectly frame stories through their selection of partisan assertions to use in leads. (Fico & Cote, 2002, p. 170)

The authors cited a study (Miller, Andsager, & Riechert, 1998) that found reporters covering the 1996 Republican primary framed stories in a far different manner than the candidates framed themselves in their own news releases.

A frame analysis offers a systematic look at how different points are highlighted or downplayed. An underlying question is the potential effect on viewers and readers, although many framing studies don't directly examine these effects. This thesis will focus only on the act of framing, not on its effects on readers.

As mentioned earlier, framing analysis is often referred to as the second-level of agenda setting:

Agenda setting is now detailing a second level of effects that examines how media coverage affects both what the public thinks about and the public thinks about it. This second level of agenda setting deals with the specific attributes of a topic and how this agenda of attributes also influences public opinion. (Ghanem, 1997)

A variety of scholars have performed framing analyses examining both the grand ideological and the single-issue levels. The framing analysis always involves some form of content analysis that records how journalists chose to present the issues. As detailed in the methodology section, the methods of these content analyses can vary widely from study to study. The results of frame analyses can also produce wide-ranging conclusions.

Entman (1993) identified a “cold war” (p. 53) frame in which all U.S. reporting fit. The media frame would explain foreign events – linking civil wars to communist rebels – from within this frame (Entman, 1993). Other scholars have examined smaller, single-issue frames. Researchers studying debate over national gun laws found that the media overwhelmingly adopted words and arguments framed by the proponents of gun control (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001).

Scholars have also identified local television news framing of the Gulf War as pro-military (Reese & Buckalew, 1995). Kerr (2003) found fundamentalist Christians framed in a mildly negative manner in network television news broadcasts. A study of obesity coverage in *The New York Times* and network television found most coverage fit into one of two major frames – either personal responsibility or a matter of public policy (Lawrence, 2004). Scholars concluded that the Fox News Channel presented a pro-U.S. frame during its coverage of the Iraq War (Aday, Livingston & Herbert, 2005). The socialist views of an Alaskan politician were framed as deviant in newspaper coverage (Daley & Beverly, 1988). One scholar found newspaper coverage of environmental issues framed in favor of Republicans (Entman, 1996). Another study found that anti-abortion groups had more success in persuading the media to use their terminology than did pro-abortion groups (Andsager, 2000).

Relevant work

Some examples similar to framing analyses come from scholars or authors who never directly cite framing theory or literature. Condit (1985) examined newspaper coverage of a murder trial and compared it to the court transcript. Her rhetorical analysis found that news reports tended to stress the prosecution's arguments while the defense positions were downplayed. Condit chose the trial because the defendant was acquitted; the decision surprised the newspaper's readers who believed the district attorney was presenting a slam-dunk case. Condit's (1985) study isn't described as a framing analysis. However, her conclusions appear to show that press accounts of the trial, to use Entman's (1993) terminology, were "highlighting some features of reality while omitting others" (p. 54).

In their book “Manufacturing Consent,” Herman and Chomsky (1998) argued that the media present topics within a construct that benefits the wealthy and powerful. In his book “The Uncensored War,” Hallin (1986) argued in the early days of the Vietnam War, *The New York Times* excluded discussion of whether the containment of communism was a proper policy. In his book “Big Story,” Braestrup asserts that the media covered the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam as a defeat when the defense was actually an unmitigated success. An examination (Benoit, Stein & Hansen, 2005) of presidential election coverage from 1952 to 2000 in *The New York Times* found negative stories twice as often as positive stories – meaning the articles may have presented candidates in a negative light. None of these authors addressed framing theory in their work, but they all appear to be examples of framing. These works lacked both a formal reference to framing theory and also a systematic content analysis – a normal trademark of a framing analysis.

Fico and Soffin (1995) also indirectly addressed the issue of framing in their study of fairness and balance in national, state and local newspaper coverage. The study concluded that “very few of the issues examined can be said to have been covered in a fair and balanced manner.” The authors used a content analysis to score articles for balance. They found that nearly half the topics covered were “absolutely one-sided in their presentation of controversy” (p. 626). For example, negative stories about the Gulf War outweighed positive stories by a nearly 2 to 1 margin. They found that 88 percent of articles about a proposal to deliver condoms to New York City students were favorable with the remaining 12 percent scored as neutral. Although this research (Fico & Soffin, 1995) stressed the issue of objectivity, the results suggest that journalists framed the topics they covered from certain perspectives.

Fico and Soffin's method contained a careful content analysis (indeed their work provides the foundation for this thesis); however, they didn't connect the dots to point to the existence of frames. They could have argued that the negative Gulf War studies pointed to a negative frame from journalists and editors. Indeed, Fico later embraced framing more directly (Fico & Cote, 2002).

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) studied a concept known as "priming." In their study, they found that the editing of the network news could affect participants' opinion of the importance of news topics. In their definition of priming, the authors explained: "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public offices are judged" (p. 63, Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Because the priming definition closely resembles Entman's framing definition, this paper will focus on the concept of framing.

The issues

The current study examines coverage of two issues – welfare reform and campaign finance reform. Both were monumental pieces of pending legislation that saw a great deal of support and opposition (Bumler, 2002; Clines, 1996). Both featured relatively clear ideological boundaries. Republicans pushed hardest to change welfare and Democrats largely worked against their efforts (Bumler, 2002; Clines, 1996). Although spearheaded (along with Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold) by Republican Sen. John McCain, campaign finance reform was largely a Democratic issue with Republicans standing in the way (Mitchell, 2002). The two issues would hopefully provide a valid backdrop to study how topics are framed because both sides offered distinct reasons for their support and opposition.

Welfare Reform

When Gov. Bill Clinton ran for president, he pledged to “end welfare as we know it” (Usborne, 1992). He won in 1992, but the issue wasn’t addressed until after the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. The president twice vetoed legislation to reform the system insisting that the measures enacted by the new Congress were too harsh (Clines, 1996). Debate over the legislation was heated. One Democratic Congressman accused Republicans of singling “out those who hurt the most” (Charen, 1996, p. 15). The president of the Urban League said, “It appears that Congress has wearied of the war on poverty and decided to wage war against poor people instead” (Charen, 1996, p. 15). Republicans were equally upset with their Democratic opponents, especially President Clinton. During negotiations, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich referred to Clinton as “a charming character of almost zero credibility” (Malone, 1996, p.44) who is running “a scandal-ridden” (p. 44) administration.

After haggling with Congress throughout the summer over what provisions he would accept, Clinton signed the welfare reform bill into law on August 23, 1996 (Clines, 1996). In his address at the Rose Garden sign ceremony he said, “Today we are taking a historic chance to make welfare what it was meant to be: a second chance, not a way of life” (Clines, 1996, p. 1). The law imposed a five-year limit for recipients of welfare (Clines, 1996). Many other details were left to the states, which received broad discretion in the spending of large block grants from the federal government (Clines, 1996).

Supporters and opponents of the measure held resolute views on its merits. Supporters of welfare reform argued that the system was “broken” (Weitzstein, 1996, p.1). The 61-year-old program guaranteed benefits to recipients without limit, a system

that critics argued encouraged dependency (Wetzstein, 1996). Reform supporters also argued that children raised by parents stuck on welfare would face more harm than any potential changes to the system (Strobel, 1996) and noted that the number of children on welfare would grow from 9 million to 12 million by the year 2006 (Wetzstein, 1996). They also argued that greater efficiency and cost savings would result if the states controlled the funds for welfare (Wetzstein, 1996).

Welfare reform opponents argued that the measure would strip the federal government of its responsibility to protect poor children (Wetzstein, 1996). They pointed to an Urban Institute study that predicted the bill would push 1.1 million children into poverty (Wetzstein, 1996). Some argued that after five years parents would be forced to leave their children unattended to search for work (Navarro, 1996). Opponents also asserted that if the states were given freedom to spend federal welfare money some might ignore the plight of the poor (“Some Look...,” 1996).

Campaign Finance Reform

The Campaign Finance Reform bill was an answer to an unintended consequence of the last campaign finance legislation passed shortly after the Watergate scandal (Seelye & Mitchell, 2002). The 1974 law limited donations to candidates for public office, but allowed unlimited donations to political parties – a term referred to as soft money – leaving many to worry about undue influence from corporations and wealthy donors (Grier & Marlantes, 2002). The soft money loophole wasn’t fully exploited until the mid-1990s (Grier & Marlantes, 2002). In 1994, soft money donations totaled just \$87 million; in 1996, that number had risen to nearly \$500 million (Grier & Marlantes, 2002). McCain made campaign finance reform a platform of his popular, but unsuccessful run

for his party's presidential nomination in 2000 (Fineman, 2002). The Senator later used his bipartisan popularity to gain the Republican votes needed in the House and Senate to pass the legislation (Fineman, 2002). The Senate passed its campaign finance legislation in 2001 with the House passing its version 14 months later. President George W. Bush quietly signed the law, with no fanfare in the Rose garden, on March 28, 2002 (Bumler & Shenon, 2002).

The law banned soft money while doubling the limit on direct contributions to politicians to \$2,000 (Clymer, 2002). The measure also banned issue ads from third-party advocacy groups for the 60 days before a general election and 30 days before a primary (Clymer, 2002).

Supporters of campaign finance reform argued that a ban on soft-money would lessen the influence of big corporations and extremely wealthy donors (Clymer, 2002). Supporters insisted that those groups held too much sway in Washington, a fact made obvious by the Enron scandal (Clymer, 2002). They also argued that the reform was needed to "to close loopholes that have allowed the political parties to eviscerate the strict contribution limits enacted by Congress in 1974 in the wake of the Watergate scandal" (Mitchell, 2001, p. 21). Supporters also saw the ban on third-party issue ads prior to elections as a way to remove the "thinly veiled attacks on candidates that flood the airwaves at election time" (Clymer, 2002, p. 31).

Opponents of campaign finance reform argued that the bill violated free speech – that financial donations to politicians and the issue ads that benefit them are constitutionally protected by the First Amendment (Clymer, 2002). Republicans (most of whom opposed the bill) also argued that they needed large soft-money donations to "counterbalance organized labor's get-out-the-vote drives on behalf of Democrats"

(Mitchell, 2002, p. 1). Opponents also argued that the measure would weaken national parties and “channel contributions into less-accountable groups” (Mitchell, 2001, p. 15).

The Newspapers

This study originally focused solely on *The New York Times*. However, the purview was expanded to include *The Washington Times* to serve as a point of reference. If the research did find that welfare reform and campaign finance reform were covered differently in *The New York Times*, one could argue that the nature of the topics – not an inherent frame – led to the coverage disparity. But if *The Washington Times* showed no difference in its coverage or an equally opposite disparity, then *The New York Times* results would gain importance. By comparing the two outlets, the researcher hoped to show that frames are created by newspapers, not by topics.

The New York Times

The New York Times was selected for this content analysis because of its reputation and influence. With a 2005 circulation of 1,136,433, *The New York Times* is the third largest newspaper in the country (Dalton, 2005). In addition to its audience, the paper also has a great deal of influence on both opinion leaders and other media. A 2004 survey (“*New York Times* Ranks...,” 2004) named the weekday edition of *The New York Times* as the best medium with which to reach American opinion leaders. The survey was conducted “among a sample of prominent Americans who have been designated Opinion Leaders based upon either a position that affects and shapes policy and opinions, or professional/personal accomplishments, activities and responsibilities that mark these individuals as noteworthy” (“*New York Times* ranks...,” 2004).

An academic study (Van Belle, 2003) found that coverage in *The New York Times* had more of an impact on government decisions regarding foreign aid than other media. The author even suggested that “scholars with no theoretical or conceptual preference may wish to choose *The New York Times* as an indicator of salience in the news media” (Van Belle, 2003).

The New York Times News Service serves about 650 smaller newspapers. The service delivers news articles and columnists on the day before publication – allowing a story running in *The New York Times* to simultaneously appear in as many as 650 other newspapers (Astor, 2005). The service also includes a look at *The New York Times* budget – a rundown of the stories the newspaper plans to carry on its front page (“The New York Times News Service,” 2005). This researcher has seen that budget used at three different newspapers to gauge the relative importance of stories to put on their own front page.

Another reason for selecting *The New York Times* lies in a quote from its former editor (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004). While accepting an “Editor of the Year” honor at the National Press Club, Howell Raines said:

Our greatest accomplishment as a profession is the development since World War II of a news reporting craft that is truly non-partisan, and non-ideological, and that strives to be independent of undue commercial or governmental influence.... It is that legacy we must protect with our diligent stewardship. To do so means we must be aware of the energetic effort that is now underway to convince our readers that we are ideologues. It is an exercise of, in disinformation, of alarming proportions, this attempt to convince the audience of the world’s most ideology-free newspapers that they’re being subjected to agenda-driven news reflecting a liberal bias. I don’t believe our viewers and readers will be, in the long-run, misled by those who advocate biased journalism. (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004, p. 16).

Raines served as editorial page editor during welfare reform passage, and he served as executive editor during the campaign finance reform debate (Bianco *et al.*, 2005). His comments indicate a belief that *The New York Times* doesn't let ideology influence its coverage. According to the former editor of *The New York Times*, the paper attempts to cover the news without framing stories that favors one side or the other.

The Washington Times

The Washington Times newspaper was created in 1982 by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church (Chinni, 2002). According to the Columbia Journalism Review, Moon "wanted a paper that would fight communism and serve as a conservative counterweight to the liberal media biases" (Chinni, 2002, para. 3). The paper's editor-in-chief, Wesley Pruden, doesn't hide the fact that the paper covers the news from a conservative viewpoint (Chinni, 2002). "We are not a Republican paper," he said. "We are conservative with a small c. We have a very eclectic curiosity, and we sometimes have a front-page story that others wouldn't" (Chinni, 2002, para. 2.).

Although shunned by some critics as a mouthpiece for the Unification Church, Republicans, or conservatives in general (Cooper, 2005), the newspaper has garnered accolades for its journalism from respected organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists and the Columbia Journalism Review (Harper, 2003). Even Benjamin Bradlee, the venerated former editor of the *Washington Post*, admitted respect for his cross-town rival: "I see them get some local stories that I think the Post doesn't have and should have had" (Scott, 2002, para. 32).

At 103,017, the 2005 circulation of *The Washington Times* pales in comparison to *The New York Times* (Baker, 2005). Indeed, *The Washington Post* boasts a circulation

seven times larger than its neighbor¹ (Shin, 2005). But, the small newspaper has carved out a niche as a conservative paper. *The Washington Times* and Fox News are often cited as examples of the conservative media (Chinni, 2002).

Research questions

Given the reputation and influence of *The New York Times*, the discovery of a frame in its coverage would be interesting. As mentioned earlier, the researcher will also look for a frame in the coverage of *The Washington Times* to serve as a point of reference. The first two research questions are elemental:

RQ₁: Did *The New York Times* coverage of welfare reform legislation differ greatly from the same newspaper's coverage of campaign finance reform legislation?

RQ₂: Did *The Washington Times* coverage of welfare reform legislation differ greatly from the same newspaper's coverage of campaign finance reform legislation?

A test to answer these questions involves the construction of a careful content analysis that evaluates whether each article was balanced, favored or opposed the two pieces of legislation. If the result of the content analysis shows a statistically significant difference in the coverage of the two issues, then the research questions will be answered

¹ The Post's 2005 circulation was 751,871 (Dalton, 2005).

affirmatively. Assuming a difference in coverage of the two issues is discovered, a third research question will be answered:

RQ₃: How did the coverage of *The New York Times* of the two topics compare to the coverage of *The Washington Times*? Did each newspaper show a bias toward certain issues?

The answer to these questions should also provide for interesting discussion. One would expect a certain frame from the avowedly conservative *Washington Times*, but a frame from *The New York Times* would prove troubling given the tenets of objective journalism (Schudson, 2001). If each newspaper is found to frame issues in an equally different manner, then perhaps it is unfair to refer to only one of them as a clearly biased source.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Researchers can look for media messages in two ways – through manifest or latent content. According to Riffe *et al.* (1998), manifest content assumes that with the message “what you see is what you get” (p. 29.) Manifest content involves denotative meaning – “the meaning most people apply to given symbols” – not subjectivity (p. 29). Latent content – “the individual meaning given by individuals to symbols” – requires a subjective eye to connote the meaning (p. 30). Holsti called latent analysis “reading between the lines” (as cited in Riffe *et al.*, 1998, p. 29). Since latent analysis involves subjectivity, Riffe *et al.*, conclude that “(q)uantitative content analysis deals with manifest content, by definition, and makes no claims beyond that.” (p. 30).

Thus, many researchers (including this one) focus on manifest content. But, the methods they use can vary greatly.

Types of frame analyses

Riffe *et al.* (1998) state that content analyses must use systematic research designs to achieve reliability and validity. Researchers must determine “in advance such research design issues as the time frame for a study, what kind of communication constitutes the focus of the study, what the variables are to be, or how precise the measurement will be” (Riffe *et al.*, 1998, p. 20). Scholars have used a number of research methods to quantify how the media set the agenda or frame an issue. Not all live up to the rigorous criteria – such as intercoder checks of reliability, mutually exclusive categories and reporting complete findings to aid replication – suggested by Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998).

Callaghan and Schnell (2001) produced a relatively rigorous analysis. They identified a number of frames from each side of the issue, and then had coders review the content and identify the corresponding frames (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). Many news pieces didn't fit a specific frame and were recorded as "just straight facts or information" (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001, p. 204). The authors sampled one-third of the data to test for intercoder reliability and found a high degree of agreement given the relatively subjective nature of the coding (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001).

Other studies appear more subjective. Aday, Livingston and Hebert (2005) sought to examine the "tone" (p. 9) of news reports covering the Iraq War. They argued "that a better measure of bias ... is one that looks for violations of the journalistic norm of detachment" (Aday, *et al.*, 2005, p. 9). The researchers created a five-point scale to measure bias, with three representing neutrality. Coders rated the objectivity of telecasts.

The authors (2005) said an example of bias in favor of the U.S. coalition would be a statement such as "these troops are courageous" (p. 10). An example of anti-coalition bias was "focusing on civilian casualties in a way that seems to go beyond merely reporting the story straight" (p. 10). In a footnote, the authors reported there "was at least 90 percent agreement among coders on all subjective variables included in the analysis" (p. 19). However, the authors (2005) didn't detail how the intercoder reliability was tabulated – whether the entire sample was tested or some fraction of the total sample. This is important because usually "reliability... is easier to achieve when a concept is more, rather than less, manifest because coders will more easily recognize concepts in the content" (Riffe et al., 1998, p. 107)

Other content analyses have little in the way of systematic schemes. Mermin (1996) stated the researcher had read or watched the news, and then offered a critical

summary. He conducted the content analysis by reading *The New York Times* and watching ABC News during the first week of the Gulf War. The study reported observations such as “two of the 31 stories during the first 3 days of the operation contained critical viewpoints on the decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia or questioned the justifications offered for it” (Mermin, 1996, p. 186). The author makes no mention of any systematic coding scheme. Despite the shortcomings of the analysis, Mermin argued that the Gulf War coverage appears “uniquely uncritical” (Mermin, 1996, p. 190).

The latter two studies (Aday, *et al.*, 2005; Mermin, 1996) report evidence of ideological or political bias, but do not use the systematic safeguards recommended by Riffe *et al.* Therefore, a quick overview of the hostile media effect seems appropriate. Vallone, Lepper and Ross (1985) defined the hostile media effect as the observation that ideological partisans often perceive the media as hostile to their own views. Their psychological study (Vallone et al, 1985) exposed two groups of students – one pro-Israel and the other pro-Arab – to television news coverage of the 1982 Lebanon War. Both groups said identical newscasts were biased against their point-of-view. Successive studies also found evidence of the hostile media effect (Christen *et al.*, 2002; Giner-Sorolla, 1994).

Therefore, any content analysis searching for frames must be carefully constructed to ensure that the researcher isn’t influenced by the hostile media effect – finding a media frame that supports the scholar’s own ideological bias. “Indeed, a biased measurer might stretch the rubber yardstick,” write Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998, p. 104).

Rigorous frame analysis

An earlier study (Fico & Soffin, 1995) examining balance in the coverage of controversial issues offers a blueprint that can be adapted to the current study. This thesis follows the design closely but doesn't duplicate it entirely. The following paragraphs offer a detailed overview of the Fico and Soffin (1995) research design.

Fico and Soffin (1995) compiled a purposive sample of prestige and local newspapers over a four-week period. They focused on the "reporting of assertions by contenders in these issues" (Fico and Soffin, 1995, p. 625) Topics included the 1991 Gulf War, a civil rights bill, and a global warming conference. By spotlighting assertions from proponents and opponents of an issue, the authors tried to remove any need to intuitively analyze the articles. Coders simply recorded how reporters and editors chose to play the assertions.

Each story was analyzed to determine six criteria:

(1) how many sources on each side of the controversy were able to have their say; (2) whether the assertions of one or both sides were cited in headlines, in the first paragraph, and/or in graphics; (3) whether the assertions of one or both sides were cited within the first five paragraphs of the story; or (4) were confined to the last half of the story; (5) whether cognate art [photographs or illustrations] accompanied one or both sides; and (6) the total column inches given to assertions by both sides. (Fico & Soffin, 1995, p. 625-626.)

The authors (Fico & Soffin, 1995) noted that with the exception of the total number of sources making assertions (1) and the total space assertions received (6), the measures focus on the prominence given to assertions by proponents or opponents debating an issue.

Each of the six criteria was coded to determine if a story favored one side or was balanced. Results were used to produce a cumulative measure of story imbalance (Fico & Soffin, 1995). The researchers used three coders to assess stories. They reported

intercoder reliability between 90 and 100 percent on all the stories assessed (Fico & Soffin, 1995).

The comparison of the Fico and Soffin's (1995) method with other framing analyses highlights potential weaknesses of the other designs. For instance, the coding scheme for a framing analysis of Iraq War coverage (Aday *et al.*, 2005) defined bias as the use of "we" when referring to coalition troops. The Fox News channel was the only broadcast source to use this terminology, so it comes as no surprise that the researchers found the network to be the only medium that presented the news in a biased fashion. Multiple measures of concepts like bias are preferable to a single measure that has such a large influence on the results.

In 2003, the Reuters news agency issued a directive to reporters and editors to avoid using the term "terrorist" (Cooper, 2003, para. 8) when referring to people who carried out acts of terrorism. The agency instructed reporters to use the words "militants" (para. 8) or "insurgents" (para. 8) except in direct quotes, according to a report in a journalism review (Cooper, 2003). The global news director defended the decision by declaring "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (Cooper, 2003, para. 6). If a researcher designed a content analysis in which the avoidance of the term "terrorist" would be coded as bias in favor of terrorists, the outcome of the research could be easily predicted. Coding schemes that easily produce certain results raise questions about the validity of the research.

The Mermin (1996) study offers another example of a potentially flawed frame analysis. The author's lack of any rigorous coding scheme calls into question whether the research's results could be replicated.

These differences led this researcher to use the Fico and Soffin (1995) design in this study. This method is based on widely accepted standards for reducing bias, such as giving equal space and prominence to different sides in a debate. Coders simply read each paragraph of a news story and decided whether assertions in the paragraph favored one side or the other. The simplicity minimized the chance of subjectivity seeping into the research results. This also simplifies the task for researchers interested in replicating the current study.

Compiling the census

The content analysis for this study consisted of a census of coverage of welfare and campaign finance reforms from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times*. The analysis for each issue began on the first day Congress met during the year that legislation was introduced. The census ended on the date that the president signed a bill into law. The welfare reform analysis covered January 3, 1996, to August 23, 1996. The campaign finance reform census started on January 3, 2001, and concluded 14 months later on March 27, 2002. The campaign finance law passed relatively quickly in the Senate but didn't get a vote in the House until the following year. A census rather than a sample was used because when looking at a single issue “probability sampling might miss key parts of the coverage” (Riffe *et al.*, 1998, p. 51).

A search in the LexisNexis academic database of news articles was used to conduct the census. A full-text search using the term “welfare” generated too many articles (more than 1,000), so separate searches were conducted using “welfare reform,” “welfare overhaul,” “welfare bill,” and “welfare measure.” In addition to searching for each term, the Boolean search function was used to exclude “week in review” and

“editorial desk” avoiding editorials on welfare reform. The term “abstracts” was also excluded to eliminate summations of other newspaper articles contained in the New York Times database. The results also excluded the term “excerpts” to avoid collecting the printed text of speeches from lawmakers and other officials. The process was repeated with the three other terms (“welfare overhaul,” “welfare bill,” and “welfare measure”) resulting in some duplication of articles. The duplicates were eliminated leaving 61 welfare reform articles from *The New York Times*.

A similar process was used for *The Washington Times*. After searching for “welfare reform,” Boolean searches eliminated “editorials” and “oped.” The results were narrowed further by including only articles from the “nation” desk which eliminated “week in review” articles. After repeating the process with the other three terms (“welfare overhaul,” “welfare bill,” and “welfare measure”) and eliminating duplicates, the census contained 58 articles from the Washington Times.

To collect campaign finance reform articles, the term “campaign finance” was searched in both papers. The pattern used with welfare reform was repeated for each paper to narrow the results further. The census compiled 100 articles from *The New York Times* and 57 articles for *The Washington Times*.

A physical examination of several randomly selected copies of the both published newspapers confirmed that all the appropriate articles had been gathered through the search process.

The census included articles written from the metropolitan desk of *The New York Times*. Although not all of those articles (covering the New York state and the region) are distributed nationally, they were included because roughly half of the newspaper’s readers see the stories (Bianco, Rossant & Gard, 2005). Since many opinion leaders read

the newspapers in New York (most other news organizations have large operations in the city) it seemed appropriate to include them in the sample. The *Washington Times* doesn't print a separate national edition – readers in New York receive the same paper as those in Washington.

Exclusions

The remaining 281 articles from both papers were then reviewed to determine if they made a reference to either topic within the first 10 paragraphs. Articles that did not have such references were excluded to keep articles with only a passing mention of welfare or campaign finance reform from influencing the study. This process eliminated 18 articles leaving 263 articles in the census.

During the coding process, more articles were excluded if they referred to the topic early in the article but the thrust of the story focused on a different issue. For instance, an article about President Bush and Senator McCain may mention campaign finance reform, but focus instead on their strained relationship. Articles that examined multiple topics were also excluded to avoid confusion in the analysis. For instance, during the welfare reform process, some debate focused on whether to include Medicare reform as part of the legislative package. These articles were excluded from the study because they didn't address the merits of the welfare bill, but instead concerned political wrangling. In the same light, election reform was often debated at the same time as campaign finance reform. Articles dealing with the former (e.g., voting booth irregularities, hanging chads) were excluded. Several articles during the campaign finance debate also examined the efforts of lawmakers to raise money during this period. Unless an article specifically quoted an opponent or proponent of the legislation (e.g.

Common Cause, an organization that pushed for the finance overhaul measure), these articles were not included in the study. During this process, another 63 articles were excluded. See Appendix A for more examples of excluded articles.

Final census

The remaining 200 articles consisted of 119 from *The New York Times* and 81 from *The Washington Times*. All of the articles from each newspaper were staff written. The final sample from *The New York Times* included 46 articles on welfare reform and 73 articles on campaign finance. The sample from *The Washington Times* included 37 articles on welfare and 44 on campaign finance (See Table 1 below).

Table 3.1: Description of census

Newspaper	Welfare	Percent	Campaign Finance	Percent	Total articles
New York Times	46	38.6	73	61.3	119
Washington Times	37	45.6	44	54.3	81
Totals	83		117		200

Coding protocol

This study looks at assertion bias to look for evidence of framing in each article. Since the operational definition of framing involves “selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Entman, 1993, p. 54), examining how assertions are presented should point to whether the news is being framed. For instance, if a reporter chooses to dedicate the first ten paragraphs of an article to the assertions of opponents of welfare reform, then the article is framed in a position unfavorable to reform. In framing terms, the reporter has highlighted the negative aspects of the reform bill while omitting the fact that some people support the legislation. In addition, the coding protocol will examine the number of sources contacted who favor or oppose each issue. If a reporter contacts two people supporting legislation, but five people who oppose it, then the issue is framed negatively. Again, the reporter is framing the issue by highlighting the negative view while omitting the positive one.

The coding protocol deviated somewhat from the design used by Fico and Soffin (1995). Fico was unable to provide the original coding sheets from the 1995 study, but he did provide coding sheets for a still unpublished content analysis examining fairness in the coverage of U.S. Senate races. Several changes in this study were adopted from the coding protocol from Fico’s newer research.

The biggest change in the current study was a coding scheme that gave more weight to assertions at the top of a story. The coding protocol was also simplified to focus on four criteria. Excluded from analysis completely was accompanying artwork, total column inches given to assertions by both sides and whether assertions were confined to the last half of the story. The Lexis-Nexis database doesn’t include artwork and column inches can’t be measured using this source.

This author's coding protocol looked for four manifest characteristics: (1) Whether assertions were balanced in the headline or first paragraph, (2) whether assertions were balanced in the second through fifth paragraphs, (3) whether assertions were balanced in the sixth through tenth paragraphs, and (4) whether the number of sources quoted from each side was balanced (i.e., were the same number of sources quoted from each side of the issue). The headline and first paragraph were combined into one coding unit because a good headline should restate the information in the lede. If the protocol counted headlines and first paragraphs separately, the result would receive too much weight. (See Coding sheet, Appendix C)

The current protocol focuses more on the top of the story than the original study did (Fico & Soffin, 1995). Under the current scheme paragraphs past the 10th are virtually ignored except for the count of sources. This is based on an assumption in Fico and Soffin's (1995) original design. The authors wrote:

The core assumption is that given the brief time readers spend with newspapers, what "leaps out" will get readers' attention. Specifically, readers may never encounter a "balanced" story if all opposition sources are confined to the end of the story. Consequently, the measures used in this study are "front loaded" in a way that parallels the stories the measures are meant to assess. (Fico & Soffin, 1995, p. 626).

Fico and Cote (2002) said in a subsequent study that their design "assumes that story leads and the paragraphs immediately following are most influential in setting such frames" (p. 170.) The coding protocol for the current study follows this front-loaded paradigm. The research focuses on the first part of each article – mimicking the traits of many readers.

Intercoder reliability

Reliability is one of the most important features of this study because it verifies “the assumption that content coding is determined by the concept definitions” (Riffe *et al.*, 1998, p. 105). Recommendations vary on the size of an intercoder sample. Some suggest 10 to 20 percent of the content in a study, while others recommend only 5 to 7 percent (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). But Riffe *et al.* recommend following the formula for standard error used in any other sampling technique. This means the size of the sample for reliability checks increases as the number of coding units decreases.

The authors (Riffe *et al.*) also suggest a random sample of the content to perform a test of intercoder reliability. In addition to controlling for human biases in selection, a random sample “produces, with a known possibility of error, a sample that reflects the appropriate proportions of the characteristics of the overall population of content being studied” (Riffe *et al.*, 1998, p. 124).

Riffe *et al.* (1998, p. 127) developed a table to determine the number of units to test for intercoder reliability with different population sizes. The table assumes a goal of 85 percent agreement between coders. The table suggests that 51 to 72 units be randomly selected for populations of 100 to 250 and a goal of 90 percent agreement. The 90 percent figure was chosen because the 5 percent confidence level could statistically produce the desired result of at least 85 percent reliability. The 90 percent figure also reflects the intercoder reliability achieved in the Fico and Soffin study (Fico & Soffin, 1995). Therefore, this author chose to randomly sample 72 articles to check for intercoder reliability. The number represents a conservative approach that is likely higher than

actually needed since the census contains only 200 articles – 50 short of the maximum allowed.

Pre-test revelations

Each article was numbered from 1 to 281. The aforementioned exclusions were conducted after the articles were numbered. For a research design pre-test and an early intercoder reliability test, a random number generator was used to select 30 articles (more than 10 percent) of the final census of 200. Two coders were briefed on the issues and vocabulary of the coding with a protocol sheet (see Appendix B.) The protocol offered coders an overview of the study, general assessment of the two issues, and the operational definitions of sources, support and opposition. Two coders used the coding sheets to record the qualities of each story (see Appendix C.)

The pre-test shed light on innate problems with both the coding protocol and researcher bias. The original coding protocol sheet (see Appendix B) consisted of four short paragraphs. The instructions didn't foresee the numerous, inherent difficulties in trying to pin down politician's speech into a simple "for" or "against" format. The original protocol did address the problem of lawmakers who say they support legislation, but propose changing it. These assertions should be coded as opposition, the coders were told, because "they oppose the legislation as written." The pre-test proved that this instruction alone couldn't encompass all the different twists and turns sources can make to qualify their true position. The protocol sheet was extensively revised after the pre-test and more than doubled in length to nearly two full pages (see Appendix E.)

Changes to the protocol sheet included defining exactly which bills were the standard bearer that all other proposals were measured against. For instance, the bill

sponsored by Sen. John McCain, (R-Ariz.), and Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) was ultimately passed as the campaign finance reform act, but an alternative bill sponsored by Rep. Bob Ney (R-Ohio) also received a great deal of support. Although supporters of Ney's bill backed "campaign finance reform," they opposed the legislation as written. During the welfare debate, several Democrats and President Clinton suggested their own versions of welfare reform, but their versions differed drastically from the Republican plans. "Any support for legislation other than the main Republican version should be coded as opposition," the new protocol instructions read.

Deciding how to code official positions also created consternation. For instance, President Clinton and his administration welcomed welfare reform in principle, but always expressed reservations with specific parts of the Republican plan. Therefore, his assertions were always coded as "opposition" regardless of what he actually said. The same was true for President Bush and his administration who opposed campaign finance reform.

As both bills approached final approval, the presidents switched from their long-standing opposition and agreed to support them. In both cases, coders were instructed to continue to code the presidents as opposing because they both stressed their objections to parts of the legislation even as they signed them into law. President Clinton insisted that he would try to dampen some of the impact of welfare reform through executive order and President Bush said he believed much of what he objected to would be struck down in the courts (Clines, 1996; Mitchell, 2002).

The coding protocol section on assertions also grew greatly in length. The coders were instructed to gauge assertions as either in favor or opposed to the legislation. But, during the pre-test it became clear that the definition of an assertion was murky. Coders

were told in the revised protocol that reporters may say that “critics of the bill argue...” In such a case, the assertion should be labeled as opposition. Also, a source’s statement may not sound like support or opposition. In those cases, coders were told “to code the quote based on the source.” The revised coding protocol explains that “the importance is who the reporter chose to quote, not necessarily what they said.”

These instructions agree with Fico and Soffin’s argument regarding the importance of assertions:

The focus of the study was on the reporting of assertions by contenders in these issues. The key assumption in focusing on such source assertions is that reporters at least adequately convey their meaning and context. In an ongoing issue, it is unlikely that a reporter can routinely distort source assertions without alienating those sources and eliminating their future usefulness. Given this assumption, assertions attributed to proponents and opponents on an issue need not be analyzed textually; instead, the focus here is on how reporters and editors play issue opponents’ assertions in a story or series of stories relative to one another. (Fico & Soffin, 1995, p. 625.)

The protocol telling coders how to document sources also proved inadequate. The coding sheet asks for both the number of sources contacted for each side of the story and an overall source bias calculated from counting sources. The original protocol sheet simply gave a few instructions regarding how to record sources and assertions. The revised protocol adds much more information. Coders are told that a source should be counted even if not quoted (e.g., the calculations offered by an activist group are cited), supposedly neutral sources should be counted depending on the direction of their quotes, and an attempt to reach a source should be counted as a source. The revised protocol even gives specific instructions should two or more contiguous paragraphs feature a reference to an unnamed source.

The results of the pre-test also highlighted bias from this researcher – who served as the primary coder. After looking over the results of an impartial coder, the researcher discovered a disregard for the coding protocol in favor of responses that tended to agree with certain assumptions. Instead of focusing on source assertions, the researcher tended to code paragraphs as favorable or unfavorable depending on the outcome of the day's action. For instance, a report that a committee had stalled the legislation should be coded as balanced because no assertions are made. But, the researcher would incorrectly code such a paragraph as opposed to the legislation. Given this discovery, the protocol was rewritten to stress the importance of assertions as the yardstick for measuring support or opposition and the researcher threw out his first coding results.

Examining the data

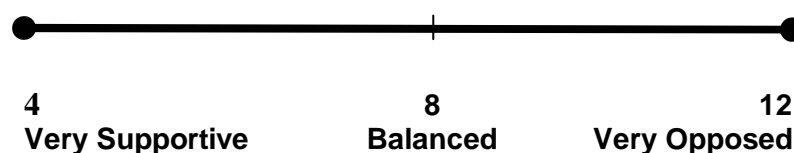
After these problems were addressed, the entire census of 200 was coded and each story's imbalance scores were tabulated. A summary measure was obtained by giving a numerical code to each section of a story. Support was defined as an assertion in favor of the legislation and given a score of one. Opposition was defined as an assertion opposed to the legislation and given a score of three. Balance was defined as assertions from both sides and given a score of two. Results from all four measures were added to create an overall score that could range from four (very supportive) to 12 (very opposed). A perfectly balanced story received an eight (see Figure 3.1 below.) Sections that featured only statements of fact (no assertions) and that didn't apply (e.g., no paragraphs from six through 10) were coded as balanced (two).

In one important divergence from the Fico and Soffin (1995) study, this research has one data set in which all the content is coded. In the earlier study, stories were first

identified as pro or con. Then, imbalance scores were tabulated. Two articles might have an identical imbalance score, even though one imbalance score shows support for one side of an issue and the other imbalance score shows support for the other side.

In the current study, all articles were given scores that show the direction of the imbalance. Numbers above eight will represent opposition to the legislation while numbers below eight will represent support.

Figure 3.1: Overall bias score



To illustrate the balance score, a hypothetical article may contain assertions favorable to the passage of welfare reform in the headline and first five graphs. In graphs six through ten unfavorable assertions are presented. The total number of sources favoring the legislation outweigh the number of sources in opposition by three to one. This article would receive a score of six. The headline and lede would receive a weight of one (supportive), the second through fifth graphs would also receive a one (supportive), the sixth through tenth graphs would receive a three (opposition), and the overall source weight would receive a one (supportive). The scores would add up to six indicating an article framed toward support of the legislation.

Analysis of the data

Analysis of the data would prove enlightening in a number of ways. By looking at the average score each topic received in each newspaper, an accurate assessment can be made of the frame the paper used.

The overall score is a useful tool because it takes into account variations in daily coverage. Returning to the minimum wage example from the introduction, a good newspaper editor may decide to frame an issue from two directions. On Tuesday, she assigns a reporter to do a story on the trials of a low-wage worker. That story would likely be coded as strongly biased in favor of raising the minimum wage. But, on Wednesday, the editor assigns a story on the small businessman and how a wage hike would restrict his ability to hire more workers. That story would likely be coded as strongly opposed to the legislation. Added together, the stories would cross each other out leaving the researcher with the correct conclusion – balanced coverage that didn't frame the issue from one point of view. But, if four stories are written on poor workers and only one on the business, then the average would skew toward support for the minimum-wage hike.

If *The New York Times* or *The Washington Times* used neutral frames to cover welfare or campaign finance reform, they might balance coverage of these issues in the same way. On one day, a story might feature a welfare mother who would have to return to work under the new law, forcing her to put her children into day care. Perhaps a couple of officials would decry this development and the severity of the law. The story would be coded as biased against the legislation. But the following day, a story might feature an example of a mother who used the welfare system for support but then went back to work. A couple of church leaders praised her grit and predicted that many others would benefit from a change in the law. That story would be coded as biased for the legislation. In the end, the data would show balanced coverage with no dominant frame. The newspapers might also cover a story from a totally balanced frame – with the assertions of supporters and opponents given equal weight. In this case, the score would indicate

balance. But if most of the paper's other coverage skewed toward support or opposition, this fact would appear in the cumulative score.

The cumulative score allows analysis of differences in the totals for each topic in each newspaper. The research questions can be answered with a t-test. This will be used to determine whether means for coverage at both newspapers differ at a statistically significant level. For the purposes of this study, an alpha level of .05 will be considered significant. If a t-test shows a significant difference in a newspaper's overall mean score for coverage of an issue or a difference between papers, a research question will be answered affirmatively. The use of scores that indicate whether frames favor a particular issue allows the researcher to then examine the direction of any difference and its potential meaning.

The following comparisons should also prove interesting: the percentage of biased stories in *The Washington Times* compared to biased stories in *The New York Times*; the percentage of stories in each newspaper that were not balanced, and a comparison of bias in sourcing (how many sources were contacted from each side) between each newspaper.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Trouble with coding

Coding proved to be much more difficult than expected. Even after tightening the coding protocols, some articles were coded using intuition, rather than by following a specific rule. A *New York Times* story about a major fundraising gala exemplified a problem seen throughout the census for both topics. The story painted a picture of Republican fundraising as a contrast to the pending finance legislation (Shenon, 2001). Many similar stories were excluded because the link to the pending legislation was relatively weak – or at times simply implied. But, this article gained inclusion because the author specifically sought assertions from proponents of campaign finance reform. Most of the story was deemed “balanced” because it was merely stating facts: this candidate had raised this much money or this organization had donated this amount. Only when the source count was tallied did an assertion bias emerge – in this case in support of the campaign finance legislation.

Many coding problems were unique. In one *Washington Times* article, a paragraph cited assertions from three organizations that shared the same view (Wetzstein, 1996b). The coding protocol was adapted to address this permutation, although it wasn’t encountered again. Several other unique occurrences were dealt with in the same manner. The lesson from creating this coding design: No protocol will ever anticipate every question a coder may raise.

The Enron scandal

Enron represents a potential flaw with the research. The Enron scandal provided major support for proponents of campaign finance reform.² But, because of restrictions in the coding protocol, the scandal was largely ignored in this study.

After passage of the bill, a *New York Times* story described the scandal's impact: "But the measure gained critical support in recent months, when the collapse of the Enron Corporation put a spotlight on political giving by corporate interests and helped propel it through the House last month, 240 to 189" (Mitchell, 2002a, p.1).

The company was often invoked as a rallying call for campaign finance reform. Rep. Martin Meehan, (D-Mass.), a co-sponsor of the House bill, said that "Enron's millions of dollars in soft money contributions has tarnished all of us in the public eye, and we're tired of it" (Mitchell, 2002b, p. 26). Stories about the Enron scandal would often mention the corporation's large donations to lawmakers, but wouldn't ask sources for specific assertions on the legislation. Therefore, most of these stories weren't coded even though they quietly provided a great deal of support for the legislation. Only stories that explicitly made the connection between Enron and the campaign finance bill were included in the census.

Intercoder reliability results

For this study, two different coders coded three random samples totaling 72 articles that were then compared to the work of the main coder (the researcher). The results of the reliability tests proved acceptable, but fell short of the 90 to 100 percent levels reported by Fico and Soffin (1995). Two different methods of calculating

² The scandal involved the bankruptcy of a high-flying energy trading company that left several executives behind bars. The corporation and its executives had been heavy political donors to both parties.

intercoder reliability were used – Holsti’s simple agreement and Scott’s Pi, a technique that takes into account agreement by chance (see Table 4.1 below.)

Table 4.1: Intercoder reliability

	Holsti Simple Agreement	Scott’s Pi	N
Test I (pre-test, coder A)	78.8%	75.2%	25
Test II (post-test, coder A)	82.5%	79.0%	27
Test III (post-test, coder B)	82.8%	77.4%	20
Average agreement	81.3%	77.2%	72

These figures account for all the variables used in the coding.

The average simple agreement of 81.3 percent surpassed the floor of 80 percent set by Riffe et al., (1998, p. 128). Simple agreement was calculated by dividing the number of identical answers by the number of total chances for identical answers. Although some researchers discount this method because it doesn’t take into account two coders accidentally agreeing, Riffe et al., note that “the fact that agreement can take place by chance does not mean it does ... All agreements could be the result of a well-developed protocol” (1998, p. 128).

The authors nonetheless suggest using at least one other calculation of intercoder reliability to allow for accidental agreement. A calculation of Scott’s Pi produced an average rate of intercoder reliability of 77.2 percent. This is below recommendations (.80), but still acceptable. Riffe et al. warn against a score lower than .70 as “hard to interpret and the method of dubious value to replicate” (1998, p. 128).

Faulty research design likely led to the relatively low intercoder reliability. After the pre-test, the coding protocol was significantly strengthened to provide specific

answers to subjective decisions. Unfortunately, the main body of coding was completed before the protocol was tightened. This faulty planning may have resulted in the two intercoders coding more accurately than the main coder (the researcher).

The intercoder calculations for each variable of the second intercoder test are shown in Tables 4.2.

Table 4.2 Individual variable intercoder calculations

	Coders Agreed	Total Variables	Simple Agreement	Scott's Pi
Article Source	27	27	100%	100%
Story ID	27	27	100%	100%
Topic	27	27	100%	100%
Headline and Led	22	27	81%	79%
2 nd thru 5 th graphs	18	27	67%	63%
6 th thru 10 th graphs	14	27	52%	48%
Source bias	18	27	67%	63%
Totals	153	189	81%	79%

Note: This table represents the second intercoder test only

The table shows that agreement differed most on the coding variables: 2nd thru 5th graphs, 6th thru 10th graphs, and source bias. Another design flaw also contributed to the higher disagreement rates with the latter variables. The articles were printed without numbers identifying each paragraph. Coders were responsible for counting their own paragraphs likely meaning a 5th paragraph might easily be coded as a 6th and lead to disagreement.

This researcher believes that intercoder reliability would come in substantially higher if the study was replicated with all coders using the updated coding sheets and the articles included paragraph numbers.

The results

The results of the content analysis proved very interesting. The difference in coverage between the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times* was stark. See Table 4.3 for the results of the welfare reform coding, Table 4.4 for the results of the campaign finance reform data, and Table 4.5 for the results of the t-test.

Table 4.3 Balance Scores for Welfare Reform

	New York Times (n = 46)			Washington Times (n= 37)		
Bias Variable	1*	2*	3*	1*	2*	3*
Headline and lede	8	21	17	20	11	6
Percent	17.4%	45.6%	37%	54.1%	29.7%	16.2%
Graphs 2-5	4	26	16	15	15	7
Percent	8.7%	56.5%	34.8%	40.5%	40.5%	18.9%
Graphs 6-10	6	29	11	13	18	6
Percent	13%	63%	23.9%	35.1%	48.6%	16.2%
Source Bias	10	5	31	18	11	8
	21.7%	10.9%	67.4%	48.6%	28.7%	21.6%

*1 = support, 2 = balanced, 3 = opposition

Table 4.4 Balance Scores for Campaign Finance Reform

	New York Times (n = 73)			Washington Times (n= 44)		
Bias Variable	1*	2*	3*	1*	2*	3*
Headline and lede	18	41	14	7	22	15
Percent	24.7%	56.2%	19.2%	15.9%	50%	34.1%
Graphs 2-5	20	42	11	11	18	15
Percent	27.4%	57.5%	15.1%	25%	40.9%	34.1%
Graphs 6-10	18	45	10	1	34	9
Percent	24.7%	61.6%	13.7%	2.3%	77.3%	20.5%
Source Bias	39	15	19	15	7	22
	53.4%	20.5%	26%	34.1%	15.9%	50%

*1 = support, 2 = balanced, 3 = opposition

Table 4.5: One Sample t-Tests of Differences within Newspapers

	New York Times		Washington Times	
	Welfare Reform	Campaign Finance	Welfare Reform	Campaign Finance
Mean overall bias score	9.02	7.44*	6.95	8.61**
Std. Deviation	2.08	1.9	2.24	2.2
N	46	73	37	44

Note: bias scores ranged from 4 to 12, with 4 indicating support for a bill, 8 indicating no bias, and 12 indicating opposition to a bill

* difference is significant, $p < .05$

** difference is significant, $p < .005$

Mean scores above 8 indicate a newspaper's overall coverage was biased against a bill, and mean scores below 8 indicate the overall coverage was biased in favor of a bill. *The New York Times'* mean scores for bias show welfare reform was covered with a negative bias, while campaign finance reform coverage shows a positive slant. The difference was statistically significant. Given the tenets of objective journalism, one would expect these mean scores to be roughly similar.

The first research question asked if *The New York Times* covered these issues differently. The answer to the question appears to be yes.

Table 4.5 also shows differences in bias scores for coverage in *The Washington Times*. These scores provide a comparison to help determine if the difference in scores at *The New York Times* had more to do with the topics rather than coverage.

Mean bias scores show coverage in *The Washington Times* had a supportive bias toward the topic of welfare reform, but campaign finance coverage was biased toward opposition. The difference was statistically significant.

The second research question asked if *The Washington Times* covered these issues differently. The answer to the question appears to be yes.

However, the comparison between the two newspapers shows they covered these topics entirely differently. Interestingly, each newspaper's level of bias mirrors the other. For instance, the bias toward welfare reform in *The Washington Times* scored an average of 6.95, more than a full point (1.05) away from balanced coverage (8.00). *The New York Times* opposition to welfare reform scored an average of 9.02, more than a full point (1.02) away from balanced coverage (8.00).

Table 4.5 also shows that campaign finance coverage produced a similar, albeit less extreme, skew in coverage. *The New York Times*' support scored a 7.44, more than a half point away from balanced (8.00). *The Washington Times*' opposition scored 8.61, more than a half point away from balanced coverage (8.00). The results show that both newspapers provided far more biased coverage of the welfare reform issue than campaign finance reform.

The difference in coverage can also be seen when a bias score for each article published by both newspapers is presented in the crosstabulation in Table 4.6. The bias score for each story was computed by recoding its overall bias score to simply reflect whether the article was supportive, balanced or opposed.

Table 4.6 Crosstabulation of newspaper coverage

			Bias Variable		
			1	2	3
Welfare Reform	New York Times	Count	12	6	28
		%	26.1%	13.0%	60.9%
	Washington Times	Count	23	6	8
		%	62.2%	16.2%	21.6%
Campaign Finance	New York Times	Count	38	14	21
		%	52.1%	19.2%	28.8%
	Washington Times	Count	16	2	26
		%	36.4%	4.5%	59.1%

Note: 1=support for a bill; 2=balanced coverage; 3=opposition to a bill

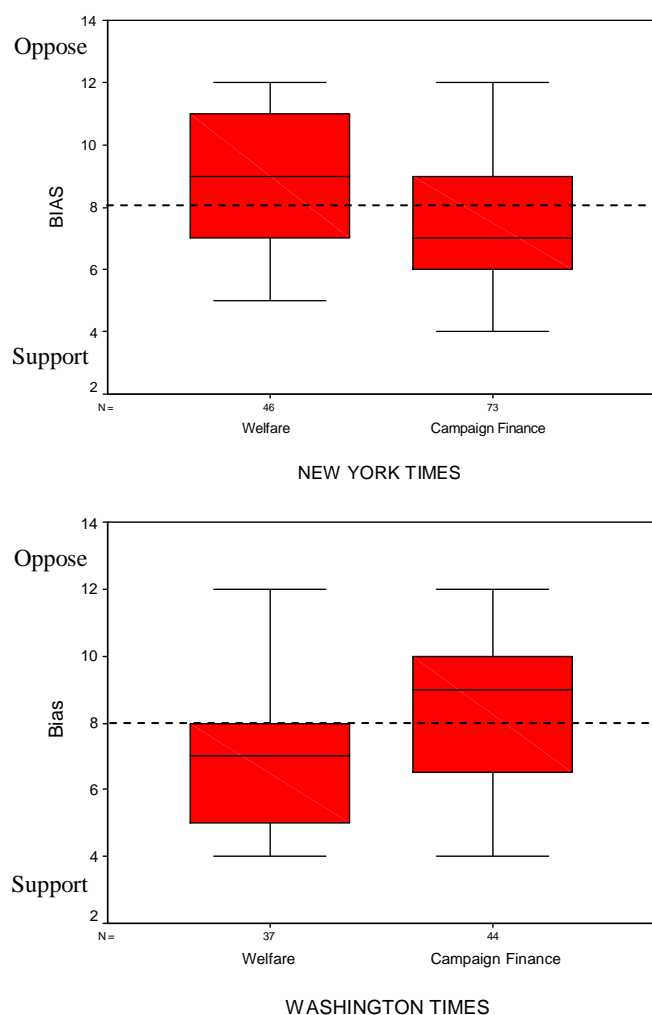
The results in Table 4.6 paint a clear picture of bias. If coverage evened out over time, the percentages of stories that score for or against a bill would be about the same. Instead, more than 60 percent of welfare reform articles in *The New York Times* scored as opposed to the legislation. Almost the same percentage of articles scored as supporting the bill in *The Washington Times*. Campaign finance coverage followed a similar same pattern with a majority of *New York Times* articles framed to lend support to the bill while nearly 60 percent of *The Washington Times* articles highlighted frames opposed to the bill.

Seeing the skew

The difference in coverage is illustrated in a box plot graphic for each newspaper (see Figure 4.1). The line in the middle of each box represents the overall median bias score for coverage of each topic. Each box represents the middle 50 percent of the overall bias scores and the “whiskers” above and below represent the top and bottom 25 percent.

The box plots use the original overall bias scores ranging from 4 (very supportive) to 12 (very opposed), where 8 is balanced coverage.

Figure 4.1: Box plots of newspaper coverage



The box plots show in stark terms the degree to which each newspaper highlighted frames when covering the different topics. The graphic shows that the median scores for each topic rest on opposite sides of the bias scale. Welfare reform in *The Washington Times* is the most clearly askew – with no part of the 50 percent middle in the range of scores for opposition. But all the other topics also show some biased coverage that reversed direction depending on the newspaper and the issue.

Breaking down the bias

By looking at the results in crosstabs, a clearer picture of each newspaper's bias for each topic emerges (see Tables 4.7-4.10 on the following pages.)

Table 4.7 Crosstabulation of assertion bias in headlines and ledes

			Bias Direction			
			1	2	3	N
Welfare Reform ^a	New York Times	Count	8	21	17	46
		%	17.4%	45.7%	37.0%	
	Washington Times	Count	20	11	6	37
		%	54.1%	29.7%	16.2%	
Campaign Finance ^b	New York Times	Count	18	41	14	73
		%	24.7%	56.2%	19.2%	
	Washington Times	Count	7	22	15	44
		%	15.9%	50.0%	34.1%	

Note: 1=support for a bill; 2=balanced coverage; 3=opposition to a bill

a χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 12.70, p<.01

b χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 89.62, p<.001

Table 4.8 Crosstabulation of assertion bias in 2nd thru 5th paragraphs

			Bias Direction			
			1	2	3	N
Welfare Reform ^a	New York Times	Count	4	26	16	46
		%	8.7%	56.5%	34.8%	
	Washington Times	Count	15	15	7	37
		%	40.5%	40.5%	18.9%	
Campaign Finance ^b	New York Times	Count	20	42	11	73
		%	27.4%	57.5%	15.1%	
	Washington Times	Count	11	18	15	44
		%	25.0%	40.9%	30.1%	

Note: 1=support for a bill; 2=balanced coverage; 3=opposition to a bill

a χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 29.33, p<.001

b χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 89.62, p<.001

Table 4.9 Crosstabulation of assertion bias in 6th thru 10th paragraphs

			Bias Direction			
			1	2	3	N
Welfare Reform^a	New York Times	Count	6	29	11	46
		%	13.0%	63.0%	23.9%	
	Washington Times	Count	13	18	6	37
		%	35.1%	48.6%	16.2%	
Campaign Finance^a	New York Times	Count	39	15	19	73
		%	53.4%	20.5%	26.0%	
	Washington Times	Count	1	34	9	44
		%	2.3%	77.3%	20.5%	

Note: 1=support for a bill; 2=balanced coverage; 3=opposition to a bill

a χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 34.98, p<.001

b χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 101.49, p<.001

Table 4.10 Crosstabulation of assertion bias in source counts

			Bias Direction			
			1	2	3	N
Welfare Reform^a	New York Times	Count	10	5	31	46
		%	21.7%	10.9%	67.4%	
	Washington Times	Count	18	11	8	37
		%	48.6%	29.7%	21.6%	
Campaign Finance^a	New York Times	Count	39	15	19	73
		%	53.4%	20.5%	26.0%	
	Washington Times	Count	15	7	22	44
		%	34.1%	15.9%	50.0%	

Note: 1=support for a bill; 2=balanced coverage; 3=opposition to a bill

a χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 17.93, p<.001

b χ^2 , d.f. 1,3 = 7.09, p<.05

The crosstabs help explain these skews in coverage. For instance, *The New York Times* stories had an assertion against welfare reform in the headline or first paragraph

in 37 percent of the time. Compare that percentage to articles with assertions against campaign finance reform in the headline or lede – just 19.2 percent (see Table 4.7).

Assertion bias can also be seen in the overall source count (see Table 4.11). The source count tallied the number of sources contacted on each side of an issue, and assigned a score depending on the direction of the source imbalance. *The New York Times* contacted more sources against welfare reform in 67.4 percent of its stories. But campaign finance reform stories reported contacts with more opposition sources only 26 percent of the time.

The Washington Times articles were similar to those in *The New York Times* – but the bias was not in the same direction. *The Washington Times* contacted more sources in support of campaign finance reform in 50 percent of its articles. Stories on welfare reform had more supporters contacted nearly 49 percent of the time (source bias in the remaining 51 percent of stories was split evenly among balanced and bias toward opposition.) Assertions from opponents of campaign finance reform were cited in a *Washington Times* headline or first paragraph 34.1 percent of the time. But, opponents of welfare reform weren't heard from nearly as often – receiving only 16.2 percent of the top space in stories on that subject.

Comparing coverage from the two newspapers illustrates the differences between them.

In some cases, the percentages are oddly similar – except for the topic. For instance, Table 4.8 shows in 2nd thru 5th graphs, *The Washington Times* favored campaign finance reform 25 percent of the time – closely matching the percentage (24.7 percent) that *The New York Times* offered welfare reform. But the differences in coverage were not always mirror images. For instance, *The New York Times* cited a supporter of

campaign finance in the headline or lede 24.7 percent of the time. *The Washington Times* was much more egregious in their welfare coverage with supporters receiving 54.1 percent of the space in the top spot.

Source bias for both newspapers appeared to be the most askew. Table 4.10 shows *The New York Times* quoted more supporters of campaign finance reform in 53.4 percent of its articles. *The Washington Times* had similar coverage of welfare reform, with 48.6 percent of the articles featuring more supporters.

At many times for both papers, the variable that received the largest percentage was “balanced.” However, given the tenets of objective journalism, one would expect to find equal numbers of support and opposition on either side.

Other interesting observations can be culled from the data. Despite the overall imbalance, *The New York Times* also did a better job balancing assertions from both sides in headlines and the first 10 paragraphs of stories on both bills. Most of its articles featured balanced assertions in these categories – headline and first paragraph, 2nd thru 5th paragraph, and 6th thru 10th paragraph. *The Washington Times* fared worse in covering both bills, with less than 50 percent of its stories balancing assertions throughout.

The 6th thru 10th paragraphs appeared to be best chance for reading balanced assertions in both newspapers. These paragraphs were coded as balanced in more than 60 percent of the time. However, this result may also reflect the inclusion of some stories where these paragraphs were absent, and also coded as balanced.

Total bias analysis

Another interesting observation can be culled by examining how many articles were covered without any attempt to offer the other side of the debate. Familiar patterns

emerge when counting stories that received a score of either four (total bias in support) or 12 (total bias in opposition) of particular legislation.

Table 4.11: Total bias by newspaper

		Total bias support	Total bias opposition
Washington Times	n	2	1
	Welfare	5.5%	2.3%
	n	1	5
	Campaign	2.3%	11.4%
New York Times	n	0	7
	Welfare	0%	15.2%
	n	10	4
	Campaign	13.5%	5.4%

Note: This table only reports results from stories with no assertions from one side or another. Percentages are for all articles in the census. The Washington Times published a total of 37 stories on welfare reform, and 44 stories on campaign finance. The New York Times published 46 stories on welfare reform, and 73 stories on campaign finance.

Table 4.12 features results based on the original scores for assertions that ranged from 4 to 12, with 8 meaning balanced. The largest percentage of articles with no balance appeared in *The New York Times*. More than 15 percent of its coverage of welfare reform legislation featured articles that did not include any assertions favorable to the bill. The paper didn't publish any articles that featured only assertions in support of the legislation. The skew against welfare reform was almost matched by the skew in support of campaign finance reform. More than 13 percent of *New York Times* articles on campaign finance featured assertions only from sources in favor of the legislation.

The Washington Times was less egregious on this measure. Its coverage of campaign finance showed the biggest violation of balanced reporting with 11.4 percent of

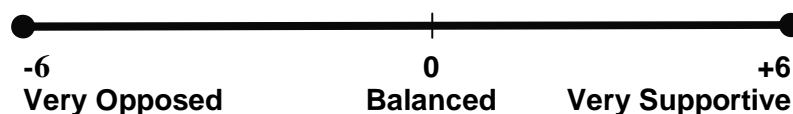
the articles totally opposed. But only 5.5 percent of *Washington Times* articles on welfare reform contained only assertions tilted toward the issue.

Overall source weight

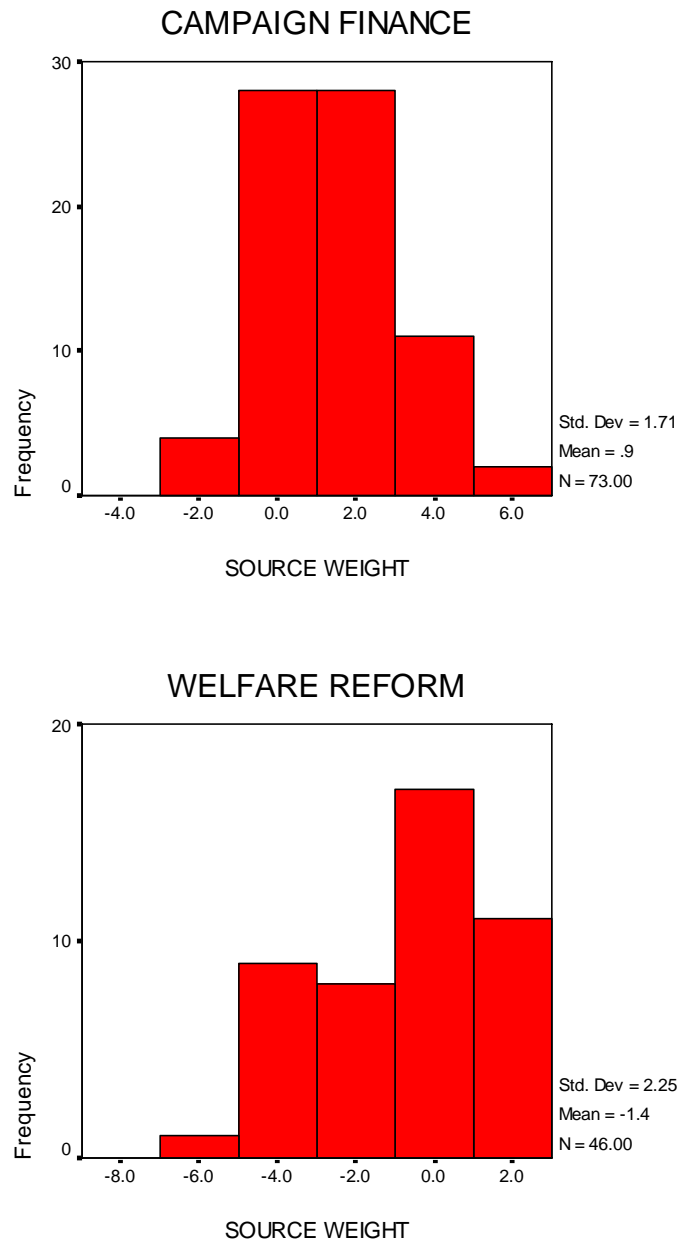
Another interesting way to look at the data was to compile a measurement that showed how many sources a reporter contacted on both sides of an issue. To achieve this end, the researcher took the number of sources contacted in support of legislation, and subtracted from that the number of sources contacted that opposed legislation. The resulting number provided an overall source weight. A negative number indicated opposition to legislation, and a positive number indicated support for the legislation. The number 0 indicated equal numbers of sources on both sides of an issue were contacted.

This is shown in Figure 4. 2

Figure 4.2: Overall source weight

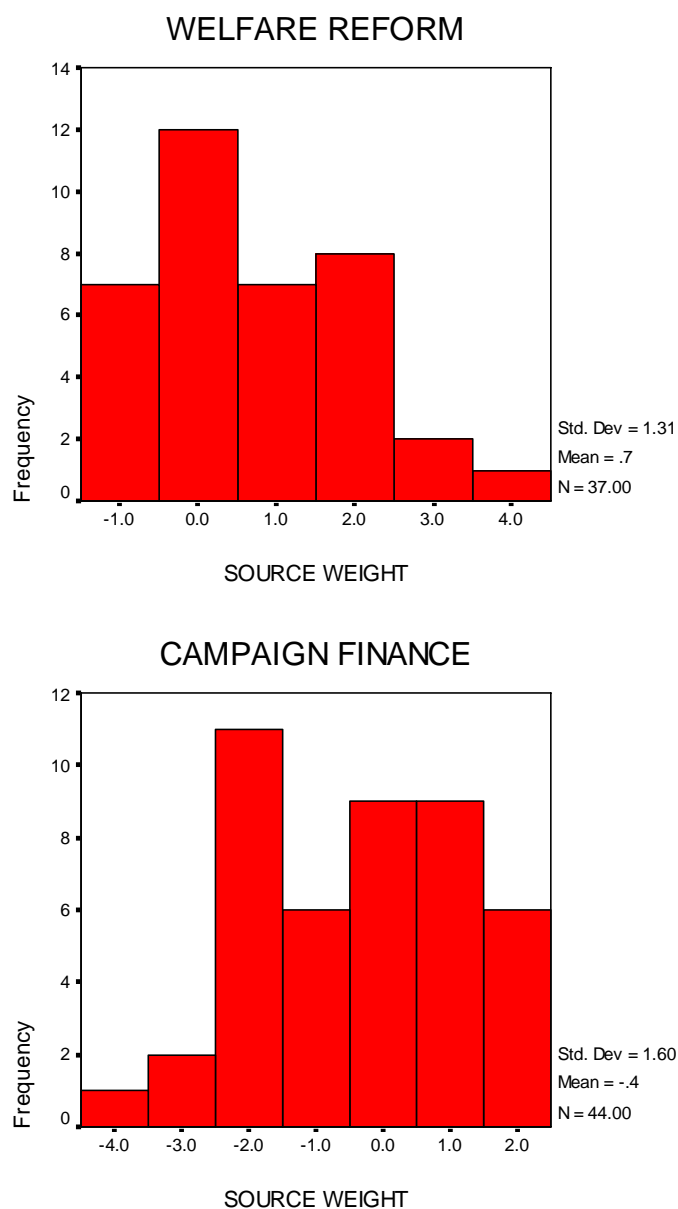


The larger the numeral, the more imbalance in the number of sources contacted. Results of these calculations are represented in histograms presented in Figures 4.3 and 4.4.

Figure 4.3: *New York Times* source weight

Note: Positive numbers indicate support for topic

Figure 4.4: *Washington Times* source weight histogram



Note: Positive numbers indicate support for topic

The histograms are based on all the articles from the census. Their shapes are telling. For instance, the *New York Times* coverage of campaign finance favored between zero and two sources in favor of the legislation. On welfare reform, the largest single

category in *The New York Times* was neutral stories, but stories with two to six more sources against the bill outnumbered articles with a bias in favor.

For the Washington times, neutral was the largest category on welfare reform. But stories with one to four more sources in favor of the bill outnumbered stories with one or more sources against. On campaign finance, articles with two more sources against the bill were the largest category. Neutral stories and stories with one more source in favor of the bill were the second largest categories.

These results reflect the overall pattern of bias. The average source weights all skew in the same direction as the scores for overall bias (Table 4.5) Interestingly, *The New York Times* produces the most skewed source bias. The newspaper scored a six in opposition to welfare reform and a six in support of campaign finance reform. The results mean that for one article the reporter contacted fully six more officials in support of the respective legislation than officials in opposition to the bill. *The Washington Times* reporters weren't as extreme, although they did achieve scores of four for both topics. The rest of the scores for both papers usually sit in a range of positive two to negative two, indicating a bias of source counts but nothing overwhelming.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The results of this research clearly identify the different angles each newspaper favored in coverage of each topic. By examining individual articles, a greater understanding of these frames can be gained.

The choice of topics chosen to cover often led to the manifestation of particular frames. For instance, *The Washington Times* ran an article on a Pew Research Center study that found campaign finance reform ranked at the bottom of respondents' concerns. The article was predictably oppositional to the legislation, and the coding producing a score of 12 – uniformly opposed. *The New York Times* chose not to cover the results of this study, although the Pew Research Center is widely respected for its non-partisan research.³

Similarly, *The New York Times* covered a highly critical report on campaign contributions from Public Citizen, an activist group that favored campaign finance reform (Clymer, 2002.) The coding for this article produced a score of four – uniformly supportive of the legislation. *The Washington Times* didn't find the report worthy of coverage.⁴

In terms of Entman's (1993) framing definition, each newspaper chose to make different elements salient – “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (p. 52.) Each newspaper helped present its frame by choosing to highlight a report that agreed with its bias. As Entman predicted, the papers

³ A search of *The New York Times* database for the word “Pew” in the two weeks surrounding the study's release produced no related articles.

⁴ Again, a search of *The Washington Times* database for the word “Common Cause” produced no related articles during that time period.

framed the stories “by selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (p. 54.)

In many articles, the first 10 paragraphs were relatively balanced with assertions from both sides of the story. But the source balance (as seen in Table 4.9) would often tip the story’s balance in favor of or opposed to the legislation. For instance, a New York Times article on the House passage of the welfare legislation scored as balanced for the first three criteria (balanced assertions in the headlines and first 10 paragraphs). But, the reporter quoted a total of 10 sources in opposition to the vote and only five sources in favor. The article’s last six paragraphs feature six quotes from six different officials who opposed the vote.

The Washington Times also suffered from over sourcing one side of the debate. In an article about a Republican governor’s threat to enact welfare reform in his own state, the reporter quoted four supporters of the pending federal legislation. The only source quoted from the other side of the issue was a spokeswoman for the federal Health and Human Services Department. Her assertions were placed in the last two paragraphs of the article.

Some of the frames couldn’t be detected by the coding protocol. For instance, a telling difference in coverage of welfare reform rested with each paper’s description of the proposed reform. When the House passed the bill, *The New York Times* wrote that lawmakers were “ending the Federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor children...” *The Washington Times* took a decidedly different tack saying that the House “passed a sweeping welfare-reform package that promises to make fundamental changes in government programs for poor families.” Interestingly, *The New York Times*’ description closely resembles a direct quote from an opponent of the legislation. Sharon M. Daly,

deputy director of Catholic Charities, was quoted months earlier saying that the proposal “would repeal the Federal guarantee of protection for poor children...” The same reporter wrote both stories.

The results showing a skew in campaign finance stories would have likely been reinforced if the study had quantified coverage of the Enron scandal and its effects on support of the legislation. However, this would also have provided an easy target of criticism to argue that the research design itself was biased.

Future research should address this issue of source bias. The bias is the likely result of a reporter covering a beat for a period of time and establishing a rapport with certain sources. After a while, the reporter may find it easier to contact familiar sources over others – perhaps because of favorable or unfavorable coverage in previous articles. The result is an article where one side of the debate is overrepresented, but the reporter feels justified because she or he couldn’t reach anyone on the other side.

The research design did possess some faults – shortcomings that affected the intercoder reliability ratings. Two faults in particular likely led to the greatest damage. A lack of paragraph numbering on the articles probably produced coder disagreement regarding the placement of assertions in the articles. The researcher’s coding of the main body of articles before the coding protocol was improved also likely led to some intercoder disagreement. Despite these defects, the study still achieved an acceptable level of intercoder reliability. If these two defects were eliminated, it is unlikely that the research would show dramatically different results. Therefore, these minor faults should not prevent the drawing of conclusions from the analysis.

Conclusion

This research is not merely an “attempt to convince the audience of the world’s most ideology-free newspapers that they’re being subjected to agenda-driven news reflecting a liberal bias” (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004, p. 16), as the former editor of *The New York Times* asserted. Instead, the research relies on facts that are rather conclusive.

The New York Times presented the subject of welfare reform from a frame that highlighted the negatives. Entman (1993) called framing the act of choosing certain aspects of a “perceived reality” (p. 52) and giving it more prominence in a communicating text. *The New York Times* certainly pushed its “perceived reality” in its headlines and first paragraphs by quoting assertions from opponents of welfare reform legislation twice as often as supporters (see Table 4.3). But, that “perceived reality” flipped with another piece of legislation, and supporters of campaign finance reform received more assertion space than opponents (see Table 4.4). *The Washington Times*, predictably, framed stories from opposite directions.

The Washington Times also presented its “perceived reality,” and its content analysis results often present mirror images of *The New York Times* coverage. But, *The Washington Times* results aren’t Earth shattering – its bias is openly admitted. However, many journalists and academics would not care to admit that *The New York Times* operates from an equally biased frame of reference.

While many critics would label *The Washington Times* or Fox News “conservative,” few would consider affixing the “liberal” label to *The New York Times*, CBS News or National Public Radio. These critics insist that conservative outlets utilize conservative frames while other outlets are “balanced.” This research shows – at least with *The New York Times* – that the evidence doesn’t support that belief.

By pretending frames don't exist – believing that journalists are objective because they try to be – we do our profession a great disservice. A 2005 poll revealed that an astounding 59 percent of respondents believed that “news organizations were biased politically.” At the same time, only 35 percent of Americans believe that “the press gets their facts straight.” These numbers have declined precipitously since the mid-1980s.

In short, journalism is a troubled profession. Reporters, editors and journalism professors must first admit this fact. Then, they must admit that subtle, politically biased frames are one of the reasons that many Americans distrust the media. Then, they need to do something about it.

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Appendix A: Examples of excluded articles

- “Spotlight on McCain.” Article mentioned campaign finance reform, but focused on John McCain’s image as a maverick senator. *New York Times*, June 3, 2001.
- “One Mother’s Ordeal with Life on Welfare.” The article was written because of changes proposed in the welfare bill and contained lines like “Ms. Seefield could face the abrupt halt in welfare payments” which may lead a reader to oppose changes in welfare. However, the reporter didn’t solicit comments directly in favor or opposed to the legislation, so the article was excluded for being too difficult to code. *New York Times*, July 31, 1996.
- “Welfare reformers: Stand and deliver.” Article focused on efforts to implement the bill. *Washington Times*, August 20, 1996.
- “100-year-old idea inspires proposals to revamp welfare.” Article focused on Dutch welfare solutions but contained few references to bill in question. *Washington Times*, January 3, 1996.
- “Budget talks put off for week; Clinton vetoes welfare bill.” Article mentioned work on new version of welfare bill but focused on budget talks. *Washington Times*, January 10, 1996.
- “Welfare bill funding tests church-state separation.” Article not focused on passage of welfare bill. *Washington Times*, January 27, 1996.
- “Bill’s progress spurs change of plans for ‘day off.’” This and several similar stories were excluded because focus wasn’t on merits of bill but rather a feature on inner workings of the Congress. *Washington Times*, August 1, 1996.
- “Enron’s Collapse: The Politicians; Enron Spread Contributions on Both Sides of the Aisle.” Although the story could be seen as an endorsement of campaign finance reform, the article was excluded because it didn’t address the pending legislation nor seek comment on it. *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2002.

Appendix B: Original coding protocol⁵

Coding Protocol

Introduction

This news story protocol is aimed at assessing balance in the coverage of two major stories in *The New York Times*: Welfare Reform legislation and Campaign Finance Reform. The two issues were debated for years before being passed into law. The study examines coverage given to each side of the issue and how it affects story balance.

Content

Not all parts of the article will feature codable material. Often, the reporter will be offering facts (e.g., “the bill moves to the Senate floor tomorrow.”) that don’t illustrate a position in favor or opposed to the pending legislation. Those elements of the articles won’t be examined for this study.

Support and Opposition

While coding, you will be asked to answer several questions regarding the allocation of space to assertions for and against the legislation. Any assertion made suggesting the legislation should be passed is considered support. Any assertion made that suggests the legislation should be rejected is considered opposition. Oftentimes, lawmakers or other sources will propose changing legislation but not killing it. In these cases, code a proposal to change the legislation as opposition because they oppose the legislation as written.

Assertion

An assertion is any piece of information that either supports or opposes the legislation. The assertion may come from any number of sources – lawmakers, government officials, campaign officials, or outside organizations. An assertion must come directly from the source or a spokesperson.

⁵ This coding protocol sheet borrows heavily and copies outright certain sections from the Lacy, Riffe, and Fico textbook. (1998, p. 112).

Appendix C: Coding sheet (unchanged)**Coding Sheet**

Balance in welfare and campaign finance reform coverage

- V1. Story identification _____
- V2. Source (The New York Times = 1, Washington Times = 2) _____
- V3. Story topic (Welfare reform = 1, Campaign Finance = 2) _____
- V4. Coder ID # (Matt=1, Greg=2, Ann=3) _____

(Circle the applicable word)

- V5. Assertions of one or both sides
Cited in headlines or first paragraph
(no assertions, code as balanced) Support Balanced Opposition
- V6. Assertions from one or both sides cited
in paragraphs two through five
(no assertions, code as balanced) Support Balanced Opposition
- V7. Assertions from one or both sides cited
within paragraphs six through 10.
(no assertions, code as balanced) Support Balanced Opposition

Enter numerals

- V8. Total number of sources
asserting each side _____ _____
Support Opposition

Circle the appropriate word

- V9. Document source balance Support Balanced Opposition

Appendix D: Coding explainer (unchanged)

Coding explainer

V1. Number of the story labeled on the article.

V5. If story has assertions of both sides in *either* the headline or first paragraph, then code the story as **balanced**. If all the assertions favor support of the legislation, then code the story as **support**. If all the assertions oppose support of the legislation, then code the story as **opposition**. If there are no assertions (e.g., the legislation will move from committee to the full House today...), then code the story as balanced.

V6. If story has assertions of both sides anywhere in the second to fifth paragraphs, then code the story as **balanced**. If the second to fifth paragraphs feature only the assertions supporting the legislation, then code the story as **support**. If the second to five paragraphs feature only the assertions opposing the legislation, then code the story as **opposition**. If there are no assertions then code the story as balanced.

V7. If story has assertions of both sides anywhere in paragraphs six through 10, then code the story as **balanced**. If paragraphs six through 10 feature only the assertions supporting the legislation, then code the story as **support**. If paragraphs six through 10 feature only the assertions opposing the legislation, then code the story as **opposition**. If there are no assertions then code the story as balanced.

V8. Count and record the number of sources (see definition) that support the legislation. Count and record the number of sources that oppose the legislation.

V9. If story has the same amount of sources in support and opposition, then code the story as **balanced**. If more sources support the legislation, then code the story as **support**. If more sources oppose the legislation, then code the story as **opposition**.

Appendix E: Revised coding protocol

Coding Protocol

Introduction

This news story protocol is aimed at assessing balance in the coverage of two major stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*: Welfare Reform legislation and Campaign Finance Reform. The two issues were debated for years before being passed into law. The study examines coverage given to each side of the issue and how it affects story balance.

Content

Many passages in news articles are neutral, not offering one side of the debate or the other. Examples could include: “The bill moves to the Senate floor tomorrow,” “Lawmakers are split on whether the bill will pass tomorrow,” “The committee approved the bill today” or “The committee blocked an amendment.” In these examples, the outcome of events may prove beneficial to supporters or opponents, but they don’t illustrate a position in favor or opposed to the pending legislation. These elements won’t be examined for this study and should be coded as **balanced**.

Support and Opposition

While coding, you will be asked to code the allocation of space to assertions for and against the legislation. Any assertion that suggests the legislation should be passed is considered **support**. Any assertion that suggests the legislation should be rejected is considered **opposition**. However, you must pay attention to the source for the assertion. Oftentimes, lawmakers or other sources will generally support legislation but with a small change or some other hesitation. In these cases, code a proposal to change the legislation as opposition because they oppose the legislation as written. For campaign finance reform the legislation was written by McCain-Feingold in the Senate and Shays-Meehan in the House. Support for any other legislation (e.g., the Ney alternative in the Senate) should be coded as opposition. For welfare reform, the legislation was written by Republican members of the House and Senate. Again, any support for legislation other than the main Republican version should be coded as opposition. Toward the end of the debate of both bills, the respective presidents moved toward signing legislation that they had long opposed. For the sake of consistency, continue to code their assertions as opposition – so that coders needn’t try to ascertain exactly when the presidents became supporters of the bills. At times a reporter will provide background information about an issue with a generic “senators say” or “lawmakers say.” This information is usually facts that neither side would argue. Code these statements as **balanced**.

Assertions

An assertion is any piece of information that either supports or opposes the legislation. The assertion may come from any number of sources – lawmakers, government officials, campaign officials, or outside organizations. An assertion may not necessarily come directly from the source or a spokesperson. A reporter may refer to “critics of the bill argue ...” This reference should be coded as **opposition**. A reporter may refer generically to the

reaction of supporters or detractors of the bill (“critics of the bill welcomed today’s decision...”). Those references should be coded accordingly as support or opposition. If the quote doesn’t clearly sound like support or opposition, then code the quote based on the source. A quote from a longtime supporter of the legislation should be coded as support, even if the quote isn’t asserting anything particularly supportive. The importance is who the reporter chose to quote, not necessarily what they said. Disregard quotes that have nothing to do with either bills (e.g., a story about the lack of movement on the campaign finance reform bill may feature several quotes on the energy bill.)

Sources

You will also be asked to count the number of sources a reporter contacted for each story. A source is a person or organization that gives information to news reporters. A source is explicitly identified as such when news reporters quote or paraphrase information from people or organizations. The means by which reporters publicly credit a source for a story is called “attribution.” A source should be counted even if not directly quoted (e.g., a lobbying group may provide data regarding the potential outcome of proposed legislation.) Supposedly neutral sources (observers, pundits, etc.) should be counted if their positions favor or oppose the legislation – even if they are merely offering their opinion as to whether the legislation will pass. If a reporter attempts to get a quote from a source (e.g., couldn’t be reached, received a no comment), then code the attempt to reach a source as if the source had been quoted. If the article contains more than one, but contiguous references to “supporters of the bill” or “critics of the bill,” then code the references as one source. If a generic “supporters” statement is followed by a specific supporter’s quote, then code the passage as one source, not two. Count a source one time only, even if the references fall far apart in the article. Often a reporter will quote a lawmaker followed by a clarification from their spokesperson or other aide. Code the lawmaker and the aide as two separate sources. Often a reporter will refer to a position that more than one person or organization stakes on an issue (e.g., “both Common Cause and the ACLU oppose the bill because ...”). Code these as one assertion or one source, unless the organizations or individuals are referred to separately later in the article.