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# Teaching the Dynamics of Framing Competitions\*

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## **Teaching the Dynamics of Framing Competitions**

*Objectives:* To make students aware of and understand the processes involved in public framing competitions.

*Courses:* Political Communication, Communication Theory, Public Opinion

### **Rationale**

Framing theory is one of the most thriving and complex fields of communication theory (Bryant & Miron, 2004) and as such it has grown to be an integral part of many political communication, public opinion or communication theory courses. Part of the complexity stems from scholars' efforts to develop accounts of framing processes that are closer to the "real world" of politics than those of the early lab-based framing studies. Importantly, these efforts include explanations of the framing processes involved in public competitions of political actors (Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009). The ensuing increase of complexity in framing theory is a challenge but just as much an opportunity for teachers. This activity shows how a small and simple in-class simulation of a value framing competition can create awareness among students of the complex dynamics of framing competitions in which political actors make deliberate use of framing strategies. It also introduces students to the strategic uses of value appeals in public communication, the considerations behind such uses and their effectiveness. In order to emphasize the role of values for framing competitions, it is advantageous to assign relevant readings (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Brewer & Gross, 2005) to students beforehand, though this is not necessary for the activity to function. The ideal class size for this activity is thirteen, but it does work with as few as nine and as many as nineteen students in class. Students should receive some background information about framing theory before the activity starts via lecturing and/or from appropriate texts (see below for two suggestions).

### **Activity Part I: Opinion Formation and Strategy Development**

The simulated framing competition focuses on a single longstanding and controversial issue given by the instructor. I use the issue of "nuclear energy" as an example below. First, students are randomly divided into three equally sized groups: The Pro-Party, the Con-Party, and the citizens. All groups are presented with the issue to be debated as well as general instructions about the procedures (allow 5-10 minutes for this). The instructor explains in advance that if a group gets stuck, s/he will be available to help, though generally the instructor should not interfere with the groups' deliberations. Members of the citizen group are then handed out a sheet to individually put down their opinions and thoughts about nuclear energy outside the seminar room for the next 25 minutes. The two parties receive sheets with a list of values that often underlie political judgments and preferences. They are then given the task to sit down in their groups for the same time and collaboratively develop as many frames as possible that further their position (pro or con). Each frame should invoke one of a set of values given by the instructor. Table 1 gives examples for the nuclear energy issue for value frames that students could come up with. Each frame should also be put down on a placard, including the value it invokes in parentheses. Such facilitation can take the form of initiating a quick brainstorming of ideas within the group or giving leads to the group for

further thought. The two parties are also instructed to develop a framing strategy by planning when to introduce which frame into the debate and what frames to counter the opposing parties' frames could be employed.

[Table 1 about here]

## **Activity Part II: The Framing Competition**

After the three groups have reconvened, the actual framing competition begins. The panel of citizen judges (“the public”) is asked to follow the discussion closely. By the flip of a coin, one of the parties wins the right to start off with the debate and has the floor for one minute to present one of their frames “in public” and pin the corresponding placard to the blackboard (turn 1). The other party then has the chance to react by (a) giving, if available, a counter-frame invoking the same value and (b) presenting and pinning another frame invoking another value (turn 2). This procedure is repeated and until the instructor declares the closure of public debate after the fourth turn. To keep the activity brief enough to be done in a single class session, it is sufficient to only run it for four turns (allow 4-5 minutes per turn for a total of 20-25 minutes, including instructions), though this can be extended if time allows. After the last turn of the framing competition, the citizen group takes an individual and secret vote on ballots prepared by the instructor about which position is more convincing.

## **Debriefing**

After the decision rendered by the panel has been announced, a follow-up discussion starts in which the experience is used as a peg to explore the following questions:

- What were the particular difficulties that parties encountered in devising their framing strategies?
- What can we learn about the importance of having multiple frames available for parties and candidates? Is it better to have many different arguments at one's disposal or stay consistent with similar value frames to form a “winning message”?
- Which factors do students think have an impact on how a frame is received by the public? Does it need to resonate with specific core values, or does it have to be consistent with other messages sent by the party and with the “party brand”? Can an adroit framing of issues reverse individuals' prior issue stances? If so, how?
- How does timing factor into framing competitions? Does it matter who is out first with their own frame?

## **Appraisal**

As mentioned, this two-part activity lets students experience the complexities of public framing competitions in a contained setting. There are multiple benefits to this exercise. First, it engages students with the issue and generates exemplary material to discuss afterwards. In particular, two complex issues in modern framing theory are illustrated for students: The effects of framing competitions and the question of what makes a strong and effective frame. Second, it makes students appreciate the unpredictable elements of framing dynamics in public debate, again relating a current strand of research with a practical experience. Third, it

encourages them to think about the factors behind the different strengths of frames (values invoked, use of vivid imagery, etc.). They also become aware of how the presence of an effective counter-frame can undercut the impact of an otherwise influential message. Fourth, it conveys to students a sense of a major communicative function of political pluralism in a democratic society: providing a multiplicity of frames for citizens to weigh and choose from. Fifth, by sensitizing them to the instrumental and strategic character of communication by interested political actors, students are helped to become more thoughtful and conscious in their own engagement with public communication.

## References and Suggested Readings

A dagger (†) indicates readings that provide students with good overviews of contemporary framing theory, including frame competitions; these should be read before the activity, if the syllabus allows, to make students aware of the topic in advance, but this is not a necessary condition for the simulation to work well. The asterisk (\*) indicates a study that may be used as a complementary in-depth reading on framing competition theory; it is advisable to be read by students *after* the activity as this makes the reading a more efficient and more lasting experience for them.

Brewer, P. R. (2001). Value words and lizard brains: Do citizens deliberate about appeals to their core values? *Political Psychology*, 22(1), 45-64. doi:10.1111/0162-895X.00225

Brewer, P. R., & Gross, K. (2005). Values, framing, and citizens' thoughts about policy issues: Effects on content and quantity. *Political Psychology*, 26(6), 929-948. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2005.00451.x

Bryant, J., & Miron, D. (2004). Theory and research in mass communication. *Journal of Communication*, 54(4), 662-704. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02650.x

\*Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007a). A theory of framing and opinion formation in competitive elite environments. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 99-118. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00331.x

†Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007b). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10(1), 103-126. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054

†Entman, R. M., Matthes, J., & Pellicano, L. (2009). Nature, sources, and effects of news framing. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 175-190). New York: Routledge.

**Table 1** Examples of nuclear energy issue frames invoking different values

Value invoked	Pro	Con
Equality	Nuclear energy as a provider of cheap energy for the poor	Nuclear energy as a means of maximizing the profits of a few corporations with no proven financial advantages for ordinary citizens
Freedom	Nuclear energy as guarantee of energy independence	Nuclear energy as a means of holding the population in custody of giant energy corporations
Individualism	Nuclear energy as a free choice of autonomous consumers	Nuclear energy as a technology to whose risk and potential harm all individuals, even those who oppose it, are subjected
Justice/fairness	Nuclear energy as necessary to be on a “level playing field” with other competing nations	Nuclear energy as a luxury bought at expense of future generations who are forced to deal with waste or contamination after accidents
Security	Nuclear power plants in our country as safest in the world	Nuclear energy as incalculable risk and prone to human error
Social order	Nuclear energy as a necessary segue into a green future to avoid widespread electricity shutdowns (“bridge technology”)	Clinging to nuclear energy against the will of the people and in favor of corporations would further erode trust in the political system
Sustainability	Nuclear energy as emission-free climate protection	Nuclear waste as unresolved threat to the environment
Welfare	Nuclear energy as a technology that provides affordable energy for society at large	Nuclear energy as a technology whose potential costs far outweigh any short-term gains for society