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Sid Bedingfield¹ and Dien Anshari¹

Abstract

Analyzing Ohio newspaper articles ($n = 466$), this study investigates the framing of Mitt Romney in a key battleground state during the 2012 presidential election. Campaign officials and political journalists contend that attacks launched by President Obama in late spring defined Romney for the remainder of the campaign. Results suggest partial support for this claim by revealing increased use of negative media frames after the attacks began. Specifically, framing of Romney as a “vulture capitalist” increased significantly during the Obama frame-building effort. Findings offer theoretical insights into the concepts of frame building and “content bias” in media coverage of political campaigns.

Keywords

frame building, framing, content bias, political communication

Introduction

The 2012 presidential election has generated a lively debate concerning the theoretical concept of frame building. At issue is President Obama’s decision to spend heavily to attack Republican Mitt Romney in late spring rather than saving those resources for use closer to the election. Did the president’s early assault permanently alter voter perceptions of Romney and thus prevent the GOP nominee from delivering a positive message across the summer and fall? Campaign officials, political journalists, and political scientists have argued this point since the campaign ended.¹ Though they prefer to use the word “define” rather than “frame,” their debate raises theoretical

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questions that are important to frame-building research: How are media frames constructed, and what role does political campaign messaging play in the process?

Campaign officials and prominent journalists have cited the president's decision to bombard battleground states with negative advertising in May and June of 2012 as a turning point that helped "shape voters' impressions" of Romney for the rest of the campaign.² They contend that the Obama campaign successfully framed Romney as a wealthy tax avoider who cared more about profits than workers and was out of touch with middle-class voters. In their view, these negative frames helped define Romney for voters before the GOP nominee could successfully sell himself as the candidate with the skills needed to fix an ailing economy. Spending such a large amount of the campaign's advertising budget so early in the race was "bold" and "risky," the *Wall Street Journal* reported, but the decision to attack Romney early was crucial because it "turned the election from a referendum on the president almost into a referendum on the challenger."³

Some political scientists have disputed this narrative.⁴ They cite opinion polls that show little change in the public's impression of Romney after the president's team began the negative messaging campaign in late spring. Studies show the effects of political advertising wear off quickly, they argue. Negative ads that ran in late spring and summer would be unlikely to resonate with voters through the November election. As one political scientist put it, "Political ads are a bit like morphine; you need dose after dose for them to keep working."⁵

The campaign officials and political journalists who tout the impact of Obama's attacks on Romney offer no empirical evidence other than the fact that the president eventually won the election. The political scientists who dispute the campaign's effectiveness focus exclusively on television advertising and its impact on public opinion polls. If the polls show no immediate change in public perception, they believe the messaging campaign must have failed.⁶ Ignored in this ongoing debate has been the role of news media coverage in the framing process. The chain of communication from political actor to voter is a multistep process in which journalists play an important mediating role.⁷ Framing researchers contend that *individual frames*—defined as "mentally stored clusters of ideas" that help people process information⁸—can shift over time when exposed to consistent *media frames*.⁹ To assess the effectiveness of the president's late spring attacks on Romney, researchers should consider their impact on media frames in the battleground states.

Traditional news outlets continue to play a significant role in disseminating political communication to the public,¹⁰ and political campaigns exert great effort in an attempt to "win the day"—to embed frames in news media coverage to benefit their candidate and damage their opponent.¹¹ In the spring of 2012, the president launched a frame-building effort against Romney that went far beyond attack ads; it was an integrated messaging campaign that included television and online advertising, surrogate speeches, and appearances by the president and his vice president.¹² The campaign had two goals: to influence the individual frames of battleground state voters directly, and to build negative frames of Romney that would appear in battleground state media reports for the rest of the campaign.¹³ This study uses media frames as the

dependent variable and employs content analysis to investigate the effectiveness of the Obama campaign's frame-building effort in one key battleground state. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the theoretical understanding of frame building and its central role in U.S. political contests.

Framing and Frame Building

The news media are believed to play at least some role in helping the public construct social reality.¹⁴ Through selection of news topics, the media can set the public agenda by identifying the most important issues.¹⁵ Framing, on the other hand, can determine *how* the public thinks about those issues.¹⁶ Journalists who report for a general audience must compress and simplify complex issues to make them more easily understood. To accomplish this, news reporters routinely make subjective decisions about which dimensions and characteristics of an issue deserve greater public scrutiny; they decide which angles to emphasize, and which to downplay or ignore altogether.¹⁷ Through this selection process, journalists create interpretive cues that identify problems and propose solutions.¹⁸ Taken individually, a media frame is believed to help "organize everyday reality"¹⁹ and serve as a "central organizing idea" that conveys meaning to events in a news story.²⁰

Frame building concerns the construction of media frames.²¹ Recent studies have investigated the social, structural, and cultural forces that determine which attributes journalists choose to emphasize in their coverage. Hänggli explored the role of power and perceived salience in the construction of media frames during a debate over immigration policy in Switzerland.²² Sheaffer and Gabay also considered the "power bias" in their study of a framing contest between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority.²³ Zhou and Moy investigated the role of online public opinion in shaping traditional media coverage in China.²⁴ In the United States, Kim, Carvalho, and Davis found that the practice of episodic storytelling in news coverage helped frame poverty as more a personal than a societal responsibility.²⁵

Shoemaker and Reese formulated a hierarchy of influences on media content that included societal norms, media ownership, routines of mass media work, ideological traits of media workers, and extramedia forces, such as news sources, special interest groups, and public relations campaigns.²⁶ They believe these levels of influence interact and often serve to constrain each other. But that interaction can vary, with some levels exerting more influence than others, depending on the media outlet or the type of media content in question.

In U.S. political campaign coverage, for example, journalistic norms usually require reporters at impartial news outlets to seek balance in their stories. To meet this requirement, they often try to include an equal number of frames sponsored by each campaign. Earlier research into media bias often used this fifty/fifty goal to measure bias in news coverage. If one candidate received more positive references than the other, the news coverage was identified as biased.²⁷ More recent research has shifted the focus from the traditional concept of media bias to frame building as the critical factor in shaping political slant in news coverage.²⁸

As noted, political actors work hard to slant coverage in their direction. In this “actor-centered process,” the media serve as an arena in which political protagonists do battle to control the public agenda.²⁹ A political actor with greater power and better communication skills can dominate the frame-building process. Using Shoemaker and Reese’s terminology, it is possible for an extramedia force with extensive resources—an incumbent president’s reelection campaign, for example—to overwhelm the restraints imposed by the remaining hierarchy of influences.

Entman contends that, despite the journalistic quest for impartiality, “framing often favors one side over another in political disputes.”³⁰ He describes this outcome as *content bias*, defined as a persistent pattern of framing that promotes one side in a conflict.³¹ One way to assess the power and effectiveness of political actors is to measure their ability to generate such content bias in news media coverage. If Obama’s spring and summer offensive had this effect, news media coverage of the Romney campaign should reflect at least some level of this content bias.

Obama’s Spring and Summer Offensive

In the United States, presidential campaigns play out as framing contests between powerful major-party nominees.³² Both campaigns usually have enormous financial resources and a skilled staff of communications professionals. The race in 2012 fit this model. A study by the media-tracking firm Kantar Media/CMAG showed Romney and his Super Pac allies spent \$492 million on advertising while Obama and his supporters spent \$404 million.³³ Yet in the spring of 2012, President Obama had a financial advantage. As an incumbent, the president had been raising money for his reelection for more than a year, and his campaign coffers were full. Romney had just emerged from a grueling Republican nomination battle that lasted longer than expected. By April, Romney had secured the nomination, but had spent heavily to do so, and would need several months of fund-raising to replenish his campaign war chest.³⁴

In late spring, the president’s team launched a messaging campaign that included heavy spending on negative advertising that began in May in the ten battleground states where polls showed the election would likely be decided.³⁵ They coordinated messaging in the ads with language used by the president, the vice president, and campaign surrogates who spoke at rallies and granted media interviews in the battleground states.³⁶ The Obama team identified five negative frames that they wanted to emphasize in advertising and embed in the news media (see “Method” section for detailed explanation of how campaign frames were identified). They intended to undermine Romney’s image as a successful businessman who understood how the economy worked by claiming that he had failed to create jobs as governor of Massachusetts, and that his firm, Bain Capital, had destroyed companies and shipped jobs abroad. They focused on his wealth, claiming he was out of touch with middle-class voters and had avoided paying his fair share of taxes. Finally, they also claimed Romney’s policies would hurt women.

The Obama campaign attempted to spread these frames by coordinating television advertising with campaign rhetoric. For example, in early July, the Obama campaign's state director in Ohio, Greg Scultz, was quoted in the (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer* in a story about Romney's chances of winning votes in northeast Ohio: "Not many Mahoning Valley residents have a Swiss bank account."³⁷ At the same time, the campaign was running an attack ad called "Makes You Wonder" that began with a picture of Romney and the words "tax havens" and "offshore accounts" flashing on the screen.³⁸

Romney's campaign could not match Obama's spending on television ads, but the Republican was not entirely defenseless. So-called Super PACs that supported Romney, including one run by GOP operative Karl Rove, tried to counter the president's attacks with advertising in support of the Republican nominee. Romney and his surrogates also delivered speeches across battleground states that addressed voters directly and, more importantly, received coverage in the news media.³⁹ In addition to its attacks on Obama, the Romney campaign emphasized four positive frames of the GOP nominee. They depicted him as a successful former businessman who knew how to create jobs; a successful former governor and a man whose leadership rescued the 2002 Winter Olympics; someone with the skills to manage the nation's deficit and debt problems; and a leader with the political strength and fund-raising prowess to actually win the presidency. The 2012 general election campaign began in earnest with this fight over frame building in battleground states like Ohio in late spring and summer.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Romney's battle for the Republican presidential nomination stretched into April and included his narrow victory in the Ohio Republican primary in early March. During the primary campaign, the Romney campaign worked hard to build those positive frames concerning his experience and character. Romney also came under fierce attack from four other Republican candidates. Our first research question and hypothesis examined how the news media framed Romney before the Obama campaign's negative messaging campaign began:

RQ1: Which frames were used in battleground state newspaper coverage of Mitt Romney during the Republican primary campaign between January 1 and April 30, 2012? How was Romney framed in straight news reports? How was he framed in opinion articles?

Daily newspapers in battleground states were expected to follow the journalistic norm of balance in political coverage and to try to present a similar number of positive and negative frames of Romney during the primary campaign season (January 1 through April 30, 2012). To test this argument, we posited the following hypothesis.

H1: There will be no significant difference between the percentage of positive and negative frames of Romney that appear between January 1 and April 30, 2012.

The president's negative advertising and messaging campaign began in May, a time when Romney was struggling to replenish resources and Obama had a resource advantage. To investigate whether the Obama messaging campaign changed the way newspapers framed Mitt Romney, we generated the following research question:

RQ2: Which frames were used in battleground state newspaper coverage of Mitt Romney between May 1 and August 31, 2012? How was Romney framed in straight news reports? How was he framed in opinion articles?

Because of its resource advantage, the Obama campaign decided to launch a major assault on Romney's image in late spring and summer. Despite the journalistic norm of balance, we believe Obama's campaign prompted daily newspapers in battleground states to present a greater number of negative than positive frames of Romney during this period. Thus, we tested the following hypothesis:

H2A: There will be a significantly greater percentage of negative frames than positive ones used in newspapers between May 1 and August 31, 2012.

Not all negative frames of Romney were sponsored by the Obama campaign. The president's team emphasized five in its messaging campaign (i.e., *vulture capitalist*, *failed former governor*, *out of touch*, *antiwomen*, and *avoid taxes*). We would like to know whether these sponsored frames were used more frequently in newspaper coverage by testing the following hypothesis.

H2B: There will be a significantly greater percentage of the negative frames emphasized by Obama than positive frames of Romney used in newspapers between May 1 and August 31, 2012.

Furthermore, some of Obama's sponsored negative frames had actually appeared before the messaging campaign began. To test whether the Obama campaign's sponsorship really made a difference in increasing use of those frames, we propose the following hypothesis.

H2C: There will be a significant increase in the use of frames emphasized by Obama during the time of his messaging campaign (May 1 through August 31, 2012) than in the period before his campaign began (January 1 through April 30, 2012).

Method

Selection of Battleground State

This study focuses on the state of Ohio because of its prominence as a battleground state. Throughout the campaign, polls showed Ohio to be a toss-up, and both the Obama and Romney campaigns devoted significant time and resources in an effort to win the state.⁴⁰ Ohio has historically served as a bellwether state in U.S. presidential politics.⁴¹ No Republican candidate has won the presidency without winning Ohio; only three Democrats have lost Ohio and gone on to the White House.

Selection of Media Outlets

Despite a steady decline in readership and revenue in the digital age, newspapers remain a primary source of political information for voters.⁴² In most markets, newspapers continue to devote more resources to original reporting in general, and to political reporting specifically.⁴³ Because of this, newspapers have been shown to serve as agenda setters for other traditional and online news outlets.

In selecting newspapers for this content analysis, the authors considered size of readership as well as availability in an accessible digital databank. The research found three of the state's four largest papers—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), *The Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Dayton Daily News*—available in the NewsBank database. One of the state's largest newspapers, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, was not included, but the three papers selected provided broad representation of Ohio newspaper circulation in terms of the state's geography, demographics, and size of its communities.

Selection of News Articles for Analysis

To select news articles, the study used the keywords “Mitt” and “Romney” appearing in all text for articles that were published between the dates of January 1 and August 31, 2012. The authors selected that time period because it provided four months of coverage before the Obama campaign's negative attacks began, and four months of coverage after the attacks were underway. This study does not include coverage that appeared after Labor Day—a date that has traditionally served as the beginning of the fall presidential campaign—because it seeks to measure the specific impact of Obama's spring and summer offensive on news coverage. Although still active, the campaigns spend more time fund-raising out of the public eye in the summer. There are fewer major campaign events to drive news coverage. By September, however, major external events such as the national conventions and debate preparations begin to dominate media coverage. In our content analysis, it would be impossible to delineate the impact of Obama's spring message campaign from the events occurring during the fall campaign. For those reasons, we chose to limit our study to the eight-month time period beginning January 1, 2012, and ending August 31, 2012. We also chose to

Table 1. Population and Sample.

Month of 2012	<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>		<i>The Plain Dealer</i>		<i>Dayton Daily News</i>	
	Available articles	Random sample	Available articles	Random sample	Available articles	Random sample
January	49	21	22	21	22	21
February	43	21	26	21	44	21
March	37	21	28	21	31	21
April	36	21	29	21	28	21
May	31	21	25	21	23	21
June	51	21	31	21	36	21
July	50	21	34	21	55	21
August	100	21	56	21	83	21
Total	397	168	251	168	322	168

examine all articles, both news and opinion. Scholars have noted that political communication flows to voters from an array of sources, not merely news reporting.⁴⁴ We believed it was important to identify frames used throughout the newspapers.

A search of the three newspapers during this time period yielded a total of 970 articles: 397 in the *Columbus Dispatch*, 251 in *The Plain Dealer*, and 322 in the *Dayton Daily News*. During the eight-month time period, the number of articles ranged between 22 and 100 per month in each newspaper. We randomly selected 21 articles from each month from the three newspapers to obtain a sample of 504 articles (see Table 1). After deleting unrelated articles, the final sample size totaled 466 newspaper articles.

Creating the Codebook

In identifying campaign messaging and frame sponsorship used by Romney and his opponents during the 2012 race, this study adapts Vavreck's system of measuring presidential candidate discourse.⁴⁵ She used a close reading of campaign advertisements, candidate speeches, and campaign coverage in the *New York Times* to identify and summarize campaign messaging. For this study, the authors reviewed those sources, as well as a sample of battleground state news media, and identified frames that appeared frequently. Based on that research, the authors identified the positive frames emphasized by the Romney campaign during its primary and general election campaigns, as well as the negative frames delivered most frequently by Romney's Republican opponents in the primary campaign. In identifying the frames emphasized in Obama's spring messaging campaign, the authors reviewed negative advertising produced by the Obama campaign and its allies, as well as media coverage of the president, the vice president and surrogates delivering speeches and interviews in the battleground states. Through this research, the authors identified the negative frames sponsored by the Obama campaign in late spring and summer of 2012. It is important

Table 2. Frames about Romney.

Positive frames	Krippendorff's alpha
Understands economy: He is a successful former businessman who understands how the economy works and, unlike his opponents, knows what it takes to create jobs.	0.90
Strong leader: He has a proven track record of leadership as governor of Massachusetts and as man who rescued the 2002 Winter Olympics; unlike his opponents, he has the skills to unite the country, get it back on the right track.	0.85
Fiscally responsible: He has the skills to manage the nation's deficit and debt problems.	0.85
Electability: He has a strong, well-financed organization and can attract broad political support; he can appeal to independents as well as Republicans to put together winning coalition.	0.65
Negative frames	
Not a real conservative: He is a "Massachusetts Moderate" who once supported abortion rights and a universal health care plan similar to Obama's; he is a timid leader.	0.70
Unelectable: He is incapable of rallying the Republican base; he does not excite evangelicals and other groups in GOP coalition.	0.75
Vulture capitalist: His former firm, Bain Capital, destroyed businesses, shipped U.S. jobs abroad; he put profits ahead of workers.	1.00
Failed former governor: He had a poor job-creation record when governor of Massachusetts.	0.79
Out of touch: His wealthy lifestyle has caused him to lose touch with middle-class Americans; he doesn't understand their problems—is "not one of us."	0.82
Antiwomen: His policies are harmful to women; he will cut Planned Parenthood and restrict abortion.	0.85
Can't be trusted: He flip-flops; he once supported health care mandate, now opposes it; he once supported abortion rights, now opposes it; he says he wants to get tough on China, but policy proposals tell a different story.	0.68
Avoids taxes: He used foreign bank accounts to avoid U.S. taxes and will not reveal past financial records.	0.79

to note that a close reading of news media coverage—both national and in the battleground state of Ohio—revealed more negative than positive frames of Romney, although some of those frames appeared infrequently. This should not be surprising, since Romney had both conservative Republican foes in the primaries and a liberal Democratic opponent in the general election. The existence of a greater number of individual negative frames overall should not necessarily lead to a greater use of negative frames during any one portion of the election season. The frames are listed in a code sheet in Table 2.

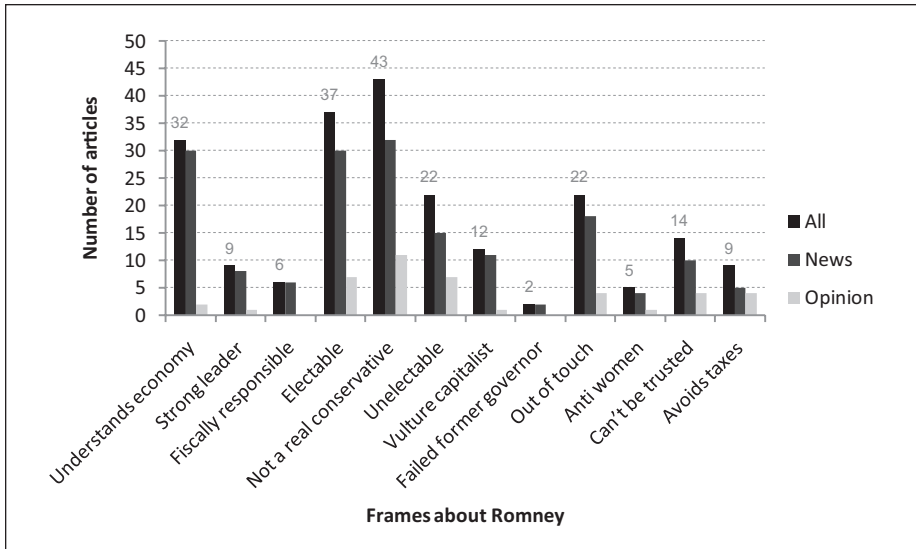


Figure 1. Frequency of frames about Mitt Romney that appeared in newspapers during time period before President Obama's attacks began (January 1 to April 30, 2012).

Inter-Coder Reliability Tests

Two coders coded the articles after having conducted a series of training and pilot-test sessions. Coders conducted the pilot tests using articles excluded from the sample. The coding sheet was revised several times as our analysis proceeded. We calculated inter-coder reliability by double-coding a random subsample ($n = 75$ or 15%) of the data.

Findings

RQ1 asks which frames of Romney were used in all newspaper articles—news reporting and opinion—during the Republican primaries and caucuses, before the Obama campaign's negative attacks began ($n = 236$). Figure 1 shows the negative frame of *Not a Real Conservative* and the positive frame of *Electable* were used most frequently to depict Romney in Ohio newspapers. More than 18% of the articles ($n = 43$) used the *not a real conservative* frame. Nearly 17% ($n = 37$) depicted Romney as politically strong and *electable*, while nearly 15% ($n = 32$) used *understands the economy*. The *out of touch* and *unelectable* frames were used an equal number of times ($n = 22$, or 9%). The *vulture capitalist* frame, which criticized Romney's tenure as head of the private-equity firm Bain Capital, was used in only 5% of the total ($n = 12$).

Figure 1 also shows frames used in news reporting only ($n = 173$). Findings show the *not a real conservative* frame was again the most frequently used ($n = 32$, 18%), but the positive frames of *understands the economy* and *electable* were used nearly as often ($n = 30$, 17%). In news reporting, the only other frame to appear prominently was *out of touch* ($n = 18$, 10%).

Table 3. Means Comparison of Positive and Negative Frames that Appeared in Newspaper Articles during Time Period before President Obama's Attacks Began (January 1 through April 30, 2012).

Article type	n	Mean		Difference	t-Test	p-Value
		Positive	Negative			
All articles	236	0.3559	0.5466	-0.19068	-3.172	.002
News	173	0.4277	0.5607	-0.13295	-1.825	.070
Opinion	63	0.1587	0.5079	-0.34921	-3.437	.001

Note. Positive frames variable was created by combining favorable frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., understands economy, strong leader, fiscally responsible, and electable). Negative frames variable was created by combining unfavorable frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., not a real conservative, unelectable, vulture capitalist, failed former governor, out of touch, antiwomen, can't be trusted, and avoids taxes).

In opinion articles—editorials, columns, and published letters to the editor ($n = 63$)—the negative frame of *not a real conservative* exceeded all others. It was used in 17% of all articles ($n = 11$) while *electable* and *unelectable* were used in seven articles each (11%). No other frame appeared in more than 5% of the opinion articles.

H1 said that Ohio newspapers would follow the journalistic norm of balance and present a similar number of positive and negative frames of Romney during the primary campaign season (January 1 through April 30, 2012). Results did not fully support this hypothesis (see Table 3). Negative frames appeared on average 0.55 times in each article, while positive frames appeared 0.36 times on average during the primary season. A *paired-samples t-test* indicated the difference was statistically significant ($t = -3.17$, $p = .002$). When focusing only on news reporting and ignoring opinion articles, however, the difference between negative ($M = 0.56$) and positive frames ($M = 0.43$) appearing in Ohio newspapers merely approached significance ($t = -1.83$, $p = .070$).

RQ2 asked how newspapers framed Romney between May 1 and August 31, after the Obama campaign began its negative message campaign against the GOP's presumptive nominee. Five frames—four negative and one positive—received significant newspaper coverage during this time period (see Figure 2). The most frequently used frame, *out of touch*, appeared in nearly 13% ($n = 29$) of the total ($n = 226$). The positive frame of *understands the economy* and the negative frame of *vulture capitalist* both appeared in about 11% ($n = 25$). The *avoids taxes* frame was found in 7% of the articles ($n = 16$), and the *can't be trusted* frame appeared in 5% ($n = 12$). No other frame appeared in more than 4% of the coverage.

In news articles ($n = 146$), the *out of touch* frame appeared in twenty-three reports, while *understands the economy* was found in nineteen news stories and *vulture capitalist* in thirteen. In opinion articles ($n = 80$), the *vulture capitalist* frame appeared twice as often as any other frame.

H2a predicted a significantly greater number of negative than positive frames would be found between May 1 and August 31, 2012, after the Obama messaging

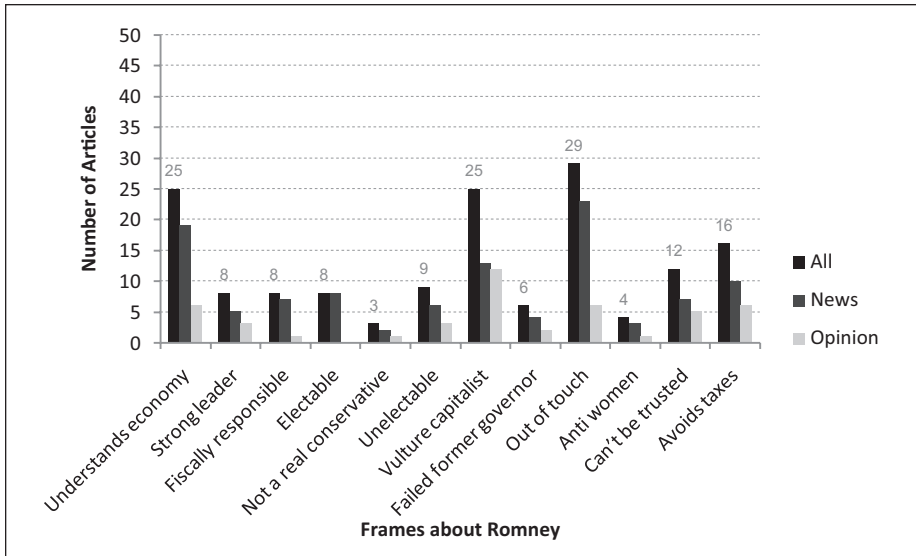


Figure 2. Frequency of frames about Mitt Romney that appeared in newspaper articles after President Obama's attacks began (May 1 to August 31, 2012).

Table 4. Means Comparison of Positive and Negative Frames that Appeared in Newspaper Articles during Time Period after President Obama's Attacks Began (May 1 to August 31, 2012).

Article type	n	Mean		Difference	t-Test	p-Value
		Positive	Negative			
All articles	226	0.2168	0.4602	-0.2434	-4.612	.000
News	146	0.2671	0.4658	-0.1986	-2.872	.005
Opinion	80	0.1250	0.4500	-0.3250	-4.108	.000

Note. Positive frames variable was created by combining favorable frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., understands economy, strong leader, fiscally responsible, and electable). Negative frames variable was created by combining unfavorable frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., not a real conservative, unelectable, vulture capitalist, failed former governor, out of touch, antiwomen, can't be trusted, and avoids taxes).

campaign began. Findings support this hypothesis (see Table 4). In all newspaper coverage, negative frames ($M = 0.46$) appeared more often than positive frames ($M = 0.22$). A *paired-samples t-test* shows the difference was significant ($t = -4.61$, $p = .000$). **H2a** was also supported when looking at news reporting only. Negative frames ($M = 0.47$) outnumbered positive frames ($M = 0.27$) significantly ($t = -2.87$, $p = .005$). Negative frames ($M = 0.45$) also appeared more frequently than positive frames ($M = 0.13$) in opinion articles ($t = -4.11$, $p = .000$).

H2b narrowed the focus to look only at the five negative frames emphasized by the Obama campaign. We compared the use of the positive frames sponsored by Romney

Table 5. Means Comparison of the Five Negative Frames Sponsored by President Obama with All Positive Frames that Appeared in Newspaper Articles during Time Period after the President's Attacks Began (May 1 through August 31, 2012).

Article type	n	Mean		Difference	t-Test	p-Value
		Positive	Negative			
All articles	226	0.2168	0.3540	-0.13717	-2.685	.008
News	146	0.2671	0.3630	-0.09589	-1.449	.149
Opinion	80	0.1250	0.3375	-0.21250	-2.692	.009

Note. Obama's sponsored negative frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., vulture capitalist, failed former governor, out of touch, antiwomen, and avoids taxes) were combined into one single variable. As the opposite comparison, positive frames about Mitt Romney (i.e., understands economy, strong leader, fiscally responsible, and electable) were combined into one single variable.

Table 6. Comparison of Obama's Sponsored Negative Frames during The President's Attacks (May 1 to August 31, 2012) and before the Attacks Began (January 1 to April 30, 2012).

Obama-sponsored frames	Percentage		Difference (%)	χ^2	p-Value
	During attacks (%)	Before attacks (%)			
Vulture capitalist	11	5.1	5.9	5.53	.02
Failed former governor	0.8	2.6	1.8	2.20	.14
Out of touch	9.3	12.8	3.5	1.40	.24
Antiwomen	2.1	1.8	-0.3	0.077	.78
Avoids taxes	7.0	3.8	3.2	2.37	.12

and his allies with the use of the five negative frames that were emphasized by the Obama messaging campaign—*vulture capitalist*, *out of touch*, *failed former governor*, *can't be trusted*, and *avoids taxes*. Results support **H2b** (see Table 5). Findings showed Ohio newspapers used Obama-sponsored negative frames of Romney ($M = 0.35$) more frequently than positive frames of the Republican candidate ($M = 0.22$) in all coverage, news and opinion ($t = -2.68$, $p = .008$). In news reports only, the difference between negative frames ($M = 0.36$) and positive frames ($M = 0.27$) was not significant. In opinion articles only, negative frames ($M = 0.34$) appeared more often than positive frames ($M = 0.13$). *Paired-samples t-test* confirmed statistical significance ($t = -2.69$, $p = .009$).

H2c predicted a significant increase in newspaper use of frames emphasized by the president's campaign after the attacks began in late spring. To test this hypothesis, we compared the frames the newspapers used during the primary campaign—January 1 through April 30—with frames that were used from May 1 through August 31, after the Obama messaging campaign had begun. Results provide support for **H2c** (see Table 6). Of the five negative frames emphasized by the Obama team, *vulture capitalist*

showed a statistically significant increase in frequency after the Obama attacks were underway ($\chi^2 = 5.53, p = .02$). Both *out of touch* and *avoids taxes* showed increases after the Obama messaging campaign began, but *chi-square tests* showed they were not statistically significant. The *failed former governor* and *antiwomen* frames received little use in either time period. The *antiwomen* frame actually declined during the spring and summer, when the Obama campaign was underway.

Discussion

The flow of communication from political actors to voters is often mediated by journalism. Through the framing process, journalists select certain aspects of that communication flow and grant it more salience in their reports. In doing so, they send strong signals that help voters assess candidates and evaluate policy choices. Political actors spend enormous amounts of money and energy trying to influence this journalistic decision-making. By employing these frame-building efforts, skilled and powerful communicators can skew news media framing in their favor, despite the journalistic norm of balance at most mainstream U.S. news organizations. Entman describes this outcome as *content bias*. In its most significant finding, this study offers evidence to suggest that this type of content bias existed in Ohio newspapers in late spring and summer, after the president launched a concerted frame-building campaign in the state. Overall, Ohio newspapers used more negative than positive frames to depict Mitt Romney after the president's assault began. More importantly, the newspapers significantly increased their use of the *vulture capitalist* frame, a charge intended to undermine Romney's perceived strength as a former businessman who knew how to create jobs.

It is important to note that a content analysis cannot establish definitive causation. This study analyzed campaign messaging to identify the frames emphasized by Obama during late spring and summer and used a content analysis to search for use of those frames in Ohio newspapers. We believe the correlation between campaign messaging and the coverage of those campaigns is a useful finding that is relevant to frame-building research. However, we must address other possible intervening variables. For example, Romney came under increased media scrutiny after winning the Republican nomination, which could explain the increase in use of the *vulture capitalist* frame. Additionally, political coverage increased in August as the national party conventions approached, which gave political reporters and columnists more opportunities to address candidate frames. We cannot say definitively that the *vulture capitalist* frame was driven by Obama messaging. Nonetheless, we believe the correlation between the president's campaign messaging and increased frame use in the media is notable.

This study began by identifying the media frames used to depict Romney before the Obama attacks began. Findings showed that Republican opponents during the primary season had successfully constructed a prominent news media frame that depicted Romney as not sufficiently conservative. Yet the Romney team had also embedded a media frame that portrayed their candidate as a successful businessman who understood the economy and could help lower unemployment. Newspaper coverage also

emphasized Romney's electability, but Republican opponents also managed to push the *out of touch* and *unelectable* frames into coverage with some frequency. The *vulture capitalist* frame received more modest newspaper attention in Ohio during the primary races, despite the national spotlight focused on it when the Gingrich campaign sponsored the frame in January and February.

Journalistic norms suggest impartial newspapers in Ohio would have used a similar number of negative and positive frames of Romney during the primary campaign season. Yet, in testing **H1**, we found no support for this prediction. Ohio newspapers used significantly more negative than positive frames of Romney during the first four months of 2012. Even when removing opinion articles and looking only at straight news, results still found more negative than positive frames, though the findings only approached significance ($p = .07$). This was surprising because of Romney's dominant financial position in the GOP race. No other Republican candidate had the resources needed to launch an integrated communications effort against the former governor. Yet Romney was also considered an underachieving front-runner. His inability to win over GOP conservatives and to secure the nomination left him open to a thousand cuts from weaker foes and encouraged the news media to depict him as vulnerable.

Two other explanations also could explain the negative coverage of Romney during the fight for the GOP nomination. Nearly two decades ago, Patterson argued persuasively that mainstream news reporting in the United States was biased toward negative depictions of all political candidates, and the Pew Research Center's state of the media report for 2013 suggests that trend is accelerating. The Pew authors found evidence that a decline in resources at traditional news organizations has given political actors a freer hand to push negative messages about their opponents into the media.⁴⁶

Turning to the time period between May 1 and August 31, after the Obama attacks began, the findings showed that Ohio newspapers used significantly more negative than positive frames of Romney, as predicted by **H2a**. The three most frequently used negative frames were pushed by the Obama campaign—*out of touch*, *vulture capitalist*, and *avoids taxes*. Yet two negative frames that were not emphasized in the Obama attacks also received significant attention—the *can't be trusted* frame, which concerned Romney's record of policy "flip flops," and the *unelectable* frame, which portrayed the GOP nominee as politically weak and a likely loser in November. Results also showed significant use of *understands the economy*, the most prominent positive frame emphasized by the Romney campaign. *Understands the economy* was the second-most frequently used frame in the time period. This suggests the Romney campaign enjoyed some success in its frame-building push, despite the greater number of negative frames used overall in the time period.

In Obama's spring and summer offensive, television advertising served as the tip of the spear, but the campaign deployed other communications weapons as well, including candidate appearances and surrogate speeches. This integrated messaging campaign emphasized five negative frames—*vulture capitalist*, *out of touch*, *failed former governor*, *avoids taxes*, and *antiwomen*. In **H2b**, we sought to assess specifically the effect of Obama's campaign by testing the prediction that those five negative frames would appear more frequently than positive frames of Romney during the spring and

summer. Results supported this hypothesis. Ohio newspapers used more of the five negative frames emphasized by the president than all positive frames of Romney. Although not definitive evidence, this finding suggests the Obama campaign succeeded in its effort to construct negative frames that appeared prominently in Ohio newspapers during the time period.

However, results of **H2c** show that of the negative frames emphasized by the president, only *vulture capitalist* increased significantly in use after the Obama messaging campaign began. Two other frames—*out of touch* and *avoids taxes*—showed modest increases, but *chi-square tests* found those increases to be insignificant. Two other Obama-sponsored frames—*failed former governor* and *antiwomen*—received little news media use either before or after the Obama attacks began.

The increased use of the *vulture capitalist* frame during late spring and summer is significant because of the important role it played in the framing contest between Obama and Romney. The Obama campaign emphasized the frame in an effort to refute Romney's claim that his business experience was needed in the White House to help generate economic growth. The *vulture capitalist* charge had received extensive national attention when it was raised by the Gingrich campaign during the race for the Republican nomination. Yet our findings showed Ohio newspapers had downplayed the issue during that time. Nonetheless, the president and his allies apparently managed to revive the frame during late spring and summer. A review of television advertising aired by the president and his allies during this time period revealed a greater use of the *vulture capitalist* frame than any other negative depiction of Romney. Those attack ads included one that claimed Romney's firm had caused the death of an Ohio woman whose insurance lapsed when her husband was laid off from a company operated by Bain Capital.⁴⁷ That particular ad received widespread criticism in Ohio newspapers,⁴⁸ but it helped shift the focus from Romney's success as a businessman to a debate over his actions at Bain Capital. In this way, the Obama attacks could have helped persuade impartial journalists in Ohio to take a fresh look at Romney's business background and present a more conflicted view of his success as a private-equity manager.

The Obama campaign's apparent ability to revive the *vulture capitalist* frame also suggests that framing effects can apply to journalists as well as the public. Chong and Druckman have identified a three-step process outlining the psychological mechanisms of framing effects.⁴⁹ They contend that frames must be stored in an individual's memory and be easily accessible—top of mind—before they can be activated. However, final activation of a frame is a more complicated cognitive process that requires the individual to evaluate the frame's relevance in relation to an existing set of facts. Journalists in Ohio had been primed to consider the *vulture capitalist* frame after it emerged in the battle for the GOP nomination in February. At the same time, they were covering a presidential campaign in which opinion polls showed job creation and economic growth to be the most important issue for the public. Given the availability, accessibility, and perceived importance of the *vulture capitalist* frame, it is not surprising that Ohio newspapers used it prominently once the Obama campaign raised the issue.

Other studies have looked narrowly at political advertising and its effects on both public attitudes and news media coverage.⁵⁰ However, this research examined Obama's attacks on Romney as part of a larger, integrated communications campaign. The study considered the president's late spring offensive in the battleground states as a frame-building effort, and it sought to evaluate its impact by searching for content bias in news media reporting. Future research should broaden this search for content bias as a means of understanding frame building and should expand the sources of media content examined to include television, online, and social media. Additionally, the interactive nature of online and social media allows researchers to examine public responses to frame-building efforts and better understand the dynamics of the frame-building process. Finally, this research focused on a key battleground state. Future research should consider the simultaneous exploration of national and state-level campaigns.

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