



# The framing of politics as strategy and game: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings

Journalism  
13(2) 162–178  
© The Author(s) 2011  
Reprints and permission: sagepub.  
co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1464884911427799  
jou.sagepub.com  
 SAGE

**Toril Aalberg**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

**Jesper Strömbäck**

Mid Sweden University, Sweden

**Claes H. de Vreese**

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## Abstract

A key concept in research on the media coverage of politics is the game or strategy frame. Contrasted with coverage of politics as issues, the framing of politics as a strategic game is marked by features such as winning and losing as the central concern and a focus on how candidates or parties are doing in opinion polls. The pervasiveness of such framing is, however, disputed since (1) the way in which the frames are conceptualized and operationalized differs significantly; and (2) while some use terms such as ‘game frame’ and ‘strategy frame’ as synonymous, others argue that there is a conceptual difference between them. Against this background, this article reviews research on the media’s framing of politics as a strategic game, what concepts have been used, and how they have been operationalized; and suggests a synthesis and ways of improving conceptual clarity and comparability in research on the media’s use of strategy and/or game frames.

## Keywords

game frame, horse race frame, political news journalism, strategy frame

---

### Corresponding author:

Toril Aalberg, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NO-7491 Trondheim, Norway  
Email: toril.aalberg@svt.ntnu.no

## Introduction

One of the most important concepts in research on the media's coverage of politics in general, and during election campaigns in particular, is the framing of politics as a strategic game. Broadly defined, the framing of politics as a strategic game is characterized by a focus on questions related to who is winning and losing, the performances of politicians and parties, and on campaign strategies and tactics. This framing is often contrasted with a focus on political substance and issues.

There are several reasons why the concept of a game frame has become so popular. One is that a number of studies have demonstrated that the news media have a strong tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than to focus on political issues. Another is evidence suggesting that this type of news coverage has increased over time (Patterson, 1993). A third reason is that some studies have demonstrated that this particular framing of politics increases political distrust and cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997) or has a negative effect on citizens' knowledge acquisitions, although there are also studies suggesting that this type of framing may boost public interest in politics (Iyengar et al., 2004), offer additional useful information (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008), or that it does not depress political participation (De Vreese and Semetko, 2002).

The growing literature about the media's framing of politics as a strategic game typically shares a common theoretical framework. In terms of how the frames are conceptualized and operationalized, they differ significantly however. We believe this represents a problem, as different operationalizations make comparisons across time, countries or studies problematic. Because of this, there is also little base on which to reconcile or interpret the conflicting evidence about the effects of such framing.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to review research on the media's framing of politics as a strategic frame, including how the concept has been used, conceptualized and operationalized. First we present the theoretical foundation behind the concept of a strategic game frame. In the next section we review how the concept has been defined and operationalized. The following section focuses on the main findings from previous research, before – towards the end of the article – we suggest a synthesis and how the framing of politics as a strategic game should be conceptualized and operationalized to increase conceptual clarity as well as greater comparability across studies and cumulativity of findings.

## Theoretical and conceptual foundations

The concept of framing has been one of the most fertile areas in recent research in journalism and mass communication. While some scholars argue that frames refer to principles of selection and emphasis (Gitlin, 1980), others argue that frames also define problems, make moral judgments and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). Matthes (2009) found that there is a wide variety of definitions, approaches and types of framing device applied in the framing literature.

He also stresses that frames have been conceptualized at various levels of abstraction. For instance, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) made a distinction between issue-specific and generic frames. While issue-specific frames apply only to certain issues, generic

frames typically describe structural aspects and features of news that can apply across different topics or issues (Matthes, 2009: 360).

In this article we focus on the generic frame often identified as a game or strategy frame, while other frames will be ignored. In *Out of Order*, Patterson (1993) showed how American campaign news has shifted away from its traditional descriptive and issue-oriented mode to a more interpretive and game-oriented approach. The argument goes that back in the 1960s, the US news media typically reported on the events of the day by devoting a significant amount of time towards the candidates' speeches, while newer political journalism focuses less on the political messages and more on the candidates' motives and tactics. According to Patterson's and other accounts, the strategic game frame now dominates at least US mainstream political news coverage (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Fallows, 1997; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011; Jamieson, 1992).

Patterson (1993) and Fallows (1997) link the rise of the strategic game frame to changes in the political system and the news business. Modern styles of campaigning rely on increasingly sophisticated strategies to manage their political platforms and images. As strategic political communication has become more professionalized, news journalists see it as their job to uncover the strategies. This is also a defense mechanism against continually being 'spun' by parties or candidates, important since most journalists want to protect their autonomy and avoid being accused of taking sides politically. By focusing on strategic aspects of the political game, political reporters maintain an apparent stance of both independence and objectivity. Zaller (2001: 248) consequently suggests a 'rule of product substitution', according to which 'the harder presidential campaigns try to control what journalists report about their candidate, the harder journalists try to report something else instead'. The framing of politics as a strategic game may thus be one of the most important means by which journalists attempt to achieve control over the news.

Meanwhile, the rise of television, new technology and commercialism may also have increased the focus on politics as a strategic game (Andersen and Thorson, 1989). Not only does the strategic game frame allow journalists to more easily produce stories on deadline, this approach also demands fewer resources than research into the substance of complex public policy debates (Fallows, 1997). The proliferation of polling also allows news media to cover the state of the horse race quickly and efficiently, and news organizations have consequently become among the most important commissioners in the polling business (Brettschneider, 1997; Sonck and Loosveldt, 2008). Moreover, an additional bonus is that a poll provides the news story with a scientific touch and a sense of objectivity compared to a story relying only on the journalists' observations or references of political messages (Lavrakas and Traugott, 2000). Finally, a focus on celebrity candidates, their backgrounds, or their successes or failures appears to draw larger audiences (Iyengar et al., 2004).

While changes in the political system and the news industry are used to explain the rapid increase in politics covered as a strategic game, the attractiveness of this frame is also related to its newsworthiness. At the most basic level it fits many of the key news values that have been prevalent in the news business for decades (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). For instance, framing politics as a strategic game reflects journalism's enduring focus on drama, conflict and negativity, and typically involves elite individuals or

political groups. But it also reflect journalists' tendency to 'personalize' the news (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Thus, a focus on the strategic game provides reporters with the currency and novelty they need for their daily news material (Skewes, 2007). Analysis of policy visions and issues may on the other hand appear stale and repetitive.

Although scholars have theorized much about the general increase and popularity of the strategic game frame, there has not been much focus on why journalists might emphasize the game of politics in some news contexts and not in others. Most studies have documented the predominance of the game frame in election news, but the game frame is also relevant for non-election periods. Lawrence (2000) suggests that news organizations' likelihood to produce strategic game-framed news over substantive issue-framed news is context dependent, depending on for instance the policy phase. The strategic game frame, Lawrence (2000) argues, is less likely to be applied in the implementation phase of policy making.

Context is, however, not only a question of policy phase. Equally important is the geographical context. Several US scholars (Fallows, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993) argue that the game frame dynamics are most likely to originate from Washington and occur on a national level, as opposed to a more regional or local level. These US scholars have, perhaps naturally, only focused on US politics. But the political communication culture may also differ on a cross-national dimension. Although the tendency to frame politics as a strategic game occurs in virtually all countries (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008), the game frame is often assumed to be particularly dominant in the commercial US news coverage (Patterson, 2000). In countries with different political structures and media systems, such as proportional multi-party systems and news markets more regulated by the state, issue frames are assumed to be more common (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 2009). The most important antecedent of the framing of politics as a strategic game, established thus far, appears to be degree of commercialism (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010).

## Effects

One of the key reasons for scholars to have such an interest in the strategic game frame is based on the assumption that such framing may have negative consequences for democracy (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993). When the news media reduce their focus on substantive issues and focus on strategies and character traits, it is claimed to undermine political information and engagement and activate political cynicism. This happens because the strategic news frames make politicians' self-interest more salient and depress knowledge on policy positions. Although strategic news also carries some information about policy problems and solutions, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that strategic news frames predispose the audience to attend to and recall strategic rather than substantive information. Even if some substantive information is offered, people are purportedly less likely to absorb it (Valentino et al., 2001b). This happens because strategic game frames distract readers from the substance of the story. In other words, it is argued that strategic game frames have negative implications for democracy as they depress and reduce a politically informed citizenry.

In *Spiral of Cynicism* (1997), Cappella and Jamieson declare that strategic knowledge is a kind of cynicism, the main reason being that strategic news coverage implies motives that are based on politicians' self-interest rather than the common good. Strategic game frames tally evidence about the self-interested nature of the political process and its players. Therefore, they argue, those who consume a lot of news that is framed this way become more cynical. Several experimental studies have confirmed such a tendency (De Vreese, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001a, 2001b). Those who are exposed to strategically framed coverage of politics are significantly more prone not only to psychologically adopt the strategy frame in their interpretations and evaluations of political behavior, campaign processes and issues, they also prove more cynical as a result of the exposure. Cappella and Jamieson (1997: 238) describe how this turns into a spiral of cynicism. Because politicians see that conflict and strategy receive more news coverage, and news journalists believe that strategic coverage is what the public wants, both reporters and political leaders minimize public access to substance. The cynicism of those remaining attentive is fed by the resulting news diet, while others disengage. The final claim in the theoretical reasoning behind the negative effects of a strategic game frame is that it causes citizens to disengage. For example, both Patterson (1993) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest that voters are turned off by the media's routine emphasis on the game frame characterized by horse race journalism and extensive coverage of opinion polls. If the public perceives politics as a game played by insiders based on self-interest, the result will be mass disengagement from political participation (Blumler and Coleman, 2010).

However, not all scholars are convinced that the tendency to frame politics as a strategic game has negative effects on citizens' knowledge, trust and engagement (Meyer and Potter, 1998; Newton, 2006; Norris, 2000; Zhao and Bleske, 1998). Some of these scholars argue that coverage of opinion polls rather stimulates attention to politics because the strategy frame makes the news coverage more exciting. It can also be argued that polls constitute important pieces of political information especially in multi-party systems where strategic voting is legitimate to either bring parties above the electoral threshold or to affect the likely coalition combination (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008; Kedar, 2009). Others merely claim that the assumed effects are highly exaggerated (Newton, 2006).

Few scholars would, however, dispute that the media have a strong tendency to frame politics as a strategic game. Most scholars also draw on the same theoretical foundations. Still, beyond that, a consensus on the level, the degree or even the content of strategic game coverage is often absent. We believe that an unclear conceptualization – mapped in the next section – is one major explanation behind this lack of consensus.

## Conceptual definitions and dimensions

A review of the literature reveals a development in the terminology. The original horse race news became part of the game frame which was later discussed as part of the strategy frame. The initial literature, however, did not use the term 'strategic game frame'. Jamieson (1992: 165–167) discusses a '*strategy schema*' where journalists focus on who wins and how, and candidates are seen as performers in a game or in a war. Patterson

**Table 1.** Two main dimensions of the strategic game frame

Game frame	Strategy frame
Opinion polls	Campaign strategies and tactics
Election outcomes	Motives and instrumental actions
Winners and losers	Personality and style
Language of sports and war	Metacoverage

(1993: 57–58), on the other hand, talks about a ‘*game* schema’ of political reporting, structured around the notion that politics is a strategic game in which candidates compete for advantage. A few years later Cappella and Jamieson (1997: 33) call it a ‘*strategy frame*’ that emphasizes who is ahead and behind and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead. Although they use somewhat different terms, ‘*strategy schema*’, ‘*game schema*’ and ‘*strategy frame*’ are, however, used as interchangeable. This is also the dominant interpretation, and typically scholars only separate between a ‘*strategic game frame*’ and a ‘*policy or issue frame*’ (Lawrence, 2000).

Recently, however, some scholars have argued that there is a conceptual difference between a game frame and a strategy frame (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 2009; De Vreese, 2005; De Vreese and Semetko, 2002; Valentino et al., 2001a). A focus on political processes in news stories, they argue, can mean different things and have different effects on the public. Research has suggested that the presence of opinion polls and the use of war language – what we may call a ‘*game frame*’ – do not always boost cynicism (De Vreese, 2005; De Vreese and Semetko, 2002; Valentino et al., 2001a). It may even increase public interest in politics, as Iyengar et al. (2004) suggest, by making politics more easily understandable and the race more exciting. In contrast, the ‘*strategy frame*’, which focuses more on politicians’ style, actions, and motivations, has been argued to be more likely to drive cynicism than the media’s focus on polls and the horse race (De Vreese, 2005: 295).

In the literature, a number of subframes have been suggested and used in studies of strategic game frames. In Table 1 we try to map the most commonly used frames and terms according to their resemblance with the ‘*game frame*’ and the ‘*strategy frame*’ respectively.

In its pure form, the game frame is dedicated to what is often labeled horse race journalism. This type of news coverage has a strong focus on winners and losers and is typically related to opinion polls and election outcomes. Quite often these news stories also involve a language of war or games to describe the campaign. One of the reasons why the ‘*game frame*’ may be different from the ‘*strategy frame*’ is that it offers a more *indirect* form of strategic information. This content may either supplant substantive information or simply draw attention away from issues and towards the political drama. Here evidence based on experiments (Valentino et al., 2001a) suggests that polls and war language do not increase respondents’ focus on strategy, although they do reduce voters’ focus on issues.

The mostly cited element of the strategic frame involves the journalistic focus on a candidate or a party's motives for taking a particular policy stand. Stories containing this element directly imply that political actors are primarily interested in garnering votes, rather than pursuing solutions for important social problems. Therefore, these elements, including personality and style, motives and instrumental actions, are at the core of the strategy frame (Valentino et al., 2001a). Some also stress that internal or external conflicts and relations are an important part of the strategy frame (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 2009). Finally, the concept of metacoverage may also be linked to the strategy frame. Metacoverage refers to news stories where the media provide self-referential reflections on the relationship between professional political strategists and political journalism (Esser et al., 2001). As pointed out by De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008), the term metacoverage is, however, a broad term that comprises several media-related themes.

## Operationalizations

Although most scholars investigating the framing of politics as a strategic game make references to the same scholarly work, how this framing has been operationalized in quantitative content analyses differs significantly. To begin with, some scholars investigate the framing of politics as a strategic game on a dominant frame basis, whereas others investigate it on a present-absent basis. Among those who investigate this framing on a dominant frame basis, it is common to perceive this framing as opposed to an issue or substance frame. Patterson (1993), for instance, distinguishes between 'policy schema' and 'game schema', where 'News stories were placed in the game category if they were framed within the context of strategy and electoral success'. The policy category on the other hand was used if stories were framed within the context of policy and issues, but Patterson also included 'leadership problems' within this frame. Lawrence (2000: 100) similarly distinguishes between an 'issue frame' and a 'game frame', while she also allows for 'mixed' framing. Broadly, the 'issue frame' is defined as stories about policy problems and solutions, descriptions of politicians' policy stands, and implications of different proposals or legislations, while the 'game frame' is defined as stories about winning or losing in elections, legislative debates or politics in general, strategies for winning, and stories about how politicians or parties are themselves affected by political processes.

Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006, see also Aalberg and Brekken, 2007; Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008; Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007; Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010) also code the issue and the game frames on a dominant frame basis, although they label these the game and issue *meta frame*. The game frame is defined, in broad terms, as focusing on politics as a game, personality contest, and as strategies and tactics for winning, while the issue frame is defined as news stories focusing on the substance of political problems, issues, or proposals. Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen's study of Danish radio news (2009) also codes the framing of politics as a strategic game on a dominant frame basis, although they make a distinction between five dominant frames. The frames they include are the policy frame, the electoral frame, the internal party frame, the interparty relations frame, and 'other processes' (2009: 175–176). The first

of these corresponds to what others label the 'issue frame', while the other frames correspond to the 'game frame'. The number of dominant frames is also expanded in Benoit et al.'s (2005) study of topics. They separate between topics that are dominated by policy and character, horse race, voter's reactions, scandal, and election information. Moreover, the horse race topic is divided into eight sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fundraising, and spending.

Aside from studies investigating the framing of politics on a dominant frame bases, there are some that code for more than one issue or topic per news story. Just et al., for example, code up to two issues or topics per story, making a distinction between 'campaign' and 'substantive issues' (1999: 27). Jamieson investigates the primary and secondary structure for each story, and codes for the main structure on each level. The frames or categories used in this study are 'strategy', 'strategy with poll', and 'issue' (1996: 27–28).

There are also a number of studies investigating frames on a present-absent basis. Sheafer et al., for example, coded the three (or fewer) main substantive and three (or fewer) main campaign-strategic topics per news story, using as main categories the issue frame and the game frame. Issue frame: ... was defined as coverage of any substantive issue, such as the state of security or the economy, and candidates' issue positions. A game frame in a news item was defined as coverage of party strategies and tactics, as well as the candidates' traits. (2008: 211).

Farnsworth and Lichter similarly make a distinction between horse race and policy focus, and both can be present in a news story (2011: 45).

De Vreese uses the term 'strategic news', generally defined as 'a focus on winning and losing, emphasis on language of war and games, focus on politicians and citizens as 'performers, critics and audiences', and focus on candidate style and perceptions' (2003: 81–82). This frame was operationalized as two dichotomous variables. In another study, De Vreese and Semetko investigate the coverage of the 2000 Danish referendum on the euro. Here 'strategic news coverage' was again used as term and coded (2002: 623–624) on a present-absent basis. All stories were coded for the presence of emphasis of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; analysis of candidate actions as part of a consolidation of positions; and language of wars, games, and competitions.

Kerbel et al. (2000: 13–15) investigate numerous different frames, each coded as present or absent and, if present, whether it was of primary, secondary, or peripheral presence. Two frames are classified as 'politics', namely the 'horse race/strategy frame' and the 'public opinion frame'. Two other frames are defined as 'media process' and 'political process'. In addition, they investigate four frames classified as 'ideas': 'issues', 'ideology', 'retrospective evaluations', and 'prospective evaluations.' Thus, the distinction between the 'political game' and 'issues and substance' is present also in this study.

In addition to the above studies, a number of comparative studies by Strömbäck and colleagues have investigated the presence or absence of different frames conceptualized as subframes of the metaframe of politics as a strategic game. Among the frames included are: the 'horse race frame', 'governing frame', 'political strategy frame' and 'news management frame'. In one of the most recent studies, Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011) investigated the framing of politics using three variables, coded on a present-absent

basis, conceptualized as part of framing as a strategic game. These variables asked whether the news story deals with (1) 'politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, or winning or losing in politics generally'; (2) 'politicians' or parties' strategies for winning elections, negotiations or issue debates'; and (3) 'polls and politicians' or parties 'standing in the polls'.

Also related to framing of politics as a strategic game is research on the media's metacoverage (Esser, 2009; Esser and D'Angelo, 2003, 2006). According to Esser and D'Angelo (2003: 619), metacoverage 'is defined as coverage of media politics that explicitly describes the role in shaping campaign events and outcomes played by the news media, communications technology, public relations, and media organizations not traditionally tied to the news media'. Altogether they identify six frames: press conduit frame, press strategy frame, press accountability frame, publicity conduit frame, publicity strategy frame, and publicity accountability frame. These frames would, in other studies, probably be conceptualized as part of the framing of politics as a strategic game.

To sum up, two main patterns can be detected in the literature with respect to operationalizations. One is to code the strategic game frame on a dominant frame basis, typically opposed to a policy frame, while the other is to distinguish between a number of subframes based on their presence or absence in the news stories.

## Key findings

Despite the variety of operationalizations, virtually all studies find that the framing of politics as a strategic game is highly common, although the evidence is mixed with respect to trends across time. In this section, we highlight some of the key findings. Beginning with studies that investigate the framing on a dominant frame basis, Patterson (1993: 73–74), investigating a random sample of *New York Times* front-page stories on elections, found that the share of news stories where the game frame was dominant increased from less than 50 percent in 1960 to more than 80 percent in 1992. Binderkrantz and Green-Pederson (2009: 177–180), distinguishing between five frames in their study of Danish public service news between 1983 and 2005, found that the 'policy frame' was dominant in *non-election* periods. In election periods the most common of the frames related to politics as a strategic game was the 'electoral frame'. Also based on a dominant frame approach, Aalberg and Brekken (2007: 188) showed how the use of a strategic game frame changes considerably even within election campaigns, from 57 percent three weeks before election day to 72 percent one week before the general election.

Turning to studies that investigate framing on the basis of 'topics', Benoit et al. (2005) investigated *New York Times*' election news coverage between 1952 and 2000. They found that 'horse race' accounted for, on average, 40 percent of the news stories, but with no linear increase over time. They found that the most common 'types of horse race coverage' were 'strategy', 'events', and 'polls'. Just et al. (1999: 33) also found that 'campaign messages exceed policy messages' in all investigated media, but particularly in local television news. Similarly, Jamieson (1996: 16) found that 'strategy or "horse race" coverage remains the prevailing press structure' in both print and broadcast US media between 1960 and 1992, although she did not find a linear trend across time.

With respect to studies that investigate different frames on an absent-present basis, a wide variety of frames are used, making comparisons across studies even more complicated. Some key results are nevertheless worth highlighting. Sheaffer et al. (2008: 211–212) found that Israeli newspapers applied the game frame more often than the issue frame in all elections between 1949 and 2003, while Israeli television news did so in all elections but one between 1992 and 2006. Esser and Hemmer (2008: 297) similarly found that ‘strategic framing’ was dominant on German television news in all elections between 1994 and 2005. Farnsworth and Lichter (2011: 45) found stories focused on the horse race outnumbered stories focused on issues on US television news in all elections between 1988 and 2008, with the exception of 2004. None of these studies found a linear trend across time.

While most studies are focused on a singular country, there are some comparative studies investigating the framing of politics on a dominant frame basis. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006: 140) found that the ‘game metaframe’ was significantly more common in US (67%) than in Swedish (50%) newspapers. In other comparisons, Strömbäck and colleagues have found that the game metaframe was dominant in between 53 and 66 percent of Belgian, British, Norwegian and Spanish news stories (Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008; Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007; Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010). Taken together, these studies suggest that this frame is highly present across a number of countries, even if there are some differences across countries.

Other studies generally confirm that frames related to the strategic game are highly common in different settings. De Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that in terms of topic in the different media’s coverage of the Danish referendum about the euro, between 25 and 69 percent of the Danish media was dominated by ‘strategy’. The most consistently and commonly used indicator was ‘use of war, games, and sports language’. Kerbel et al. (2000: 17) found that ‘horse race/strategy’ was the most commonly used primary and secondary frame reference in US television news, while Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006) found that the ‘horse race’ and the ‘political strategy’ frames were more common in both Sweden and the USA than the ‘news management’ and the ‘politicians as individuals’ frames. Both frames were more common in the US than in the Swedish news coverage. In a comparison of Swedish and Norwegian election news, Strömbäck and Aalberg (2008) found that the most present frame in Sweden was the ‘horse race’ frame, while the most present frame in Norway was the ‘governing’ frame.

Looking finally at studies investigating the metacoverage in campaign news, Esser and D’Angelo (2006) found that different topics related to electioneering, campaigning, public opinion – that is, the political game – were more common than topics related to policies and issues in all three countries, and that the share of stories with metacoverage was highest in the USA, followed by Germany and then Britain. On average across countries, the most common frame was the press conduit frame, followed by the publicity strategy frame.

To sum up, this review shows that there is a large body of research on the framing of politics as a strategic game and that many scholars largely share a common theoretical framework; but also that there are clear differences in how the frames are conceptualized, operationalized, and in the terminology. This makes it very difficult to make comparisons across studies, which decreases research cumulativity and hampers research into the antecedents and effects of this – or these – framings of politics. To remedy this, there is a great need to move towards greater conceptual clarity.

## Towards conceptual clarity

One of the most important reasons to care about game and strategy framing has to do with the assumed effects of these frames. It is assumed that *horse race news*, focused on opinion polls and interpreted as a game of who is winning and losing, is distracting citizens from the substance of politics (Patterson, 1993). It is also assumed that strategy framing, by portraying politics with a focus on politicians' self-interest, depresses knowledge gains about policies and substance, increases political cynicism, and depresses political engagement (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). It is assumed that meta news framing, focusing on the role of the media in politics and on how politicians try to influence the media, reflects badly on public perceptions of politics, the media, and communication professionals (De Vreese and Elenbaas, 2010).

It is with these assumed and partially demonstrated effects that we should focus the endeavor to synthesize and define the concepts. Underlying this question is a conundrum which is largely unsolved in the communication literature, namely what a frame is and how to measure it. Recent overviews (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010; Matthes, 2009) show that the notion of framing is approached from a variety of angles. In this article we have focused on one type of generic *frame in the news* and thus discard other, more macro-inspired approaches to studying, for example, cultural frames. Game and strategy frames belong to the notion of generic news frames (De Vreese, 2009), which implies that they can be used in relation to different issues, that they have been identified in different political contexts and media systems, and that they are inherent to the work routines of journalism. As such, generic frames are better suited for comparative research than issue-specific frames. But this also indicates that they are even more dependent on standardization and conceptual clarity.

Our overview suggests that it makes sense to distinguish between two dimensions in the study of strategic game frames: the *game frame* and the *strategy frame*. We propose the following definitions:

- 1 The *game frame* refers to news stories that portray politics as a game and are centered around: who is winning or losing elections, in the battle for public opinion, in legislative debates, or in politics in general; expressions of public opinion (polls, vox pops); approval or disapproval from interest groups or particular constituencies or publics; or that speculate about electoral or policy outcomes or potential coalitions.
- 2 The *strategy frame* refers to news stories that are centered around interpretations of candidates' or parties' motives for actions and positions; their strategies and tactics for achieving political or policy goals; how they campaign; and choices regarding leadership and integrity, including personal traits. It also involves different types of media strategies, including news coverage of press behavior.

We thus consider the game frame and the strategy frame as two equal but different dimensions of the larger *strategic game* frame. This distinction is in line with the conceptual origins of the two frames: one taking a starting point in the use of polls and the horse race; the other taking a starting point in the interpretative nature of journalism. We maintain the importance of this distinction as somewhat different effects have been

demonstrated for these two frames. Our review suggests that there is not a lot of evidence that polls and the game frame, as defined above, have strong negative effects on the public (see also Valentino et al., 2001a). Although the game frame may ‘distract’ the public from substantial issues, it clearly also has the potential to boost public interest in politics (Iyengar et al., 2004). On the other hand, there is more ample proof to suggest negative effects of strategy frames on, most notably, different forms of political cynicism.

Although the game, strategy, and potentially even meta news frames can be seen as related (De Vreese and Elenbaas, 2008) and part of a larger macro frame (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010), it is important to distinguish the constituent parts of such a ‘higher level’ frame. How separate the different frames are in actual news coverage remains to be explored, but only by capturing these different dimensions may we be able to investigate the linkages between the different frames and learn about their impact on the public.

## **Conclusion: Towards increasing comparability and cumulativity**

Most research on the strategic game frame to date is single country studies, and, while there are some comparative studies, most include only a few countries at the time. While research shows that the game and strategy frames have become important features of news around the world, the level of such framing and the conditions under which they are most likely to occur remains to be comprehensively investigated.

For such research to be comparable across studies, we believe it is imperative to use a set of standardized variables and coding instructions. They should also target the different facets of the strategic game frame and be designed to maximize the validity of the variables and intercoder reliability. To this end, we suggest a list of variables as operationalizations of the macro strategic game frame and the constituent game and strategy frames. The suggested operationalizations are developed for quantitative content analysis, using the full news stories as the unit of analysis, and to be applicable in research on both print and broadcast media. Here we present the variables, with the full coding instructions included in the Appendix. As intercoder reliability is usually higher for variables coded on a present-absent basis, most of the operationalizations we suggest have this structure.

To measure the extent to which the media apply a game or strategy frame, we suggest four variables that, for the game frame, pertain to the reference to opinion polls, election outcomes, winners and losers, and the language of sports and wars (see Appendix for the specific item wording). To measure the extent to which the media apply a strategy frame we propose four variables that pertain to the reference to campaign strategies and tactics, motives and instrumental actions, personality and style, and the role of the media in the political process.

In principle, one could argue that multiple indicators enable us to measure the ‘strength’ of certain frames. If, for instance, a news article has a positive score on all of the four game items, this may indicate that the article have a stronger game frame than a news article that only focuses on one of the four items. While we do not believe that these items provide us with a perfect cumulative index, the four items will provide a valid and robust measure and provide insights into which elements the game and the strategy frame respectively actually consist of.

Given that we see the game and the strategy frames as two equal but separate dimensions of an overall macro frame, we also need a variable targeting this macro frame on a dominant frame basis. Thus, in addition to the 2 x 4 items tapping the game and strategy frames respectively, we also propose to code for the presence of an overall strategic game frame with a single item. This final variable, we suggest, will tap what the dominant framing of politics in a news story is, making it an overall distinction between strategic game framing and the coverage of politics in terms of substance, issues or policies. The dominant framing should be identified according to the amount of time, frequency and order of appearance of the various elements. Moreover, we believe that the headline and lead should be given extra weight in the judgment of what frame dominates the news story.

Taking a step back from our concrete recommendations, we can conclude that the strategic game frame is one of the most important concepts in research on the media's coverage of politics in general, and during election campaigns in particular. The extant literature shares common ground in this conclusion, but the pervasiveness of the frame and its sub-elements as well as the effects is disputed, while the different operationalizations have made it very difficult to draw firm conclusions. This is clearly a problem, as it has hampered research cumulativeness.

We hope, however, that this article has contributed to the conceptual clarity around this concept, and will pave the way for an increased comparability between studies and hence cumulativeness in our knowledge.

## References

- Aalberg T and Brekken T (2007) Når spill og enkeltepisoder blir viktigst [When games and single episodes become most important]. In: Jenssen AT and Aalberg T (eds) *Den medialiserte politikken* [The mediatized politics]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 177–196.
- Andersen K and Thorson SJ (1989) Public discourse or strategic game? Changes in our conception of elections. *Studies in American Political Development* 3: 262–278.
- Benoit WL, Steen KA and Hansen GJ (2005) *New York Times* coverage of presidential campaigns. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82(2): 356–376.
- Binderkrantz AS and Green-Pedersen C (2009) Policy or processes in focus? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14(2): 166–185.
- Blumler JG and Coleman S (2010) Political communication in freefall: The British case – and others? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15(2): 139–154.
- Brettschneider F (1997) The press and the polls in Germany, 1980–1994: Poll coverage as an essential part of election campaign reporting. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 9(3): 248–265.
- Cappella JA and Jamieson KH (1997) *Spiral of Cynicism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- D'Angelo P and Kuypers JA (eds) (2010) *Doing News Framing Analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- De Vreese CH (2003) *Framing Europe. Television News and European Integration*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- De Vreese CH (2004) The effects of strategic news on political cynicism, issue evaluations and policy support: A two-wave experiment. *Mass Communication and Society* 7(2):191–215.
- De Vreese CH (2005) The *Spiral of Cynicism* reconsidered. *European Journal of Communication* 20(3): 283–301.
- De Vreese CH (2009) Journalistic news frames. In: D'Angelo P and Kuypers J (eds) *Doing Framing Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 187–214.

- De Vreese CH and Elenbaas M (2008) Media in the game of politics: Effects of strategic metacoverage on political cynicism. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3): 285–309.
- De Vreese CH and Elenbaas M (2010) Political publicity and spin. In: Brants K and Voltmer K (eds) *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- De Vreese CH and Semetko HA (2002) Cynical and engaged: Strategic campaign coverage, public opinion and mobilization in a referendum. *Communication Research* 29(6): 615–641.
- Entman RM (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.
- Esser F (2009) Metacoverage of mediated wars: How the press framed the role of the media and military news management in the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003. *American Behavioral Scientist* 52(5): 709–734.
- Esser F and D'Angelo P (2003) Framing the press and the publicity process. A content analysis of meta-coverage in campaign 2000 network news. *American Behavioral Scientist* 46(5): 617–645.
- Esser F and D'Angelo P (2006) Framing the press and publicity process in US, British, and German election campaigns. A comparative study of metacoverage. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(3): 44–66.
- Esser F and D'Angelo P (2003) Framing the press and the publicity process. A content analysis of meta-coverage in campaign 2000 network news. *American Behavioral Scientist* 46(5): 617–645.
- Esser F and Hemmer K (2008) Characteristics and dynamics of election news coverage in Germany. In: Strömbäck J and Kaid LL (eds) *Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World*. New York: Routledge, 289–307.
- Esser F, Reinemann C and Fan D (2001) Spin-doctors in the United States, Great Britain and Germany: Metacommunication about media manipulation. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6(1): 16–45.
- Fallows J (1997) *Breaking the News*. New York: Vintage.
- Farnsworth SJ and Lichter SR (2011) *The Nightly News Nightmare. Media Coverage of US Presidential Elections, 1988–2008*, 3rd edn. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Galtung J and Ruge MH (1965) The structure of foreign news. The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research* 2(1): 64–91.
- Gitlin T (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Irwin GA and Van Holsteyn JJM (2008) What are they waiting for? Strategic information for the late deciding voters. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20(4): 483–493.
- Iyengar S, Norpoth H and Hahn KS (2004) Consumer demand for election news: The horserace sells. *Journal of Politics* 66(1): 157–175.
- Jamieson KH (1992) *Dirty Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson KH (1996) *Assessing the Quality of Campaign Discourse – 1960, 1980, 1988, and 1992*. Philadelphia: Annenberg Public Policy Center of University of Pennsylvania.
- Just M, Crigler A and Buhr T (1999) Voice, substance, and cynicism in presidential campaign media. *Political Communication* 16(1): 25–44.
- Kedar O (2009) *Voting for Policy, Not Party. How Voters Compensate for Power Sharing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerbel MR, Apee S and Ross MH (2000) PBS ain't so different. Public broadcasting, election frames, and democratic empowerment. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5(4): 8–32.
- Lavrakas PJ and Traugott MW (2000) Why election polls are important to a democracy: An American perspective. In: Lavrakas PJ and Traugott MW (eds) *Election Polls, the News Media, and Democracy*. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 3–19.

- Lawrence RG (2000) Game-framing the issues: Tracking the strategy frame in public policy news. *Political Communication* 17(2): 93–114.
- Matthes J (2009) What's in a frame? A content analysis of media framing studies in the world's leading communication journals, 1990–2005. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 86: 349–367.
- Meyer P and Potter D (1998) Pre-election polls and issue knowledge in the 1996 US presidential election. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3(4):35–41.
- Newton K (2006) May the weak force be with you: The power of the mass media in modern politics. *European Journal of Political Research* 45(2): 209–234.
- Norris P (2000) *A Virtuous Circle. Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patterson TE (1993) *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage.
- Patterson TE (2000) The United States: News in a free-market society. In: Gunther R and Mughan A (eds) *Democracy and the Media. A Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 241–265.
- Rhee YW (1997) Strategy and issue frames in election campaign coverage: A social cognitive account of framing effects. *Journal of Communication* 47(3): 26–48.
- Semetko HA and Valkenburg PM (2000) Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication* 50(2): 93–109.
- Sheafer T, Weimann G and Tsifti Y (2008) Campaigns in the Holy Land: The content and effects of elections news coverage in Israel. In: Strömbäck J and Kaid LL (eds) *Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World*. New York: Routledge, 209–225.
- Skewes EA (2007) *Message Control. How News Is Made on the Presidential Campaign Trail*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sonck N and Loosveldt R (2008) Making news based on public opinion polls. The Flemish case. *European Journal of Communication* 23(4): 490–500.
- Strömbäck J and Aalberg T (2008) Election news coverage in democratic corporatist countries: A comparative study of Sweden and Norway. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 31(1): 91–106.
- Strömbäck J and Dimitrova DV (2006) Political and media systems matter: A comparison of election news coverage in Sweden and the United States. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(4): 131–147.
- Strömbäck J and Dimitrova DV (2011) Mediatization and media interventionism. A comparative analysis of Sweden and the United States. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16(1): 30–49.
- Strömbäck J and Kaid LL (eds) (2008) *Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World*. New York: Routledge.
- Strömbäck J and Luengo ÓG (2008) Polarized pluralist and democratic corporatist models. A comparison of election news coverage in Spain and Sweden. *The International Communication Gazette* 70(6): 547–562.
- Strömbäck J and Shehata A (2007) Structural biases in British and Swedish election news coverage. *Journalism Studies* 8(5): 798–812.
- Strömbäck J and Van Aelst P (2010) Exploring some antecedents of the media's framing of election news: A comparison of Swedish and Belgian election news. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 15(1): 41–59.
- Valentino NA, Beckmann MN and Buhr TA (2001a) A spiral of cynicism for some: The contingent effects of campaign news frames on participation and confidence in government. *Political Communication* 18(4): 347–367.
- Valentino NA, Buhr TA and Beckmann MN (2001b) When the frame is the game: Revisiting the impact of 'strategic' campaign coverage on citizens' information retention. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 78: 93–112.

- Van Aelst P, Sheafer T and Stanyer J (2012) Personalization of politics in the news. *Journalism* 13(2).
- Zaller JR (2001) The rule of product substitution in presidential campaign news. In: Katz E and Warshel Y (eds) *Election Studies. What's Their Use?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 247–270.
- Zhao X and Bleske GL (1998) Horse-race polls and audience issue learning. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 3(4): 13–34.

## Biographical notes

Toril Aalberg is Professor in Media Sociology at the Department of Sociology and Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim.

Jesper Strömbäck is Professor in Media and Communication, and Professor and Chair in Journalism, at Mid Sweden University. He is also research director at the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University.

Claes H. de Vreese is Professor and Chair of Political Communication. He is Director of the Center for Politics and Communication and Scientific Director of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam.

## Appendix: Coding instructions

### Game frame

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (1) Does the story deal with opinion polls and politicians' or parties' standing in the polls?   | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once mentions opinion polls and the standing of political parties or individual candidates in these. Coders should also type 1 if the news story includes references to generic 'polls' or 'the opinion' and the standing of political parties or candidates according to 'polls' or 'the opinion'. Otherwise coders should type 0. |
| (2) Does the story deal with politicians, parties or other actors in relation to potential election outcomes and/or coalitions/government formation? | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story reports or speculates about election results or government/coalition formations. Otherwise coders should type 0.   |
| (3) Does the story deal with politicians, parties or other actors winning or losing (elections, debates or in general)?                              | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once refers to whether politicians, parties or other actors are winning or losing with respect to elections, debates or in general. Otherwise coders should type 0.   |
| (4) Does the story make use of a language of sports or war?  | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once makes use of a language of sports and war, such as battle, competition, winning, or fight. Only exempted expression is 'campaign'. Otherwise coders should type 0.   |

---

**Appendix. (continued)**


---

**Strategy frame**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (5) Does the story deal with politicians' or parties' strategies or tactics for winning elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, favorable news coverage, or for achieving other forms of political success? | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once refers to politicians' or parties' strategies or tactics for winning elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, favorable news coverage, or for achieving other forms of political success. Otherwise coders should type 0. |
| (6) Does the story deal with politicians' or parties' motives for actions, positions, or behaviors?   | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once refers to politicians' or parties' motives for actions, positions, or behaviors with reference to other aspects than their sincere belief in the policies. Otherwise coders should type 0.   |
| (7) Does the story deal with party, candidate or campaign style or performance?   | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once refers to party, candidate or campaign style or performance, or how they campaign. Otherwise coders should type 0.   |
| (8) Does the story deal with the media's role in politics or campaigning and/or the relationship between political actors and the media?  | This variable has two codes: 0 = no, 1 = yes. Coders should type 1 if the news story at least once refers to the media's role in politics or campaigning and/or the relationship between political actors and the media. Otherwise coders should type 0.  |

**Strategic game macro frame**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (9) What is the dominant framing of politics? | Coders should type 1 for 'Strategic game frame' and 2 for 'Issue frame'.<br>'Strategic game frame' includes news stories that frame politics as a game, personality contest, as strategy, and as personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. News stories that focus on the tactics or strategy of political campaigning, how they campaign, on the images of politicians, on political power as a goal in itself, and on politicians as individuals rather than as spokespersons for certain policies, should count as 'Strategic game frame'. The same applies for horse race coverage.<br>'Issue frame' includes news stories that focus on issues and issue positions, on real-life conditions with relevance for issue positions, and on what has happened or what someone has said and done to the extent that it deals with or is depicted as relevant for the political issues. Coders should select the frame that <i>dominates</i> in the news story. Usually, dominance is decided by space in which the respective frames are applied, but the headline and lead should be given extra weight in the judgment of what frame dominates the news story. |
|---|---|
-