

How Framing Influences Political Campaigns

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how framing theory can be utilized by political campaigns to improve a given candidate's chance of winning office. Politicians are always trying to station themselves in the best possible light for public approval, therefore the campaign trail is eerily familiar with framing. Framing has been utilized for decades to improve the images of candidates; as time has moved on, the mediums used to frame the campaign trail have evolved. This led to the examination of how the changing mediums (those being print, television, and social media) have caused an evolution in how framing is utilized on campaign trails. Through this examination, patterns and recommendations were able to be formed for campaign managers as to the best methods of framing their candidates in a positive light in each respective medium. This paper is both a historical analysis of effective framing and a guide as to how to use these methods on a campaign to bring about the best outcomes for a candidate.

Introduction

The concept of framing media is a long held standard for journalism, campaigns, entertainment, and more. Staging information in a way that aligns with the goals or beliefs of those consuming it is a near guaranteed way of engaging and influencing an audience.

Depending on the type of message a person may want to send, different frames can be utilized as a means of maximizing their success. In the political world, framing a message can be the key to gaining or losing support for one's campaign. Politicians are already engaging heavily in framing to help their campaigns. When Hillary Clinton was on the 2016 campaign trail she engaged on social media like Vine and tried to use slang terms to target young voters. This framing actually saw some success, as voters under 30 “reported voting for Clinton over Trump by a margin of 58% to 28%, with 14% supporting one of the third-party candidates,” according to Pew Research Center (2018). This paper would like to examine the effect that framing can have on campaign trail for politicians; having a successfully framed campaign can alter the outcomes of elections and in turn the course of American history.

Another point of interest for this paper is examining how effective framing is across mediums. Society has seen the rise and fall of print media, with television and social media taking the primary roles of how people consume their news. Different methods are utilized to best suit each type of media; this leads one to wonder what the most effective method of framing campaigns has been over the course of history. Social media has allowed for completely unique forms of framing to occur. This is particularly evident when viewing “selective activation of congruent content by social media peers and the accumulation of certain frame elements ... [which form] what we know as social media bubbles,” (Arugute et al., 2023). This contrasts print and television forms of media, which utilize similar frames within their respective medium.

Research Questions:

General: How can political candidates utilize framing across mediums to maximize the success of their campaign?

Specific: What medium amongst print, television, and social media is most effective in framing their messages in a way that persuades their audiences?

Literature Review:

Many studies have tackled the topic of framing as a whole, with many finding both immediate and long term effects that the strategy can produce. While not all of these works focus on the political aspects of the research questions, the effects that framing has remains consistent throughout the scenarios. In 2018 there was an opioid crisis going through Ghana that garnered media attention. The coverage of the crisis brought it to the forefront of people's attention and caused many people to consider a primary issue for their government to tackle (Thompson & Ofori-Parku, 2021). Their efforts worked and the government passed policies that regarded the influx of opioid use the country was seeing. This shows that, to an extent, the mere exposure of an issue on the mainstream media can cause it to go from a minor public concern to a problem that legislation can be passed for in a matter of months.

Another example of framing leading to direct effects was when two white news anchors on an Arkansas station donned afro wigs in a news piece that covered a "return to the 70s" (Brown et al., 2023). This story of insensitivity gained traction internationally and many called for the termination of the two men. The research focuses on a "wrongdoing" frame, as many people of color used the story to show the discrimination and insensitivity that they deal with on a daily basis. The anchors tried to pass off the action as a joke gone wrong, but they found the backlash to be incredibly intense. Another study focused precisely on the framing of humorous

or satirical pieces of media, and how they need to be handled differently than traditional media frames (Brugman et al., 2023). The idea of genre having such a profound effect on the framing of content explains why the news anchors found themselves in such trouble. The study found that satirical content is far more person centered than its traditional counterparts. It also found that the only consistent frames used across both genres were political frames and anxiety related frames. This observation would be a crucial one for politicians to understand and engage in when the timing is appropriate.

Leaning back into the more politically driven ideas, a study on the psychology of how framing works found that people within similar ideological groups use the same framing methods (Arugute et al., 2023). The researchers attribute this action, whether conscious or not, has contributed heavily to some of the political polarization seen on social media platforms. This study finds that “social media bubbles” can cause online communities to only view frames and news stories that they actively seek out; when they find a story that aligns with their views they send it to their bubble and allow it to spread. This form of framing is unique to social media, as there has never been a medium that allows people to spread information at such a fast pace. Another piece of research that focuses on people’s psychology examined how the sources of information can influence people’s trust of a source. Though this study looked into the effects source trustworthiness had on vaccine use, it can also be applied to a campaign trail. They state that their “findings suggest that the source of the message is an important factor in influencing vaccine acceptance, with messages from medical doctors being particularly effective,” (Catalán-Matamoros et al., 2023). The application of these findings to political campaigns will be explored in the discussion section of this paper.

As time moves on, people become further removed from the events of the past, whether that be forgetting details or not even being alive to witness it. This causes the records of the event to be incredibly valuable to those looking back on the era. This study argues that “we give media the power and opportunity to construct, promote/denote, and contest/revise our recollection and reminiscence (and even commemoration) of an event in the past” and therefore need to be highly aware of the an event may be framed in the media so it does not alter a person’s memory of an event (Sreepada & Aksoy, 2023). Being aware that a news piece may frame a singular aspect of an event as more or less important than it was in the past can contribute to why people feel a disconnect from when they live an experience versus when they read about it in the years following.

Discussion

When examining the many findings that these studies have provided, there is a path for politicians and campaign managers to follow when it comes to framing their content for the masses. When examining the “network activated frames” piece it is easy to imagine how politicians may be able to utilize the psychological model of human beings (Arugute et al., 2023). If they create a message that is framed to cater to a specific audience presumably those within that demographic will spread the message like wildfire across the internet. While this may damage the image of the given candidate a slight bit amongst their critics, people within the original target audience and those with unformed opinions would see a highlighted and curated message that could appeal to millions of people.

In the case of the Catalán-Matamoros study, their findings of vaccine trustworthiness being influenced by the source from which a person receives their information is highly applicable to the political campaign trail. When people are presented with information directly

from the source of a campaign they will likely take the information at face value. However, if they view the same information for the first time through a news source they see as biased (possibly places like FOX News or CNN) they may have a deep mistrust of the information they are presented with. In order to avoid this mistrust, campaign managers can try to push their campaign ads on social media and via television commercials on highly viewed networks; this will lead to a higher number of people viewing the information through the original and more trusted source.

Another way they could utilize findings is by engaging in the humorous frames that were established by Brugman and his coauthors. Former President Obama was considered a very personable politician, in some part due to his sense of humor and his team's utilization of it. He made jokes at himself or his adversaries, but never towards the American people or hot button issues. Obama's strategy in regards to humor was unprecedented, as he was sitting down with late night hosts and never taking himself as seriously as many assumed a president would. This type of framing may also be able to reach across the aisle and make the politician's persona to be likable to those on the opposing side, which would be a huge political step for any candidate. Being well liked and easy to work with are hard things to achieve on Capitol Hill, and therefore campaign managers will want to emphasize these aspects of a candidate's personality over some of the less agreeable parts.

The Sreepada & Aksoy study looks at the interesting way that media affects framing in the long term. It is fascinating to apply their findings to the framing of former United States presidential campaigns. When looking at a president like John F. Kennedy, who tragically died on his campaign trail, the way his final campaign framed him leaves him as one of the most popular presidents to this day. Most people remember him as a patriot, someone who looked out

for the lower class, and who was very effective in his office. Because of this many people forget the catastrophe of the Bay of Pigs or that Kennedy was deeply distrusting of many of his advisors. This shows how essential framing is not only to the present day, but also how the candidates' legacies could be affected.

Overall, framing is clearly a pivotal point in the campaign process; if your candidate is not framed to be well liked and effective to the public then their popularity will be incredibly adversely affected. Campaign managers have utilized the types of media available to them, as well as the news sources that cover their campaigns, so that they will have the utmost advantage when it comes to election day. While the print and television mediums have seen great success in the ways that framing has been utilized, social media still has room for improvement. Since social media is still so new in the grand scheme of things, politicians still seem to be testing the waters as to how to best frame themselves on that platform. For future research, looking into how framing is utilized on separate social media platforms could help differentiate some of the methods used (video-based versus text-based framing). Future research could also benefit from looking at large scale campaigns, as many looked at small scale or non-political campaigns. The evolution of framing is evident, though, through analysis of its use across mediums in regards to political campaigns, and it will continue to improve as technology develops.

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