THE INFLUENCE OF PARTISAN CONFLICT ON POLICY ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

MARY LAYTON ATKINSON: The Influence of Partisan Conflict on Policy Attitudes.
(Under the direction of Frank R. Baumgartner)

The central question the project asks is to what degree are policy attitudes shaped by aversion to partisan conflict versus the substance of proposed legislation? I argue that the tenor of elite debate—which is often highlighted by the news media and characterized by them as combative—acts as a powerful signal that shapes public policy opinion in predictable ways. The news media's focus on heated partisan debate can erode public support for policies associated with it because many Americans view such conflict as a sign of dysfunction in the government. Each of the articles that comprise the dissertation uses a different methodological approach to test this hypothesis: a natural experiment, a controlled experiment, and an aggregate level examination of the relationship between policy debate in the news and policy-specific mood over time. I find that approximately two-thirds of policy-focused news reports employ a "conflict frame" that highlights precisely the elements of the lawmaking process that many Americans dislike. Further, I find that the public responds more negatively to policies associated with partisan conflict, even when controlling for factors related to the substance of the bill and to individual's underlying policy preferences. These findings are of importance for lawmakers and scholars of public opinion alike. They suggest that to fully understand patterns of public policy opinion we must examine attitudes toward the substance of policies *and* the process of lawmaking.

For my parents.

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1 INTRODUCTION

News reports about policymaking are often filled with colorful descriptions of partisan debates, battles, and brawls on The Hill. Reporters seize on these "more dramatic and controversial aspects of politics" to increase the entertainment value of public affairs reports, to craft a running story line that can be updated regularly, and to conform to norms regarding what constitutes "balanced coverage" (Patterson 1993, 60, also see: Bennett 1996; Graber 1984; Iyengar, Norpoth, Hanh 2004; Jamieson 1992; Zaller 1999). Yet, prior research demonstrates that many Americans dislike partisan conflict and view nearly all policy debate as politically motivated "bickering" that stands in the way of real problem-solving (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Many Americans believe there is a "best way" to correct the problems we face as a nation and think that a properly functioning government should "just fix it" without wasting time on needless debate (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

When policy disputes become heated and protracted—as with the 2009 debate over health care, the budget negotiations of 2011, or the sequestration debate of 2013—the public grows increasingly cynical. For instance, nearly three quarters of respondents surveyed at the height of the 2009 health care debate stated the debate demonstrated that "our policymaking process is broken," rather than working as intended (Kaiser 2010). Similarly, when survey takers were asked to describe in their own words the state of political debate at the height of the 2011 budget negotiations, the most common responses were "ridiculous," "disgusting," and "stupid" (Pew 2011).

In an age of both intense political controversy and seemingly widespread aversion to

partisan debate, studies of the effects of exposure to political conflict have become an important area of research. Scholars have investigated topics such as the link between exposure to political conflict and trust in government, approval of the government and the institutions that comprise it, and support for the political system (e.g. Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht 1997; Cappella and Jamieson 1996; Forgette and Morris 2006; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Collectively, these works demonstrate that heightened periods of political debate lead to more negative public assessments of the government, Congress, and the political system. I build on these prior studies, investigating the role exposure to partisan debate plays in shaping attitudes toward specific policies. I examine the degree to which policy attitudes are shaped by aversion to the process of policymaking versus the substance of proposed legislation.

The bodies of literature on cognition, attitude formation, and issue framing provide the undergirding of the theory I test (e.g. Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1996; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). What these schools of thought share is an assumption that political attitudes are formed through an aggregation process that draws on the mix of information an individual associates with a given target (such as a person, a policy, or a bill). Further, each of these schools of thought argues that the more salient the information associated with a particular target, the more that information will contribute to an individual's overall attitude toward the target.

Building on this work, I argue that information about the process of lawmaking—which is highlighted by the news media and characterized by them as combative—becomes associated with and shapes attitudes toward the policies under consideration by lawmakers. Thus, individuals who are disgusted by the tenor and tactics of the debate may turn against the policy proposal itself. Among individuals who have a negative response to political debate, exposure to partisan conflict should both: 1) Lead to the sentiment that the policymaking process is broken, and 2) Dampen support for the policies associated with such

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controversies. This reaction is most likely among those with weak prior attitudes on the policy in question and should be minimal among those with strong preexisting attitudes.

I test this theory using three methodological approaches: a controlled experiment, a natural experiment, and an aggregate level examination of the relationship between policy debate in the news and aggregate level policy opinion over time. While the chapters are written in the style of articles that can each stand on their own, they also work together to provide answers to the project's central question. The controlled experiment allows me to manipulate descriptions of the policymaking process and issolate their influence on policy opinions. Its participants were randomly assigned to one of six treatment groups and asked to read a short vignette describing a fictional education policy. All of the treatments open with a lead paragraph that describes the education bill as one "designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers." The six treatments differ in that they vary both the tone of debate (heated or civil) and the substance of the article. This allows for a comparison of support for the bill among participants who view a "heated debate" treatment versus a "civil debate" treatment.

While the results of the controlled experiment are promising—they show that bills associated with high levels of conflict receive significantly less support than do those associated with lower levels of conflict—the test leaves questions about generalizability and external validity unresolved. To address these questions, the natural experiment and aggregate level study provide evidence from the "real word" that bolster the lab findings. The controlled experiment examines attitudes toward the Federal Marriage Amendment (a proposed gay marriage ban) during 2004 and 2005. During that period, 14 states considered ballot measures on constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage, creating a high conflict environment in those states. The remaining states experienced demonstrably less debate during this period, allowing for a comparison of attitudes toward the FMA among states with high versus low levels of conflict. I find that the average level of support for the

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FMA decreased by 12 percentage points among residents of high conflict states during this period, while support remained unchanged among residents of other states.

Together, the two micro-level tests show that considerations about the policymaking process can have a substantive, negative effect on policy opinions. Put simply, policies that are associated with partisan debate garner less public support than do policies not associated with such debate. This creates perverse incentives for lawmakers in the minority party. Those who want to stymie the majority party's legislative agenda have an incentive to gin up nasty brawls over the majority's proposals—even when (and perhaps especially when) the substance of the legislation is publically popular. Doing so will generate media attention focused on the conflict, and exposure to that media coverage will dampen public support for the bills and actors associated with it.

As a result of this dynamic between the majority party and the minority party, a cyclical pattern of public opinion emerges. Individuals want more government services and more federal spending in areas like health care, education, and social welfare until proposals are put forward that would provide them. Once a reform plan is introduced, the debate begins and is quickly picked up by the press. As the rhetoric becomes increasingly heated, public opposition to the controversial plan mounts and public demand for increased spending and services decreases. Eventually, the pendulum of public opinion swings firmly toward the minority party, and it seizes power. Using the election as a mandate for smaller government, the new majority party proposes plans to reduce government spending and cut government services. Yet these proposals ultimately suffer the same fate as the liberal policies that came before them, and public demand for increased spending and services again begins to swell.

The cyclical pattern of public opinion described above has long been observed and studied. Traditionally, it has been seen as evidence that the public is rational and responsive to the substance of new legislation—demanding less government when more spending and services are provided and more government when fewer services and less spending

is provided (e.g. Alesina and and Rosenthal 1989; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; Wlezien 1995). In the fourth chapter, I argue that aggregate level public opinion is responsive to policy-focused news reports rather than government action *per se*. I create new full-text databases of policy-focused news reports and use content analysis to demonstrate that information about the policymaking process is more plentiful and prominent than is information about the substance of new laws. I then model aggregate level policy opinion as a function of policy-focused news coverage, change in government spending, and the passage of major legislation. I find that the public is more responsive to news reports about lawmaking than to objective measures of government activity. In fact, public opinion can shift in response to a salient policy debate even when policy change does not occur and the status quo remains in place.

This project offers insights that are of importance for lawmakers and scholars of public opinion alike. Policy opinions are influenced by news coverage that highlights the non-substantive elements of the policymaking process, such as the tone of elite debate and the tactics used by lawmakers to advance their preferred policies. Even when the public wants to see policy reform, and even when the provisions of the legislation being drafted are publicly popular, policies associated with heated debate can suffer a public backlash. People simply do not like to see the sausage being made, and when they inevitably do, it turns their stomachs. We should not, therefore, automatically assume that policy opposition reflects attitudes toward the substance of the legislation under debate. To fully understand patterns of public policy opinion we must examine attitudes toward the substance of policies *and* the process of lawmaking.

2 "BROKEN POLITICS" AND INDIVIDUAL LEVEL POLICY ATTITUDES

At the beginning of 2009, most Americans either viewed the health reform taking shape in Washington favorably or had yet to form an opinion. An online Harris poll showed that in February of 2009, the fledgling plan had 50% approval and 20% disapproval, with the balance of Americans undecided (Harris 2009).

The key provisions of the reform package that was developed over the course of the next 13 months garnered broad public support. Polls revealed that 82% of respondents strongly or somewhat favored expanding Medicaid and SCHIP (a health care program for impoverished children) (Kaiser 2010). Eighty percent strongly or somewhat favored requiring health insurance companies to cover everyone who applies for insurance, regardless of pre-existing conditions (Kaiser 2010). Sixty eight percent of respondents answered that they strongly or somewhat favored requiring all Americans to have medical insurance if those who could not afford it were given financial help (Kaiser 2010). Nearly 60% supported requiring companies not providing their employees with health coverage to pay into a government health care fund (Pew 2009a). And 58% supported raising taxes on families with high incomes as a means of paying for reforms (Pew 2009a).

Despite the popularity of the bill's provisions, opposition to the plan increased throughout 2009, climbing above 50% by the end of the year (e.g. ABC News/Washington Post 2009; CNN 2009; The Economist/YouGov 2009). Why did the tide of public opinion change so rapidly for the Affordable Care Act and how could a plan with such popular provisions become so broadly *un*popular? Rather than being extraordinary, I argue that the pattern of public response to the Affordable Care Act is typical in an age of media cynicism and public opposition to partisan debate. I use a controlled experiment to demonstrate that

policy attitudes are not solely a function of the substantive elements of bills and policy debates. The tenor of debate—which is often highlighted by the news media and characterized by them as combative—is also a powerful signal that shapes public policy opinion in two distinct ways. First, the association of a given bill with partisan conflict has a direct, negative impact on public policy support among individuals who view such debate as a sign of dysfunction in government. Second, ideologically-minded individuals use the presence (or absence) of partisan debate as a cue about the ideological content of legislation. Among these individuals, exposure to partisan debate shapes policy attitudes indirectly by altering the perceived location of the bill on the left/right ideological spectrum. In the aggregate, policies associated with partisan conflict receive less public support than do identical bills that do not generate such controversy.

These findings have important implications for the broader work on public policy attitudes at both the micro and macro levels. They indicate that policy attitudes are sensitive to non-substantive information about the process by which policies are made—and the ways in which that process is characterized by the news media. This creates perverse incentives for lawmakers in the opposition party to attack, battle, and brawl over the legislation put forward by the majority party—even when (and perhaps especially when) the substance of that legislation is publically popular. I further discuss these implications in the concluding section of the paper. In the following section, I review prior studies documenting the pervasive use of the "conflict frame" in news reports on public affairs, which I argue focuses public attention on the partisan aspects of lawmaking that many Americans dislike. I then build on established theories in political psychology to make the case that the association of a bill with partisan conflict in the news has predictable and significant effects on policy attitudes.

2.1 Conflict in the News

The factual information citizens receive from news reports about the content of proposed laws is often packaged with descriptions of the political conflicts surrounding the bills. Colorful references to poisonous partisan debate, brass knuckles politics, battles, attacks, and stalemate on the Hill are frequent elements of reports on policymaking. Public affairs journalists and editors have incentives to focus on the conflicts inherent in the process of lawmaking. Doing so increases the entertainment value of the articles (Iyengar, Norpoth, Hanh 2004; Zaller 1999), provides a running story line that can be updated regularly (Patterson 1993), and conforms to journalistic norms regarding what constitutes "hard news" and "balanced coverage" (Patterson 2007). As a result, partisan rhetoric on the Hill is amplified by the news media, who track the successes and setbacks of each party, presenting political elites as "polarized forces" (Newman, Just and Crigler 1992).

Viewed through this lens, the actions of politicians seem petty and self-interested. The legitimacy of differences of opinion over the best course of action for the country are lost in the cacophony of partisan "bickering" trumpeted by the press. The news media seldom highlight lawmakers' efforts at compromise or their dedication to constituent's needs. Little attention is given to the underlying problems at issue, their causes, and the needs of the groups most affected. The details of the bills generating such debate are also frequently subordinated to descriptions of the partisan conflict.

The proclivity of journalists to focus on the political conflict when reporting on public affairs has been documented in a number of studies (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1993; Pew 2010a; Rozell 1996). In particular, a Pew Research Center study analyzed news coverage of the recent health care debate. Rather than focusing on the substantive elements of the debate, the study found that more than 40% of the coverage focused on politics—the strategies and tactics of, and the horse race between the actors on both sides of the issue (2010a). Descriptions of the proposed provisions of the

various reform plans comprised the second largest category of articles, accounting for 23% of all coverage. Some articles in this category provided substantive analyses of those provisions, however, "many others, while outlining the elements of the proposals, also focused on the political calculus for passage" (Pew 2010a, 8). Descriptions of partisan conflict were, therefore, pervasive elements of the coverage of health care reform. Just 9% of the coverage focused on the underlying issue—"the health care system itself, what works, what doesn't, what needs to be fixed and what is all right" (Pew 2010a, 7).

Public opinion polls reveal that Americans were largely unsatisfied with the media's coverage of the health care debate (Pew 2009b; Pew 2010b). In August of 2009, 70% of the individuals surveyed responded that news organizations had done either a poor or only a fair job of "of explaining the effect the proposals would have on people like [themselves]" (Pew 2009b). When asked for their impressions of the debate itself, respondents were similarly negative in their views. Nearly three quarters of respondents surveyed at the height of the debate stated that it demonstrated that "our policymaking process is broken," rather than working as intended (Kaiser 2010). When asked to give a one-word impression of Congress in the days just prior to the House vote on the sweeping reform package that was ultimately enacted, the most frequent responses were "dysfunctional," "corrupt," "self-serving," and "inept" (Pew 2010c).

In focusing on strategy, conflict, and the horse race, the news media are highlighting precisely the elements of the legislative process that many members of the public dislike and view as a sign of dysfunction in government. Many Americans believe there is a "best way" to correct our collective problems and think that a properly functioning government would "just fix it" without wasting time on what they perceive to be needless debate (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Hird and Reese 1999).

This aversion to political debate and conflict among Americans has been shown to have a variety of negative consequences for political attitudes. Forgette and Morris (2006),

for instance, find that "conflict-laden television coverage decreases public evaluations of political institutions, trust in leadership, and overall support for political parties and the system as a whole" (447). Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht (1997) demonstrate that periods of heightened conflict in Congress and the reflection of that conflict in the news have a negative impact on Congressional approval. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) show that for Americans without strong policy preferences, disapproval of the conflictual process of policymaking played a larger role in shaping attitudes toward the government than did disapproval of government policies. Exposure to negativity and incivility in campaign advertisements has been shown to decrease turnout (Kahn and Kenney 1999), decrease political trust (Lau et al. 2007; Mutz and Reeves 2005), and decrease feelings of political efficacy (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Lau et al. 2007).[1]

This project builds on these prior studies by investigating the role exposure to partisan conflict plays in shaping attitudes toward specific policies. I investigate the degree to which public policy attitudes are shaped by conceptions of the process of lawmaking as compared with the substance of the proposals. Put differently, I ask how Americans respond to bills that they believe are the product of a "broken," "dysfunctional" lawmaking process. I turn to the literature on cognition and attitude formation for insight into the processes by which impressions of lawmaking come to influence attitudes toward specific policies.

2.2 Cognition and Attitude Formation

The specific processes by which individuals form political attitudes and the degree to which those attitudes are stable over time has been a topic of research and debate in political science for nearly 50 years (e.g. Converse 1964; Achen 1975; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Lodge McGraw and Stroh 1989; Taber and Lodge 2006). My goal is not to

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[1]But note that in the context of campaign ads, negativity has also been found to have some positive effects, such as increased political knowledge (Lau et al. 2007, 1999) and increased political engagement (Brooks and Greer 2007).

generate a new, competing theory, but instead is to highlight some important commonalities among the established schools of thought—particularly between the accessibility-based models developed by Zaller (1992) and Zaller and Feldman (1992) and the online processing model developed by Lodge and his colleagues (e.g. Kim, Taber and Lodge 2010; Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge and Taber 2005). I draw on these commonalities to demonstrate that attitudes toward the political process of lawmaking naturally spill over onto and shape attitudes toward the policies associated with political controversy.

The Zaller and Feldman (1992) model and the online processing model both assume that political judgments are generated through an aggregation process that draws on the range of considerations an individual associates with a given target (such as a candidate or policy). Zaller and Feldman (1992) argue that individuals arrange the information they encounter into "schema," a term from cognitive psychology that refers to the mental framework used to organize ideas and make sense of new information by associating it with similar, familiar concepts. According to this school of thought, attitudes are formed by sampling from and averaging across associated information accessible in memory.

The online processing literature also draws on concepts from cognitive psychology. It describes the organization of associated concepts in an individual's mind as a series of "nodes" and "links." For a specific policy proposal, for instance, some of the many nodes that might be linked with it include information about the bill's provisions, information about the groups and individuals who endorse and oppose it, the party affiliation associated with it, and more abstract concepts like "expensive" or "conservative" (Lodge and Taber 2000). Each of these associations will be charged with a positive, negative, or neutral feeling. Summing the charges on each of the associated nodes generates global affect (e.g. Kim, Taber and Lodge 2010; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge and Taber 2005).

While the two schools of thought differ in the roles they believe memory and emotion play in attitude formation, at a more basic level they both describe attitude formation as the

result of individuals linking up and aggregating across associated concepts in their minds.

Axiom 1: Political attitudes are formed through an aggregation process that draws on the mix of information an individual associates with a given target.

Both models also assume that the recency of exposure to information and the degree to which the information is salient will affect how it is factored in to the individual's overall attitude (e.g. Kim et al. 2010; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge et al. 1989; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Salient, recently encountered information will be more heavily weighted in the global tally according to the online processing model. Similarly, Zaller and Feldman (1992) argue that only information that is salient at the time the attitude is called for will be averaged across in forming an attitude on the spot. Both schools of thought, therefore, acknowledge the importance of priming and framing effects in the formation of political attitudes. Factors that are focused on by the news media and political elites (or made salient via other means, such as an exogenous event or by the question order on a survey) are made readily available for consideration and, thus, play an important role in shaping political attitudes. This assumption of the two models has been confirmed by numerous studies that demonstrate the influence of priming and framing effects on both individual and aggregate level attitudes (e.g. Baumgartner, DeBouf and Boydstun 2008; Chong and Druckman 2007a; Chong and Druckman 2007b; Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kellstedt 2003; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997).

Axiom 2: The more salient the information associated with a particular target, the more it will contribute to an individual's global attitude.

Axiom 3: Media frames shape public attitudes by influencing the salience of particular

considerations.

Finally, both models hold that the political novice and the political sophisticate will process information differently. Political sophisticates will have a larger body of knowledge to draw from in forming their opinions, leading to attitude stability. Further, sophisticates are expected to filter new information as it is received, accepting information that supports their preexisting attitudes and discounting information that challenges them (e.g. Fischle 2000; Kim, Taber and Lodge 2010; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006; Zaller and Feldman 1992). The political novice, however, does not hold stable, pre-formed attitudes. Instead, the attitudes such individuals reveal are heavily dependent upon the mix of information that is currently salient to them—in the words of Zaller and Feldman, the information "at the top of the head." As the mix of salient considerations about a given topic changes, so will the attitude expressed (although according to Zaller and Feldman, an individual's attitude will vary around a central tendency).

Axiom 4: Individuals with strong prior attitudes filter new information, accepting information that confirms their prior beliefs and discounting information that challenges them.

2.2.1 Cues and Heuristics

An additional branch of the literature on attitude formation focuses on the use of heuristics by individuals to aid them in decision-making (e.g. Brady and Sniderman 1985; Boudreau 2009; McKelvey and Ordshook 1984, 1985; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). "Heuristics are judgmental shortcuts, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices ..." (Sniderman et al. 1991, 19). Lau and Redlawsk (2001) outline five such cues that individuals routinely use to help them make judgments about candidates: party

identification, ideological cues, endorsements, candidate viability, and candidate "likeabil-
ity." Perhaps the most often used heuristic among these is the party cue. Voters familiar
with the platforms of the major parties save time figuring out where a particular candidate
stands on the issues by assuming the views of the candidate align with the views of the
candidate's party (e.g. Aldrich 1995; Rahn 1993; Schaffner and Streb 2002). Heuristics
are also used when individuals are asked to make judgments about policies. For instance,
Lupia (1994) found that voters used heuristics to guide their attitudes toward an arcane
California ballot measure related to insurance reform. Voters were able to decide whether
to vote for or against the measure just by knowing the insurance industry's position on it.

Level of political knowledge influences both the heuristics individuals use and the de-
gree to which they do so effectively. Political sophisticates, who view political decisions
through an ideological lens, are more likely to use party cues, ideological cues, and en-
dorsements to aid them in determining the degree to which the views of a candidate or the
contents of a bill aligns with their underlying ideological preferences (Law and Redlawsk
2001). These individuals are often able to use heuristics effectively. Individuals with low
levels of political knowledge are likely to use heuristics ineffectively and to draw incor-
rect conclusions from them (e.g. Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000;
Kuklinski, Quirk, Schweider, and Rich 1998). Such individuals are more likely to use cues
such as candidate likeability and candidate viability than are individuals with higher levels
of knowledge (Lau and Redlawsk 2001).

2.3 How Conflict Influences Policy Attitudes

The association of a bill with conflict can influence policy attitudes both directly and
indirectly. Based on the four axioms above, the direct process by which conceptions of the
lawmaking process influence policy attitudes is straightforward. When individuals asso-
ciate a particular policy with controversy and debate, those considerations become part of

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the mix of information that is aggregated in forming an attitude toward the policy. Individuals who are not ideologically-minded and who have lower levels of political knowledge are particularly apt to view such controversy as a sign of dysfunction. Among individuals who have a negative response to the tenor of the debate, attitudes toward the policy itself will sour through this associative process. The more salient the conflict is—which can be influenced by media coverage of partisan "bickering"—the more heavily conceptions of the lawmaking process will weigh in to the individual's overall assessment of the policy. Some individuals are less likely to be swayed by the tenor of the debate than are others, however. Those with high levels of political knowledge and strong prior attitudes are less likely to be influenced directly by exposure to policy debate because their preferences tend to be stable over time, they tend to discount information that challenges their prior beliefs, and they are less inclined to view debate in a negative light. In the aggregate, a policy that is the center of a heated, partisan policy debate will receive less public support than will a policy that does not generate heated debate.

H1: The greater the amount of conflict associated with a policy, the less public support it will receive.

H2: The policy attitudes of individuals with weak prior attitudes will be the most directly affected by exposure to conflict.

Figure 2.1 summarizes this associative process. Here, the "target" is the Affordable Care Act. The concepts linked with the policy in the individual's mind include President Obama (which is a positive association for this individual), and "partisan," "divisive," and "expensive" (all negative associations). Notice that some of the nodes are larger than others. The size of the node indicates the salience of the concept. The concepts that were

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most heavily covered in the news—those characterizing the lawmaking process—are most salient here. To form an attitude toward the policy, the individual calculates a weighted sum of the charges on each of the associated nodes and arrives at an overall negative impression of the Affordable Care Act.
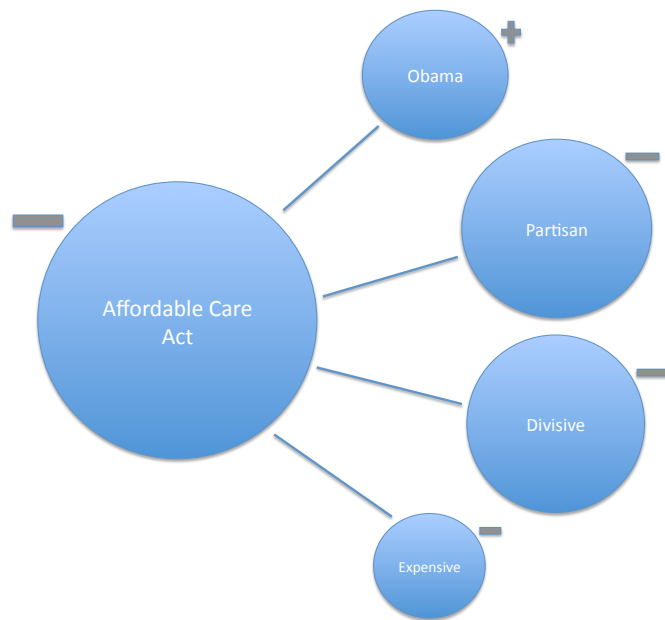
Figure 2.1: Concepts Associated With the Affordable Care Act

The innovation here is not that associated concepts form the bases of political attitudes. We've long know that, just as we've long know that framing effects can have a powerful influence on attitudes. What runs counter to conventional wisdom is the idea that *non-substantive* considerations are part of these associative maps and, due to their heightened salience, can overwhelm the influence of substantive considerations in the formation of policy attitudes.

Partisan conflict also has the potential to influence policy attitudes in an indirect way, by acting as a cue about the ideological content of the bill's provisions. Individuals with high levels of political knowledge and strong policy preferences generally view policy debate through an ideological lens, looking for cues that can help them place the policy on

the left/right ideological spectrum (while the political novice, who does not have preformed preferences and strong ideological leanings, is less inclined to do so). By figuring out how closely the bill's provisions align with their own policy preferences, these individuals can decide how much they like or dislike the bill. To help accomplish that task, these individuals might use the presence (or absence) of partisan debate as a shortcut, just as they use party identification as a shortcut that helps them determine where politicians stand on various issues. When a piece of legislation generates bipartisan support, this might be viewed as a cue that the bill's content is fairly moderate; after all, bipartisan legislation ought to reflect compromise and compromise leads to moderation. Conversely, when a bill generates partisan debate, ideologically-minded citizens might take this as a sign that the bill's content is ideologically extreme. In this way, the presence or absence of partisan debate could influence public policy attitudes indirectly, by altering the perceived location of the bill on the left/right ideological spectrum.

H3: When a bill generates heated debate, ideologically-minded individuals will perceive its content as more ideologically extreme than if the bill generates bipartisan support.

Note that this hypothesis leads to an expectation that is somewhat counter-intuitive. If the presence of conflict is used as an ideological cue, conflict should have the ability to *increase* support for legislation among some members of the public. For instance, suppose a Democratic bill is introduced in Congress that would increase public school funding. If the bill generated partisan conflict, strong liberals would place it closer to themselves (at the far left of the ideological spectrum) because the controversy would suggest to them that the bill is extremely liberal. Due to the perceived congruence between their own preferences and the content of the bill, strong liberals would be more inclined to support the bill under such circumstances than they would if the bill generated bi-partisan support. Conservatives, on

the other hand, would be less likely to support the bill if it generated controversy than they would if it were to receive bi-partisan support. This is because the heated debate would similarly suggest to them the extremely liberal nature of the bill. Ultimately, the closer an ideologically-minded individual places a bill to him or herself on the ideological spectrum, the more likely he or she will be to support it.

H4: Strong liberals will place Democratic bills closer to themselves on the ideological spectrum when such bills generate partisan debate, while moderates and conservatives will place them further away. Conversely, strong liberals and moderates will place Republican bills further from themselves on the ideological spectrum when such bills generate partisan debate, while strong conservatives will place them closer to themselves.

The basic causal structure outlined in this section is summarized by Figure 2.2. Conflict can affect policy attitudes directly, through the associative process described, or indirectly, by altering the perceived distance between the individual and the bill on the ideological spectrum. Whether the association of a bill with partisan debate causes an individual to place the bill closer to him or herself or further away depends upon the individual's ideological self-placement. But note that in the aggregate, the signal that a bill is ideologically extreme will be a negative for most Americans (because a minority of Americans place themselves at either extreme of the ideological spectrum).

2.4 Design

I use an experimental design to assess the influence of heated, partisan debate on policy attitudes.[2] The experiment was administered online to 367 UNC-Chapel Hill undergraduate students using the Qualtrics platform during the fall of 2011. Subjects, who were required to participate in the university subject pool or complete an alternative assignment,

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[2]UNC-Chapel Hill IRB number 11-1741.
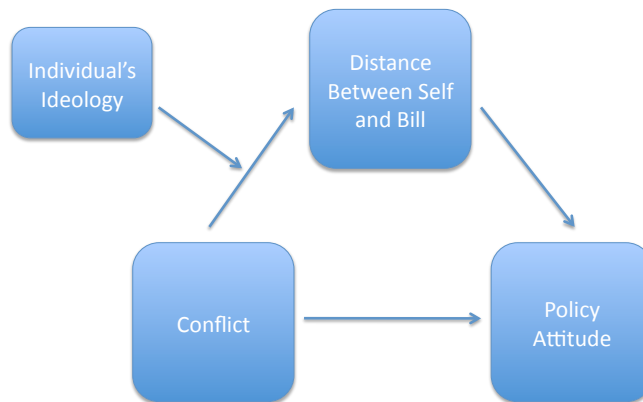
Figure 2.2: Direct and Indirect Influence of Conflict on Policy Attitudes

were first asked to complete a questionnaire that gathered demographic information as well as information on party identification, political ideology, political knowledge, and interest in politics.[3] Participants were then randomly assigned to one of six treatment groups and asked to read a short vignette (approximately 250 words long) about an education policy. Education was chosen because it was not a topic of national debate while the experiment was in the field, thereby minimizing the influence of real world policy debate on the experimental findings. All of the vignettes were modeled after real *New York Times* articles about the Obama health care plan (where education was substituted for health care), using as many verbatim statements from the articles as possible. While the real articles attribute

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[3]The use of a student subject pool poses some limitations for the project. First, levels of knowledge about and interest in politics are higher and less variable among a group of students enrolled in a college-level political science class than they would be among the general public. Nearly 94% of the respondents stated they were somewhat or very interested in politics, leaving just six percent of respondents with low levels of interest. On some measures of political knowledge contained in the pre-treatment questionnaire, more than 91% of participants responded correctly. This creates a hard test of the primary hypothesis, as conflict is expected to have the largest direct impact on the policy attitudes of those with low levels of political knowledge. Secondly, students are also fairly uniform in their support for education funding—nearly 71% stated they generally preferred more federal funding for K-12 education, and just under 7% stated that they would like to see the government spend less (with the balance saying the believe federal spending on education is "about right"). This also creates a hard test as those with strong, preformed attitudes are thought to resist the influence of exposure to conflict. Nevertheless, the uniformity of knowledge, interest, and preferences among students makes it impossible to test the ways in which these factors interact with exposure to conflict to influence policy attitudes. For that reason, I do not test hypothesis two here.

quotes to named party leaders (like Nancy Pelosi), no actual members of Congress were referenced by name in the treatments. (The treatments reference speakers with titles, such as "Committee Chairman," or use made up names.) This was done to prevent attitudes toward specific political figures from influencing participant responses. The vignettes were also designed by a graphic artist to look like articles downloaded from the *New York Times*.[4]

All of the treatments open with a lead paragraph that describes the education bill as one "designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers." The six treatments—summarized in Table 2.1—differ in that they vary both the tone of debate (heated or civil) as well as the substance of the article. The treatments that highlight partisan conflict use the headline, "Partisan battle on education heats up." The articles themselves describe the bill as "hotly contested," note that "the debate has deteriorated into a partisan brawl," and state that "Democrats will have to close ranks and vote as a bloc to pass the bill without Republican support." All of the treatments that employ a civil tone describe the bill as a bipartisan one, note that the bill is gaining momentum in the Senate, and describe lawmakers as working to reach a compromise.

Table 2.1: Description of Experimental Treatments

	Spending	**Efficacy**	**Tactics**
Heated Tone	Tone: "Partisan brawl," "hotly contested bill" Substance: Disagreement over bill's effect on deficit	Tone: "Partisan brawl," "hotly contested bill" Substance: Disagreement over efficacy of provisions	Tone: "Partisan brawl," "hotly contested bill" Substance: Bundle of amendments attached to bill
Civil Tone	Tone: "bipartisan bill," "working toward a compromise" Substance: Disagreement over bill's effect on deficit	Tone: "bipartisan bill," "working toward a compromise" Substance: Disagreement over efficacy of provisions	Tone: "bipartisan bill," "working toward a compromise" Substance: Bundle of amendments attached to bill

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[4]The full text of the treatments can be found in Appendix A.

The three different substantive treatments each focus on a distinct facet of real-world policy debate, as reported by the news media. Those facets are the parliamentary tactics being employed by the respective parties, the program's cost, and the efficacy of the plan's provisions. The tactics and procedures treatments provide minimal substantive information about the bill being considered (they note the party affiliation of the bill and provide the description of the bill that is common to all of the articles regarding "vastly more spending"). The article is focused on the attachment of a bundle of amendments to the bill, which are described by the Democrats as "delay tactics" in the heated conflict version of the article, and described as a method of insuring bipartisan support in the civil debate version of the article. The tactics treatments are, therefore, designed to show the impact of partisan debate on policy attitudes in an instance where very little substantive information is available.

The spending and efficacy treatments provide a more moderate level of substantive information about the bill. These treatments give arguments for and against the passage of the legislation, describing the particular elements of the bill about which the parties disagree. In the two "spending" treatments, Republicans reject Democrat's claims that the proposal will decrease the deficit. In the two "efficacy" treatments, Republicans assert that some of the bill's provisions might do more harm than good because they are "risky" and "untested," while Democrats state the plan will increase test scores. All four of these treatments, therefore, describe the substance of the policy debate. The civil and heated versions of the treatments manipulate the tone of that debate.

After reading the article to which they were assigned, all participants were asked to respond to several questions (the order of which was randomized). To assess perceptions of the policymaking process, respondents were asked: "Do you think the education reform process shows more that our policymaking process is working as intended, or more that our policymaking process is broken?" Respondents were also asked whether they support or oppose the policy and where they would place the policy on a seven-point ideological

scale.

2.5   Analysis and Findings

One of the key assumptions on which the primary hypothesis is built is that many Americans view partisan conflict as a sign of dysfunction in the lawmaking process. I examine the veracity of this assumption by comparing the proportion of respondents that stated the policymaking process is broken in the heated debate groups with that of participants in the civil debate groups. Table 2.2 shows the results of t-tests measuring differences in proportions between paired treatment groups—meaning differences between the Efficacy/Heated group and the Efficacy/Civil group were analyzed, differences between Spending/Heated and Spending/Civil were analyzed, and so on. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences in proportions between these paired groups.

Table 2.2: Proportion of Respondents Who Agree that the Policymaking Process is Broken, by Treatment Group

Treatment	Efficacy	Spending	Tactics	Overall
Heated Debate	0.45	0.48	0.59	0.51
Civil Debate	0.27	0.38	0.22	0.29
Difference	0.18*	0.10	0.37*	0.22*

* Indicates 95% confidence

Notice that in all cases, participants who received one of the heated debate treatments were more likely to view the policymaking process as broken than were participants who received one of the civil debate treatments. With the exception of the spending treatments, all of these differences are statistically significant. Overall, individuals who received one of the heated debate treatments were 22 percentage points more likely to view the policymaking process as broken than were individuals who received one of the civil debate treatments.

I further explore the factors that affect attitudes toward the policymaking process by modeling the likelihood of a "broken" response as a function of exposure to heated conflict,

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and of opposition to the education bill. By including both of these variables in the model, I can test the degree to which attitudes toward the policymaking process are a function of the amount of conflict inherent in the process as compared with approval/disapproval of the legislation produced by the process. The results of the model are shown in Table 2.3. They indicate that exposure to conflict is a statistically significant predictor of the belief that the policymaking process is broken, while opposition to the proposed bill is not. These findings provide strong evidence that heated, partisan debate is interpreted by many members of the public as a sign of dysfunction in government, which leads to more negative evaluations of the policymaking process.

Recall that H3 expects conflict to influence conceptions of the ideological content of the bill, causing individuals to view the bill's provisions as more ideologically extreme. To test this hypothesis, Table 2.4 compares the average ideological placement of the bill by respondents on a seven-point scale, across treatment group (where lower values indicate a more liberal placement of the bill and higher values indicate a more conservative placement of the bill). Paired t-tests are again used to assess statistical significance. This analysis provides evidence in support of the cue-taking hypothesis. The t-tests show that across all the substantive treatments, respondents who were exposed to conflict evaluated the bill as more liberal than did respondents who received the corresponding civil debate treatment. On average, individuals who received a heated debate treatment assessed the bill as being .5 points more liberal (on a seven-point scale) as compared with other respondents. Further, the influence of heated debate was strongest among respondents who received the "tactics" treatments, indicating that the presence of heated partisan debate is a particularly strong cue in instances where individuals have very low levels of substantive information about the bill under consideration.

Hypothesis four states that for some individuals, the association of a bill with partisan conflict will cause them to place the bill closer to themselves on the ideological spectrum.

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Table 2.3: Likelihood of Believing the Process is Broken

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Heated Debate Treatment	0.98*	0.22
Opposes the Bill	-0.50	0.33
Constant	-0.85*	0.17
N=367; Pseudo R^2=0.04		

* Indicates 95% confidence
Results are from a logit model.

Table 2.4: Average Ideological Placement of Bill on a Seven Point Scale

Treatment	Efficacy	Spending	Tactics	Overall
Heated Debate	2.9	2.7	2.9	2.8
Civil Debate	3.2	3.2	3.5	3.3
Difference	- 0.3*	- 0.5*	- 0.6*	- 0.5*

* Indicates 95% confidence
Lower values indicate a more liberal assessment of the bill's ideology, higher values indicate a more conservative assessment of the bill's ideology.

In the case of the education bill, strong liberals exposed to the heated debate treatment should place the bill closer to themselves, as the presence of debate should signal the extreme (very liberal) nature of the bill. Both moderates and strong conservatives should place the bill further from themselves on the ideological spectrum when it is associated with heated debate. To test this hypothesis, I first generate a variable that measures the absolute value of the distance between the individual's placement of the bill on a seven-point ideological scale and the individual's placement of him or herself on the same scale (which was assessed with the pre-treatment questionnaire). The variable has a mean of 1.6 and ranges from zero to five with a standard deviation of 1.2. I then model this distance as a function of exposure to heated debate, the individual's ideology, and a set of variables that interact these indicators. Ideology is measured with two dummy variables—one that identifies strong liberals (respondents who placed themselves at one or two on the seven-point scale), and one that identifies strong conservatives (respondents who placed themselves at six or seven on the seven-point scale). Exposure to conflict is measured with an additional

dummy variable that indicates whether the respondent received one of the three heated debate treatments. The ideology variables are multiplied with the conflict variable to create interaction terms.

Table 2.5 displays the results of this model. They indicate that strong liberals who were exposed to partisan conflict placed the bill closer to themselves than did strong liberals who were not exposed to heated debate (as indicated by the negative, statistically significant coefficient of the interaction term "Heated Debate X Strong Liberal"). The sign of the coefficient on the interaction term, "Heated Debate X Strong Conservative" is positive, indicating that strong conservatives who were exposed to heated debate placed the bill further from themselves than did strong conservatives who received one of the "civil debate"' treatments. This interaction term is not statistically significant, however.[5] These findings provide moderate support for hypothesis four. Strong liberals do, in fact, view controversial Democratic bills as being closer to themselves on the ideological spectrum, as compared with bills that receive bipartisan support.

Table 2.5: Absolute Value of Distance Between Ideological Self-Placement and Placement of Bill

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Heated Debate Treatment	0.12	0.13
Strong Liberal	0.20	0.16
Strong Conservative	1.83*	0.16
Heated Debate X Strong Liberal	-0.52*	0.22
Heated Debate X Strong Conservative	0.11	0.23
Constant	1.14*	0.09
N=364; R^2=0.49		

* Indicates 95% confidence
Results are from an OLS model.

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[5]The failure of the "Heated Debate X Strong Conservative" to attain statistical significance is likely related to the presence of multicollinearity. Both of the interaction terms are highly correlated with the heated debate variable.

The ultimate goal of this project is to assess the impact of exposure to heated partisan debate on policy attitudes. Toward that end, Table 2.6 compares the proportion of respondents who stated support for the education bill across treatment groups. Paired t-tests are again used to assess statistical significance. Overall, 69% of respondents given a civil debate treatment supported the bill as compared with just 52% of respondents given a heated debate treatment—a difference of 17 percentage points. This finding provides support for the first hypothesis, which states that the association of a policy with heightened debate results in decreased support for it. Looking at the paired, substantive treatment groups, 73% of the respondents in the efficacy/civil debate group supported the bill, and the same percentage of respondents supported the bill in the tactics/civil debate group. Support among respondents who received the heated debate version of those treatments fell to 50% and 48% respectively.

The difference in support between the heated and civil versions of the spending treatment is not statistically significant, although the difference is in the expected direction. Interestingly, support for the bill is highest among those who received the spending/heated debate treatment as compared with any of the other heated debate treatments. It seems that partisan conflict over spending and the deficit is less likely to tamp down support for legislation than is debate on other topics. This suggests that debate over government spending may be seen as more legitimate than are other substantive topics of debate.

Table 2.6: Proportion of Respondents who Support the Bill

Treatment	Efficacy	Spending	Tactics	Overall
Heated Debate	0.50	0.58	0.48	0.52
Civil Debate	0.73	0.62	0.73	0.69
Difference	-0.23*	-0.04	-0.25*	-0.17*

* Indicates 95% confidence

Thus far, we have seen evidence in support of the hypothesis that exposure to conflict affects policy attitudes directly, and support for the hypothesis that conflict affects attitudes

indirectly (by causing citizens to alter their placement of the bill on the ideological spectrum). As a means of testing these hypotheses against one another, I model the likelihood of support for the education bill as a function of exposure to conflict and the distance between the ideological placement of the bill and the individual's ideological self-placement. If conflict has a direct effect on policy attitudes, the coefficient on the conflict variable should be negative and statistically significant. If exposure to conflict affects policy attitudes indirectly, the coefficient on the ideology variable should be negative and statistically significant. If conflict affects policy attitudes both directly and indirectly, we should see the coefficients for both variables attain statistical significance.[6]

Table 2.7 displays the results of the model. The coefficient on the conflict variable is negative and statistically significant, indicating that the association of a bill with heated conflict lowers support for it. The coefficient on the ideology variable is also negative and statistically significant, indicating that individuals who place the ideology of the bill further from their own ideological preferences are less likely to support the bill.

Table 2.8 shows the predicted probability of support for the education bill for the two categories of the conflict variable and for various levels of the ideological distance measure. The probability of support for the education bill was 19 percentage points lower among individuals who were exposed to heated debate (holding the distance variable at its mean). This finding provides strong evidence that exposure to partisan conflict has a direct, negative, substantively meaningful impact on policy attitudes. The probability of support for an individual who perceives no difference between the ideology of the bill and his or her own ideology is 77%, as compared with 57% for an individual who places the bill two points away from him or herself—a difference of 20 percentage points. The predicted probabilities, therefore, indicate that conflict has both a direct and indirect effect on policy attitudes and that both of these effects are substantively significant.

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[6]Note that the level of correlation between the conflict variable and the ideology variable is just 0.007, so the inclusion of both variables does not raise concerns about multicollinearity.

Table 2.7: Likelihood of Supporting the Bill

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Heated Debate Treatment	-0.79*	0.23
Absolute Value of Distance Between Respondent Ideology and Perceived Bill Ideology	-0.47*	0.10
Constant	1.75*	0.25
N=364; Pseudo R^2=0.07		

* Indicates 95% confidence
Results are from a logit model.

Table 2.8: Predicted Probability of Support for Education Bill

Independent Variable	**Predicted Probability**
Civil Debate Treatment	.71
Heated Debate Treatment	.52
Absolute Value of Distance Between Self–Placement and Bill Placement $= 0$	.77
Absolute Value of Distance Between Self–Placement and Bill Placement $= 2$	.57
Absolute Value of Distance Between Self–Placement and Bill Placement $=4$	.34

Predicted probabilities were generated holding all other variables at the mean or modal value.

2.5.1 Summary of Findings

The results from the logit model estimating the likelihood of support for the bill show that respondents exposed to heated debate were less likely to support the bill even when accounting for the absolute value of the distance between their ideological self-placement and their placement of the bill on the same scale. This finding provides strong support for the primary hypothesis. The mere association of a policy with heated, partisan debate results in decreased support for the associated policy. Exposure to debate also increases the likelihood that individuals will view the policymaking process as broken, which is further evidence in support of the primary hypothesis. Yet support for the cue-taking hypothesis is found as well. Exposure to debate causes individuals to view the provisions of the bill as

more ideologically extreme. The further an individual places the bill from him or herself on the ideological spectrum, the lower his or her predicted level of support for it—meaning conflict can indirectly influence policy attitudes. This cue-taking effect is perhaps most likely to influence policy attitudes in instances where very low levels of substantive information about the bill are available, as indicated by the strong influence of conflict among individuals who received the "tactics" treatment.

2.6 Conclusion

Journalists make choices about how to cover lawmaking, and these choices are guided by the norms of their profession and the need to attract attention. Health care reform, for instance, is a multifaceted issue that could have been covered from a variety of angles, including a focus on the political aspects of the debate, the substance of the proposals, the effect of the economic downturn on health coverage, and the workings (and failures) of the health care system itself (Pew 2010a). In choosing to focus on politics, partisanship, and the horse race, journalists framed the issue in a way that was consequential for public policy attitudes. Such coverage highlighted the aspects of lawmaking that many Americans view as a sign of dysfunction. Further, those negative conceptions of the process of lawmaking became part of the mix of information that was aggregated when individuals formed opinions about the Affordable Care Act. As a result, a law with many popular provisions became widely unpopular.

Due to the incentives that lead journalists to focus on conflict and the widespread aversion to partisan debate that exists among members of the public, we should find that bills with popular provisions fail to attain public support time and again. The longer a partisan debate drags on, the more heated the rhetoric becomes, and the greater the media focus on the conflict, the more public opposition should be generated.

This implication is somewhat troubling from a normative perspective. The process of lawmaking is inherently political. It involves debate, disagreement, and conflict. In fact,

debate and deliberation are cornerstones of the democratic process. And yet many members of the public are faulting elected officials for engaging in debate and rejecting the policies associated with it. For this reason, lawmakers—and particularly those in the majority party—are "damned if they do and damned if they don't." The failure to act on issues of societal concern will surely generate public criticism, but just a surely, proposing solutions that generate debate will also produce public disapproval. Realizing this, members of the minority party have every incentive to argue, obstruct, battle, and brawl over the proposals put forward by those in the majority. In doing so, they signal the extreme nature of the legislation (whether or not the provisions of the bill warrant such a label) and turn off those who become disgusted by the tenor of the debate.

As a result of this dynamic between the majority party and the minority party, a cyclical pattern of public opinion emerges. Individuals want more government services and more federal spending in areas like health care, education, and public welfare until proposals are put forward that would provide them. Once a reform plan is introduced, the debate begins and is quickly picked up by the press. As the rhetoric becomes increasingly heated, public opposition to the controversial plan mounts and public demand for increased spending and services decreases. Eventually, the pendulum of public opinion swings firmly toward the minority party, and it seizes power. Using the election as a mandate for smaller government, the new majority party proposes plans to reduce government spending and cut government services. Yet these proposals ultimately suffer the same fate as the liberal policies that came before them, and public demand for increased spending and services again begins to swell.

The fourth chapter explores these macro-level implications of the micro-level theory developed here. Before turning to the macro-level data, the third chapter offers an additional test of the micro-level theory.

3 STATE LEVEL CONFLICT AND SUPPORT FOR THE FMA

The substantive elements of policies (such as their provisions and costs) are generally thought to be the primary factors that shape public attitudes toward them. In contrast to this wisdom, I argue that non-substantive considerations also shape public policy attitudes in predictable and important ways. In particular, the tenor of a policy debate—which is often highlighted by the news media and characterized by them as combative—is also a powerful signal that shapes public policy opinion. Due to a commonly held belief that heated debate signifies dysfunction in government, the association of a given policy with partisan conflict can dampen public support for it.

I use a natural experiment to test this hypothesis, focusing specifically on the effects of exposure to debate over same-sex marriage on levels of support for the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA) during 2004 and 2005. During this period, 14 states considered ballot measures on constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Additionally, the courts and state legislature in Massachusetts took numerous actions on the issue during 2004. Residents of 15 of the nation's states were exposed to high levels of conflict over the issue of gay marriage in 2004 due to the news coverage and campaigns that surrounded these state-level actions. This case, therefore, provides a novel opportunity to compare changes in policy attitudes between individuals exposed to high levels of conflict and individuals exposed to relatively lower levels of conflict. Further, attitudes toward the substantive elements of the FMA are easily measured. Unlike complex policies with numerous provisions, the sole purpose of the FMA was to ensure that gay marriage would be prohibited nationwide. The unidimentional nature of the policy allows me to cleanly measure and model support for the FMA as a function of both exposure to debate and as a

function of support for the policy's substantive elements—that is, support for the prohibition of same-sex marriages and civil unions.

I find that between the spring of 2004 and 2005, the average level of support for the FMA decreased by 12 percentage points among residents of "high conflict" states, while opposition remained unchanged among residents of other states.[1] This change in attitudes is not the result of a persuasion effect—support for the legalization of gay marriages and civil unions did not increase during the period studied. Rather, the findings support the hypothesis that the *conflict* surrounding the referendums dampened support the FMA in the states that considered them. I subject these findings to a number of robustness tests and find that they are insensitive to model specification.

In the section that follows, I briefly review the literature on the effects of exposure to conflict on political attitudes, and the literature on cognition and attitude formation. I then turn to my theory, data, and analysis.

3.1 Partisan Conflict and Political Attitudes

A number of studies have documented the pervasive use of the "conflict frame" in news coverage of public affairs (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1993; Pew 2010; Rozell 1996). News reports that employ this frame present political elites and the views they articulate as "polarized forces—'the two sides of the issue' " (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992, 64). Such reports package factual information about the substantive elements of policies and political campaigns with information about the horse race between elites, and descriptions of the tenor of the debate. This framing allows journalists to craft stories that are novel, dynamic, and that lend themselves to a narrative form (Patterson 1993). The focus on controversy also adds entertainment value to public affairs reports, which helps attract readers (Iyengar, Norpoth and Hanh 2004; Zaller 1999). Further, focusing news reports on two opposing sides of a debate conforms to journalistic

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[1]The terms high conflict states and ballot measure states are used interchangeably throughout this article.

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norms regarding what constitutes "hard news" and "balanced coverage" (Patterson 2007; Tuckman 1978). For these reasons, public affairs reporters have incentives to frequently use the conflict frame.

This focus on conflict can have a number of negative effects on political attitudes. For instance, Forgette and Morris (2006) demonstrate that "conflict-laden television coverage decreases public evaluations of political institutions, trust in leadership, and overall support for political parties and the system as a whole" (447). Heightened conflict in Congress and the reflection of that conflict in the news also leads to lower levels of Congressional approval (Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht 1997). Exposure to negativity and incivility in political campaigns can decrease turnout (Kahn and Kenney 1999), decrease political trust (Lau et al. 2007, Mutz and Reeves 2005), and decrease feelings of political efficacy (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, Lau et al. 2007).[2]

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that these types of negative responses to policy debate occur because such debate is often perceived as politically motivated "bickering" that stands in the way of real problem-solving. Particularly among Americans without strong policy preferences, disapproval of the lack of cooperation among political elites plays a larger role in shaping attitudes toward the government than does disapproval of government policies (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

In sum, exposure to partisan conflict has been shown to have a variety of negative consequences for political attitudes. The literature on cogition and attitude formation suggests the ways in which exposure to conflict might also shape policy attitudes.

3.2 Cognition and Attitude Formation

Individuals who are less interested in and knowledgeable about politics are also less likely to hold strong, stable policy opinions (Converse 1964), and are more likely to view

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[2]But note that in the context of campaign ads, negativity has also been found to have some positive effects, such as increased political knowledge (Lau et al. 2007, 1999), and increased political engagement (Brooks and Greer 2007).

heated debate as a sign of dysfunction in government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). These individuals often base their assessments of the government not on the congruence between their policy preferences and the outputs of government, but on their evaluations of the policy-making process—whether it is conflictual, partisan, and subject to gridlock or inclusive, bipartisan, and productive (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). To the extent that this type of non-substantive information about the lawmaking process becomes associated with particular policies in people's minds, it should shape attitudes toward those policies.

The basis of this argument comes from the literature on cognition and attitude formation. Information in the long-term memory (LTM) is often conceptualized as a series of nodes joined by links that create associations between concepts (e.g. Anderson 1983; Kim, Taber and Lodge 2010; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge and Taber 2005). For a particular piece of legislation, for instance, some of the thousands of nodes that might be linked with it in the LTM include information about the provisions of the legislation, the groups and individuals who support it, the groups and individuals who oppose it, and a range of abstract concepts like "somewhat liberal," "secular," "expensive," "divisive," or "partisan" (Lodge and Taber 2000). Rather than treating substantive information about a policy proposal differently from information about the process that produced, this line of scholarship supports the idea that *all* information about a given policy will be integrated into a single associative map.

Many branches of literature on attitude formation—including the literature on hot cognition and online processing, the memory-based literature from Zaller and Feldman (1992), and the framing effects literature—describe the process of attitude formation as one based on the aggregation of these associated concepts. The hot cognition literature contends that all of these associated concepts are affectively charged with a positive, negative or neutral "feeling" (e.g. Abelson 1963; Bargh 1994, 1997; Fazio, Sambomatsu, Powell and Kardes

1986; Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge and Taber 2005; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge, Mc-Graw, and Stroh 1989). According to this line of research, an individual's global attitude toward the piece of legislation (or political figure or institution) is created by summing the affective charges on each of the associated nodes. Zaller and Feldman (1992) describe the formation of political attitudes as a process of aggregation that draws on the associated information accessible in memory (also see Zaller 1992). In their view, individuals form opinions "by averaging across the considerations that happen to be salient at the moment of response" (Zaller and Feldman 586). Similarly, the framing literature discusses the ways the news media and political elites shape policy preferences by influencing "the mix of dimensions an individual considers when forming an opinion about a policy or program" (Chong and Druckman 2007, 105; also see: Baumgartner, DeBoef and Boydstun 2008; Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kellstedt 2003; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997). Thus, while the three strands of literature do not agree on all aspects of attitude formation, they do agree that political attitudes are formed through an aggregation process that draws on the mix of information an individual associates with a given target.

3.2.1 Updating Attitudes

As individuals encounter new information they form new associations, repeat the aggregation process, and update their global attitudes (Kim et al. 2010; Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lodge and Taber 2005). During competitive campaigns, constituents are awash in information that could potentially be used to update their attitudes (Gronke 2000). The 24-hour news cycle and the onslaught of paid political ads that accompanies the campaign season combine to create a high information environment for voters. Salient ballot measure campaigns, like those involving same-sex marriage, attract particularly high levels of news coverage (Smith 2001; Nicholson 2003). Some of this coverage focuses on the substantive elements of the policy debate, providing the views of both

supporters and opponents of the measure (Patterson 2007). If an individual is particularly receptive to the substantive appeals made by those on one side of the issue (perhaps because they find one of the two camps to be more credible), the individual may be persuaded. Here, the indivdual's policy opinion is altered by the acceptance of new, substantive information.

In addition to providing information about the substance of the proposal, much of the news coverage will also highlight the nature of the political conflict—the degree to which the debate is heated and partisan, the strategies employed by political elites, and the "horse race" between the opposing sides of the issue (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Morris and Clawson 2005; Patterson 1993, 2007; Zaller 1999). As this type of conflict-focused information becomes associated with a policy in people's minds, it has the potential to shape their attitudes toward that policy. For individuals who view such conflict as "bickering" and as a sign of a dysfunctional government, these negative associations can generate opposition to the policy itself.

All individuals are not equally likely to update their attitudes on the basis of new information, however, as prior attitudes may bias the acceptance of it. Individuals with strong prior attitudes toward politicians and political issue have been shown to readily accept new information that confirms their prior attitudes and to discount information that challenges them (e.g. Fischle 2000; Kim et al. 2010; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006). This use of "motivated reasoning" means that strong attitudes are likely to persist regardless of the new information with which individual's are presented. In contrast, weak attitudes are likely to exhibit variance over time as individuals update them on the basis of the information they encounter over the course of a campaign.

Individuals may also update their attitudes on the basis of a change in the political environment. As new leaders are elected and new policies are adopted, the political context is altered. For example, an individual may oppose state policy on a given issue prior to a policy change, and support it following the adoption of a reform that he or she favors. But

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notice that in a federated system of government, changes in the political context at one level of government may have implications for attitudes toward policies considered by another level of government. This line of reasoning stems from Schattschneider (1960), who asserts that victors in a given venue will prefer that the issue remain within the jurisdiction of that venue. On the other hand, losers in a given venue will prefer to expand the scope of the conflict to a larger venue (see also Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Haider-Markel 1996). This reasoning is based on the relative homogeneity of preferences in smaller venues (such as states) versus larger venues (such as the federal government). If an individual's preferred policy prevails in a smaller, more homogeneous venue, it is better to have the issue settled under such favorable conditions rather than risk bringing the issue to a larger, more heterogeneous venue. The preferred policy might receive less support in the latter context. The passage of a policy at the state level, could, therefore have implications for attitudes toward federal legislation on the same topic.

3.3 Hypotheses

The negative emotional response some individuals experience in reaction to political conflict has the ability to shape policy attitudes. When individuals associate a particular policy with controversy and debate, those considerations become part of the mix of information that is aggregated in forming an attitude toward the policy. Through this associative process, the attitudes of individuals who have a negative response to the tenor of the debate are likely to sour. I hypothesize that individuals who are exposed to prolonged or heated political debate over a particular policy will exhibit less support for that policy at the conclusion of the debate than at its outset. In the case study provided here, this means that residents of high conflict states should be less supportive of the Federal Marriage Amendment in 2005 (following a period of heightened debate over gay marriage) than they were in 2004.

This decrease in support for the FMA in high conflict states should be driven by individuals with weak prior opinions. These individuals are both more likely to have a negative response to political conflict and are less likely to be engaged in motivated reasoning. Those with strong prior attitudes are expected to have more stable policy preferences over time. Such individuals are the most likely to be engaged in motivated reasoning and are the least likely to exhibit variance in their policy preferences based on exposure to political conflict. These expectations are summarized in Table 3.1, as are those of the alternative hypotheses discussed below.

3.3.1 Alternative Explanations

Two alternative explanations for changes in attitudes toward the FMA also warrant investigation. First, substantive considerations could be the driving force behind any observed shift in attitudes toward the FMA among residents of high conflict states. Over the course of the ballot measure campaigns in these states, groups on both sides of the issue worked to get out their respective messages. Generally, opponents of such bans argue that equal marriage is a right and that denying gay couples the opportunity to marry is discriminatory. Proponents claim that same-sex marriage poses a threat to heterosexual marriage and the traditional, nuclear family. Unlike policy debates in other issue domains (like social welfare policy, for example), arguments about the effectiveness of the policy, its cost, or its implications for the size of government are absent from the debate on gay marriage. Rather, the substance of the debate is aimed squarely at influencing individual's underlying attitudes toward same-sex marriage. If residents of high conflict states were persuaded by the substantive arguments of ballot measure opponents, we should observe increased support for the legalization of gay marriages and unions among these individuals. This increased support for the legalization of same-sex marriage should underscore any observed decrease in support for the FMA. In contrast, if exposure to political conflict underscores a decrease in support for the FMA, no change in underlying attitudes toward the legalization

Table 3.1: Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Key Expectations
Conflict Hypothesis	Decrease in support for FMA in ballot measure states. Decrease in support driven by those with weak attitudes.
Substantive Considerations	Increase in support for legalization of gay marriage and/or civil unions in ballot measure states.
Response to Political Context	Decrease in support for FMA in high conflict states driven by marriage opponents.

of gay marriage is expected.

Second, changes in the political context at the state level could have influenced attitudes toward the FMA. Opponents of same-sex marriage who live in states without marriage bans may prefer the enactment of such bans at all levels of government. However, the political context was altered in 14 states in 2004 when each of the marriage amendments considered that year passed. Marriage opponents in the ballot measure states became the "victors" within the state venue as a result of this policy change. As such, these individuals may have updated their attitudes toward the Federal Marriage Amendment—now preferring to contain the scope of the conflict to the states. If so, the success of the state amendments should have dampened support for the FMA among same-sex marriage opponents. According to this alternative hypothesis, marriage opponents should drive increased opposition to the FMA in high conflict states.

3.4 The Same-Sex Marriage Case Study

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts and the ballot measure campaigns that unfolded in 14 states during 2004 and early 2005 created both a high information and a high conflict environment for residents of those states with regard to the issue of same-sex marriage.[3] In 2004, approximately \$13.4 million was spent in ballot

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[3]The high conflict states are: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah and Massachusetts. The findings presented are not sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of Massachusetts in the high conflict category. The results of a logit model

measure states by campaign committees on both sides of the marriage issue (O'Connell 2006). These funds were spent primarily on tactics such as broadcast advertisements and direct mail pieces designed to influence ballot measure votes (O'Connell 2006).[4] Further, the local media in these states followed the debate far more closely than did the media in non-ballot measure states.

Table 3.2 shows the results of searches in Lexis Nexis for the terms "same-sex marriage" and "gay marriage" in high conflict state newspapers between January, 2004 and April, 2005. The searches were conducted using the capital city newspaper or the newspaper from the most populous city in each state (depending on availability in Lexis Nexis) for all of the high conflict states available. I repeated these searches with a sample of capital and major city newspapers from ten geographically and politically diverse non-ballot measure states, shown in the bottom portion of Table 3.2. I then compared the average number of articles in ballot measure states with the average number of articles in non-ballot measure states.[5]

The searches show that the average number of articles mentioning same-sex marriage in ballot measure states was about 515 and about 145 in non-ballot measure states. Thus, the issue received roughly three and a half times more news coverage in ballot measure states than in other states.[6] Further, most of the articles about gay marriage included a

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estimating support for the FMA without the inclusion of Massachusetts are presented in Appendix B.1.

[4]The amount of money spent on the 2004 referendum campaigns was quite modest as compared with more recent referendum campaigns. In 2008, campaign committees spent over $101 million in just four states considering bans related to gay partnerships (Quist 2009). The modest amount of money spent during the 2004 campaign cycle creates a hard test of the hypothesis I outline. Had larger sums of money been spent by committees on their initiative campaigns in 2004, the association of conflict with the issue would likely have been intensified.

[5]Clearly, the sample used here is one of convenience. The searches depended upon the availability of archives in Lexis Nexis and the analysis does not take account of exogenous differences between newspapers or media markets that could affect the number of articles on gay marriage (such as differences in the average number of pages in each newspaper). The exercise should be viewed as an informal test (not a comprehensive content analysis) designed to assure the reader that residents of ballot measure states were exposed to greater debate vis-á-vis residents of other states.

[6]In both instances the standard deviations are large (234 in ballot measure states and 117 in non-ballot

Table 3.2: Number of news articles mentioning "same-sex marriage" or "gay marriage" between January 1, 2004 and April 30, 2005

State	Newspaper	Total Articles	Conflict Described
Arkansas	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)	480	83.1%
Georgia	The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	805	74.2%
Louisiana	The Advocate (Baton Rouge)	293	*
Massachusetts	The Boston Herald	652	*
Michigan	Detroit Free Press	10	70.0%
Missouri	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	733	69.4%
North Dakota	The Bismarck Tribune	134	64.9%
Oklahoma	The Tulsa World	559	64.8%
Oregon	The Oregonian (Portland)	793	*
Utah	Deseret News (Salt Lake City)	699	64.8%
Alaska	The Anchorage Daily News	94	83.0%
California	The Sacramento Bee	261	78.9%
Connecticut	Hartford Courant	0	NA
Florida	Tallahassee Democrat	1	100.0%
Illinois	The State Journal-Register (Springfield)	123	84.6%
Maryland	The Capital (Annapolis)	74	68.9%
Minnesota	Star Tribune (Minneapolis)	266	83.8%
Nebraska	The Lincoln Journal Star	75	70.7%
North Carolina	The News and Observer (Raleigh)	327	62.4%
Texas	Austin American Statesman	230	67.8%

Source: Lexis Nexis

Ballot measure state papers are listed in the top half of the table and non-ballot measure state papers are listed in the bottom half of the table.

* During the course of the data collection for this project, Lexis Nexis removed The Advocate, The Boston Herald and The Oregonian from their archives. I was, therefore, unable to search these papers for articles that describe the nature of the same-sex marriage debate.

description of the conflictual nature of the debate. This was assessed by combining the "gay marriage" key words with conflict-oriented key words such as "partisan," "battle," "feud" and "bitter."[7] The percentage of articles about same-sex marriage that contained these conflict-oriented key words is shown in the fourth column of Table 3.2. On average, just over 70% of all the articles that mentioned same-sex marriage also included information about the conflictual nature of the debate. Put differently, when the news media discuss the issue of gay marriage, they nearly always highlight the controversial nature of the issue and the conflict surrounding it. Because residents of states considering ballot measures were exposed to more than three times as much news coverage on the issue of gay marriage, they were also exposed to a higher volume of information about the heated nature of the debate.

The activities of the campaign committees on either side of the issue and the news coverage of the issue are two examples of the ways in which residents of ballot measure states were exposed to information about gay marriage and the debate surrounding it. Residents of these states probably also received information from additional sources, such as social media and discussions with friends and relatives. By election day, even individuals who were not particularly attentive to politics where likely to have heard something about the same-sex marriage debate taking place in their state.

3.4.1 Research Design

To test whether the heightened exposure to conflict experienced by residents of ballot measure states lead to a decline in support for the FMA, I compare the change in the average level of support for the amendment in ballot measure states with the change in the average level of support in non-ballot measures states before and after the referendum process.

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measure states) due to the presence of some extreme outliers. Nevertheless, a difference of means test indicates the average number of articles in the respective groups are statistically different from one another.

[7]The exact keywords used for the search are: BODY((gay marriage OR"same sex marriage") AND (partisan OR battle OR argu! OR fight OR conflict OR controvers! OR heated OR feud OR fissure OR intractable OR outrage OR showdown OR standoff OR bitter OR fear OR anger! OR hate! OR assault! OR rage OR raging OR contentious OR condemn OR vehement! OR war))

The analysis is conducted using national survey data from two ABC/Washington Post polls administered by the same survey house in March, 2004 and April, 2005. Both surveys asked respondents, "Would you support amending the U.S. Constitution to make it AGAINST THE LAW for homosexual couples to get married anywhere in the U.S., or should each state make its own laws on homosexual marriage?" (ABC News/Washington Post 2004; 2005).[8] In 2004, 42% of respondents answered in favor of the amendment and in 2005, 37% did so.[9]

The timing of these two polls allows the opportunity to assess public opinion before and after the 2004 campaign season. In March of 2004, the referendum process was not yet underway in most states. Utah's legislature was the first to approve the placement of a marriage referendum on the ballot—the measure passed both houses on March 3rd. Yet, even in this early state, the popular campaign for the measure was in its infancy when the poll went into the field on March 4th. In fact, in 13 of the 15 high conflict states, the issue was decided on or after November 2nd, meaning that the height of the campaigns surrounding the measures came nearly eight months after the initial March, 2004 poll.[10] The 2004 poll, therefore, provides a baseline measure of public opinion regarding the FMA prior to the referendum process.

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[8]The 2004 poll randomly assigned half of the respondents a slightly different question wording. The alternate wording reads: "Would you support amending the U.S. Constitution to make it ILLEGAL for homosexual couples to get married anywhere in the U.S., or should each state make its own laws on homosexual marriage?" (ABC News/Washington Post 2004, 26). I combine these two question wordings.

[9]In an analysis of various survey questions on the subject of the FMA, The Pew Research Center finds that respondents are less likely to favor the FMA when given the option of leaving the matter to the states (Pew Research Center 2004). Levels of support for the FMA reported here may, therefore, be lower than those reported in studies that rely on different question wordings. However, the question wording used does not impede my ability to test the hypotheses I develop as the same question wording was used to assess support for the FMA in 2004 and 2005. I was also sensitive to the possibility that respondents who oppose the FMA are not given a response option that clearly articulates their position on the issue. This could result in high levels of "don't know" responses among marriage supporters (see Berinsky 2004). I explore this possibility in an analysis provided in Appendix B.2. I find that the question wording does not result in a significantly different percentage of "don't know" among between marriage supporters and opponents.

[10]Missouri decided the matter with a popular vote held on August 3rd, 2004, and Louisiana put their measure to a popular vote on September 18th, 2004.

By the time the April, 2005 poll was conducted, residents of ballot measure states had been exposed to the intense debate that accompanies the referendum process. Each of the 2004 ballot measures had been decided by the time the poll went into the field, as had the Kansas marriage amendment that passed on April 5th, 2005. The timing of this second survey allows for an examination of attitudes following the conclusion of the campaign season.

3.5 Analysis and Findings

Figure 3.1 shows the respective percentage of respondents who stated they would support a federal amendment banning same-sex marriage, by year and by residence in a ballot measure state. In 2004, roughly 40% of non-ballot measure state residents supported the FMA and in 2005 approximately 37% of respondents continued to support it. In ballot measure states, however, the change in support for the FMA was much larger. While roughly 48% of residents in these states supported the FMA in 2004, just over 36% stated they supported the FMA in April, 2005—a difference of approximately 12 percentage points.

With a quasi-experimental design like this one, assignment to the treatment group (i.e. referendum states) and control group (i.e. non-referendum states) is nonrandom. States considering amendments banning same-sex unions are likely to have a higher proportion of residents who oppose gay marriage, a higher proportion of conservative residents, and a lower proportion of liberal residents as compared with other states. The resulting imbalance between the treatment and control groups has the potential to cause estimation error and bias in the estimates drawn from these data.

To address the problem of imbalance, I use coarsened exact matching (CEM) to preprocess the data prior to running a logit model estimating the likelihood of support for the FMA (Iacus, King and Porro 2011a; Iacus, King and Porro 2011b). Observations in the treatment and control groups are matched on self-reported ideology (measured with two variables, one identifying liberals and one identifying conservatives), attitude toward gay marriage,
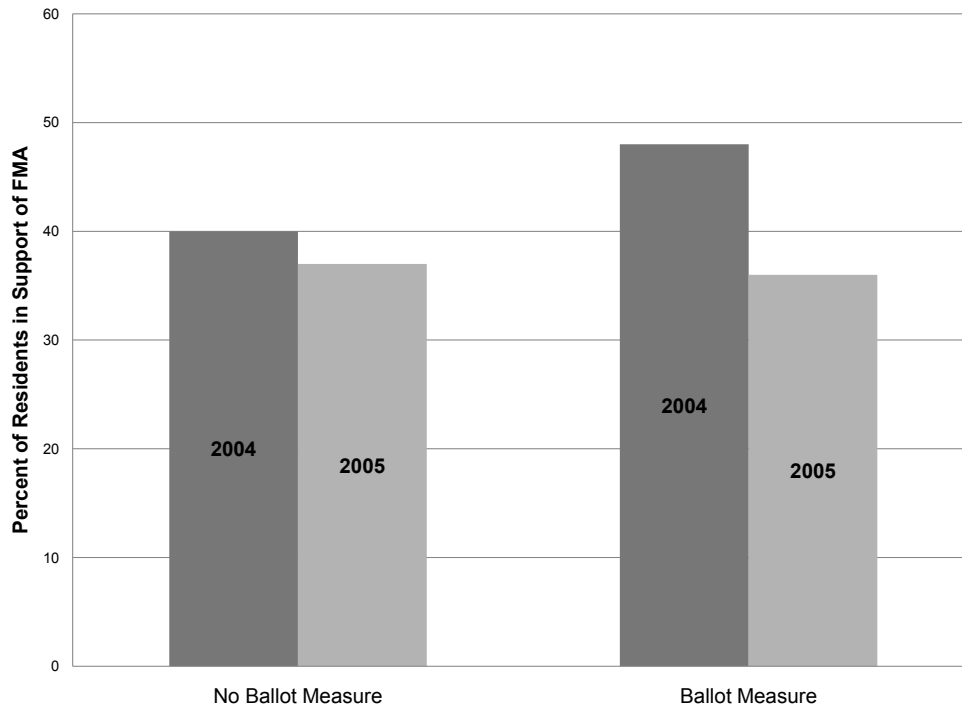
Figure 3.1: Levels of Support for the Federal Marriage Amendment Between 2004 and 2005 in Ballot Measure and Non-Ballot Measure States

and year. Variables measuring attitudes toward gay marriage are constructed from questions that gauge support for the legalization of same-sex marriage and civil unions.[11] Two such variables are created, one that indicates opposition to marriage and civil unions, and one that indicates support for civil unions but not marriage.[12] This process "prune[s] observations from the data so that ... the empirical distributions of the covariates (X) in the groups are more similar" (Iacus, King and Porro 2011a, 1). Preprocessing the data with matching also has the advantage of reducing model depedence (Ho, Imai, King and Stuart 2007).

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[11]The question wordings are provided in Appendix B.3.

[12]See Appendix B.2. One might anticipate that attitudes toward same-sex marriage would perfectly predict support for the FMA. In actuality, however, of the 868 individuals who responded that same-sex marriage should not be legal, 257 (roughly 30%) responded that the states should make their own marriage laws.

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Prior to matching, the data had a multivariate L_1 distance (a measure of global imbalance) of approximately .13. A multivariate L_1 distance of zero indicates perfectly balanced data. After matching, the rounded multivariate L_1 distance is zero.[13] With data that are exactly balanced (as these now are), control variables are not needed to establish treatment effects, as the control variables are no longer related to the treatment group (King et al. 2011a).

To determine whether the change in support for the FMA among ballot measure state residents differs significantly from the change among non-ballot measure states, a logit model is used to estimate the likelihood of support for the FMA. The data are weighted with the CEM weights generated by the CEM algorithm and the standard errors are clustered by state.[14] The dependent variable is a dummy coded as one for respondents who support the FMA and zero otherwise.[15] The key independent variables of interest are: a year dummy (coded as zero for 2004 and one for 2005), a dummy representing residence in a ballot measure state, and an interaction term that multiplies the two. The coefficient on the interaction term gives the difference-in-difference estimate for the treatment effect of residence in a ballot measure state.

Table 3.3 displays the results of the analysis. The coefficient for the interaction term "Ballot Measure State X Year" is negative and statistically significant, indicating that support for the FMA decreased among ballot measure state residents between the spring of 2004 and the spring of 2005.

To assess the magnitude of the treatment effect in substantive terms, Figure 3.2 displays the predicted probability of support for the FMA by year and by residence in a ballot

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[13]The precise multivariate L_1 distance is 1.287e-15.

[14]Hierarchical linear models (provided in Appendix B.4) returned nearly identical results and support the same conclusions as do the logit models presented. However, HLM models do not support importance weights in STATA, and therefore, can not utilize matched data. For this reason, I find that logit models with clustered standard errors are preferable.

[15]The zero category of the dependent variable includes both individuals who prefer to leave the matter to the states and those who respond they "don't know."

measure state. The first set of predicted probabilities (plotted in black) shows that the probability of support among ballot measure state residents dropped from nearly 48% in 2004 to approximately 36% percent in 2005—a difference of 12 percentage points. The confidence intervals for these two sets of predicted probabilities do not overlap, indicating that the change in support for the FMA is statistically significant. The probability of support among residents of non-ballot measure states (plotted in gray) decreased by just two percentage point during this time and the change is not statistically significant—as indicated by the overlapping confidence intervals. These results provide strong evidence that the debate over gay marriage that accompanied the referendum process lessened support for the FMA in ballot measure states, while support in other states remained stable.

Table 3.3: Model A—Likelihood of Support for the FMA by Year and Residence in a Ballot Measure State

Variable	Model A
Ballot Measure State Dummy	0.10
	(0.15)
Year	-0.08
	(0.09)
Ballot Measure State X Year	-0.41*
	(0.16)
Constant	-0.17
	(0.09)
N	2165
AIC	3010.69

Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by state.
* Indicates statistical significance at the level of 95% confidence.

3.5.1 Testing Sub-Hypotheses

The conflict hypothesis leads not only to the expectation that support for the FMA will decline among residents of ballot measure states, but also to the expectation that this decline will be driven by individuals without strong views on gay marriage. In contrast, if the decrease in support for the FMA in high conflict states reflects a response to the altered
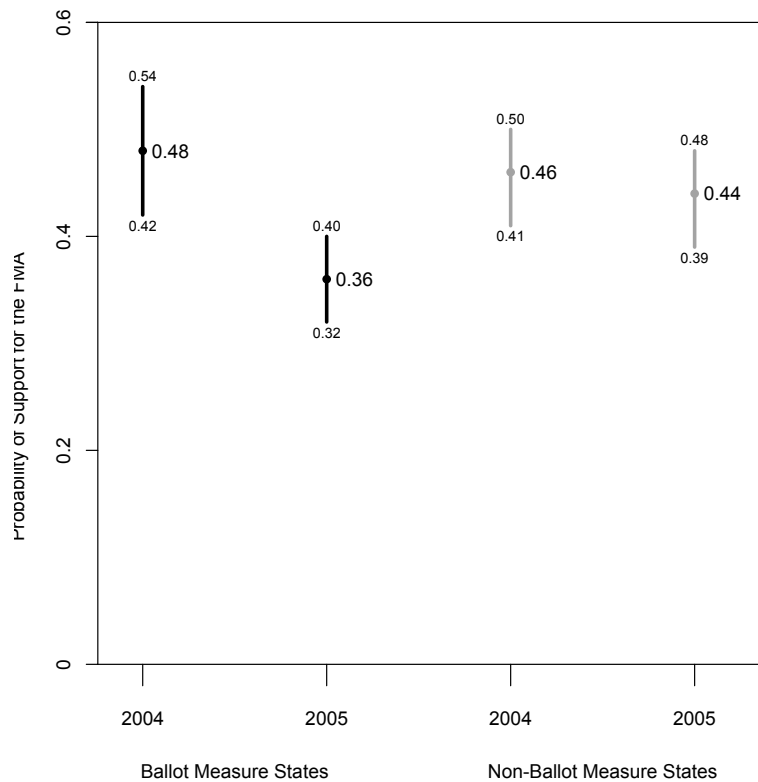
Figure 3.2: Predicted Probability of Support for a Federal Marriage Amendment

political context (that is, the success of the ballot measures), the decrease should be driven by marriage opponents.

Individuals are classified as having weak attitudes if they hold a moderate possition on gay marriage—supporting civil unions but opposing equal marriage. This is done because those who hold particularly *strong* attitudes (who we might call policy activist) generally support either equal marriage or oppose all recognition of same-sex unions—indicating a link between the strength of one's attitude and the attitude itself. Marriage opponents are classified as those who oppose both gay marriage and civil unions for same-sex partners.

To assess whether the decline in support for the FMA was driven by individuals with strong views or weak views on gay marriage, the data are subsetted to include only the

responses of high conflict state residents.[16] Logit models (models B and C) are used to estimate support for the FMA among these residents.[17] The key independent variables in these models are a year dummy variable, a set of dichotomous variables indicating the respondent's attitude toward the legalization of gay marriage, and a set of interaction terms that multiply the year variable times each of the respective attitude indicators.

Model B includes two attitude indicator variables (and the corresponding interaction terms): "supports marriage," which is coded one for respondents who support gay marriage and zero for all other respondents, and "supports civil unions," which is coded one for those who support civil unions but oppose gay marriage and zero for all other respondents. Model C replaces the "supports marriage" variable and interaction term with a variable indicating the respondent opposes gay marriage and civil unions and an interaction term that multiplies "opposes marriage" with the year variable. Measures of self-reported ideology are also included in both models. The ideology measures are included because support for states' rights is associated with conservatism. Conservatives who support states' rights might prefer to leave the issue of same-sex marriage to the states even if they oppose gay marriage.

The results of Models B and C are shown in Table 3.4. Notice that the coefficient for the interaction term "supports civil unions x year" is negative and statistically significant in both models—as expected by the conflict hypothesis. The additional interaction terms fail to attain statistical significance in Models B and C, respectively.

To unpack the substantive significance of the interaction terms, predicted probabilities are generated and displayed in Figure 3.3. The first set of predicted probabilities (plotted in

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[16]These alternative hypotheses were also tested without subsetting the data, using a series of three-way interaction terms that multiply the individual's attitude toward gay marriage times year and times residence in a ballot measure state. The results of these models support the same conclusions as do the models presented below. Subsetting the data is preferable, however, as the inclusion of the three-way interactions causes serious multicolinearity among the independent variables.

[17]Due to the smaller sample size that results from subsetting the data, the standard errors reported in these models are bootstrapped in addition to being clustered by state.

Table 3.4: Models B & C—Likelihood of Support for the
FMA in Ballot Measure States

Variable	Model B	Model C
Year	-0.46*	-0.29
	(0.21)	(0.29)
Supports Civil Unions	-.70*	1.93*
	(0.28)	(0.43)
Supports Civil Unions X Year	-1.05*	-1.22*
	(0.59)	(.55)
Supports Marriage	-2.70*	.
	(.35)	.
Supports Marriage X Year	.22	.
	(.42)	.
Opposes Marriage	.	2.64*
	.	(0.30)
Opposes Marriage X Year	.	-0.18
	.	(0.37)
Liberal	-0.31	-0.32
	(0.31)	(.32)
Conservative	0.48*	0.53*
	(0.21)	(.22)
Constant	.71*	-1.94*
	(0.23)	(.21)
AIC	588	594
N	537	545

Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by state and boot-
strapped.
* Indicates statistical significance at the level of 95% confidence.

light gray) shows the likelihood of support for the FMA among equal marriage proponents
in 2004 and 2005. These predicted probabilities are not statistically different from one
another. The second set of predicted probabilities shows the likelihood of support for the
FMA among proponents of civil unions.[18] Notice that between 2004 and 2005, support for
the FMA decreased by 24 percentage points among individuals in this group. This change
is both substantively large and statistically significant, as indicated by the fact that the confi-
dence intervals for the two predictions do not overlap. This finding provides strong support

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[18]The predicted probabilities plotted for civil union proponents are from Model C.

for the conflict hypothesis—individuals without strong policy preferences were swayed by the tenor of the debate over gay marriage. The last set of predicted probabilities (plotted in dark gray) shows the likelihood of support for the FMA among opponents of gay marriage in 2004 and 2005. The change in support for the FMA among these individuals was not statistically significant, casting doubt on the idea that the success of the state marriage amendments was responsible for the decrease in support for the FMA. In sum, the decrease in support for the FMA in high conflict states was driven by individuals with relatively weak attitudes toward gay marriage, as predicted by the conflict hypothesis.
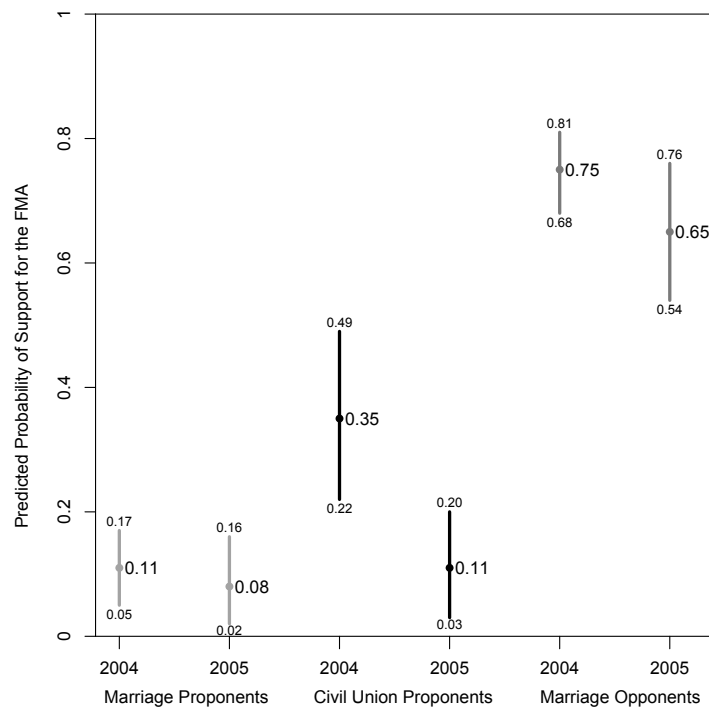
Figure 3.3: Predicted Probability of Support for FMA Within Ballot Measure States

3.5.2   Did Support for the Legalization of Gay Marriage Increase?

In this section, I examine attitudes toward the substantive elements of the FMA—that is, attitudes toward the legalization of same-sex marriage and civil unions. During the referendum campaigns, persuasive arguments made by those against state marriage amendments could have caused individuals to update their attitudes toward the legalization of same-sex

unions. If so, we should observe an increase in support for the legaliation of same-sex marriages and civil unions in those states. Such a finding would suggest that substantive considerations, rather than exposure to conflict, underscored the decrease in support for the FMA.

To test this alternative hypothesis, attitudes toward the legalization of same-sex marriage are estimated with a multinomial logit model using the full dataset that includes respondents from all states. The categorical dependent variable ranges from zero to two, with zero indicating opposition to marriage and civil unions, one indicating support for civil unions but not marriage, and two indicating support for equal marriage. Like the models measuring support for the FMA, here we are interested in aggregate level differences in attitudes—specifically, whether support for gay marriage or civil unions increased among residents of ballot measure states. In contrast to previous models, however, the dependent variable used here is substantively different from the models assessing support for the FMA. Rather than assessing support for a specific federal policy, this dependent variable measures attitudes toward the legalization of gay marriage and civil unions generally. For this reason, additional covariates must be considered.

The key independent variables of interest are familiar: a dummy measuring residence in a ballot measure state, a year dummy, and an interaction term that multiplies the two. The coefficient on the interaction term is the difference-in-difference estimate indicating whether any change in attitudes toward gay marriage among ballot measure state residents differs from any change in attitudes toward gay marriage among residents of other states. If the coefficient on the interaction term is positive and statistically significant, this finding would offer support for influence of substantive considerations.

Several additional factors are likely to systematically influence opinions on gay marriage. First, the issue of same-sex marriage has become politicized—with conservatives

and Republicans largely opposing gay marriage and liberals and Democrats largely supporting progressive marriage laws. Second, for many individuals, attitudes toward gay marriage are guided by religious or moral beliefs (Mooney 2000; Mooney and Lee 2000). Religious individuals, and Evangelicals in particular, are more likely to oppose same sex-marriage than are secular individuals (Pew Research Center 2006). And lastly, several studies document a correlation between higher levels of education and higher levels of tolerance toward people differing from one's self (Gibson 1987; Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Seltzer 1993; Sullivan, Pierson and Marcus 1982). For this reason, individuals with higher levels of education may be more likely to support equal rights for same-sex couples, including the right to marry.

To the extent that aggregate level ideology, religiosity, and level of education differs between ballot measure states and non-ballot measure states, the data will be imbalanced. For this reason, the data are preprocessed by matching respondents from ballot measure states with respondents from other states on each of these three dimensions using CEM. The specific variables used for matching are: an indicator for self-identified conservatives, an indicator for self-identified liberals, an indicator for Evangelical and Born-Again Christian, and an indicator for respondents without a religious affiliation (i.e. secular respondents). Lastly, a categorical measure of level of education is used and is coded zero for individuals without a high school diploma, one for individuals with a high school diploma but no college education, two for individuals with some college, and three for individuals with at least a four-year college degree.

Matching reduced the global level of imbalance between the treatment and control groups to zero. For this reason, no control variables are included in the model below. The CEM weights generated by the CEM algorithm are used to weight the data in Model D. The standard errors are clustered by state.

The results of the multinomial logit model estimating support for the legalization of

gay marriage are shown in Table 3.5. The top portion of the table displays estimates of the likelihood of support for civil unions as compared with the likelihood of opposition to same-sex marriage (which is the base outcome). Here, we see that the "Year X Referendum" interaction term fails to attain statistical significance. The bottom half of the table displays estimates of the likelihood of support for equal marriage as compared with the likelihood of opposition to same-sex marriage. Here again, the "Year X Referendum" interaction term fails the significance test. These findings support the conflict hypothesis and fail to provide support for the influence of substantive considerations. The decrease in support for the FMA in ballot measure states was not underscored by an increase in support for the legalization of civil unions or gay marriages. Instead, the observed decrease in support for the FMA among residents of high conflict states reflects growing frustration with a policy that became associated with intense debate at the state level.

Table 3.5: Model D—Likelihood of Support for the Legalization of Gay Marriage

Variable	Coefficient	Robust S.E.
Likelihood of Support for Civil Unions		
Referendum	-0.21	0.26
Year	0.80*	0.13
Year X Referendum	**0.07**	**0.31**
Constant	-1.09*	0.11
Likelihood of Support for Marriage		
Referendum	-0.05	0.20
Year	-0.32*	0.11
Year X Referendum	**-0.13**	**0.25**
Constant	-0.34*	0.14
AIC = 4198.53		
N = 2010		

Estimates are from a multinomial logit model. "Opposes marriage" is the base outcome.
Standard errors are clustered by state.
* Indicates statistical significance at the level of 95% confidence.

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3.6 Conclusion

Partisan conflict and debate are mainstays of the American political process and, like it or not, members of the public are exposed to the messy details of that process via the news media. The findings presented here demonstrate that the tone of a policy debate can shape public attitudes toward the policy under consideration—especially among individuals without strong underlying attitudes on the issue.

These findings are somewhat disconcerting from a normative standpoint. They indicate that lawmakers face a catch-22. Achieving the collective goals of the American people requires the passage of legislation, but the legislative process (whether it takes place in the context of a referendum campaign or within a legislative body), entails debate, conflict, and is inherently political. Because many Americans have a negative response to these aspects of the policymaking process, solving the societal problems the people want solved via government action can actually result in a public backlash.

In the case study provided here, the backlash was against anti-marriage policies. According to the theory developed, however, public opinion toward pro-marriage policies could sour just as easily were such policies the subject of heated political debate (as they were during 2012). Further, the theory can be applied readily to other sorts of policies as well, from health care, to education, to the environment. Wherever heated debate is present, the opportunity for a public backlash exists.

4   THE NEWS MEDIA AND THE THERMOSTATIC RESPONSE

> On Friday, we learned that the United States received a downgrade by one of the credit rating agencies — not so much because they doubt our ability to pay our debt if we make good decisions, but because after witnessing a month of wrangling over raising the debt ceiling, they doubted our political system's ability to act ... So it's not a lack of plans or policies that's the problem here. It's a lack of political will in Washington. It's the insistence on drawing lines in the sand, a refusal to put what's best for the country ahead of self-interest or party or ideology. And that's what we need to change (Presidential Remarks 2011).

On August 8, 2011, President Obama spoke in an address to the nation about the downgrading of U.S. debt by the credit-rating agency Standard and Poor's. The downgrade came after Democrats and Republicans brought to an end weeks of heated debate over deficit reduction and agreed to legislation that would slash government spending and increase the nation's debt ceiling. Why did the agency downgrade the nation's debt if the crisis (the threat of a government default) had been averted? Standard and Poor's cited "the difficulties in bridging the gulf between the political parties," as a primary concern in the report they released on August 5 (Swann 2011, 2). The report went on to say that intense partisan debate lead the agency to question the "effectiveness, stability, and predictability of American policymaking and political institutions" (Swann 2011, 2).

The 2011 deficit reduction debate and subsequent debt downgrade illustrate the central thesis of this article—reaction to public policy hinges as much on perceptions of the process that produces policies as on the substance of the laws themselves. Much of our public dialogue about lawmaking centers on discussions of the conflict-laden process by which policy is made. The information citizens receive from the news media about the content

of bills comes packaged with colorful descriptions of the political battles, partisan brawls, and veto threats that surround their passage (or defeat). I investigate the way this process focused news coverage shapes aggregate public policy opinion. I demonstrate that the media's focus on conflict and partisan debate makes the public more aware of and more likely to respond to the contentious nature of the process than the substance of new laws.

This study builds on the body of research devoted to the study of aggregate public opinion (e.g. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1989, 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Stimson 1991; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995, Wlezien 1995). Prior studies have established the responsiveness of aggregate public opinion to the outputs of government—that is, to the amount of spending and services the government provides. As the government does and spends more to provide programs and services, public demand for increased government spending has been shown to decline, and as the government does and spends less, public demand for further government spending has been shown to swell—a pattern often referred to as the thermostatic response (Erikson et al. 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992; Wlezien et al. 1995). Additional studies show that Congress and the president heed these demands, creating a feedback loop wherein the government is responsive to the people and the people are responsive to the government (Erikson et al. 2002; Stimson et al. 1995).

The news media play a critical role in this feedback system, serving as messengers that deliver information about the government's actions to members of the public (e.g. Wlezien 1995; Erikson et al. 2002). The goal of this article is to further explore the mechanism that brings about the thermostatic response by examining in detail the content of policy-focused news reports. I construct a new, full-text database of news articles on the topics of health care, education, and social welfare published between 1980 and 2010. Using this dataset, I identify a corpus of policy-focused news reports and analyze the information they provide about the substance of new laws. I pay particular attention to information about government

spending and changes in the provision of government services because these are the factors to which aggregate public opinion has traditionally been thought to respond. I also examine the non-substantive information about the policymaking process provided by these articles. In particular, articles are coded based on their inclusion of descriptions of parliamentary tactics, political strategies, and heated confrontations between lawmakers. I also examine the prevalence of partisan debate in policy-focused news reports. Prior studies find that Americans respond negatively to these aspects of the policymaking process (Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht 1997; Forgette and Morris 2006; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

I find that descriptions of conflict are ubiquitous in policy-focused news reports. Seventy percent of the policy-focused articles sampled contained descriptions of parliamentary tactics, political strategies, partisan debate, or heated confrontations between political elites. Forty nine percent contained descriptions of two or more of these contentious aspects of the policymaking process. In contrast, just 37% provided cost estimates for new programs or discussed projected changes in government spending. Further, descriptions of conflict between political elites were placed more prominently in news articles than were discussions of government spending. Thirty eight percent of public affairs reports described a conflict or debate in the headline or first four sentences. Information about government spending was prominently featured in just 17% of policy-focused articles. More frequently, such details were buried several paragraphs into reports that were otherwise focused on the policymaking process. In sum, descriptions of the policymaking process are more frequently and more prominently provided by news reports than are descriptions of the substance of new laws.

After examining the content of policy-focused news articles, I assess the relationship between such news coverage and aggregate level public opinion. I create annual counts of policy-focused news reports pertaining to federal health, education, and welfare legislation, respectively. I then model public demand for increased spending and services in these three

policy areas as a function of the amount of policy-focused news coverage, the passage of major legislation, and the change in federal spending in each of the three respective policy domains. In contrast to prior studies that find public mood is a function objective indicators of the size of government, I find that mood is most responsive to the amount of policy debate in the news. Even in instances when the proposed policy fails and the status quo remains in place—as with the Clinton health reform proposal—public mood responds negatively to policy debate.

This project has important implications for the broader work on aggregate public opinion. The findings demonstrate that public demand for government spending and services is shaped by non-substantive information about the lawmaking process. Changes in government spending and policy are not necessary to bring about changes in policy-specific mood—a highly publicized policy debate among lawmakers is sufficient to generate a public response.

4.1 Conventional Wisdom: The Thermostatic Response

In "The Public as Thermostat," Wlezien (1995) argues that the public has and is able to express preferences over how much government it wants. The evidence supporting this claim comes from survey data on preferences for levels of government spending and federal budget data. Wlezien demonstrates that as appropriations increase, survey respondents become more likely to say spending is too high and vice versa. Wlezien (1995) anticipates that policymaking on salient issues generates news coverage, that this coverage provides information on whether the government is doing more or less, and that public opinion responds rationally to this information. Because his focus is not on the role of the news media, however, Wlezien (1995) does not explore the degree to which news reports provide information about government spending to the public. Overall, his piece on the "thermostatic response" of the American public to policy change has been very influential and is seen as an accurate portrayal of the relationship between policymaking and public sentiment.

Erikson et al. (2002) also envision the public responding to policymaking in a thermostatic manner. These authors use a measure of public liberalism called "public mood" (Stimson 1991) to examine public preferences for more or less government over a more than 40 year period. The mood measure is created from a collection of survey questions that ask respondents whether they want the government to spend or do more or less in areas of domestic policy like education, health care, the environment, etc. Because responses to these questions mostly load on a single factor, the authors are able to examine whether the public wants more or less government over time. Erikson et a. (2002) model mood as a function of "policy activity" at the federal level. Using an updated list of Mayhew's influential laws that the authors coded for ideological content, they also model public mood as a function of policy change. Similarly to Wlezien's (1995) findings, they demonstrate that the passage of major liberal legislation is followed by a conservative shift in mood and vice versa. In other words, as the government does more, the public demands less of government, and as the government does less, the public demands more.

A number of other studies have also examined the "thermostatic response" and find evidence for it (e.g. Wlezien 1996; Wlezien 2004; Alesina and Rosenthal 1989). For example, Alesina and Rosenthal (1989) demonstrate the impact of the thermostatic response on Congressional elections. They argue that voters are presented with polarized candidates in presidential elections, who, once in office, pursue policies that are more extreme than the policies favored by the median voter. Upon observing the extreme policies of the incumbent government, the electorate favors the out party in the midterm elections. The midterms thus offer a mechanism by which the public can cool off the over zealous policy activities of the governing party.

These previous studies demonstrate that public sentiment waxes and wanes, becoming more liberal in times of conservative governments and more conservative in times of liberal governments. The precise stimulus to which the public reacts is not government

policy, however, but information about lawmaking from secondary sources like the news media. This is because most individuals do not directly observe the actions of federal lawmakers. As described by Walter Lippman (1965 [1922]), citizens experience a "pseudo-environment," constructed largely by the news media that filter, simplify and organize the information they receive about the world. Wlezien (1995) also notes the importance of the news media as an intermediary between political elites and the public, stating that "public responsiveness must reflect information communicated by the mass media..." (998). Erikson et al. (2002) discuss the importance of the news media in providing information about "the scope and direction of [policy] change" to citizens (371). By investigating the content of policy-focused news reports we can, therefore, better understand the mechanism that brings about the thermostatic response.

4.1.1 The News Industry as an Institution

Early studies in the communications field expected the news media to play a neutral role in the political process. Like a mirror reflecting events exactly as they happened, the news media were expected to pass information about government to the masses without distorting, altering or shaping it (Shoemaker and Reese 1998). Westley and MacLean (1957) are the architects of one of these early models, which conceived of the media as the agent of the public, "selecting and transmitting nonpurposively the information they require, especially when that information is beyond their immediate reach" (Shoemaker and Reese 1998, 33).

Since those early works, studies in the fields of communication and mass media have explored the ways that professional norms and routines shape the work that journalists do. Many of these studies coveive of the news media as institutions (e.g. Carter 1959; Cook 1998 2005; Schudson 2002), and most of them acknowledge that the incentives and professional norms that govern the news industry shape the content of the news in meaningful ways.

One routine that shapes the news is the reliance of reporters on familiar frames. Media frames "organize the presentation of facts and opinions within a newspaper article or television news story" (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997). The handful of media frames that reporters regularly draw on—sometimes called "generic" or "journalistic frames"—provide reporters with a template for synthesizing complex information in a way that is manageable for both the writer and the reader. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) identify five such frames in an analysis of newspaper, news magazines and television news stories. Those frames are:

1. The economic frame, which "reflects the preoccupation with 'the bottom line,' profit and loss, and wider values of the culture of capitalism" (63).

2. The conflict frame, which focuses on "polarized forces—'the two sides of the issue' " (64).

3. The powerlessness frame, which describes individuals or groups "as helpless in the face of greater forces" (67).

4. The human impact frame, which "focuses on describing individuals and groups who are likely to be affected by an issue" (69).

5. The morality frame, which generally contains indirect references to moral and cultural values (72).

Any given topic of societal concern could conceivably be presented using one of these five frames. In fact, Neuman et al. (1992) provide examples wherein a single issue is presented at different times with different frames. Yet the conflict frame is thought to be particularly associated with articles about politics and public affairs for a variety of reasons (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Patterson 1993; Rozell 1996). First, to survive, news outlets have to attract consumers and ultimately advertisers (Hamilton 2004). A great deal of evidence

suggests that what many consumers want is not "hard" news, but entertainment (e.g. Bennett 1996; Graber 1984; Iyengar, Norpoth, Hanh 2004; Neuman 1991; Zaller 1999). Zaller (1999) asserts that while journalists would prefer to provide high quality, in-depth news coverage of public affairs, the pressure of competition between news outlets forces them to provide a lower quality product. As competition increases, he argues, news reporting becomes more focused on entertaining than informing (Zaller, 1999). To attract readers, journalists have an incentive to highlight the element of controversy in public affairs (Norpoth et al. 2004). This incentive is compounded by professional norms surrounding what it means to provide "balanced" news coverage.

News reporters seek to provide objective portrayals of the events and opinions they cover. To do so, they rely on professional norms and regularized procedures in gathering and reporting the news. One such norm, often referred to as indexing, is the practice of reflecting opinions in relation to how widely they are expressed by political elites (Bennett 1990; Hallin 1984; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). Objectivity is, therefore, predicated upon reporting all "sides" of an issue, not upon reporting the "facts," as the relevant facts in a policy debate might be subjective.

Interviews with journalists support these assertions. When asked what they believe constitutes objectivity in news reporting, a plurality of American journalists (39%) stated "expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute" and another 10% stated "an equally thorough questioning of the position of each side in a political dispute" (Patterson 2007, 29). Together, 49% of the journalists surveyed stressed the importance of gathering and reporting information from elites on both sides of a political dispute. Just 28% stated that "going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute" constitutes objectivity, and 14% gave other responses (Patterson 2007, 29).

In sum, public affairs news reports are likely to be structured in a predictable way,

focusing on debate and on the conflicts that arise between elite actors. They are unlikely to present information about new policies as "fact," and more likely to present information as the opinions of either policy supporters or detractors. Conversely, when an issue of societal concern is discussed outside the context of politics, the generic frame employed is less likely to be the conflict frame. For instance, articles about societal problems, like a rise in the rate of HIV infection, might lend themselves to the human impact frame. Articles focused on business or finance might lend themselves to the economic frame. Certain topics may simply be more associated with particular frames than are others. To date, a systematic examination of the prevalence of the conflict frame and the context in which it is most often employed has not been conducted. Yet such a study is warranted as the existing literature on framing effects and the work of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) suggests that this structure could have a meaningful impact on public opinion.

4.1.2   The Effects of the Conflict Frame on Public Opinion

A growing body of literature demonstrates that media frames have the power to shift public opinion "by encouraging readers or listeners to emphasize certain considerations above others when evaluating that issue" (e.g. Druckman and Nelson 2003, 730; Baumgartner, DeBoef and Boydstun 2008; Berinsky and Kinder 2006; Cappella and Jamieson 1996; Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001; Kellstedt 2000; Nelson et al. 1997). For instance, Baumgartner et al. (2008) catalogued the frames used in articles about the death penalty and evaluated the effect of those frames on public attitudes toward capital punishment. They found that over time, news articles about the death penalty shifted from a focus on the victims of crimes to the potential innocence of the accused. This shift in framing caused public support for the death penalty to decrease by drawing attention to a different set of considerations related to the issue.

The media's frequent use of the conflict frame in public affairs reports is also likely to shape public opinion because it focuses public attention on debate between lawmakers.

Many Americans view such debate as a sign of dysfunction in the government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Americans generally believe there is consensus around the goals government should pursue—like a strong economy, low crime and quality education—and think lawmakers should "just select the best way of bringing about these end goals without wasting time and needlessly exposing people to politics" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 133). The fact that a "best solution" may not be readily apparent or available is lost on many members of the public. For this reason, they fail to understand why potential solutions need to be debated in a public forum. As stated by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), "people equate the presence of dissenting policy proposals with the presence of special interests and the attendant demotion of the true consensual, general interest" (157).[1]

Prior studies have examined the effects of exposure to political conflict on various political attitudes, like public cynacism, trust in government, approval of the government, and support for the political system, (e.g. Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht 1997; Cappella and Jamieson 1996; Forgette and Morris 2006; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Collectively, these works demonstrate that periods of heightened political debate lead to more negative public assessments of the government, Congress, and the political system. Periods of heightened conflict may, similarly, influence aggregate level policy opinion.

4.2   Theory and Hypotheses

The existing literature on the thermostatic response contends that changes in the amount of government Americans receive influence the amount of government Americans say they want. "Amount of government" has been operationalized in past studies in several ways, including changes in federal spending (Wlezien, 1995) and the passage of important laws (Erikson et al. 2002). If the prevailing theory is correct, public mood should become more conservative when government spending increases and when major liberal legislation is

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[1]This is precisely the idea articulated by President Obama in the quotation that opens this paper. He implies that partisan posturing and conflict represent "a refusal to put what's best for the country ahead of self-interest or party or ideology" (Presidential Remarks 2011).

passed and vice versa.

H1: Public mood responds to the amount of government American's receive, becoming more conservative with increased government spending and the passage of liberal laws, and vice versa.

The theory I develop stands in contrast to those developed in the existing literature. I argue that American legislators face a catch-22. Achieving the collective goals of the American people requires the passage of legislation, but the legislative process, much like sausage making, is messy and unappealing to the public. It entails debate, conflict, and is inherently political—all qualities that the American people dislike. For this reason, solving the societal problems the people want solved through policymaking can actually result in a public backlash if the people see how the sausage is made. That is where the news media come in.

When an issue of societal concern is discussed in the context of government action, reporters are likely to employ a conflict frame that highlights disagreement between the parties and depicts elites as "polarized forces." Imposing this frame on public affairs reports allows journalists to increase the entertainment value of such articles while respecting the norm of balanced coverage. But the application of the conflict frame to policy-focused reports structures these articles in predictable and meaningful ways. Rather than the news media functioning as a "pipeline" that delivers hard facts about the substance of new legislation to the public, policy-focused reports are shaped around the two-sides of the debate. With this structure in place, the "pseudo-environment" experienced by consumers of policy-oriented news is one dominated by conflict, disagreement, obstructionist tactics, deadlock, veto threats and horse trading. In this environment, the substance of the legislation itself is secondary to the process of policymaking.

H2: When an issue is discussed in the context of government action, the conflict frame is more likely to be used than are other frames. Conversely, when an issue is discussed outside the context of government action, the conflict frame is less likely to be employed than are other frames.

Rather than all press being good press, for the legislative process just the opposite is true. The more news coverage a particular bill receives, the more likely that members of the public will be exposed to the policymaking process they so despise. Having been exposed to that process and the conflict associated with it through the media, the public becomes dissatisfied. Legislation that is associated with a high degree of conflict is viewed by many members of the public as partisan, divisive and antithetical to the public interest. As a result, we observe a public backlash against the legislation and the actors associated with it—a shift in public opinion opposite the direction of the president's party. Because the stimulus that drives this backlash is exposure to the conflict present in the policymaking process (via the news), not policy change, it should occur whether or not the bill in question becomes law. Even failed policies that receive high levels of media attention should have a negative impact on public opinion. Similarly, poorly publicized policy changes should fail to generate changes in public mood.

H3: The public responds negatively to conflict, causing mood to shift opposite the direction of the president's party.

I test the hypothesis that public mood responds to policy-focused news reports against the rival hypothesis that changes in the "amount of government" drive mood. I further describe the research design in the following section.

4.3 Research Design

To test the hypotheses outlined above, I examine the content of news articles focused on health care, K through 12 education, and social welfare published between 1980 and 2010.[2] I then examine the relationship between this coverage and aggregate public opinion on these topics. The content analysis is designed to test the hypothesis that public affairs reports are typically framed in terms of conflict between political elites. I examine the impact of policy-focused news reports on public mood to test the standard thermostatic model against the conflict hypothesis—the idea that the public responds negatively to conflict in the news.

There are several reasons for the selection of these three policy topics. First, health care, education and welfare are all domestic welfare state policies. The thermostatic response is generally associated with such policy topics (as opposed to foreign policy or topics that are more regulatory in nature, like gun control). In fact, health care, education and welfare were three of the five policies examined by Wlezien (1995) in his original article on the thermostatic response. Selecting these cases allows me to make the argument that the findings from the study should be generalizable to other domestic welfare state policies.

Secondly, health care is advantageous because a highly publicized attempt at health reform failed during the time period examined by the study. The Clinton health reform plan provides a useful counterfactual that can be leveraged to assess whether policy change must occur for public attitudes to also change, or whether debate and conflict on a particular issue can elicit a public response in the absence of policy change.

Lastly, the education and welfare series both include periods during which my expectations diverge from those of the thermostatic model—the periods surrounding the debate and passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA). Here, President Bush championed a liberal policy that

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[2]Here, "welfare" policy refers to means tested social programs, such as AFDC, TANF, food stamps, WIC, and so forth. Social welfare problems include social ills such as hunger, homelessness, and poverty.

dramatically increased federal regulation of K through 12 education, while President Clinton advocated welfare reform and signed into law a conservative plan that ended the guarantee of income assistance for the indigent. If the public responds to the substance of new legislation, as the thermostatic model anticipates, public mood should shift in the conservative direction in response to NCLB and in the liberal direction in response to PRWORA. However, if the public responds to the conflict surrounding this legislation, it should punish the president's party in both cases due to the president's association with these "divisive" policies.

To create the news databases needed for the study, I conducted keyword searches of the *New York Times* in Lexis Nexis. The search terms used were designed to identify relevant national news reports related to societal problems (like inadequate health care, falling test scores, increases in the poverty rate, etc.) and government responses to those problems (such as new laws and regulations).[3] Because the theory tested here pertains to national events and national news coverage, articles from particular sections or "desks" of the *New York Times* that generate editorials, foreign news, sports, local news, etc. are omitted. Those desks are: metropolitan, editorial, foreign, weekly, book review, arts and leisure, travel, sports, and society.

The search terms were developed by reading a sample of the stories returned by the searches and iteratively revising the search terms until at least 90% of the articles returned

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[3]The health keywords used are: BODY(("health care" w/5 reform) OR ("medical care" w/5 reform) OR ("health care" w/5 universal) OR (Medicare w/5 reform) OR ("health care" w/5 access) OR ("health care" w/5 availability) OR (health w/5 cost) OR (health w/5 spend*) OR (medical w/5 spend*) OR (cost w/5 Medicare)) AND NOT (Metropolitan Desk OR editorial desk OR weekly desk OR foreign desk OR "arts and leisure desk" OR "book review desk" OR travel desk OR sports desk). Education keywords: BODY((high school! OR secondary school! OR elementary school! OR public school!) w/10 (student! OR study OR test! OR problem! OR fail! OR achieve! OR educat! OR program OR bill OR legislation OR tax OR fund!)) AND NOT (Metropolitan Desk OR editorial desk OR weekly desk OR foreign desk OR "Arts and Leisure Desk" OR "book review desk" OR travel desk OR sports desk OR society desk). Welfare keywords: BODY("Aid to Families with Dependent Children" OR AFDC OR "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families" OR TANF OR PRWORA OR EITC OR poverty OR low income OR working poor) AND NOT (Metropolitan Desk OR editorial desk OR weekly desk OR foreign desk OR "Arts and Leisure Desk" OR "book review desk" OR travel desk OR sports desk).

were "true hits."[4] Sensitivity studies were also conducted on the search terms by iteratively removing one of the keywords contained within the search terms and rerunning the search to assess the degree to which the results were driven by a single keyword. The annual number of articles returned by these iterative searches must be highly correlated with one another (with a correlation coefficient of at least .85) for the search terms to be approved. After the search terms were vetted, the full text of all the articles returned by these searches was downloaded and imported into an Access database.[5] For the content analysis described below, a ten percent sample of the health and welfare databases was examined (generated by capturing every tenth article) and a 20 percent sample of the smaller education dataset was used. All coding was done by a process of human text annotation.[6]

4.3.1 Content Analysis

Hypothesis two expects that the conflict fame will be used more often when an issue of societal concern is discussed in the context of government action than when it is discussed outside the context of government action. When articles focus on societal problems like the rising cost of prescription drugs or the shortage of primary-care physicians, for example, they are less likely to highlight debate and conflicts between elite actors. To test this hypothesis, the policy-focused and problem-focused articles within the health, education and welfare datasets were identified in an initial round of coding. Policy-focused articles are those that center on federal legislation (that is being drafted, has been proposed, or has recently passed) and policymaking. Problem-focused articles center around issues that are of

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[4]"True hits" means that the articles used the keywords in the context in which they were intended. For instance, the education keywords include "bill," meaning a piece of legislation. If the search returned articles about men named Bill, such articles would represent "false hits." Articles about education bills in Congress would be "true hits."

[5]The articles that comprise the dataset were downloaded from LexisNexis by hand. An automated parsing program developed by a software programmer at UC-Davis was then used to compile the articles into an Access database.

[6]A team of research assistants conducted the initial round of coding (the assignment of the "policy" and "problem" codes). The author conducted the second round of coding. This process is fully described in Appendix C.1.

broad social concern. If an article gives equal weight to the discussion of a societal problem and to the discussion of legislation designed to ameliorate that problem, both codes can be applied. Articles that do not receive either the problem code or the policy code are not eligible for further codes. Such articles include those focused on political campaigns or platforms, those focused on state or local policy initiatives, and those focused on improvements or innovations (like rising test scores or the benefits of a new vaccine).[7]

In a second round of coding, I examine the content of the policy and problem-focused articles in detail. This includes the assignment of codes that pertain to conflict and the legislative process, codes that identify substantive information about the content of a piece of legislation or the severity of a societal problem, and codes that identify the use of a second "generic frame," the human interest frame.

Five separate codes are applied that pertain to conflict and the legislative process: the generic conflict frame, heated conflict, substantive debate, parliamentary tactics, and political calculus.[8] First, recall that, as described by Newman et al. (1992), the generic conflict frame focuses on "polarized forces—'the two sides of the issue' " (64). Therefore, to receive the generic conflict code, the article must be focused around two groups that are competing or at odds over an issue or piece of legislation. The headline and opening sentences of an article are critical to the assignment of this code. If the article described a dispute between two actors or groups within the first four sentences, setting the article up as an examination of the "two sides of the issue," the article received the generic conflict code.

The heated conflict code goes one step further than the generic conflict code, identifying

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[7]A complete codebook with decision rules for assigning the codes described here is provided in Appendix C.

[8]These codes are informed Newman et al's (1992) description of the conflict frame, by Jamieson (1992) and Patterson's (1993) descriptions of "strategy coverage," by Cappella and Jamieson's (1996) typology of news coverage, and by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) discussion of public response to the policymaking process.

debates between elites that have become uncivil. It is applied to articles in which the author repeatedly characterizes the interactions between elites as heated or uncivil (meaning words like battle, fight, argument or enemies are used to describe the interactions between elites or to characterize the debate itself).

Substantive debate comprises an additional element of the conflict frame. Many members of the public would prefer to see elites in agreement about the best course of action for the country and dislike disagreement between elites of any kind. For that reason, I track the occurrence of substantive debate, which I define as a two-sided discussion of the causes or severity of a societal problem, or of the efficacy, merits, or potential effects of a given piece of legislation. Using health care as an example, such an article might contain arguments from Democrats saying that the legislation will help to control future health care costs, and arguments from Republicans saying the legislation will cause long waits and the rationing of medical services.

In addition to the codes described above, which could potentially apply to both problem and policy-focused articles, the final two conflict codes are specific to articles that focus on lawmaking.[9] Many Americans believe lawmakers employ parliamentary and political tactics to advance legislation that will be advantageous for the lawmakers themselves, rather than for the public at-large. When such tactics are employed, their use is viewed as a sign of dysfunction in the government. I, therefore, apply two codes that correspond to discussions of parliamentary and political tactics. The first, "parliamentary tactics," could also be called the "sausage making code." It is applied to articles that detail the strategies used by lawmakers within the legislative arena to advance their preferred policies and defeat the policies they oppose. This includes discussions of delay tactics and the strategic timing of votes, tactics used to limit debate, filibustering, presidential veto threats, methods of ensuring party loyalty, the strategic addition of amendments, party-line votes, and disputes over

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[9]I did, however, look for instances of these codes in the problem-focused dataset and recorded the few instances of their occurrence.

committee jurisdiction.

The "political calculus" code is applied to articles that discuss the political conse-
quences that may result from the passage or defeat of a piece of legislation. This includes
discussions of the electoral consequences of passage or failure for members of Congress
and the president, discussions of the impact of passage or failure on presidential job ap-
proval numbers, etc. Discussions of the political strategies used to rally popular support
for a piece of legislation also fall under the purview of this code. Together, these two codes
represent the facets of the conflict frame that are entirely related to the legislative process,
as opposed to the substance of the legislation under consideration.

One possible alternative to the conflict frame is a spending frame that focuses on the
fiscal and macroeconomic consequences of a societal problem or policy change. This type
of frame is the most likely to highlight the information that the thermostatic model views as
consequential for shaping public mood—information on changes in the level of government
spending. For this reason, I code articles according to the degree to which they employ the
economic frame using a set of five codes. The first indicates the presence of spending or
deficit estimates related to a societal problem or policy change. The second code identifies
references to anticipated changes in macroeconomic indicators (such as the unemployment
rate or inflation) that could result or have resulted from a given policy or societal problem.
The third code identifies descriptions of proposed tax increases, and a fourth code identifies
descriptions of proposed tax cuts and tax credits. The last code is an indicator of the
prominence of the spending and economic information found in the article. To receive this
code the economic information must be found in the headline or first four sentences of the
article.

A second possible alternative to the conflict frame is a human interest frame, which
"focuses on describing individuals and groups who are likely to be affected by an issue"
(Newman et al. 1992, 69). Articles that include such a description in the first four sentences

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are given the code, "human interest lead." Articles that include such descriptions in the body of the article are given the code, "human interest focus."

The last code, "substance focus" identifies articles that are primarily informative in nature, meaning they provide facts and figures about a policy or problem. For policy-focused articles, a substance focus means that at least 50% of the article is devoted to providing an explanation or description of a bill's provisions. For problem-focused articles, a substance focus mean that at least 50% of the article is devoted to a discussion of the causes, reach, or severity of a societal problem. Human interest stories that provide a portrait of the struggles faced by one family or one community, but do not provide facts about the degree to which the example is indicative of a larger problem, do not receive the "substance focus" code.

Using the coding scheme outlined here, I explore the degree to which problem and policy-focused news reports respectively utilize the conflict frame, the economic frame, and human interest frame.

4.4 Content Analysis Results

Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 provide the results of the content analyses for the health, education, and welfare datasets, respectively. In all three cases, the conflict codes are more prevalent among the policy-focused articles than among the problem-focused articles. Across all three topics, the percentage of policy-focused articles that received at least one conflict code ranges from 64% (in the welfare dataset) to 74% (in the health dataset). Among the problem-focused articles, however, the percentage of articles that include at least one conflict code ranges from 14% (in the welfare dataset) to 27% (in the health dataset).[10] Roughly half of the policy-focused articles received two or more conflict codes. The percentage of problem-focused articles with two or more conflict codes was 10% for the health care dataset, 8% for the education dataset, and 3% for the welfare dataset. Not only was

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[10]Difference in proportions tests reveals that the differences in the prevalence of the conflict frame between the policy-focused and problem-focused groups are statically significant at a level of 95% confidence.

conflict more prevalent overall in the policy-focused articles, conflict was also more likely appear in the headline or opening sentences of policy-focused articles—more than a quarter of the policy-focused articles established the presence of conflict in the headline or opening sentences (as indicated by the prevalence of the generic conflict frame). Whatever substantive information about the provisions of the legislation that might also have been contained in these articles was provided within the context of conflict, as established by the first few sentences of the article.

Table 4.1: Content of Health-Focused News Articles

Code	Policy-Focused Articles		Problem-Focused Articles	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Conflict Lead (generic conflict frame)	52	29%	3	3%
Heated Conflict	60	33%	8	8%
Substantive Debate	72	40%	27	27%
Parliamentary Tactics	71	39%	0	0%
Political Calculus	49	27%	0	0%
At Least One Conflict Code	138	**76%**	28	**27%**
Two or More Conflict Codes	97	**53%**	10	**10%**
Substance Focus	43	**24%**	69	**68%**
Spending/Deficit/Economic Lead	25	14%	13	13%
Macroeconomic Implications Discussed	9	5%	3	3%
Spending or Deficit Estimates	50	27%	11	11%
Tax Increases Described	19	10%	0	0%
Tax Cuts Described	10	5%	1	1%
Human Interest Lead	3	2%	20	20%
Human Interest Focus	0	0%	17	17%
Total Articles	182		102	

Table 4.2: Content of Education-Focused News Articles

Code	Policy-Focused Articles		Problem-Focused Articles	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Conflict Lead (generic conflict frame)	29	38%	10	7%
Heated Conflict	24	32%	8	5%
Substantive Debate	24	32%	26	18%
Parliamentary Tactics	11	14%	0	0%
Political Calculus	15	20%	1	0.7%
At Least One Conflict Code	54	**71%**	30	**20%**
Two or More Conflict Codes	35	**46%**	12	**8%**
Substance Focus	31	**41%**	100	**68%**
Spending/Deficit/Economic Lead	7	9%	1	0.7%
Macroeconomic Implications Discussed	0	0%	0	0%
Spending or Deficit Estimates	29	38%	6	4%
Tax Increases Described	0	0%	0	0%
Tax Cuts Described	0	0%	0	0%
Human Interest Focus	0	0%	25	17%
Human Interest Lead	0	0%	39	26%
Total Articles	76		148	

Table 4.3: Content of Welfare-Focused News Articles

Code	Policy-Focused Articles		Problem-Focused Articles	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Conflict Lead (generic conflict frame)	79	47%	6	4%
Heated Conflict	46	27%	3	2%
Substantive Debate	45	27%	11	7%
Parliamentary Tactics	39	23%	0	0%
Political Calculus	29	17%	6	4%
At Least One Conflict Code	108	**64%**	21	**14%**
Two or More Conflict Codes	78	**46%**	5	**3%**
Substance Focus	64	**38%**	92	**60%**
Spending/Deficit/Economic Lead	42	25%	10	6%
Macroeconomic Implications Discussed	4	2%	11	7%
Spending or Deficit Estimates	77	46%	28	18%
Tax Increases Described	5	3%	0	0%
Tax Cuts Described	20	12%	0	0%
Human Interest Focus	3	2%	48	31%
Human Interest Lead	3	2%	45	29%
Total Articles	168		155	

Government spending and deficit estimates are often given in policy-focused articles. Forty six percent of welfare policy-focused articles contained such estimates, 38% of education policy-focused articles contained them, and 24% of health policy-focused articles contained spending or deficit projections. These figures were not typically the focus of the articles that contained them. Spending and deficit estimates were prominently placed (in the first four sentences) in approximately 25% of the welfare-focused articles, 14% of the health policy articles, and just 9% of the education policy articles. Further, despite the inclusion of such figures, the overall effect a policy was projected to have on federal spending and the deficit was not always clear. Articles often contained information about both spending increases and spending cuts, or both spending increases and deficit reductions. For instance, among the health policy articles that contained spending or deficit estimates, 35% gave estimates about both increases and decreases in spending or the deficit. Readers seeking a clear, prominent signal about the impact of a policy on federal spending or the deficit are likely to have difficulty finding one.

Cost estimates and deficit projections are, themselves, frequently topics of debate among lawmakers. Opponents of a given policy often argue that it will cost more than proponents estimate, that it will not be deficit neutral, or that it will not save as much money as expected. For example, an article published on November 11, 2009 outlined the contradictory claims made by lawmakers about the cost of "Obamacare":

> Over two days of debate on the Senate floor about the motion to move ahead with the major health care legislation, Democrats and Republicans fired volley after volley of contradictory claims about the proposed bill ... Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina: "The bill we are moving to consider will cost $2.5 trillion once fully implemented; nearly three times the official C.B.O. score of $848 billion. The Democrats are playing a shell game to hide the true cost of this legislation." Judd Gregg, Republican of New Hampshire: "When all this new spending occurs, this bill will cost $2.5 trillion over that 10-year period – $2.5 trillion. That is the real cost of this bill." Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey: "This bill actually cuts the deficit by $130 billion in the first 10 years and $650 billion in the second 10 years" (Herszenhorn 2009).

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Of all the policy-focused articles that contained spending and deficit estimates, 92% also received at least one conflict code, and 61% received two or more conflict codes. In sum, substantive information about government spending and changes to the size of the government is rarely provided in a "just the facts" sort of way. Rather, this information is provided within the context of debate.

Statistics alone cannot convey the degree to which partisan conflict is highlighted by many of the policy-focused articles. These articles are peppered with colorful language that describes "poisonous partisan debate," "surly clashes between the parties," and "Congressional debate deteriorat[ing] into a partisan brawl" (Pear and Toner 2004; Hulse 2003; Pear 2010). The opening sentences of four different policy-focused articles are provided below to illustrate the flavor imparted by the use of the conflict frame:

> In a Congressional session thus far devoid of serious policy-making, it is probably fitting that the first showdown between Democrats and President Bush comes over the largely symbolic question of how much to raise the minimum wage (Rasky 1989).

> President Clinton escalated the fight over Medicare spending today, demanding that Congress shift money to health programs for poor people, disabled children and legal immigrants. But Republicans rebuffed White House pleas to negotiate on the issue and said they felt they had the upper hand (Pear 2000, 22).

> Congress broke for Thanksgiving with a final burst of partisan recriminations over the conduct of a session that produced Medicare changes, tax cuts and hard feelings certain to spill over into the 2004 campaign ... Democrats asserted that Republicans, in their drive to prove they could deliver when controlling both the House and the Senate, badly bent Congressional rules and resorted to "brass knuckles" to force through flawed legislation that will backfire with the public (Hulse 2003).

> Education Secretary Rod Paige said Monday that the National Education Association, one of the nation's largest labor unions, was like "a terrorist organization" because of the way it was resisting many provisions of a school improvement law pushed through Congress by President Bush in 2001 (Pear 2004).

These quotations illustrate the tone set by the use of the conflict frame. The structure focuses attention on party leaders and the president, what each has to gain or lose from the legislation's passage, and who has the upper hand. When the substantive debate is described or discussions of spending are introduced, it is often done within the context of a standoff between political elites. Understanding this structure helps to explain why many Americans see policy debate as a sign that legislators are pursing their own interests. Debate is not presented as an effort to develop the best policy for the American people, it is presented as a "battle" between the parties, each of whom has a vested interest in being the victor.

Lawmakers and journalists are both aware of the role the news media play in shaping the public discourse on policy. For instance, in August of 1994, as it became clear that President Clinton would be unable to pass his health reform legislation, *The New York Times* ran an article with the headline: "Talking Sausage; The Art of Reprocessing the Democratic Process" (Toner 1994). In the article, the author describes how lawmakers and the news media both slipped into "campaign mode" during the long fight over health reform and "focused on whether Mr. Clinton was winning or losing" rather than the substance of the debate (Toner 1994). This focus frustrated members of the public and perpetuated partisanship in Washington.

The frames used in problem-focused articles differ from those employed in policy-focused ones. Not only are problem-focused articles less likely to be structured around the "two sides" of an issue, but as shown in Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, they are also are more apt to focus on the facts—by providing substantive information about the issues under consideration. They also employ the human interest frame more often than do public affairs reports. As a result, the tone of problem-focused articles is less combative. Compare the following four examples of opening sentences from problem-focused articles with the policy-focused examples provided above. The first two examples are indicative of a substance focus, and

the second two employ the human interest frame:

> The well-being of children in America has declined dramatically since 1970, according to an index that measures aspects of "social health" like infant mortality and drug abuse. Particularly devastating to the nation's youth have been sharp increases in the numbers of children and teen-agers who are abused, who live in poverty and who commit suicide, the index found (Goleman 1989).

> About one in four classes at public middle schools and high schools is taught by a teacher not trained in the subject, and the problem is much worse in schools that serve poor and minority students, according to a report released today by the Education Trust (AP 2002).

> The boy seemed a loose tangle of arms and legs as he spoke of spending many of his school days last year at home watching cartoons or outside riding his bicycle. Whenever he rode, graffiti and urban decay whisked by as he pedaled along in his New York City neighborhood, flattening spent crack vials with as little alarm as if they were fallen leaves (Marriott 1990).

> As she weighs bunches of purple grapes or rings up fat chicken legs at the supermarket where she works, Fannie Payne cannot keep from daydreaming. "It's difficult to work at a grocery store all day, looking at all the food I can't buy," Mrs. Payne said. "So I imagine filling up my cart with one of those big orders and bringing home enough food for all my kids" (Becker 2001).

As illustrated by these examples, reports that are substance-focused often present information in a dry, straightforward manner. When problem-focused articles are embellished to add interest, it is often with descriptions of the individuals and communities affected by particular problems—that is, through the application of the human interest frame.

Articles that discuss societal problems could be framed in terms of conflict. They could outline debates over the causes and severity of social ills like poverty and drug use. They could include discussions of who is to blame for these problems and disputes over who ought to bear responsibility for fixing them. In fact, *some* problem-focused articles do include just these types of discussions. But far more often, debate and conflict are not part of the dialogue about societal problems until the discussion enters the arena of government action. Once lawmakers take-up the issue, debate is brought to the fore. Until

that time, agreement that the problem is bad and should be corrected dominates the public discourse, as it does in the four examples above. The lack of conflict in problem-focused news coverage helps to explain why many Americans believe "'most' people agree on the most important problem facing the country," and think finding the solution should be as straightforward as identifying the problem (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 145).

In sum, the content analysis reveals that the public does receive information about the substance of new laws, but that this information is packaged or framed in predictable ways by the news media. Most policy-focused news reports are structured around "polarized forces" and highlight points of disagreement between political elites. The substantive information provided to news consumers is given within the context of this conflict or competition. How this framing affects public opinion is assessed in the next section.

4.5 Policy Focused Articles and Public Opinion

Having examined the content of the policy-focused articles, I assess the relationship between this news coverage and aggregate public opinion. Hypothesis three expects public opinion to respond to policy debate in the news—moving opposite the direction of the president's party when he becomes associated with a divisive policy. The thermostatic model expects public opinion to respond to the amount of government citizens receive, which has been measured using government spending and the passage of major legislation. To test these two competing theories, I model aggregate public opinion on health policy, education policy, and welfare policy, respectively, as a function of policy-focused news coverage, changes in government spending, and the passage of major legislation in each of the three policy areas.

The dependent variables for the three models are three new policy-specific measure of public mood. James Stimson's original mood measure has been thickened, disaggregated, and coded in accordance with the Policy Agendas topic codes to allow researchers to track

mood on specific policy topics.[11] The health mood series was created to correspond with Policy Agendas subtopic 301, Health Care Reform. The education series corresponds to subtopic 602, Elementary and Secondary Education, and the welfare series corresponds to subtopic 1302, Poverty Assistance for Low Income Families.[12]

I created time-series measures of policy-focused news coverage for inclusion as independent variables by creating annual counts of the health policy, education policy, and welfare policy articles identified in the three news samples. These counts were then multiplied by negative one for years with a Republican president (as debate during Republican presidencies is hypothesized to cause an increase in mood, while debate during Democratic presidencies is hypothesized to cause a decrease in mood). Summary statistics for the three news variables and mood variables are provided in Table 4.4. The news series are graphed against the mood series in Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.

Table 4.4: Summary Statistics for
News and Mood Variables

Statistic	News	Mood
Health		
Mean	1.97	74.26
Standard Deviation	9.14	3.17
Minimum	-13	68.27
Maximum	31	80.70
Education		
Mean	-1.1	68.96
Standard Deviation	3.0	2.05
Minimum	-9	62.97
Maximum	5	72.08
Welfare		
Mean	-1.61	54.20
Standard Deviation	6.61	4.19
Minimum	-16	44.58
Maximum	16	59.65

[12]The keywords used to generate the news databases were also designed to correspond with these topic codes.

Figure 4.1: Health Policy Mood and Number of Health Policy News Articles
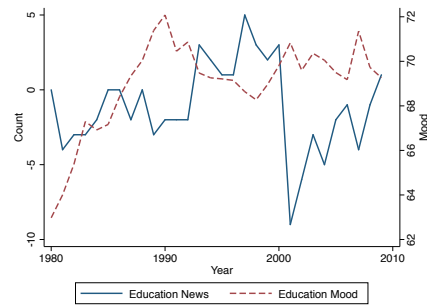

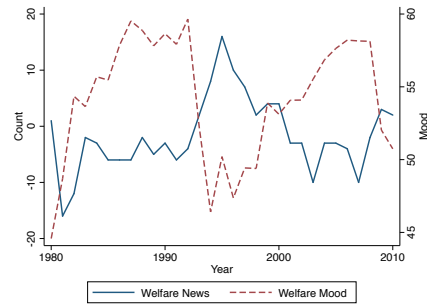Figure 4.2: Education Policy Mood and Number of Education Policy News Articles

Figure 4.3: Welfare Policy Mood and Number of Welfare Policy News Articles

The results of Dickey-Fuller tests for a unit root indicate the three mood series are all stationary. A stationary series has a constant mean and if disrupted by a shock, will return to its equilibrium level within a few lags. This tendency toward equilibrium likely explains the upward drift in health care mood at the beginning of that series (see Figure 4.1). Health reform was off the news agenda from 1980 until the Clinton health reform debate began in 1993. Health mood drifted toward its equilibrium level during that period. When debate over the Clinton reform plan began, mood was shocked—it responded to the policy debate with a sharp shift in the conservative direction. After the debate died down, mood started to drift back toward its equilibrium level. Overall, the data displayed in Figure 4.1 are promising.

Important laws in the three policy domains were identified using an update list of Mayhew's important laws.[13] Using this list, I created two policy intervention variables for each policy domain—one liberal and one conservative—that indicate the years in which major initiatives became law.[14] Table 4.5 lists the liberal and conservative laws identified in each policy domain.

I include the annual percentage change in spending in each of the three policy domains as a second measure of "amount of government" (recall that Wlezien (1995) operationalized amount of government in this way). These data are available from the Policy Agendas Project through 2009.[15]

Tables 4.6 through 4.8 display the results of lagged dependent variable models estimating health care mood, education mood, and welfare mood, respectively. Notice that

[13]This list is available for download on David Mayhew's website: http://pantheon.yale.edu/ dmayhew/datasets.html

[14]Many of the laws in Mayhew's updated list were coded for directionality by Erikson et al. (2002). Where available, I rely on the liberal/conservative codes provided by those authors. Where not available, I coded as liberal laws that created new regulations, created new government programs, or increased federal funding for existing programs. I coded as conservative laws that dismantled regulations, eliminated government programs, or decreased federal funding for existing programs.

[15]The data available through the Policy Agendas Project were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant number SBR 9320922.

Table 4.5: Important Laws, 1980-2009

Legislation	Year	Direction
Health		
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981	1981	Conservative
Catastrophic Health Insurance for the Aged	1988	Liberal
Health Insurance Portability Act	1996	Liberal
Creation of Children's Health Insurance Program (as part of budget deal)	1997	Liberal
Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit	2003	Liberal
Education		
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981	1981	Conservative
Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965	1994	Liberal
100,000 New Teachers	1998	Liberal
Ed-Flex	1999	Liberal
No Child Left Behind	2001	Liberal
Welfare		
Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981	1981	Conservative
McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987	1987	Liberal
Family Support Act of 1988	1988	Liberal
Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act	1996	Conservative

Source: Updates to *Divided We Govern*

the coefficients for the news coverage variables are negative, as expected, and statistically significant in all three models. Public mood responds negatively to policy focused news reports, even when controlling for the passage of major laws and changes in federal spending.

The substantive impact of each policy focused news article can be found by dividing the coefficient for the news variable by one minus the coefficient for the lagged dependent variable. The expected change in mood across all time periods resulting from each policy article is –0.39% in the health care case, –0.30% in the education case, and –0.43% in the welfare case. We can also evaluate the change in mood that results from a standard deviation change in the number of articles. For instance, the mean number of health policy news articles is 1.97 per year with a standard deviation of 9.14.[16] A move from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above results in a 7% decrease in health care mood.

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[16]Recall that the news variable reflects not only the number of articles per year, but also the party of the president. Articles published during Republican presidencies have a negative value.

Table 4.6: Estimating Health Mood, 1980-2009

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Lagged Health Mood	0.64**	0.13
Health Policy News Coverage	-0.14**	0.04
Percent Change in Health Spending	-0.16	3.79
Liberal Policy Change	-1.59	0.96
Conservative Policy Change	-1.64	1.93
Constant	27.31**	9.43
Adjusted R^2	0.67	
N	29	

*Indicates $p < .10$
*Indicates $p < .05$

Table 4.7: Estimating Education Mood, 1980-2009

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Lagged Education Mood	0.67**	0.09
Education Policy News Coverage	-0.10*	0.05
Percent Change in Education Spending	< -0.01	0.01
Liberal Policy Change	0.13	0.45
Conservative Policy Change	-1.52	1.04
Constant	22.83**	6.35
Adjusted R^2	0.77	
N	29	

*Indicates $p < .10$
*Indicates $p < .05$

Table 4.8: Estimating Welfare Mood, 1980-2009

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Lagged Welfare Mood	0.49**	0.11
Welfare Policy News Coverage	-0.22**	0.06
Percent Change in Welfare Spending	-0.08*	0.09
Liberal Policy Change	1.57**	0.33
Conservative Policy Change	-3.87**	1.70
Constant	27.94**	6.20
Adjusted R^2	0.72	
N	29	

*Indicates $p < .10$
*Indicates $p < .05$

The health care case is particularly instructive because the period with the most news coverage (1993 to 1994), is not associated with a policy change. The Clinton reform plan generated much debate, but ultimately failed. Despite the plan's failure, we can see from Figure 4.1 and from the regression results that health care mood responded to the debate surrounding the Clinton plan. The status quo does not need to change for mood to respond—a highly publicized policy debate can cause a backlash in mood, even in the absence of policy change.

The coefficients on the policy change and spending change variables fail the significance test in the cases of health care and education. In the case of welfare, however, the coefficient on the spending variable is negative and statistically significant at a level of 90% confidence. This finding comports with the expectations of the thermostatic model—as spending on welfare increases, welfare mood moves in the conservative direction and vice versa. Importantly, news reports focused on welfare policy provided more substantive information about government spending than did reports focused on health or education policy. This media focus may have made the public more aware of and responsive to changes in spending related to welfare as compared with the other two policy topics.

Interestingly, the coefficient on the conservative policy change variable is also negative and statistically significant at a level of 95% confidence in the welfare case. Notice that, based on the traditional thermostatic model, this coefficient has the wrong sign. The passage of major conservative legislation should result in mood becoming more, not less, liberal. But these results indicate that the passage of each piece of conservative welfare legislation results in a 7.6% decrease in welfare mood. The likely reason for this finding is the debate over and passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act during the Clinton administration. PRWORA was a conservative piece of legislation that ended the guarantee of welfare payments to the poor. Yet, this bill was signed by a Democratic president who had pledged to reform welfare. The minority of Americans who pay close

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attention to politics probably recognized this discrepancy between the president's party affiliation and the direction of the welfare reform plan. The majority of American who are less interested in politics probably did not. These Americans either missed or ignored the cues available to them about the substance and ideological orientation of PRWORA. They instead responded to the tenor of the debate, punishing the president and his party for his association with a divisive policy debate.

4.6   Conclusion

Public affairs reports are routinely structured in a way that highlights conflict between political elites and the parties, emphasizing what elites have to gain or lose from the passage of a piece of legislation. Such reports contribute to the sense many Americans have that lawmakers are pursing their own interests rather than the public good by engaging in a policy debate. As a result, exposure to this news coverage can lead to a public backlash. Members of the public penalize the president and his party when the initiatives he is associated with generate conflict. This causes mood to move cyclically, as it responds to cues about partisanship and policymaking in Washington. But contrary to conventional wisdom, mood is not strictly a function of the size of the government. It is responsive to the portrayal of the policymaking process provided by the news media. Changes in government spending and policy are not necessary to bring about changes in policy-specific mood. A highly publicized policy debate among lawmakers is sufficient to generate a public response even when the status quo remains in place.

5 CONCLUSION

President Obama's first term saw the passage of two pieces of legislation that are sure to go down in history as landmarks: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. While the former pumped roughly $800 billion into the faltering economy, the latter reformed the health insurance industry and mandated universal coverage. The Dodd-Frank Act, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell are among the dozens of other important laws also signed during President Obama's first term.

Given these accomplishments, the headlines could have read: "Another important bill signed into law." Or: "Lawmakers work tirelessly on behalf of constituents." But they did not. Instead, they described partisan arguing and a dysfunctional political system.

Journalists make choices about how to cover lawmaking based on the norms of their profession and the need to attract readers, viewers, and advertisers. Focusing on the horse race, the partisan conflicts, and the strategies employed by lawmakers helps them accomplish these goals. This framing also has predictable, profound, and negative consequences for public policy opinion.

When thinking about a piece of legislation, people do not separate or compartmentalize substantive information about a program's cost and provisions from non-substantive information about the partisan conflicts surrounding it. Instead, all the information an individual learns about a bill becomes linked up with it in people's minds. The more the news media focus on debate and discord among lawmakers, the more salient and accessible that information becomes. Due to its heightened salience, non-substantive information about the process of lawmaking can overwhelm the influence of substantive considerations in the

formation of policy opinions.

Chapter two demonstrates that, as a result of this process, an individual may oppose a piece legislation as a whole even if he or she supports the provisions that comprise it. Chapters three and four demonstrate that, in the aggregate, this process can result in a public backlash against policies with *popular* provisions and the political actors who champion them.

These findings are of importance for scholars who study public opinion and for lawmakers who wish to heed it. They indicate that to properly interpret the signals sent by the public about proposed legislation, we must examine attitudes toward the policy's provisions *and* toward the process of lawmaking. Without an examination of the latter, policy opposition can be inappropriately ascribed to disapproval of the substantive elements of a piece of legislation. Lawmakers who misinterpret this signal will have difficulty acting as Representatives of the people. Scholars who misinterpret it may draw inaccurate conclusions about the degree to which lawmakers are responsive to public preferences.

The findings also illustrate the importance of the role the news industry plays in shaping public policy attitudes. People learn about the actions of the government from the news media, and for this reason, public opinion is more responsive to policy-focused news coverage than to actual policy and spending changes. As shown in chapter four, public opinion will respond to a highly publicized policy debate, even in the absence of policy change. Scholars wishing to model aggregate policy opinion should consider the inclusion of measures of news coverage to capture this dynamic.

Lastly, the findings presented have implications for the way we view the thermostatic response. The thermostatic response has traditionally been seen as evidence that the public responds rationally to government action—demanding more spending and services when government outputs are reduced, and demanding less spending and services when government outputs are increased. For the thermostatic response to function this way, the news

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media must provide clear, prominent, accurate signals about the direction of public policy.

The content analysis provided in chapter four shows that these conditions are not always met. Facts about government spending are not always highlighted or even provided by policy-focused news reports, and information about the substance of a bill is typically given in the context of a two-sided debate. This framing makes the public more aware of and more responsive to the contentious nature of the debate than to the substance of new laws. As already stated, this dynamic can result in a public backlash against policies associated with partisan conflict. Our interpretation of the thermostatic response as "rational" should, therefore, be tempered. True, the public responds predictably to a stimulus we can identify and measure—partisan policy debate. But by punishing the governing party for the introduction of legislation that generates debate, the American people are creating perverse incentives for lawmakers that actually help to perpetuate and intensify the partisan bickering they dislike. We should update our understanding of the thermostatic response to allow for the fact that the public's preferences can be shaped—and even manipulated— by journalistic norms and by the strategic actions of lawmakers. In such instances, the thermostatic response is not a rational one.

A   AN APPENDIX: EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS

A.1   Heated Debate, Spending
Headline: Partisan Battle on Education Heats Up

A hotly contested Democratic bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is pitting Democrats against Republicans.

The debate has deteriorated into a partisan brawl centered on what the plan will cost and how it will be paid for. While Democrats argue the plan will reduce the federal deficit, Republicans vehemently reject these claims, saying the plan will cost far more than Democrats estimate.

Senate Democrats rely on the Congressional Budget Office projections, which show the costs more than offset by new taxes and fees and reduced government spending over the next ten years. "Republicans need to stop scaring everyone with their false claims about deficit spending," said Democratic Senator Mike Luna. "The CBO estimates show that our plan is fiscally sound and responsible."

Senate Republicans take a different view, saying that it is unlikely that Congress would follow through on many of the cost-saving measures included in the bill and that the projections are therefore misleading. "The Democrats are playing a shell game to hide the true cost of the legislation," said the chairman of the Senate Republican Conference. "We need firm commitments to rein in wasteful government spending as a precondition of increasing education funding."

Despite the controversy, the bill is expected to make it out of committee and to be considered by the full Senate in the coming weeks. Senate Democrats will have to close ranks and vote as a bloc to pass the bill without Republican support.

A.2   Civil Debate, Spending
Headline: Panel's Progress on Education Reflects Bipartisan Support

A bipartisan bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is gaining momentum in the Senate.

Efforts to reform the education system have moved ahead rapidly, with committee members on both sides of the aisle making concessions designed to build a consensus on the main ingredients of legislation. Now members of the Senate are turning to the last key issue of the debate—how to pay for the plan—hoping they can reach a compromise there too.

Senate Democrats rely on the Congressional Budget Office projections, which show the

costs more than offset by new taxes and fees and reduced government spending over the next ten years. "The CBO estimates show that the plan is fiscally sound and responsible." said Senate Democrat Mike Luna. "The Democrats are ready to move forward with it.

But Senate Republicans say that it is unlikely that Congress would follow through on many of the cost-saving measures included in the bill and that the projections are therefore overly optimistic. "We need firm commitments to rein in wasteful government spending as a precondition of increasing education funding," said the chairman of the Senate Republican Conference. "We can not take a wait-and-see approach to financing this program."

Leaders of both parties have pledged to find common ground and resolve their differences over spending before the upcoming Congressional break. "We are all working toward a common goal here," said Luna. "We won't let politics get in the way of that."

A.3 Heated Debate, Efficacy
Headline: Partisan Battle on Education Heats Up

A hotly contested Democratic bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is pitting Democrats against Republicans.

The debate has deteriorated into a partisan brawl centered on whether several key provisions of the legislations will be effective. While Democrats argue the plan will help failing schools improve, Republicans vehemently reject these claims, saying the plan will lead to unintended, negative consequences.

"If we do nothing, I can almost guarantee you that test scores will continue to fall over the next 10 years, because that's what they did over the last 10 years," said Democratic Senator Mike Luna. " This plan will reverse that trend by providing our schools with the resources—like skilled teachers, new computers, and high speed internet access—that they need to provide all of our children with a first-rate education. Republicans need to stop their obstructionist tactics and get on board."

Republicans concede the need for education reform, but contend the plan could do more harm than good. "The overhaul is a risky experiment that Democrats are trying to ram through Congress," said the chairman of the Senate Republican Conference. "Many of the bill's provisions are untested, irresponsible, and could cause some students to fall further behind. We want to see more proven methods added to the legislation."

Despite the controversy, the bill is expected to make it out of committee and to be considered by the full Senate in the coming weeks. Senate Democrats will have to close ranks and vote as a bloc to pass the bill without Republican support.

A.4 Civil Debate, Efficacy
Headline: Panel's Progress on Education Reflects Bipartisan Support

A bipartisan bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is gaining momentum in the Senate.

Efforts to reform the education system have moved ahead rapidly, with committee members on both sides of the aisle making concessions designed to build a consensus on the legislation. Now members of the Senate are turning to the last key issue of the debate—whether more can be done to insure the program's effectiveness—hoping they can reach a compromise there too.

"If we do nothing, test scores will continue to fall over the next 10 years, because that's what they did over the last 10 years," said Democratic Senator Mike Luna. "The Democrats feel confident that this plan will reverse that trend by providing our schools with the resources—like skilled teachers, new computers, and high speed internet access—that they need to provide all of our children with a first-rate education."

"I agree that we need to fix the educational system," said the chairman of the Senate Republican Conference, "but I don't want to rush into anything that hasn't been fully vetted. There's always a risk of unintended, negative consequences with a new program, which could cause some students to fall further behind. We want to see more proven methods added to the legislation."

Leaders of both parties have pledged to find common ground and resolve their differences before the upcoming Congressional break. "We are all working toward a common goal here," said Luna. "We won't let politics get in the way of that."

A.5 Heated Debate, Tactics

Headline: Panel's Battles on Education Highlight a Broader Split

A hotly contested Democratic bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is pitting Democrats against Republicans.

The debate has deteriorated into a partisan brawl, with both sides employing parliamentary maneuvers designed to stall the other's efforts. Most recently, Senate Democrats swatted down Republican attempts to make fundamental changes to their legislation on Wednesday as the Finance Committee voted on a wide range of amendments that highlighted the deep partisan divide over the issue.

Democratic Senators characterized the amendments as "delay tactics." Senator Mike Luna said, "There is a substantial slow-walk taking place in this committee." The Committee Chairman said he hoped the committee would approve the bill this week, so it could be merged with a separate bill approved in July by the Senate Education Committee.

Republicans argue that Democrats are attempting to ram the legislation through the Senate. The chairman of the Senate Republican Conference, said: "Democrats have insisted on using education reform as a weapon against Republicans. They've been cynically exploiting people's fears, making responsible debate almost impossible."

Despite the controversy, the bill is expected to make it out of committee and to be considered by the full Senate in the coming weeks. Senate Democrats will have to close ranks and vote as a bloc to prevent a Republican filibuster from effectively killing the bill.

A.6 Civil Debate, Tactics

Headline: Panel's Progress on Education Reflects Bipartisan Support

A bipartisan bill designed to reform K through 12 education by providing vastly more resources for schools and teachers is gaining momentum in the Senate.

Efforts to reform the education system have moved ahead rapidly, with committee members on both sides of the aisle making concessions designed to build a consensus on the legislation. Now, Senate Democrats are working with Republicans to add a final series of amendments to the bill. The amendments are a compromise between the parties, designed to insure bipartisan support.

Democratic Senators expect the bill to move smoothly through the committee process. Senator Mike Luna said, "The committee is making excellent progress with regard to this bill." The Committee Chairman added that he believes the bill will be approved this week and will then be merged with a separate bill approved in July by the Senate Education Committee.

Republicans are also pleased with the progress of the bill. "We are all working toward a common goal here," the chairman of the Senate Republican Conference said. "Members of both parties are working together to guarantee that the legislation will enjoy broad support and will be considered in a timely fashion."

Thanks to the efforts of senators on both sides of the aisle, the bill is expected to make it out of committee and to be considered by the full Senate in the coming weeks. The measure is expected to pass easily with majorities of both parties approving the legislation.

B   AN APPENDIX: SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS FOR CHAPTER THREE

B.1   Support for the FMA, Excluding Massachusetts

Table B.1: Likelihood of Support for the FMA, Excluding Residents of Massachusetts

Variable	Coefficient
Ballot Measure State Dummy	0.09
	(0.16)
Year	-0.05
	(0.08)
Ballot Measure State X Year	-0.45*
	(0.16)
Constant	-0.16*
	(0.09)
AIC	2927.6
N	2106

Standard errors are clustered by state.
* Indicates statistical significance at the level of 95% confidence.
The data were preprocessed using CEM

B.2 Cross Tab of Marriage Attitudes and Support for the FMA

Table B.2: Comparison of Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage with Support for the FMA

Attitude Toward Same-Sex Marriage	Supports/Opposes FMA			
	Supports FMA	Opposes FMA	Don't Know	Total
Supports Marriage	n=92 13.3%	n=572 82.7%	**n=28** **4.0%**	n=692 33.6%
Supports Unions	n=159 31.7%	n=329 65.5%	**n=14** **2.8%**	n=502 24.3%
Opposes Marriage and Unions	n=586 67.5%	n=257 29.6%	**n=25** **2.9%**	n=868 42.1%
Total	n=837 40.6%	n=1158 56.2%	**n=67** **3.2%**	n=2062 100%

Tau-b = -.4332; Z-Score $< .001$

B.3 Question Wording, Support for Gay Marriage

Question wordings from 2004 survey measuring support for gay marriage and civil unions:

- On another subject, do you think homosexual couples SHOULD or SHOULD NOT be allowed to form legally recognized CIVIL UNIONS, giving them the legal rights of married couples in areas such as health insurance, inheritance and pension coverage?

- Do you think it should be LEGAL or ILLEGAL for homosexual couples to get married?

Question wording from 2005 survey measuring support for gay marriage and civil unions:

- Do you think same-sex couples should be or should not be allowed to obtain legal recognition of their relationships? (Allowed to legally marry, Allowed legally to form civil unions, but not to marry, Should not be allowed to obtain legal recofnition of their relationships.)

B.4 Alternative Model Specification, Support for FMA

Table B.3: HLM Estimating Likelihood of Support for the FMA

Variable	Coefficient
Ballot Measure State Dummy	0.08
	(0.16)
Year	-0.29*
	(0.13)
Ballot Measure State X Year	-0.39*
	(0.24)
Supports Civil Unions	-1.07*
	(0.15)
Opposes Marriage	2.44*
	(0.14)
Liberal	-0.29*
	(0.15)
Conservative	0.62*
	(0.12)
Constant	-1.79*
	(0.13)
Random Intercept	-14.9
	(26.5)
AIC	2241.2
N	2098

* Indicates statistical significance at the level of 90% confidence.

These data were not preprocessed using CEM because HLM models will not allow the use of importance weights in STATA. Control variables are, therefore, included.

C AN APPENDIX: CODEBOOK

C.1 Coding Procedures

Research assistants worked with the author to complete the initial round of coding in which the "policy" and "problem" codes" were applied. Before working with virgin data, all coders worked with a training dataset that had been coded by the author. The research assistants (who could not see the author's codes) independently coded the training dataset in small batches of approximately 50 articles at a time. At the end of each batch, their codes were compared to those of the author. Any discrepancies in codes were addressed and the coding rules described herein were clarified to facilitate more uniform and accurate coding. Once the coders reached a level of 85% agreement with the author's codes, they were assigned virgin text. To allow for an assessment of inter-coder reliability, a 25% sample of virgin text was independently coded by two coders. The level of inter-coder reliability was approximately 89%.

Only the articles that received either the "policy" or the "problem" code were eligible for further coding. The conflict, spending, substance, and human-interest codes described herin were applied by the author in a second round of coding.

C.2 General guidelines for the application of the policy-focus code

To receive the policy-focus code, at least 50% of the article should pertain to a policy initiative in Congress related to domestic policy in the areas of health, education or welfare. This includes descriptions of federal legislation (which is being drafted, has been proposed, or has recently passed), the potential effects of that legislation, the legality of such legislation, or the debate, opinions, or political compromises surrounding the legislation. These articles generally mention actors such as the President, members of Congress,

Congressional groups (like Congressional Democrats or Congressional Republicans) and Congressional leaders (like the Speaker of the House, House/Senate Minority/Majority leader, etc.).

- Letters to the editor, op-eds and other opinion pieces should not receive this code.

- These articles MUST have a legislative component. If an administrative agency or the Supreme Court is the main actor and the article does not discuss Congressional action or a presidential policy initiative, the article cannot be coded as POLICY.

- If the article centers on problems with existing health, education or welfare policies or programs, the article should be coded as "problem focused" rather than "policy focused." For example, an article focused on the fact that current welfare payments are not sufficient to meet the needs of low-income families should receive the "problem" code. (But note that articles can be double coded as both policy and problem focused if equal weight is given to policy solutions and the societal problems those policies are designed to address.)

- Articles about state and local policies should not receive this code.

C.3 General guidelines for the application of the problem-focus code

Here, health, education and welfare are discussed outside the context of government action and the the article focuses on a societal problem (like increasing rates of diabetes, falling test scores or an increasing poverty rate).

- If the problem described is a fluke (meaning it affects one person, one town or one business but has no implications for a larger segment of society), it should NOT receive this code. EXAMPLE: The health care dataset contains an article about a pet store where a kitten was discovered to have rabies. Hundreds of people came in contact with the kitten before it was known to be infected and all of those people

required rabies shots. This was a fluke and was not representative of a larger problem with exposure to rabies in pet stores. This article should not receive the "societal problem" code.

- Most articles about legislation being considered will discuss the possible ill effects of the policy (i.e. the article will discuss the possibility of future problems that *could* result from the passage of the bill). This type of discussion should NOT be given the "societal problem" code. Only descriptions of existing societal problems warrant the problem code.

- Letters to the editor, op-ed or other opinion pieces should not be given this code.

C.4 Topic Specific Codes

C.4.1 Health

Articles are eligible for the "health policy" and "health problem" codes if the main focus is domestic health or health care, meaning: the American health care system, the cost of health care in the US, the state of health care in the US, threats to public health, access to health care, health policy, innovations in medicine, or the cause, effects, or treatment of a particular disease/disorder.

- Note, this category does not include business-focused articles about the price of Kaiser stock, the sale or merging of health care companies, etc. UNLESS the article goes on to talk about the ways the business transaction will affect the cost or quality of health care, access to health coverage, the cost of prescription drugs, etc.

- A note about abortion. Articles about abortion should only be coded as health if abortion is discussed in the context of health (as part of a plan to reform health care, for example). If abortion is mentioned as a stand-alone issue (such as legislation requiring parents to be notified if a minor seeks and abortion), it should NOT be coded as health.

- The health policy code is designed to loosely map on with Policy Agendas Topic Code 301: comprehensive health care reform. Examples of legislation considered "health policy": comprehensive health care reform, Medicare reform/funding, Medicaid reform/funding, regulation of health insurance, the regulation, coverage and cost of prescription drugs and medical devices, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the regulation of state health care reform, initiatives in women's health, initiatives in rural health.

- The health problem code applies to articles where the main focus (at least 50%) is related to issues, such as: lack of accessible health care, the rising prevalence of particular diseases/disorders, risks to public health, the high cost of health care, problems funding Medicare or Medicaid, lack of medical specialists or personnel, understaffing in hospitals, Medicare fraud, or the inadequacy or ill effects of existing health policies.

C.4.2 Welfare

The main focus of the article is social welfare meaning: the American social safety net in general, appropriations and budget requests for means tested programs, administration's welfare reform proposals, the effectiveness of federal and state welfare/public assistance programs, the problems of poverty, hunger and homelessness, the needs of low income families and children, discussions of the poverty rate, the effects of budget cuts on low income individuals and families, mandatory work and training programs for welfare recipients.

- The "welfare policy" code is designed to loosely map on with Policy Agendas Topic Codes 1301 (Food Stamps, Food Assistance, and Nutrition Monitoring Programs) and 1302 (Poverty and Assistance for Low-Income Families). Legislation related to means tested programs is considered "welfare policy." This primarily includes: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Temporary Assistance to Needy

Families (TANF), Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other tax credits for low income people, HHS energy assistance programs, Economic Opportunity Act antipoverty programs, child welfare issues associated with the Social Security Act, food stamps, free and reduced price school lunch programs, Medicaid, subsidized housing, and WIC.

- Social programs that are not explicitly aimed at aiding the impoverished (such as universal health care plans, Medicare, Social Security) should NOT automatically receive the welfare code. Only when articles about these programs go on to explicitly describe how the program will affect poverty or the welfare of low income/impoverished people should the article be given the "welfare" code.

- The "welfare problem" code applies to articles where the main focus relates to issues, such as: poverty, hunger, homelessness, the needs/ problems of low income families, the effects of the high cost of living or a slow economy on low income/working class families, problems funding existing welfare programs, abuse of the social safety net (i.e. articles about "welfare queens" who won't look for work and rely on welfare payments for several years), or the inadequacy or ill effects of existing welfare policies.

C.4.3   Preschool through grade 12 education

The article focuses on descriptions of preschool, elementary and secondary education programs (including public school programs, private school programs, charter schools, home schooling, voucher programs, year-round schooling, and other innovative education programs) and the merits of or problems with these programs.

- Articles focused on college education, community college, or postgraduate education

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(including medical school, law school, business school, or other graduate or professional programs) should NOT be coded as education.

- Articles about adult education programs should NOT be considered education.

- The "education policy" code is designed to loosely map on with Policy Agendas Topic Code 602: elementary and secondary education. Articles focused on federal legislation that pertains to preschool through grade 12 education should receive this code. Legislation that falls into this category includes bills that address the following topics: school funding disparities, education choice programs, high school dropout prevention, standards for public school teachers, federal spending on preschool through grade 12 education, student discipline, violence in schools, the Safe Schools Act, construction of public schools, high school scholarship programs, preschool programs, No Child Left Behind, Head Start, ways to measure student and teacher performance, college prep programs, charter schools, disparities in education (based on geography or demographic factors).

- To receive the "education problem" code, the main focus of the article should be related to problems in schools (preschool through grade 12) or the education system generally. This includes: low student performance, violence and bullying in schools, crumbling school buildings, American children not performing as well as students in other countries, lack of funds for quality education, low teacher salaries, inadequate teacher training, high drop-out rates, high truancy rates, students not being adequately prepared for college or vocations by public schools, students not prepared to learn when they enter kindergarten or first grade, high rates of illiteracy, underperformance in science and math, lack of nutritious foods in school cafeterias, disparities in the quality of schools (based on geography and/or demographic factors), programs/courses being cut (such as music, foreign language, recess/phys-ed,

etc), older or inadequate text books.

C.5 Conflict Codes

C.5.1 Heated Conflict

This code is applied to conflict-focused descriptions of the interactions between political elites (meaning the article repeatedly—at least twice—uses words like battle, fight, attack, argument or enemies to describe interactions between elites). Examples:

- "The perennial tension between governors and mayors exploded again last week in their responses to President Bush's proposal to turn over $15 billion of Federal programs to the states."

- "The whole question of work requirements for welfare recipients has generated intense conflict between Democrats and Republicans. House Democratic leaders attacked other parts of the Republican welfare bill, saying that those portions should have much more stringent requirements that people work as a condition of receiving cash assistance."

- "By proposing sharp slashes in Federal aid to education, President Reagan has run head on into the collective wrath of what former Representative Edith Green once called 'the educational-industrial complex.'"

- "Armed with conflicting economic studies, they waged verbal battle over job losses, inflationary effects and the question of whether Democrats or Republicans were the truer champions of workers at the lowest end of the scale."

- "Still, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, remains an angry opponent of the bill, which would abolish the longstanding Federal entitlement to assistance for any eligible poor family. 'I hope the President will veto this bill,' Mr. Moynihan told reporters. 'It's sure as hell cruel in the lives of American children.'"

C.5.2 Generic Conflict Frame

This code refers to the overall theme and structure of the article. The headline and lead paragraph (first four sentences) are the keys to assigning this code. If either of these two elements of the article focuses on the struggle/tension/conflict/dispute between two or more actors or groups (such as Congressional Republicans and Congressional Democrats, the President and Congress, The Administration and the states, etc.), setting the article up as an examination of the "two sides of the issue," the article should receive this code. Examples:

- Lead: "The White House is clashing with governors of both parties over a plan to cut Medicaid payments to hospitals and nursing homes that care for millions of low-income people. The White House says the changes are needed to ensure the 'fiscal integrity' of Medicaid and to curb 'excessive payments' to health care providers. But the plan faces growing opposition. The National Governors Association said it 'would impose a huge financial burden on states,' already struggling with explosive growth in health costs."

- Lead: "As he completes his welfare plan, President Clinton must resolve a fight that has divided aides for months and has led one faction to accuse another of trying to rip holes in the social safety net. The fight is over whether families who follow all the rules can eventually be dropped from both welfare and a work program that Mr. Clinton is proposing."

- Lead: "Even though President Clinton and Congress have agreed to spend $16 billion on health care for uninsured children in the next five years, a major dispute has broken out over whether the states or the Federal Government should decide how to use the money. Disagreements that have been bubbling just below the surface in the last two months will burst into public view this week, as the Senate Finance Committee votes

on legislation to carry out the budget agreement."

C.5.3 Substantive Debate

This code is applied to debate over program efficacy and the potential effects of provisions. Here, the substance of a policy or a particular provision of a bill is described and elites discuss the potential merits and consequences of the bill's enactment. Substantive debate may also include debate over the causes or severity of a societal problem, such as poverty, homelessness, lack of access to health care, etc. Examples:

- "The proposed new program, known as Part C of Medicare, was conceived by Representative Pete Stark of California, chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health, who has long favored 'Medicare for all' as the best way to guarantee coverage for all Americans. 'Medicare is simple: no new rules, no new bureaucracy,' Mr. Stark said in an interview today. But many Republicans and some Democrats, including some in the Clinton Administration, say the Ways and Means Committee bill relies too heavily on the Government to cover the uninsured. They say it would be better to help people buy private insurance, rather than creating a new Federal health insurance program as part of Medicare."

- "House Republicans said today that they wanted to cut $16.5 billion from the food stamp program over the next five years by establishing strict new work requirements for recipients and by trimming the growth in benefits. The proposal represents a fundamental shift in the design of the program, which serves as the ultimate safety net for more than 27 million poor Americans. It is one piece of a huge bill intended to free poor people from dependence on Government while vastly increasing the power of state officials to run their own welfare programs free of Federal supervision. Democrats say the overall bill is cruel to women and children because it would, for example, scrap the national school lunch program and give the money to the states

as well as bar the use of Federal money to provide cash assistance to unmarried teen-
agers."

C.5.4 Political Calculus

To receive this code, the article must contain a significant discussion (at least three
sentences) of the political ramifications of a policy proposal or problem for a political
actor (the president, congressional Democrats/Republicans, etc.). "Horserace" coverage
(explaining which side is winning or losing) should receive this code, as should discussions
of tactics designed to win popular support for a piece of legislation. Examples:

- "Their efforts to portray Mr. Bush as insensitive to the poor have generated little
  public reaction, and Mr. Bush appears to have suffered little political damage for
  his refusal to negotiate any alteration in his own plan. Fearful that they may now
  be perceived as the ones responsible for delaying a wage increase for the sake of a
  political battle over nickels and dimes, many Democrats are looking for a way out."

- "The same political concerns that compelled President Bush to announce a "com-
  prehensive health reform program" today also obliged him to be vague about many
  details. ... While it has become politically necessary for candidates to address health
  care in general, it is virtually impossible for them to make specific proposals without
  offending somebody. Thus Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, the Secretary of Health and Hu-
  man Services, and White House officials were unable to answer important questions
  today about how the President's plan would work."

- "For months the two chambers have played a game of legislative chicken, inviting
  each other to be the first to tackle this prickly issue in the midst of a Presidential
  election campaign. ...Wary of forcing an election-year vote on an issue so sensitive
  to each of these powerful constituencies and unable to come up with a compromise,
  Congressional leaders all but gave up two weeks ago and pronounced a minimum

wage increase dead for this year. Bush Raises Issue Again But then Vice President Bush shifted the political equation by endorsing an unspecified increase in the minimum wage, provided that it was accompanied by the 'training wage' for new workers set below the minimum standard."

- "Mr. Bush's budget began an ideologically charged debate in a midterm election year, with his party's control of Congress at stake. ... The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee quickly dispatched talking points tailored to hot Senate races. 'White House budget forces Santorum to choose between Pennsylvania and Bush,' said one set of talking points focused on Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, a Republican facing a difficult re-election fight."

C.5.5 Parliamentary Tactics

This code capture elements of Congressional "sausage making" and strategizing by lawmakers and the administration. It should be applied to articles that are focused on the process of policymaking within the legislative arena, particularly those that discuss the parliamentary tactics employed by the parties or the administration. This includes: mentions of delay tactics, tactics used to limit debate, filibustering, methods of ensuring party loyalty, strategic timing of votes, strategic addition of amendments, party-line votes, disputes over committee jurisdiction, vetoes and veto threats, the imposition of deadlines on Congress, discussions of the administration lobbying Congress, etc. Articles that focus on deal making, logrolling, negotiations, and political alliances should receive this code. Examples:

- "President Bush has threatened to veto the House bill, developed entirely by Democrats, and a more modest bipartisan measure, expected to win Senate approval this week. Republicans tried to block consideration of the House bill and complained that it was being rammed through the House without any opportunity for amendment."

- Lead: "In a vote they acknowledged was largely symbolic, House Democrats today failed to override President Bush's veto of a bill raising the minimum wage. But the Democrats vowed to press for a compromise the President would sign. Moments after the 247-to-178 vote, 37 votes shy of the two-thirds needed to override the veto, Democrats in both the House and Senate made good on that pledge, by laying out plans for legislation aimed at persuading the President to bargain."

- "Democrats were narrowly defeated today on another important amendment to the Republicans' welfare bill. Their amendment, rejected by a vote of 50 to 49, sought to prevent states from slashing their contributions to basic welfare programs. But the Republicans prevailed only after their leaders made new concessions on the issue to hold their party's moderates."

C.6   Spending, Deficit and Macroeconomic Codes

C.6.1   Spending and Deficit Estimates

This code is an indicator of whether the article provides factual information on the amount of new spending, size of spending cuts, or changes in the deficit that would result from the passage of given policy. The article may also provide estimates of the amount of money that would be needed to correct a societal problem. To receive this code the article must provide a dollar estimate, such as a cost estimate, budget projection, or projected deficit figure that would result from new legislation. Specific estimates of the size of a cut to or expansion of a program can also receive this code (such as a percentage reduction/increase in the size of a program, figures detailing the size of a personnel cut/expansion, etc.). Examples:

- Size of cuts to a program: "Samuel R. Pierce Jr., Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, detailed the Administration's proposals at the beginning of today's hearing. He said that one effect of the proposals would be to reduce authorization for new public housing to 175,000 units, from the 260,000 units recommended by the

Carter Administration; to raise rents for subsidized housing tenants to 30 percent of income, from 25 percent, and to make other cuts in Federal housing aid."

- Size of cuts in spending: "David B. Swoap, Under Secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services, said at a briefing for reporters that the new restrictions in welfare eligibility would result in Federal savings of $1 billion by 1982, while states' costs will be reduced $850 million."

C.6.2   Tax Increases

Sub-code that identifies discussions of new taxes or proposed tax increases.

C.6.3   Tax Decreases

Sub-code that identifies discussions of proposed tax cuts or new tax credits.

C.6.4   Macroeconomics

Identifies references to anticipated changes in macroeconomic or business indicators (such as the unemployment rate or consumer sentiment) that could result or have resulted from a given policy.

C.6.5   Economic Focus

This code indicates that the spending, tax, or macroeconomic information provided is the focus of the article. To receive this code, such information must be contained in the headline or first four sentences of the article.

C.7   Substance Focus

The purpose of the article is to describe the substance of a piece of legislation. The focus is on providing information about the purpose of the legislation and the provisions contained within it. To receive this code, at least 50% of the article should focus on such substantive descriptions of the legislation. Substance focused articles may also describe and discuss societal problems, such as poverty, homelessness, lack of access to medical care, etc. Such articles should give facts and figures about the reach or severity of the problem. "Human interest" stories that provide a portrait of the struggles faced by one family or

one community—but do not provide information about the degree to which the example is indicative of a larger problem—should not receive the substance code. Examples:

- Policy substance: "The mammoth budget bills before the Senate and the House of Representatives this week follow the same themes, although they differ somewhat on the margins. These are the main elements: TAXES Taxes would be reduced by $245 billion over seven years. Most families would get a tax cut of $500 a child. The tax rate on capital gains would be lowered, eligibility for individual retirement accounts would be expanded, the marriage tax penalty would be lessened and a tax credit would be allowed to offset some adoption expenses."

- Problem substance: "The poverty rate last year was three-tenths of a percentage point higher than in 1991, and it was the highest since the 15.2 percent level recorded in 1983. Many Parallel Data At the same time, the Census Bureau reported that the number of Americans without health insurance rose 2 million last year, to 37.4 million. President Clinton has repeatedly cited such statistics in asserting that the Federal Government should guarantee health insurance coverage for all Americans. The new poverty data reflect trends already evident in other statistics. Unemployment last year averaged 7.4 percent, up from 6.7 percent in 1991, the year the recession ended. The number of people receiving food stamps climbed steadily, to 26.6 million in December 1992, from 24.9 million in December 1991. And the number of people on welfare, in the program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, rose to 14 million in December 1992, from 13.4 million in December 1991."

- Policy substance: "The House education committee posted the proposals on its Web site this week. Among the most important changes in the draft are those to the law's accountability system, in which states judge whether schools have made 'adequate yearly progress' and can avoid sanctions. The draft would allow states to look beyond annual test scores and says bluntly that broader criteria 'may increase the number

of schools that make adequate yearly progress.' Another change would distinguish schools where only one or two student groups fail to meet annual testing goals from those where three or more groups fall short. The latter would face more rigorous sanctions; students at the former would no longer be eligible to transfer to higher-performing schools. ... The draft bill would loosen the rules governing the testing of students with limited English, which have provoked disputes between federal officials and educators in some states, by allowing states to test students in their native language for five years, instead of the law's three years."

- Policy substance: "The legislation, geared to help low-income students, seeks to reward good schools and penalize failing ones by carefully tracking improvement among students. It calls for annual testing and higher standards. Under the tentative proposal, students in the fourth and eighth grades would be required to take the current standardized national test every other year to serve as a benchmark for progress. This test would be taken in addition to a battery of yearly tests designed by the states. But schools would not be penalized or rewarded for their performance on the national test, only on the state tests. The proposal would also allow states and local school districts to shift up to 50 percent of their federal funding between various programs, as long as they do not touch money earmarked specifically for poor children. Seven states and 150 local schools districts would be given even more flexibility with their federal dollars as part of a pilot program. And the legislation would allow for the first time parents of low-income children to use federal money for private tutoring."

C.8 Human Interest

The human interest code should be applied to articles that contain descriptions of the people or communities affected by a policy or societal problem. Such articles "put a human face" on the policy or "paint a portrait" of the problem through example.

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C.8.1 Human Interest Lead

Articles that contain such a description in the first four sentences should receive the human interest lead code.

- "Nothing conspicuous in Christopher and Jennifer Cundiff's appearance says they are poor: not the neat navy blue soccer shirt and blue jeans Christopher wears, or Jennifer's white Mary Janes with a white rose button on each strap. Nor do they act deprived. Blond Jennifer, 6, bounds out of the schoolhouse door, while Christopher, 9, runs to his mother yelling, 'I got me an orange juice today!' But their mother, Norma Cundiff, says she gets every stitch of their clothing from a charity closet where the school keeps other kids' castoffs. Although their father, Robert, works as a dishwasher, the Cundiffs receive welfare, too: two free school meals a day and $60 a month in food stamps. Home is a tiny, cluttered white house, with castoff tattered sneakers piled in a corner and possessions covering every table."

- "SHALIA WATTS, a government employee from Sacramento, received some upsetting news in June: the health maintenance organization to which she belongs, Health Net, will no longer be available through her employer next year. At the same time, she said, she found that the monthly premium for the Blue Shield H.M.O. she chose as a replacement would be $110, almost double what she pays now. Co-payments for her prescription-drug plan already rose this year, she said, from $5 to a scale ranging from $10 to $30. 'I'm starting to feel the financial pressure; it really adds up,' said Ms. Watts, 48, who earns about $48,000 a year as a disability insurance program representative for the California Employment Development Department. In addition to covering herself, Ms. Watts has two daughters, one of whom suffers from lupus, a chronic autoimmune disorder."

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