FRAMING A PRESIDENT:
THE MEDIA AND JOB PERFORMANCE RATINGS
FOR GEORGE W. BUSH

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Framing a President: The Media and Job Performance Ratings for George W. Bush

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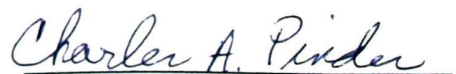
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Abstract

Since the 1930s, presidential job approval public opinion polls have been providing a snapshot of the public's general approval levels of the incumbent president's job performance. The job approval ratings for President George W. Bush ranged from one extreme to the next during his eight years as President of the United States. Past studies have shown the media have powerful influence on public opinion, especially with the use of news frames. A content analysis of news content covering President Bush investigates the possible connections between the media's positive and negative framing of President Bush and his job approval ratings.

Introduction

"When what we consider reputable polls ... show a politician's support changing from day to day, or a President's approval rating moving up and down from week to week, we have to ask ourselves if we are measuring reality, or creating it." (Cannon, 2001, p. 2490)

This was the message delivered to the American Association for Public Opinion Research by outgoing President Kathleen A. Frankovic in a May 22, 1993 speech (Cannon, 2001). The question Ms. Frankovic posed to her associates in that May speech is a question that has been the subject of much research and debate and that lingers ever more increasingly as news media face criticism and accusations of bias. The question posed in this study is not if media are biased, but rather if the news delivered to the public is delivered in such as way as to influence the public's approval ratings for the president.

Presidential job approval ratings were first introduced by George Gallup in the late 1930s to help measure the public's support of a president's policies and handling of issues while in office (United States Presidential Approval Rating, n.d.). Approval ratings are determined using opinion polls conducted among the public to gauge what percentage of the public approves of the job the president is doing versus what percentage of the public disapproves of the job the president is doing. Some presidential job approval polls are conducted by public opinion research centers, but the majority of these polls are conducted by major news media outlets such as CNN, FOX NEWS, CBS/New York Times, Newsweek, NBC/Wall Street Journal and the LA Times. A typical poll question simply asks, "Do you approve or disapprove of the job the president is doing?" Some polls delve deeper asking about approval of the president's performance on specific issues such as the economy, foreign affairs, immigration and healthcare. The statistics cited in this study are collected from The Roper Center Public Opinion Archives at the

University of Connecticut, which aggregates the job approval poll results from all the major media and determines average ratings. Job approval ratings are generally accepted as a snapshot of the public's opinion of the incumbent president. "Higher approval ratings tend to pay off electorally, both for the president and for his party in Congress," (Gronke & Newman, 2003, pp. 501-12) thus a high approval rating can be a highly valuable political tool. It is important to study job approval ratings and how the public chooses to be in favor of or against the job performance of a president because of the influence that high approval ratings have in the political environment.

Many variables make up the formulation of public opinion. They include individual values, personal observation, media, experiences, etc. Page and Shapiro (1999) argue that the public weighs new information and experiences against its previous values through a process called collective deliberation. "However, the quality of this deliberation is only as good as the information presented to the public" (Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe & Shapiro, 1999, pp. 283-291). This "information" referred to by Glynn et al. (1999) can be attributed to the mass media that deliver the news to the public. Public opinion scholars offer the Full News standard which Zaller (2007) explains as the premise that the news "should provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day, including the performance of top public officials" (Porto, 2007, pp. 303-321). Presidential job approval ratings can then be considered to be the culmination of public opinion and the media.

Over the years since the Gallup organization first started tracking presidential job approval ratings in the 1930s, no other president has produced more dramatic swings in job approval than President George W. Bush. At the height of President Bush's public approval, his job approval rating reached 92% in the weeks immediately following the September 11, 2001

terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and The Pentagon, setting a record for the highest job approval rating of a president (Comparing Past Presidential Performance, 2006). At the lowest point in his presidency, Bush's job approval ratings fell to 19% in the last months of his second term, setting another record for the lowest job approval rating for a president (Comparing Past Presidential Performance, 2006). This data is shown in Table 1. These are interesting statistics given that the public's access to and the amount of available media coverage was unprecedented during George W. Bush's eight years in the White House compared to all other presidential terms in history. This trend of increased media exposure will likely continue with each new president who takes office as the effects of the information age continue to impact our global society.

Table 1.   Comparison of Presidential Approval Ratings

President		Highest		Lowest

Note. Table and data provided by The Roper Center Web site.

Considering that the public has so much available information, the question arises of how much influence do the media have on the public's approval or disapproval of the president's job performance in office? And particularly in the case of this study, does the framing of news stories about the president's activities in office negatively or positively affect job performance approval ratings? As the public is sorting through all this information, the concept of framing must be considered because news is not simply delivered to the public in the form of straight facts. As journalists attempt to compile a series of events into a meaningful and logical account or representation of those events into a "package" that makes sense to readers, the news stories tend to take on a particular slant or tone with the message that is referred to in mass media research as the "frame". "Theories of framing suggest that news coverage can foster changes in public opinion by promoting particular definitions and interpretations of political issues" (Shah, Watts, Domke & Fan, 2002, pp. 339-377). Entman (2007) argues that the accepted position that media have the power to direct what people think *about* only confirms support for the concept that media have the same influence to direct *what* people think.

By examining news content published by major news media in the weeks leading up to major approval and disapproval spikes in the president's approval ratings, some insight should be gained as to possible direct links between the media's framing of President George W. Bush and the public's opinion of his performance as president. "Yoel Cohen (1986) notes that public opinion and the media 'play a negative role of limiting the options open to the policymaker'" (Public Opinion, The Press, and Public Policy, 1994, p. 14). This is an important issue to study because the president's ability to garner public support and accomplish policy can be inhibited by the way in which the media present or frame issues to the public, therefore impacting the effectiveness of overall presidential leadership (Sparrow, 2008).

Literature Review

Media and Public Opinion

Researchers of mass media have often studied the effects of media on public opinion,

applying such concepts as agenda-setting, priming and framing. These concepts deal with the

influence media have in shaping the public's evaluation of issues. Kim and McCombs (2007)

addressed the effects of agenda-setting or more specifically in this instance, the effects of

attribute agenda setting and attribute salience in local media coverage of the 2002 Texas

gubernatorial and U.S. senatorial elections and also how the perceived tone of attributes covered

in the news were related to the public's attitudes toward the candidates. Attribute agenda setting

focuses on the characteristics, qualities or traits the media select to illuminate or focus on in

news coverage. Attribute salience is the degree to which or the amount these attributes are

covered in the news. Kim and McCombs based a content analysis of candidate news coverage on

six categories of major attributes: general political descriptions, specific issue positions, personal

qualifications and character, biological information, campaign conduct and support and

endorsements, finding that overwhelmingly descriptions of the candidates were focused on

personal qualifications and character both positively and negatively. Combining these assertions

with a survey of constituents, their study found evidence that the "attributes positively or

negatively covered in media will be perceived in a similar fashion by the public and are

significantly related to opinions about political candidates" (pp. 299-314).

The media undoubtedly play a critical role in informing and educating the public. Porto

(2007) argued that citizen competence, critical to the formation of public opinion and the

democratic process, is affected by the news media. Porto questioned whether citizens must be or

become well-informed or knowledgeable about issues in order to make rational decisions and

form logical opinions. Researchers of heuristics might argue that the public need not be very knowledgeable about issues in order to effectively form rational preferences because they are able to efficiently deduce decisions by relating surface-level information about an issue about which they are not familiar to information on issues they are more knowledgeable about in order to draw meaningful conclusions. For example, "Republicans favor lower taxes on capital gains, and I am a Democrat, so I oppose them" (Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe & Shapiro, 1999, pp. 283-291). Porto (2007) explored two models of citizen competence: The Ignorant Citizen and The Rational Citizen. Porto's research led to a conclusion that citizens are rational in their opinion formation and are able to develop sensible choices based on low levels of information. Based on this finding, the media might then be considered to have elevated influence among the people because only a small amount of media exposure could be required to produce significant and lasting effects on public opinion. Porto's study supports the idea that the media's role in public opinion can be effectively developmental in nature with the presence of frame diversity in news coverage, an important factor in helping to maintain a balanced environment in which citizens view and evaluate issues. "Only when exposed to competing interpretive frameworks do citizens have access to cues that enable them to think about the political situation in more complex and original ways, even when they are not well informed" (pp. 303-321). Porto defined interpretive frames as "a specific interpretation of a political event or issue" (pp. 303-321). His study provides a better understanding of how news quality impacts public opinion. If news coverage of an issue or event is primarily reported with a single or popular interpretation, the effects limit the public's ability to evaluate the information objectively. These assumptions warrant further discussion of framing.

Framing

Framing studies play an integral role in mass media research. Entman (2007) defined framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (p. 163). In the media, "news frames are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images influenced in a news narrative" (Entman, 1991, p. 7). Presented here are studies conducted into the influence framing has on public opinion.

Simon and Jerit (2007) set out to discover if specific framing of the partial-birth abortion (PBA) issue in political discourse influenced public opinion for or against a ban on PBA by conducting a word choice experiment. They presented separate groups of subjects with a newspaper article about PBA substituting only the words "fetus" and "baby" within the article to measure the word choices' effect on the groups' favorability toward a proposed ban on PBA. They found that respondents in the "fetus" condition were significantly less likely to support a ban on PBA than respondents in the "baby" condition providing proof that "media's word choice drives citizens' survey response" (pp. 265-266).

On the issue of gun control, Callaghan and Schnell (2001) found evidence that media independently frame issues with little to no influence from the interest groups and legislators that lobby in favor of or against gun control, nor the public's opinion on the issue. This is a very important finding in the study of framing, as it indicates the media's power to promote an agenda among the public. In this case, Callaghan and Schnell argue the media's agenda appeared to be the desire to keep the matter dramatic and interesting to increase or maintain ratings and sell advertising. This study also highlights the media's ability to impede the democratic process

through the use of frames by withholding the detail of political dialogue on issues and limiting the public's information on issues (pp. 183-212).

Lawrence (2000) notes that "news frames are of particular interest because they constitute an exercise (intentional or, quite often unintentional) of journalistic power" (April-June 2000, pp. 93-114). In her study, Lawrence illuminated the press's practice of presenting political news in the frame of a "game" or strategy. The concern posed by Lawrence is that framing political news as a strategic game where the story is always about who is ahead and who is behind distracts from the core objective of the news, causing readers to lose sight of the actual issues (Apr-Jun 2000, pp. 93-114). The net result of "game" framing in the news is a loss of substance in the news that misguides public opinion formation.

Critical to studying media framing is an acute understanding of what framing is and how best to apply the theory in mass media research. In a 2003 conference paper presented to the International Communication Association, Lisa Holstein pointed to Deborah Tannen's observation of "enormous usefulness" framing has "in understanding human sense-making activities, or 'structures of expectations' for negotiating the environment, in that a frame 'refers to an expectation about the world based on prior experience, against which new experiences are measured and interpreted'" (pp. 1-26). Holstein (2003) argued against the tendency to confuse themes with frames in mass communication research, explaining that labels such as conflict, economics, human impact, change, morality and American values are no more than categories of themes and do not represent the true definition of frames. Instead, frames are applied to themes by the news media. Consequently, the study of frames provides a mechanism for explaining how news is "socially constructed" and raises "the question of a media role as agents of social

control" (pp.1-26). Framing is intrinsically connected to agenda-setting and framing analysis provides a context in which to actually measure agenda setting theory (Holstein, 2003).

"Framing research is less concerned with the relative quantity of stories about various issues than with the qualitative ways in which those stories are covered" (Aday, 2006, pp. 767-784). Aday (2006) studied the effects of media on public opinion by examining the quality of news frames presented to the public taking into account the differing effects between objectivist and advocacy frames. Aday defines objectivist frames as those that rely on the basic "who", "what", "where" and "why" of a story, while advocacy frames are more rhetorical in nature, providing readers with more interpreted views of a story. The study revealed that media influence on public opinion is greater with exposure to advocacy frames than with objectivist frames. The results demonstrated that the media, through the use of advocacy frames, not only have the ability to influence the public about what issues are important, but also the ability to transfer specific thought-patterns to the public such as the causes of an issue and how the issue should be addressed (pp. 767-784).

VanAtteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis and Ruigrok (2006) expanded the study of frames by introducing the concept of associative frames and how issues can become interrelated to the public through strong textual associations and co-occurrence in the media. Their study also addressed physical frames such as geographic location of textual components and placement of images and photographs. By identifying "meaning objects" through keywords, the study calculated the instances of these objects relative to each other in articles about hurricane Katrina. When there was evidence of objects occurring repeatedly in text, the research team argued that their respective meanings would become associated in the minds of readers (pp. 1-23). Their study went further to predict objects that would occur in articles based on the initial presence of

other objects. Applying these theories, they analyzed news stories containing the keywords Islam, immigrants and terror both before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to look for possible associative frames. The results showed no direct association between Islam and terror until after the 9/11 attacks when the occurrence of the terms Islam and terror began to appear together in 12% of the articles examined (pp. 1-23). These results indicate opportunities for the media to bend the attitudes of the public on issues by making contextual associations through the use of associative frames. Although there hasn't been much work done in the area of associative frames, this study provides more insight into framing and its inherent effects on public opinion.

Media and Presidential Approval

Kinsey and Chaffee (1996) compared the effects that mass media versus interpersonal communication had on presidential approval for George H. W. Bush. Their study found that interpersonal discussion plays a larger role in forming presidential approval than mass media. Their study was conducted in the context of an active election campaign and they theorized that interpersonal discussions are heightened during an active campaign, suggesting that interpersonal discussion may play a lesser role in indicating presidential approval when no active campaign is in progress, concluding that mass media and interpersonal communication should be studied separately when evaluating their influence on presidential approval (Kinsey & Chaffee, 1996).

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) media system dependency theory suggests that during times of crisis such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, the interdependencies among the public, the media and public officials intensifies, making the mass media the primary source of information for the public (Hindman, 2004). Hindman (2004) applied this theory in an analysis of public opinion about the media and the president during the time of the September 11 attacks.

One hypothesis tested by Hindman was, "Support for the news media will be more closely related to support for the president after September 11th than before" (pp. 29-42). He found this theory to be consistent with the results of his study noting that in times of great crisis, support for the president and consequently the media coverage in general increases as people, the press and politicians become more interdependently related (Hindman, 2004). This study sheds some light on the high approval ratings that President Bush experienced immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and is an important work in the study of media influence on public opinion. These findings further support the idea that media have a more powerful effect when "the audience has a high need for guidance," (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 320) as would have been expected during a national crisis.

Shah, Watts, Domke and Fan (2002) utilized Fan and Cook's (2002) "ideodynamic model, which attempts to predict public approval based on media coverage," (pp. 339-377) to predict public approval of President Bill Clinton in the context of the Lewinsky sex scandal. President Clinton's job performance approval ratings remained high throughout the duration of the Lewinsky scandal, leading Shah et al. to contend that media frames of the scandal prevented decreases in the public's approval of President Clinton. In their study, they argued that particular frames are developed and shared among the media, leading to an overall theme in the media about an issue that ultimately sways the judgment of the people and impacts overall public opinion. Based on a content analysis of news coverage of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, the results of their study suggest that the dominant frame used in reporting the scandal was that of attacks on President Clinton by conservatives, which neutralized the negative overtones of the scandal itself and of the President (Shah, Watts, Domke & Fan, 2002). This neutralization effect created by the media's news frames provided an environment where the public's positive opinion

of President Clinton's job performance was allowed to remain intact even in the midst of a pending scandal. This theory is also supported by Yioutas and Segvic (2003) whose study produced similar findings in their evaluation of news framing of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. They argued that despite poll results indicating 87% find moral character to be an important factor in voting decisions, President Clinton's approval ratings were not negatively affected as a result of the scandal. Yioutas and Segvic's research found that the media's framing of the scandal coverage minimized the impact the scandal had on the President's approval ratings (Autumn 2003, pp. 567-582).

Kiousis (2003) also studied the media's influence on the public's opinion of President Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal. This study parlayed the 2002 study by Shah et al. evaluating the public's perceived favorability in addition to job approval. Focusing on the priming and agenda-setting theories and utilizing a time-lagged method designed to take into account the length of time it takes for public opinion to respond to media coverage, Kiousis found less linkage between media influence and job approval and a robust relation between media influence and perceived favorability of the President, indicating that job approval is associated with cognitive-performance and perceived favorability is associated with emotional-personal evaluations although both concepts were subject to shifts based on media coverage (pp. 435-451).

Public opinion has also been shown to be dependent on how much the public focuses on a particular issue in the media. Bennett (2002) argued that the amount of attention paid to the media's coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, affected the public's perception of President Clinton and that the public's inattentiveness to the matter in the media can help explain the phenomenon of the president's approval ratings remaining high throughout the scandal. He

studied the American public's attention to the scandal in the media using national polls from January 1998 through February 1999 that were conducted to assess how much people were following the story in the news. Bennett's findings were that fewer Americans closely followed the scandal than followed the news coverage of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the anthrax attacks. The height of attention being paid to the scandal peaked at 36% of the American public compared with a peak of 74% of Americans closely following news coverage of the 9/11 attacks. These results were contrary to earlier research on this topic performed by Brody and Jackman (1999) that claimed 80% of the American public followed the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal "very" or "somewhat" closely (pp. 276-292). In his study, Bennett only considered people who "very closely" followed the scandal coverage. The question raised by both of these findings is whether presidential approval is relative to attentiveness to news coverage of issues. Bennett argued that in the case of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the president's high approval ratings can be partly attributed to the public's perceived indifference to the issue and lack of overall attention Americans paid to the scandal media news coverage.

Further promoting the effects media have on presidential approval among the people, Edwards, Mitchell and Welch (1995) assert that an issue must be salient to people in order for it to have significant influence on evaluations of the president. Edwards et al. posit that understanding presidential approval "requires identifying not only what issues Americans think about but also gauging the degree of salience Americans place on these issues" (Edwards, Mitchell & Welch, pp. 108-134). Their study found that the public's evaluation of the president is directly influenced by the salience of issues to the public. Issues that were heavily addressed in news coverage became the issues that people weighed when evaluating their approval of the president, thus constantly evolving the basis by which the president is evaluated.

Kelleher and Wolak (2006) explored the effects of issue priming on presidential evaluations. Issue priming is the media's practice of drawing more attention to certain aspects of an issue rather than other aspects of the same issue (Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe & Shapiro, 1999). In shaping the public's opinion about the president, priming effects direct the attention of the public to particular areas of interest for consideration. Mass media research has frequently attributed the effects of media influence on public opinion to the issue of priming. One research question posed by Kellehar and Wolak was, "Which components of presidential evaluations will be the most vulnerable to media effects through priming?" (pp. 193-210). In answering this question, Kellehar and Wolak argued that the effects of priming are conditional proportionately based on the complexity of issues, suggesting that more complex issues are less likely to be primed in the media therefore diminishing the media's influence, and less complex, more familiar issues are more highly primed and offer more enhanced media influence. Issues they considered to be less complex when evaluating the president and therefore less primed by the media were economy and character. Issues they considered to be more complex and therefore more primed by the media were domestic policy and foreign policy. Using an extensive content analysis of presidential news from 1981 to 2000 and surveys on the four topics previously described, Kelleher and Wolak found a direct link between the enhanced priming of the less complex issues and the degree to which those issues are considered in evaluating the president as well as evidence that more complex issues are less primed by the media and have less influence on the public's evaluation of the president. (pp. 193-210)

The effects of media priming on presidential evaluations were also studied by McGraw and Ling (2003). They examined the conditions under which the effects of media priming on presidential evaluation are most likely and least likely to occur. The conditions that were the

subject of this analysis were associated with issue responsibility, novel versus long-standing issues, political knowledge and media trust. McGraw and Ling found that of the three conditional areas, priming effects were most heightened for presidential evaluations with media trust, stating that "priming was most likely to occur among those who trust the media" (pp. 23-40).

As with all theories of mass communication, the concept of media priming has not always proven to stand up to research. In a 2007 study into the main determinants of presidential job approval for President George W. Bush as were related to voter choice during the 2004 election, Malhotra and Krosnick determined that Bush's handling of the Iraq War and the economy had the largest impact on how people viewed his job performance when they were considering whether to vote for him or Senator John Kerry. Malhotra and Krosnick tested media priming theory by questioning if the public's focus on those particular issues was attributed to the media's priming or concentration on these topics. The results surprisingly showed no evidence to support that the media's attention to the Iraq War and the economy drove the public's interest in these areas and emphasis on these issues when evaluating the president's job performance. Malhotra and Krosnick concluded that the "weights that American voters placed on various policy domains when evaluating President Bush were determined by factors other than news media volume" (2007, pp. 249-278). Furthermore, the results of their study indicate that media priming theory was disproved in this case because citizens are likely to be more engaged in the presidential evaluation process at a deeper level during times when more public involvement is expected on political matters such as during an election or a war (pp. 249-278).

Past research has demonstrated that major news media are the main source from which citizens gain their knowledge about national issues and political leaders. Media coverage represents the primary communication channel between the public and the government.

Regarding specifically the job performance approval of President George W. Bush, Farnsworth and Lichter (2005) studied the amount, focus and tone of the news coverage of the Bush administration to examine patterns and possible media bias. In all, nine different news outlets were studied, comparing 2001 news coverage of the government and the president both before and after the attacks of September 11. (pp. 91-108) The news outlets were divided into three main categories: network news, national newspapers and regional newspapers. The results and findings of this study are far too extensive to cover with any breadth in this paper, but in summary, coverage of President Bush became much more positive after the September 11 attacks among all nine news outlets. Interestingly, coverage of the rest of the executive branch remained more negative in nature after 9/11 than the personal coverage of the president. Farnsworth and Lichter discovered that topics most highly concentrated on by post 9/11 presidential news coverage included job performance, ethics and character, political conduct and political effectiveness. Overwhelmingly, job performance was most commonly the focus of news media coverage of the Bush administration by all three categories of news outlets both before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks (2005, pp. 91-108), demonstrating the emphasis that media place on the president's job performance.

Contrary to Farnsworth and Lichter's (2005) investigation of presidential job performance coverage among various types of media, West (1991) focused his study solely on the impact of television on presidential approval. West compared approval ratings for President Jimmy Carter and President Ronald Reagan with degrees of public attention to television and the critical tone of television coverage of these presidents. The results of his study proved that "when news coverage is negative and the commentary critical, presidents tend to lose popularity" (pp. 199-214). West argued that most American presidents since the rise of television have lost

popularity while they are in office and that the results of his study indicate a strong connection between negative television news coverage and presidential popularity.

Burden and Mughan (2003) tested the effects of media on job approval ratings for President Clinton with regards to media coverage of international economic affairs. Media coverage was determined to have negatively impacted the job approval ratings of the president due to the amount of media coverage of the trade deficit with Japan. "Adverse trade relations with Canada proved neither to help nor hinder President Clinton's approval ratings" (pp. 555-578). Burden and Mughan attributed this contradiction in impact on job approval for the president to the heightened media coverage of the trade relations with Japan compared with the low levels of media coverage of trade relations with Canada.

A study conducted by Wayne Wanta suggests that the media and the president often compete for public attention. By examining the relationships among the press, the public and the president, Wanta (1991) set out to determine how the issue agenda is developed among the three. Although the general consensus among researchers has been that the media set the agenda by which the public determines the importance of issues, Wanta argued that the three-pronged, agenda-building framework that exists among the press, the public and the media can help explain the process by which certain issues become the focus of the press and the public. Wanta applied presidential approval ratings to the study, hypothesizing that the president has more influence for shaping the agenda of the press and the public when presidential approval ratings are high and as a result, the press has less opportunity for agenda-setting in an environment where the majority of the public supports the president. The results of the study supported these concepts and provided evidence that the public listens to the media more when presidential job approval ratings are low – a direct connection between media credibility and presidential

approval. The results of the study also suggested that "presidents become more popular when they react to their surrounding environment – namely the news media and public opinion" (pp. 672-679).

This Study

Using what can be learned from the literature and through application of framing theory, this study examines the media's ability to affect the presidential job approval ratings of George W. Bush. A qualitative content analysis of news content about the president's activities in office was conducted to identify existing negative and positive frames using keyword indicators. The co-occurrence of the keywords along with references to the president within the same sentence was then measured to identify instances when the president was negatively or positively framed in the news stories. Results were then compared to approval and disapproval peaks in the public's job performance ratings of President Bush to assess if associated patterns could be established between positively framed news coverage of the president in the week leading up to the spikes in approval ratings and between negatively framed coverage of the president in the week leading up to spikes in disapproval job performance ratings. In general, this study attempted to test two specific hypotheses:

H1 – Job approval ratings of the president are more likely to be low when negative news frames dominate news coverage of the president.

H2 – Job approval ratings of the president are more likely to be high when positive news frames dominate news coverage of the president.

In order to test the hypotheses the following research questions emerged:

RQ1 – Were positive and negative frames of the president's job performance apparent in the

news coverage of the president?

RQ2 – Which frames were more dominant in the news coverage of the president, negative or

positive frames?

RQ3 – Did the negative/positive framing of news coverage of the president coincide with the

negative/positive job approval ratings?

Method

Combining the principles of conceptual and relational analysis, a qualitative content analysis of news content was conducted utilizing a qualitative analysis software program called QDA Miner[©] developed by Provalis Research (www.provalisresearch.com). The analysis was performed on 800 samples of online news content from three mainstream media channels: CNN.com, FOXNEWS.com and NYTIMES.com. For the purpose of this study, "news content" refers to news articles, television news program transcripts, interview transcripts and editorial text either originally published or re-produced on the media websites. The news content included text only. No images or graphics were considered.

Selective reduction was used to determine three sets of keyword indicators for which the content was evaluated. Through conceptual analysis, the presence of the keyword indicators were identified and respectively coded. Once coded, relational analysis was performed to identify co-occurrences of selected keyword indictors within the same sentences of the text. Applying this dual method offered the opportunity to first isolate the keywords within the text and then analyze possible relationships between the concepts represented by the keywords. Findings were then compared to known statistics about President Bush's job performance approval ratings for testing the hypotheses and deducing answers to the proposed research questions.

Selection of News Content

Online news content was selected for this study primarily for the vast availability of archived news on the Internet. Google[©] News Archive Search returned a wide variety of news content that consisted of a majority of articles originally published in the media websites' print publications, as well as published transcripts from previously aired television news programs,

interviews and a small percentage of editorial content. The use of online news content, as opposed to print, television or other media was considered to represent a reliable cross-section of the major issues being addressed in the news across all outlets during the selected time frames. A 2007 study by Jae Kook Lee about the redundancy of news and information published by all types of news outlets found strong evidence "that a heterogeneous agenda is not likely to appear across different media channels as long as newer media are bound by limited resources and dependent on traditional media in reporting" (pp. 745-760).

The three major news media outlet Web sites (CNN.com, FOXNEWS.com and NYTIMES.com) were selected due to their extreme popularity and clout among the American public. All three websites ranked among the top 10 most popular news outlets on the Web as reported in an October 21, 2008 article published by the news journal *Editor & Publisher*. News content samples were selected from the Web sites by performing a keyword search of Google[©] News Archive Search for each of the three websites based on six different time frames. Only one keyword was used for the news archive search, "Bush". This was the only word required within the content to conclude that information about President Bush was included. The date ranges used for collecting the content were based on six significant spikes in job approval ratings for President Bush. Figure 1 illustrates the general approval trend for President Bush.

Figure 1. General Approval Trend for President Bush (02/07/2001 – 11/01/2008)
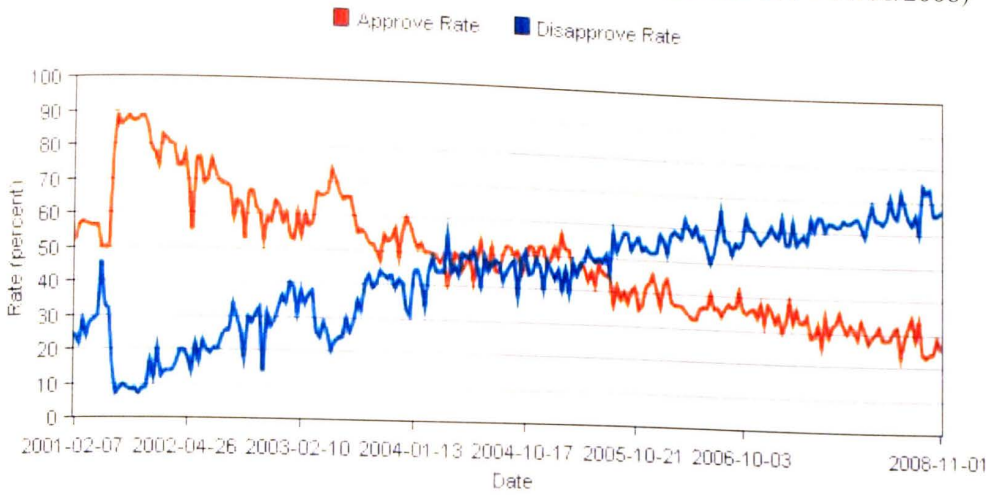
Three of the dates used reflected dramatic hikes in approval ratings for the president and the other three dates reflected drastic decreases in job approval ratings. The following Figures 2-7 illustrate the approval spikes identified for this study.

Figure 2. Approval Spike 02/08/2002 – President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 82% approval on February, 8, 2002.
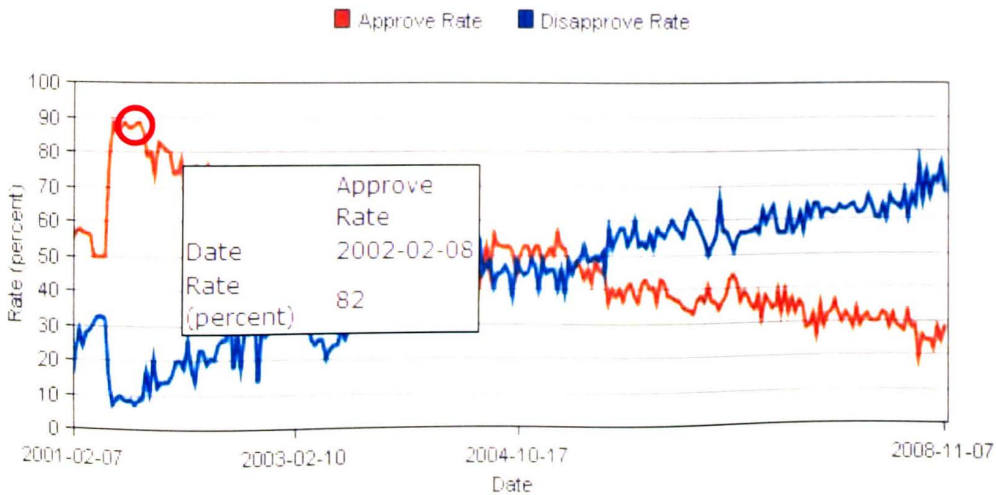
Figure 3.   Approval Spike 04/08/2003 - President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 74% approval on April, 8, 2003.
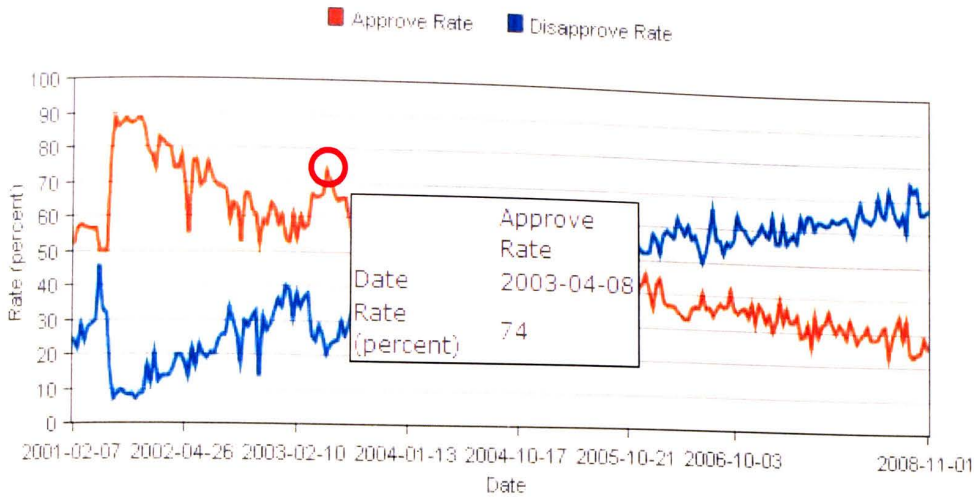

Figure 4.   Approval Spike 01/07/2004 - President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 58% approval on January, 7, 2004.

Note. Figures provided by The Roper Center Web site.
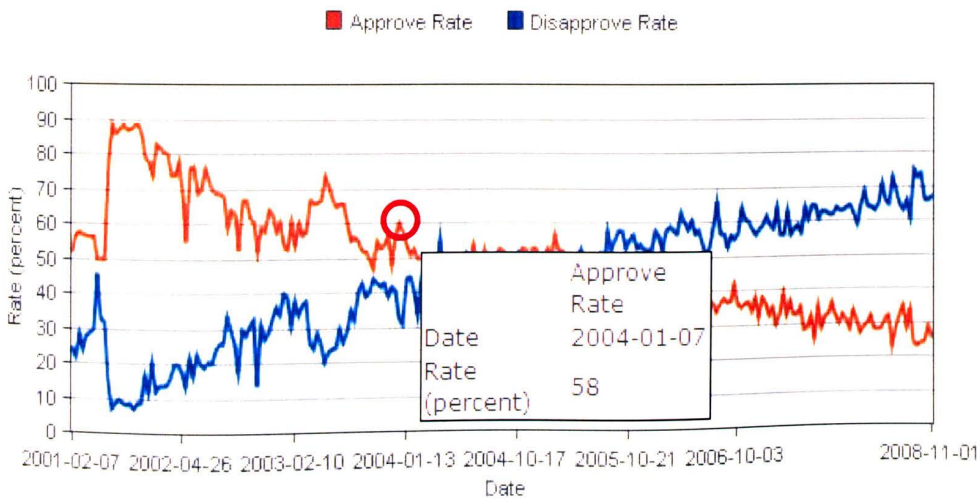
Figure 5.   Disapproval Spike 06/13/2001 - President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 46% disapproval on June, 13, 2001.
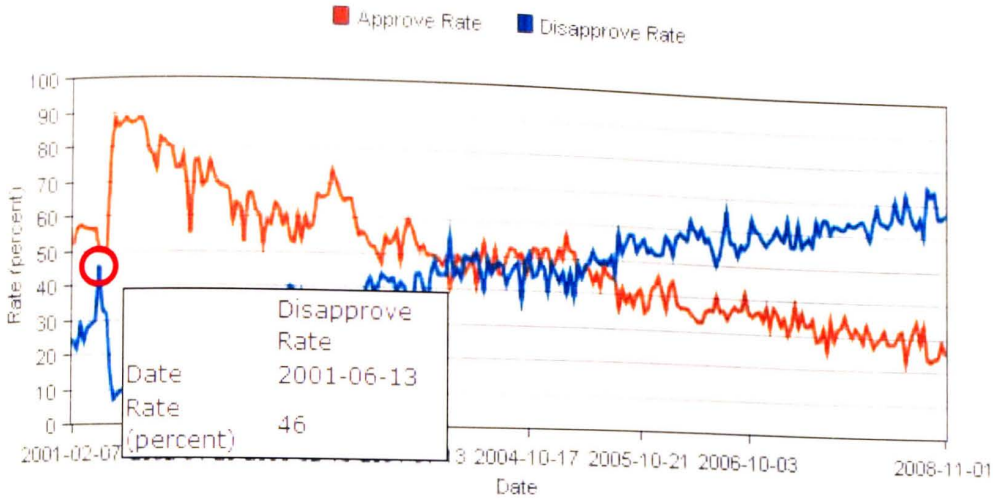
Figure 6.   Disapproval Spike 04/08/2004 - President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 55% disapproval on April, 8, 2004.
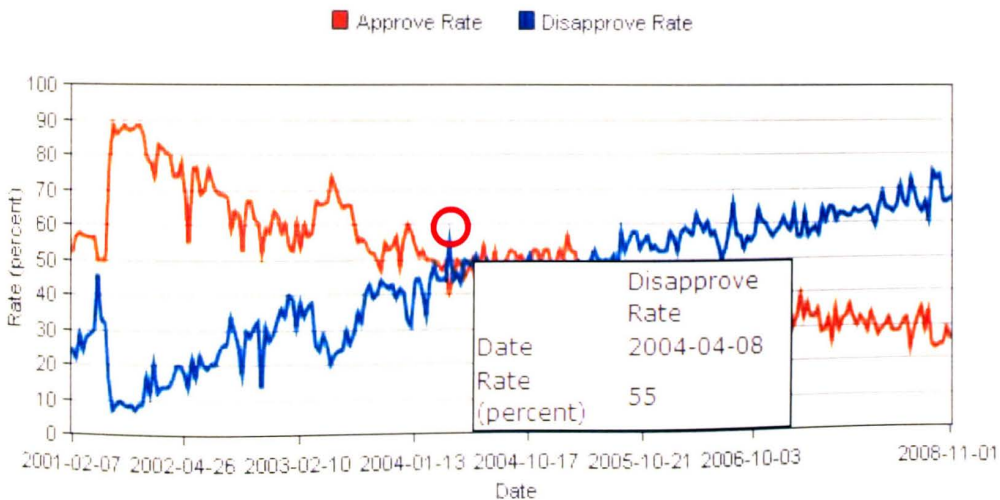
Note. Figures provided by The Roper Center Web site.

Figure 7.   Disapproval Spike 08/04/2006 - President Bush's job approval ratings spiked at 66% disapproval on August, 4, 2006.
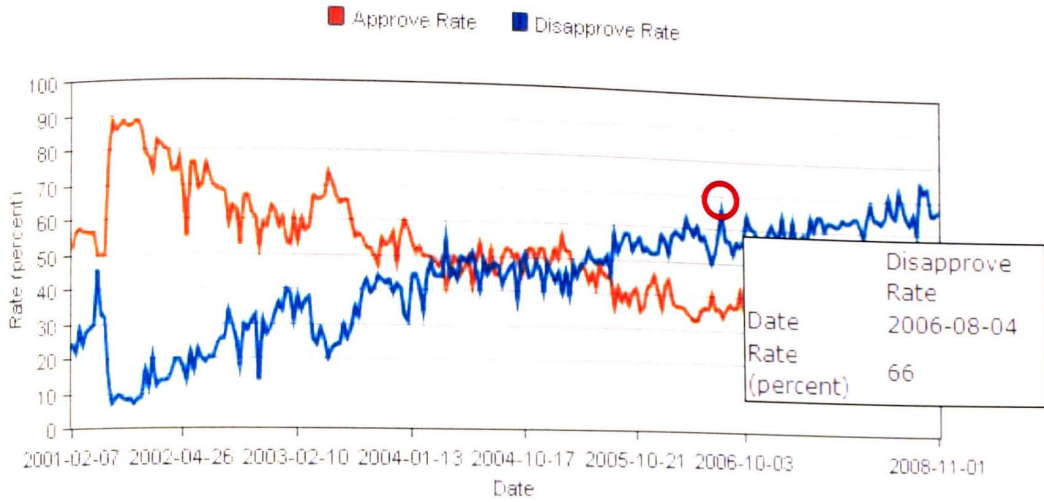

Table 2 shows the corresponding date ranges used for collecting news content from Google[©]

News Archive Search, and the number of samples collected for each of the media sources.

Note. Figure provided by The Roper Center Web site.

Table 2.   Dates, Source and Volume of News Content Samples

Approval Spike 1	Date Range of Samples	Source	Number of Samples
2/8/2002	02/02/2002 - 02/08/2002	CNN.com	63
	02/02/2002 - 02/08/2002	FOXNEWS.com	41
	02/02/2002 - 02/08/2002	NYTIMES.com	42
Approval Spike 2			
4/8/2003	04/02/2003 - 04/08/2003	CNN.com	70
	04/02/2003 - 04/08/2003	FOXNEWS.com	31
	04/02/2003 - 04/08/2003	NYTIMES.com	44
Approval Spike 3			
1/7/2004	01/01/2004- 01/07/2004	CNN.com	76
	01/01/2004- 01/07/2004	FOXNEWS.com	35
	01/01/2004- 01/07/2004	NYTIMES.com	33
Disapproval Spike 1			
6/13/2001	06/07/2001 - 06/13/2001	CNN.com	44
	06/07/2001 - 06/13/2001	FOXNEWS.com	29
	06/07/2001 - 06/13/2001	NYTIMES.com	20
Disapproval Spike 2			
4/8/2004	04/02/2004 - 04/08/2004	CNN.com	51
	04/02/2004 - 04/08/2004	FOXNEWS.com	40
	04/02/2004 - 04/08/2004	NYTIMES.com	30
Disapproval Spike 3			
8/4/2006	07/29/2006 - 08/04/2006	CNN.com	39
	07/29/2006 - 08/04/2006	FOXNEWS.com	47
	07/29/2006 - 08/04/2006	NYTIMES.com	65

Coding Process

Two categories of keywords were established: 1) framing indicator and 2) President Bush indicator. Two different sets of keywords were then identified for the framing indicator category: 1) positive keywords indicating positive framing and 2) negative keywords indicating negative framing. Only one set of keywords was used for the President Bush indicator: 1) Bush keywords indicating references to President Bush. Table 3 defines the lists of keywords within each set used for coding or the "codebook". Commonly used words that indicate mild to moderate emotion, judgment or interpretation were chosen for the positive and negative groups. No words representing extreme emotion were included, as the use of those types of words is generally accepted as not relative to normal news content. The same number of reciprocating words was used for both the positive and negative sets to provide a level of reliability to the results. For each positive/negative word that is coded during the analysis, the probability of a reciprocating positive/negative word being coded is relatively equal. For each positive/negative word that is not coded during the analysis, the probability of a reciprocating positive/negative word being not coded is also relatively equal.

Table 3.   Keywords/Codebook

Framing
Indicator

	Positive Keywords	Negative Keywords
	succeed*	fail*
	positive*	negative*
	resolve*	conflict*
	much*	little*
	promote*	impair*
	approve*	disapprove*
	high*	low*
	certain*	unclear*
	accomplish*	attempt*
	good*	bad*
	progress*	decline*
	accept*	reject*
	support*	against*
	win*	lose*

President Bush
Indicator

	Bush Keywords	
	Bush*	
	President*	
	George*	
	The President*	
	Bush administration*	
	administration*	
	White House*	

* denotes all forms of the word were coded

Procedure

The corresponding news content samples were imported into the QDA Miner© software according to each of the six sets of date ranges corresponding with the approval and disapproval spikes. All analyses were performed separately on each set of data. Coding was the initial step in the process. All positive keyword hits in the text were coded first, and then negative keyword hits were coded, followed by Bush keyword hits. Once all keyword hits were coded, a code frequency analysis was performed to determine the total number of codes for each of the different sets of keywords. Finally, a code co-occurrence analysis was performed to identify the instances of positive keywords occurring in the same sentence as Bush keywords and the instances of negative keywords occurring in the same sentence as Bush keywords using the following formula/s:

[code = positive keywords IF is overlapping code = Bush keywords]

[code = negative keywords IF is overlapping code = Bush keywords]

The assumption made was that co-occurrences of positive and Bush keywords within the same sentences indicate positive framing of President Bush, while co-occurrences of negative and Bush keywords within the same sentences indicate negative framing of President Bush.

Results

In response to RQ1, the results of the study showed strong evidence that positive and negative frames of the president were present in the news coverage. For approval spike 1, there were 226 co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 136 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords. For approval spike 2, there were 146 co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 129 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords. For approval spike 3, there were 182 co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 122 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords. With regards to RQ2 and RQ3, these results for the three different approval spikes show that positive frames of the president were consistently dominant in the news coverage published or broadcast during the weeks leading up to increases in the president's job approval ratings. For approval spike 1, there were 24% more positive/Bush co-occurrences (positive frames) than negative/Bush co-occurrences (negative frames). For approval spike 2, there were only 7% more positive/Bush co-occurrences (positive frames) than negative/Bush co-occurrences (negative frames). Approval spike 3 results showed 20% more positive/Bush co-occurrences (positive frames) than negative/Bush co-occurrences (negative frames).

When examining the news coverage of President Bush in the weeks leading up to decreases in the president's job approval ratings, the responses to the research questions differ from the results found when analyzing the news coverage published or broadcast during the weeks leading up to dramatic increases in the president's job approval ratings. Although negative news frames were apparent, they did not coincide with the decrease in approval ratings. The findings show that positive frames of the president remained consistently higher than negative frames of the president even during times of high public disapproval ratings for the president. These results do not support the proposed hypotheses. For disapproval spike 1, there were 152

co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 117 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords, a 14% increase in positive frames versus negative frames. For disapproval spike 2, there were 158 co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 102 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords, 22% more positive frames than negative frames. For disapproval spike 3, there were 189 co-occurrences of positive/Bush keywords and 168 co-occurrences of negative/Bush keywords, only 6% more positive frames than negative frames.

Discussion

No evidence was found to support H1, that job approval ratings of the president are more likely to be low when negative news frames dominate news coverage of the president. The results did however consistently support H2 that job approval ratings of the president are more likely to be high when positive news frames dominate news coverage of the president. Due to the discrepancy in these findings, this study did not produce strong evidence to support that presidential job approval ratings are likely to coincide with the dominant frames used in the news media when covering the president. Much evidence of framing was apparent both in terms of negatively framing President Bush and positively framing President Bush. There were some indications that public opinion is possibly directly affected by news media frames, as shown with the concurrent increased job approval ratings and high percentages of positive framing of President Bush, but there are many other factors that go into the formation of public opinion that must be considered such as media trust, personal experiences and interpersonal discussion.

The formation of public opinion is an extremely complex subject. Based on the results of this study, presidential job approval ratings are clearly not driven by media alone. History has shown that presidential job approval ratings generally decline for all presidents over the course

of a presidency, as was also the case for President George W. Bush. This can in part be attributed to the compounded alienation of demographic and special interest groups that occurs over time as presidents enact legislation and policy. With each major decision made by a president, there are always certain groups of people that are displeased and feel alienated as a result of that decision. As a president's time in office lengthens, the amount of people that fall into these groups also inherently increases, resulting in less of the overall population finding satisfaction with the president.

History has also demonstrated a "Rally the Troops" effect that can drive presidential approval ratings up among the public during times of national crisis, as citizens tend to seek more guidance and security from government leaders. This effect was apparent after the attacks of 9/11, as President Bush's approval ratings soared.

With controversy over the proposed national missile defense system in Europe, the 9/11 Commission hearings, the Israeli/Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon and debate over troop withdrawal in Iraq dominating the news during the weeks of the disapproval spikes, perhaps the results of this study also indicate that the nature of the issues being covered were stressful and/or negative to such a degree that no amount of positive news framing of the president was enough to transfer over to approval of the president's performance.

Use of content analysis software and keywords for content analysis both present limitations to the validity of a content analysis such as this, as there is simply no substitute for coding performed by actual trained coders. However, for analysis of high volumes of content, automated content analysis can be effective for gleaning high-level information on a large scale. Additional studies of this nature are needed to test the method used in this study and provide deeper insight into the degree of framing effects of media on presidential job approval. Studies

using larger data sets that incorporate more media outlets and a longer time frame leading up to the spikes in presidential job approval or disapproval should be considered. Also, an additional method for the selection of keywords is recommended. An initial study should first be conducted by trained coders to determine sample articles that exhibit very positive or negative framing of the president. These sample articles could then be used as the basis for extracting the list of positive and negative keywords. The objective would be to obtain more accurate results in future studies by using a more methodical approach to selecting keywords.

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