



## **Framing Effects in Political News: Cognitive Mechanisms Underlying Audience Interpretation and Belief Formation**

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### **Abstract**

News framing—the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality to promote specific interpretations, evaluations, and policy prescriptions—represents one of the most extensively studied phenomena in political communication research. This paper provides a comprehensive synthesis of framing effects research spanning Entman's (1993) canonical definition through contemporary social media framing dynamics, with particular focus on the cognitive mechanisms through which frames shape audience interpretation, belief formation, and political attitudes. Drawing on Dual Process Theory (Kahneman, 2011), Prospect Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), and Chong and Druckman's (2007) theoretical integration, the paper distinguishes equivalence framing (logically equivalent messages with differently emphasized aspects) from emphasis framing (different substantive perspectives on the same issue) and examines the distinct cognitive pathways through which each operates. Meta-analytic evidence confirms framing effects are "real but limited"—typically small to moderate in magnitude ( $d = .15-.35$ ) but practically significant given the scale of political communication. Key moderators including political knowledge, need for cognition, and motivated reasoning are

systematically examined. The paper advances a Cognitive Mechanism Model of Framing (CMMF) integrating applicability, accessibility, and availability effects within a unified computational account. Research on competitive framing, temporal dynamics, visual versus textual framing, and social media amplification of framing effects is synthesized. The paper identifies critical literature gaps including the absence of longitudinal framing research, insufficient attention to visual framing in digital news, and limited cross-cultural evidence. Implications for democracy, political communication design, and journalistic responsibility are discussed.

**Keywords:** framing effects; political communication; dual-process theory; news interpretation; belief formation; cognitive mechanisms; media effects; equivalence framing

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## 1. Introduction

Among the most consequential powers of news media is the power to frame: to select, emphasize, and contextualize information in ways that profoundly shape how audiences perceive political issues, evaluate policy alternatives, and assign causal responsibility for social problems. Unlike agenda-setting (what to think about) or priming (which considerations to use in evaluation), framing operates at the level of how issues are conceptualized—which narrative structures, causal attributions, moral implications, and remedial actions are made cognitively salient through news coverage.

Entman's (1993) canonical definition established that framing "select[s] some aspects of a perceived reality and make[s] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." This definition encompasses both the producer-side activity of frame-building and the audience-side process of frame-setting, creating a communication system linking journalistic choices to audience cognitive outcomes (Aarzo & Lal, 2024).

The stakes of framing research for democratic communication are substantial. If news frames systematically shape how citizens interpret political problems, attribute responsibility for social conditions, and evaluate policy alternatives, then the aggregate framing choices of news organizations constitute one of the most powerful forces shaping democratic opinion

formation. The documented effects of episodic versus thematic framing on responsibility attribution (Iyengar, 1991), of gain versus loss framing on risk acceptance (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), and of economic versus humanitarian framing on immigration attitudes (de Vreese et al., 2011) collectively suggest that journalism's framing choices have consequences well beyond content selection.

This paper advances three primary objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive theoretical synthesis of framing mechanisms, distinguishing and integrating the cognitive pathways through which different frame types produce effects. Second, it evaluates the empirical evidence for framing effects with attention to effect size moderation and the conditions under which framing effects emerge versus fail. Third, it advances a Cognitive Mechanism Model of Framing (CMMF) that integrates the major theoretical accounts within a unified computational framework applicable to contemporary digital framing research.

## 2. Literature Review

The framing concept entered mass communication research through two converging traditions: sociological framing (Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980), which focused on institutionalized narrative structures through which news producers organize and present reality, and psychological framing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984), which demonstrated through laboratory experiments that logically equivalent choice options produce different decisions when presented in gain versus loss frames.

Iyengar's (1991) influential experimental studies of episodic versus thematic framing provided the first systematic evidence of consequential news framing effects in political communication (Aarzo & Lal, 2025a). Episodic frames present political issues through individual cases or events; thematic frames present issues through broader contextual trends. Iyengar (1991) demonstrated across multiple issue domains that episodic coverage causes audiences to attribute responsibility for social problems to individuals (personal responsibility attribution), while thematic coverage causes attribution to societal forces (societal responsibility attribution)—with direct consequences for policy preferences and political evaluations.

The theoretical integration by Chong and Druckman (2007) in "Framing Theory" (\*Annual Review of Political Science\*) represents the most comprehensive account, distinguishing frame communication (how frames are presented) from individual-level framing effects (how frames influence cognitive outcomes). Their account identifies three cognitive

mechanisms: availability effects (frames increase the accessibility of particular considerations in memory), applicability effects (frames promote use of specific evaluative schemas), and magnitude effects (frames influence the perceived importance of specific values). This tri-mechanism account moved beyond simple accessibility-based explanations toward a richer account of how frames work cognitively (Aarzo & Lal, 2025b).

Lecheler and de Vreese's experimental program provides the richest direct evidence base. Their 2012 study (N = 1,537) found framing effects are mediated by both belief importance change and belief content change, with content change being more prominent. Political knowledge moderated both mediation pathways—high-knowledge participants showed stronger applicability effects while low-knowledge participants showed more availability effects, suggesting that frames work through different cognitive mechanisms depending on prior knowledge architecture.

Lecheler and de Vreese (2013) examined temporal dynamics, finding that framing effects persisted but attenuated over one to two weeks, with decay moderated by competing information exposure. Their 2013 competitive framing study found that when two opposing frames are simultaneously presented, neither dominant frame emerges—instead, the most recently encountered frame shows a modest advantage (recency effect) moderated by political knowledge. De Vreese, Boomgaarden, and Semetko (2011) demonstrated across two experiments that negative frames produced consistently stronger effects than positive frames, a valence asymmetry consistent with Loss Aversion Theory.

The recent evolution toward social media framing research has introduced complications including user-generated framing (audiences as frame producers), algorithmic amplification of particular frame types (emotional and partisan frames receiving engagement advantages), and competitive real-time framing (Aarzo & Lal, 2026) dynamics across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. MDPI's (2022) review of social media framing studies found that social media platforms systematically favor episodic, emotionally charged, and identity-relevant frames—creating systematic framing environments that may differ substantially from legacy media.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The Cognitive Mechanism Model of Framing (CMMF) proposed here integrates five cognitive accounts within a computational framework. At the memory level, Collins and Loftus's (1975) spreading activation model explains how frames activate associated memory

networks: when a news frame presents immigration as a "cultural threat," it activates a threat-relevant network including prior threat associations, value structures, and policy preferences. The frame's effect on subsequent evaluation reflects this network activation pattern. Accessibility and applicability operate as distinct network effects: accessibility reflects activation spread to relevant considerations; applicability reflects the evaluative weight assigned to activated considerations in forming judgments.

At the processing level, Dual Process Theory (Kahneman, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how processing depth moderates framing effects. Under System 1 (heuristic) processing conditions—low elaboration, cognitive load, or motivation—frames produce direct judgment effects through simple association activation. Under System 2 (analytical) processing conditions—high elaboration, expertise, motivation—frames interact with prior beliefs, with high-knowledge audiences capable of recognizing and counter-arguing frame implications. This explains the consistent finding that political knowledge moderates framing effects: knowledgeable individuals are not immune to framing but process frames through different cognitive pathways.

At the motivational level, Motivated Reasoning Theory (Kunda, 1990) explains partisan asymmetries in framing effects. When frames are compatible with existing political identities, they are processed with systematically reduced skepticism; when frames challenge partisan positions, motivated counter-arguing reduces effects. Chong and Druckman's (2007) empirical demonstration that competitive framing reduces net effects—because each side's partisan audience processes their preferred frame—demonstrates this motivational architecture.

At the schema level, Bartlett's (1932) schema theory explains how frames activate and modify existing cognitive schemas. Immigration "economic contribution" frames activate economic schema networks; immigration "cultural threat" frames activate security schema networks. The resulting evaluations reflect the schema-based processing structure activated by the frame, explaining why the same individual can hold contradictory attitudes when different frames activate different schema networks (Zaller, 1992).

#### **4. Methodology**

The recommended methodology for framing effects research combines experimental and survey methods with temporal tracking. The core experimental design employs a 2 (frame type: episodic vs. thematic, or gain vs. loss) × 2 (elaboration condition: high vs. low) between-

subjects factorial design with random assignment. News stimuli should be professionally produced articles manipulating only the focal frame while holding all other content constant—this requires careful pilot testing with content analysis validation confirming manipulation success.

Outcome measurement should address four domains: attitude formation (primary dependent variable, multi-item scale on issue position); responsibility attribution (individual vs. societal); policy support (specific policy instrument preferences); and metacognitive awareness (did participants notice the frame?). Mediator measurement for the CMMF should include belief importance ratings and belief content ratings (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012 operationalization), allowing mediation pathway decomposition via the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018).

Key moderator variables requiring measurement include: political knowledge (factual test), need for cognition (NCS-18), partisan identity strength (ANES party identification scale), and issue involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Sample size calculation for moderated mediation requires accounting for the typically small to moderate effect sizes in framing research. Power analysis for detecting  $d = .25$  with 80% power and two-tailed  $\alpha = .05$  indicates  $N = 255$  per condition; the recommended minimum per cell is  $N = 100$ , total  $N \geq 400$ .

For competitive framing designs, within-subjects approaches controlling for prior issue attitudes are recommended over between-subjects designs, as competitive framing effects are particularly sensitive to pre-existing attitude strength. Temporal tracking designs should include follow-up assessments at 1 day, 1 week, and 3 weeks to model effect decay curves.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The meta-analytic evidence base for framing effects supports several robust conclusions. First, equivalence framing effects (gain vs. loss) are consistently found in hypothetical choice scenarios but show substantially reduced effects in naturalistic news consumption contexts where prior knowledge, issue involvement, and counter-information are present. Second, emphasis framing effects—the type most relevant to routine political news—are small to moderate in magnitude (meta-analytic  $d = .15-.35$ ) but meaningful given political communication scale: if framing produces even a 5% attitude shift in a politically divided population, the electoral implications can be substantial.

Third, moderation by political knowledge produces counterintuitive findings: knowledgeable citizens are not simply more resistant to framing, but rather show stronger

applicability effects while showing reduced availability effects. This suggests knowledge changes the mechanism rather than simply reducing effect magnitude—knowledgeable audiences become more susceptible to sophisticated, applicability-based framing while becoming more resistant to simple accessibility-based framing.

Fourth, temporal dynamics show frame effects decay significantly over two weeks in typical conditions, but persistence is enhanced by: repeated frame exposure, absence of competing counter-frames, high issue involvement, and ideological frame-audience alignment. The practical implication is that a single news story's framing effects are relatively transient, but the cumulative impact of consistent framing across a news cycle can produce durable attitude structures.

Fifth, competitive framing conditions significantly constrain net effects—when audiences are exposed to both frames simultaneously, the net attitude shift is substantially smaller than single-frame exposure, though it is not zero. This provides moderate empirical support for journalistic "balance" as a partial corrective for frame effects, though the correction is incomplete.

## **6. Implications**

The CMMF and framing effects evidence carry several implications for democratic communication theory and practice. For journalists, the demonstration that episodic frames systematically produce individual responsibility attributions while thematic frames produce structural attributions suggests that routine episodic news coverage may systematically undermine understanding of structural causes of social problems (poverty, inequality, health disparities). This has direct implications for what might be called "framing responsibility" in journalism—the obligation to consider the cognitive consequences of routinely chosen narrative structures.

For media literacy education, the finding that political knowledge changes framing mechanisms (rather than simply reducing effects) suggests that knowledge-focused curricula may be insufficient. Metacognitive awareness training—explicitly teaching audiences to identify and evaluate frames—may be more effective at reducing framing vulnerability than factual knowledge accumulation alone. The finding that NFC moderates framing effects further suggests that motivation-building (encouraging analytical engagement with news) may complement knowledge-building in media literacy programs.

For communication researchers, the CMMF provides a testable computational architecture that generates specific predictions about framing effects across content domains, audience segments, and media platforms. The model's explicit incorporation of processing depth, motivated reasoning, and schema activation enables more precise experimental design than previous framework-level accounts.

## **7. Limitations**

The framing effects literature faces several persistent limitations. First, ecological validity remains a critical concern: most experiments present single news articles to university students in controlled settings, while real framing effects occur through repeated, selective exposure in social media environments with algorithmic amplification. Second, virtually all framing research is short-term; no study has tracked framing effects longitudinally across naturalistic news consumption over months or years. Third, visual framing—the selection and composition of photographs accompanying news text—is theoretically recognized but methodologically understudied despite photographs' disproportionate cognitive impact. Fourth, the cross-cultural generalizability of framing effects is undermined by the dominance of US and Western European samples in the experimental literature. Fifth, framing effects in social media environments—where users serve as co-framers through sharing and commenting—are theorized but inadequately empirically characterized.

## **8. Conclusion**

Framing effects represent one of the most theoretically rich and practically consequential domains in political communication research. The Cognitive Mechanism Model of Framing proposed here integrates availability, applicability, motivated reasoning, and schema activation accounts into a unified computational framework applicable across media environments and issue domains. The meta-analytic evidence establishes framing effects as real, modest in magnitude, and importantly moderated by political knowledge, processing depth, and motivational orientation. The research agenda identified here—including longitudinal designs, visual framing experiments, cross-cultural replication, and social media framing dynamics—represents the frontier for a field whose implications for democratic communication are both profound and urgently relevant.

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