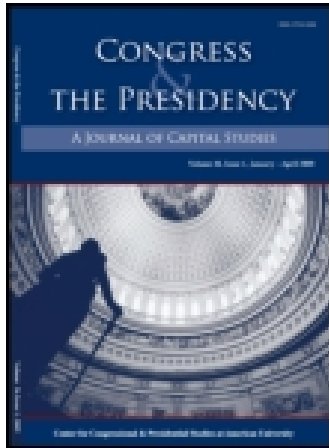


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### Sounding Presidential: Frame Creation in the Obama Administration

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# SOUNDING PRESIDENTIAL: FRAME CREATION IN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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*Among the often-cited powers of the presidency is the power of the pulpit. Presidents attempt to influence Congress directly and indirectly through their rhetoric and its influence on national policy debates. This includes the power to shape debates through the use of frames. While much is known about framing, no past study has attempted to document all frames utilized by a policy entrepreneur in his attempt to shape the policy debate. Comprehensive understanding of frame creation is necessary to understand what frames persist and how frames are used in policymaking. This study identifies how one president, Barack Obama, framed domestic policy issues in speeches early in his administration. Identifying frames the president uses provides insights into this president's attempts to set the public agenda. The findings of this study suggest that Obama's use of specific frames is highly idiosyncratic, but that these idiosyncratic frames coalesce around identifiable policy areas, particularly macroeconomic policy. This study provides insight into how one president attempts to both frame and set his domestic policy agenda.*

## INTRODUCTION

On March 5, 2009, President Obama convened a who's who of the Washington and health care community to begin to set a public agenda for the improvement of health care affordability in America. What started out as a big tent attempt to construct health care reform gave way to a partisan bill that continues to be a source of controversy. Throughout this process, President Obama and other government officials used frames as a means of highlighting particular aspects of the debate to

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elevate public and political concern with the issue. This study examines the use of frames within health care and a wider set of policy domains to examine how the president uses these frames to set a public agenda. In particular, this study tests (1) whether Obama's presidential remarks tend to focus on a select set of frames and/or policy domains, (2) the relationship between the number of frames in a given policy domain and that domain's priority among mass publics, and (3) the relationship between frame context (question and answer periods vs. prepared remarks) and public opinion.

Specifically, this study focuses on how one president frames domestic policy issues in his speeches at the beginning of his administration. Framing "is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluations and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described," (Entman 1993, 52, italics in original). Essentially, frames are cues embedded in a sender's message, in this case presidential speech, designed to get the receiver(s) to perceive the world or events in a specific way or as a way to *understand* events (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; Edwards 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Conventionally, frames are thought of as an intentional process by which policy entrepreneurs engage in agenda setting. Frames advance agenda setting because they serve as heuristics or cues that provide an easy way for the receiver to understand complex political or policy issues. In this context, frames are tools that simplify a complex and messy reality into something more easily understood by individuals, particularly those with only a passing interest in politics and public policy (Edwards 2003). For example, when President Obama states to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, "there's enormous opportunity when it comes to energy to create jobs." Energy policy is linked to economic policy to build support for public investment.

However, this definition of framing does not restrict one to intentional policy directed frames. While intentional and politically relevant frames are at the core of most studies of framing (Chong & Druckman 2007a; Jacoby 2000; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997), it is important to note that frames can be unintentional and the result of unconscious framing judgments made by the communicator or by expressions of common frames of reference as a result of social norms and values (Entman 1993). Consider President Obama's comments during a March 2009 speech on veterans' health care. He introduces a frame that identifies a set of American ideals when he says that veterans are "living out the ideals that stir something deep within the American character: honor, sacrifice, and commitment to a higher purpose and to one another." In the context of the speech, the comment served little political end, but does highlight a particular set of values. In addition, it does not require that frames be directed toward advancing a particular public policy choice. For example, when President Obama proclaims at a Georgetown University economic forum that "I want every American to know that each action we take and each policy we pursue is driven by a larger vision of America's future," he

is not proposing a particular solution but rather attempting to draw attention to a perceived progressive vision for all of his policies.

While a great deal of research looks at the effects of frames on attitudes, Chong and Druckman (2007b 117–118) note that more work is needed to examine both the production of frames and strategies motivating political entrepreneurs to create them.

## IDENTIFYING FRAMES

The dominant approach to identifying frames appears to be content analysis of media and elite sources to identify frames for specific policy issues or choices (Hershey, 2011). For instance, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) conduct a content analysis of news media focusing on the issue of nuclear power since the end of World War II. Baumgartner and colleagues (2008) apply this same approach to understanding changes in framing of the issue of the death penalty which they argue has undergone a rapid shift within the past 20 years. In experimental research, a significant portion of the work on framing in political communication, researchers identify frames they think are likely to activate different considerations when subjects are asked to give their opinion or make a policy choice. In some work this is done a priori by researchers who expect that selected frames will differentially affect attitudes (e.g., Nelson and colleagues' 1997 use of civil liberties and public safety frames). In other work, researchers combine these approaches by identifying likely frames through a content analysis and discussions with elites in a particular policy area and then pre-testing frames to select only those that are most resonant for inclusion in the study (e.g., Chong and Druckman's (2007a) experimental work on competing urban growth management frames).

When scholars choose frames for study, they ground their decisions about what a frame is and what frames exist by referring to news and elite discourse about that policy issue or topic. Furthermore, these frames are relatively simple, because they are designed to be easy cues to alert receivers to specific considerations during attitude formation. They are also few in numbers because they reflect well-established policy images. Framing studies that identify frames exclusively by news and dominant elite discourse may be appropriate for examining the effect of framing for a specific policy issue or choice. However, their narrow focus is inappropriate for examining how any one particular political actor, such as the president, attempts to frame a variety of issues because they mask the larger number of frames that have the potential to emerge.

An alternative approach adopted by this study is to extract frames directly from political communication (Cohen 1995; Entman 2003; Hill 1998; Meyer 1995). This approach enables researchers to examine how presidents shape a policy by framing the way that it is presented (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Kingdon 2003). Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 26) write that, “. . . different people can hold different

images of the same policy. Policies will differ in the degree to which a single image is well accepted by all." Political conflict exists around these competing images and the president has an incentive to manipulate these images through framing in order to gain support for his preferred policy positions (Baumgartner & Jones 1993, 28–29). This suggests that policy entrepreneurs, like the president, play a distinct role in shaping what frames emerge in news and elite debate. In order to understand how President Obama frames issues, one needs to be able to identify raw frames *before* they become aggregated into media or elite discourse or lost altogether.

### FRAMING AS PART OF AN AGENDA-SETTING STRATEGY

This study advances the argument that framing is an essential technique that political actors use while engaging in agenda setting. Previous studies have examined framing as part of an agenda-setting strategy mainly in terms of single issues for one political actor or across many issues within the context of political campaigns. Hanggli and Kreisi (2010) present a conceptual framework that links together a great deal of thinking about framing and other forms of rhetoric as part of an agenda-setting strategy. They do so within the context of a study on how various groups framed issues surrounding a ballot initiative over immigration in Switzerland, but their framework appears broadly applicable to a variety of contexts. They suggest that framing as a part of an agenda-setting strategy involves three sets of choices: substantive emphasis choice, oppositional emphasis choice and contest emphasis choice (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010). These first two strategic choices are applicable to the analysis of framing as a tool of presidential agenda setting and will be discussed in more depth. The third, contest emphasis choice, relates to choices made within the course of a campaign to focus on the contest itself versus more substantive issues (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010, 144). Although this third choice is applicable within the context of campaigns, it may be less so within the context of presidential agenda-setting after an inauguration and during the administration's initial honeymoon period.

The first strategic choice, substantive emphasis, involves identifying and employing a frame or set of frames capable of drawing attention to one's position (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010, 143). Drawing on the framing literature, Hanggli and Kreisi note that strong frames capable of garnering attention may rely on either, "...cultural congruence, cultural resonance, or narrative fidelity..." (2010, 143). For a political actor, like the president, attempting to set an agenda for a term of office involves two choices regarding substantive emphasis. The first choice involves identifying important policies while the second involves selecting frames for those policies that are capable of drawing attention.

The second strategic choice, oppositional emphasis, concerns how a campaign reacts to the opposition's frames (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010, 143–144). This draws

on the concept of issue trespass, in which a political actor engages an issue owned by an opponent but does so in a way that is beneficial by framing the issue consistently with that actor's policy preferences (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010; Holian 2006; Sides 2006). Examples of this include Holian's (2004) analysis of how candidate, and future president, Clinton neutralized the Republican candidate's ownership on the issue of crime by reframing discourse on the issue from punishment to prevention. Sides (2006) shows that House and Senate candidates from both parties address the public's main policy concerns or issues leading up to an election (a "ride the wave" strategy). While candidates do address the same issues, Sides (2006, 434) finds that one tactic they use is to frame issues in a way that is consonant with their party's traditional positions. The oppositional emphasis choice suggests that framing as a strategy of presidential agenda setting may lead a president to focus on issues of public concern or those raised by the opposition. However, when a president does this they will frame issues in a way that supports their preferred policy positions or refutes arguments made by opponents.

### **MESSAGE DISCIPLINE IN PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC**

One would expect these frames to be consistent given the increasing emphasis on message discipline. Framing discipline is more important in the twenty-first century than ever before because greater demands on our attention associated with the pervasiveness of media mean that citizens are attentive to fewer and fewer cues and thus less likely to absorb the primary message that politicians seek to advance unless it is repeated often and consistently (Jackson 2003). The advice from communication advisors to politicians is to "stay on message" in order to have clear themes for audience members or to "have one and only one message to communicate to voters" (Benoit et al. 2001, 52) in order to encompass multiple issues within a coherent frame (Baines 1999; Bradshaw 2004). Politicians are competing not only with other opponents but also with their own messages for attention leading consultants and pundits to advise message discipline as the strategy for success (Jackson 2003).

Whether politicians are successful in message discipline is another issue. One case study of the Bush administration finds a tremendous amount of message discipline as demonstrated by limited channels of information, consistent repetition in policy focus and a complex marketing machine designed to reinforce a consistent image of President Bush as a modern day everyman (Mayer 2004). In contrast to these findings, a 2011 content analysis of 21 Republican and Democratic candidates in the 2008 presidential primary suggests that there is remarkably little consistency among the messages utilized by candidates (Benoit et al. 2011). While the study doesn't explicitly address consistency in framing, it does find that then-candidate Obama was comparatively inconsistent in his relative focus on policy and candidate character across communication mediums (Benoit et al. 2011).

Moreover, there is also reason to believe that a focus on message discipline would not necessarily result in consistent framing early in an administration. As the reach of political rhetoric has been extended by the 24 hour news cycle and America has experienced a continued proliferation of mass media, presidents have become more sensitive to the demands to present “quantifiably safe rhetoric” (Hall 2002, 319). To this end, politicians seek feedback on rhetoric through polls to confirm its acceptability before introducing it to a larger audience (Hall 2002). Similarly, one might expect that early in an administration or in lower profile addresses, the president might test frames for “safeness” before using them in major addresses. This would maintain “quantifiably safe” message discipline in major addresses while testing and winnowing frames for acceptability in minor addresses (Hall 2002). In other words, politicians are trying to identify a menu that would be attractive to serve the citizens who are determining the best political pairs (Sniderman and Bullock, 2004).

This leads to two pair of contradictory hypotheses. On one hand, the theory of message discipline would lead one to expect consistency in both policy and frame in political communication.

H<sub>1</sub>: Presidential communication attempts to repeat the same frames to increase exposure to them.

H<sub>2</sub>: In order to set the political agenda, the president focuses his efforts on a limited selection of policy domains.

Communication lies at the heart of a president’s ability to set a public agenda and framing represents a major tool by highlighting different elements of policy debates in order to increase the likelihood of getting on the public agenda (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2004; Smith and Smith 1994, Stuckey and Wabshall 2000). The conventional wisdom is that presidents are most successful in setting the agenda when they exercise message discipline. Although not all presidents are successful in maintaining a consistent message, presidential staff exert much time and effort in controlling public perception of presidential priorities (Mayer 2004).

On the other hand, framing strategy would suggest that the president is searching for strong frames and is strategic about responding to political opponents and public opinion. Sometimes referred to as “riding the wave,” this responsiveness to other actors is a necessary part of effective political communication. This is consistent with the evidence from campaign research that suggests that while there is a lot of message discipline in campaign communication, the majority of messages differed in tone, topic, or priority (Benoit et al., 2011). Likewise, the findings on presidential media powers suggest that those powers are highly constrained. Consequently, framing is limited in its effect for a number of reasons. One reason that the impact of presidential leadership may be highly constrained, or non-existent, is that the president is in competition with other political actors and institutions to lead the public (Edwards 2003, 2009). Chong and Druckman note that in the



real world, individuals are exposed to multiple and competing frames about policy choices (2007a, 2007c).<sup>2</sup> This points to a more pessimistic prospect that the president does little to set the public agenda but rather responds to mass public concerns for the purpose of political gain. This is consistent with past research that shows that presidents are more likely to discuss policy concerns that are already shared by mass audiences (Bawn 1997). To this end, we would expect frames utilized during a question and answer period to be more varied as the president has less control over the content. To examine this phenomenon, we test two hypotheses:

H<sub>3</sub>: The frequency of presidential frames reflects the priority assigned to public policy concerns among mass publics.

H<sub>4</sub>: Frames generated during question and answer periods are more closely tied to public opinion than frames introduced during prepared remarks.

## METHODS

The starting point for identifying frames comes from Entman's definition of framing described above. Specifically, a frame exists if it highlights specific information for the purposes of identifying societal problems, identifying policy solutions or promotes a moral evaluation about either problems or solutions (Entman 1993). This approach to identifying frames is conceptually simple, yet provides a way to identify frames across a wide variety of policy areas. Frames are judged on whether they advance an identifiable bias in the policy debate.

To test the hypotheses above, this study identifies frames and codes them into classificatory typologies. Classificatory typologies group cases into "types" to identify what type of case a particular observation represents (Elman 2005). In this study, presidential comments represent cases that were grouped into types of frames representing different ways of viewing contemporary political issues. These frames were identified using interpretive content analysis. Interpretive content analysis allows one to read or observe narrative statements and analyze them using scientific methods including objectivity, inter-subjectivity, replicability and validity (Neuendorf 2002).

This method was applied to 144 presidential speeches from February 21, 2009, until June 2, 2009. This includes every public pronouncement made by President Obama over a 10-week period in his first term. The decision to focus on a limited period significantly limits the ability to generalize the results but is necessary given the demands of the research. The manual coding for the 10-week period involved more than 1,000 hours of analysis and discussion. The labor intensity of this process limits that scope of the study, but is necessary in order to accurately document the population of frames utilized by the president. The decision to select an intact sample, as opposed to selecting speeches from throughout a presidency, is justified on the basis that this study seeks to explain how a presidential speech serves as a format for leadership within a particular context. As such, this sample

is representative of the early parts of a president's first term in office and may not be applicable to other contexts. While any policy entrepreneur could be selected for this analysis, president Obama was selected for two reasons. First, as president he is the highest profile policy entrepreneur and thus provides the most data points. Second, as the sitting president, his speech has the most contemporary policy relevance.

This particular period was selected for two reasons. First, it represents a time in which the president is most active in agenda setting. The early days of a presidential administration provide an opportunity to set priorities and attempt to push a legislative agenda kicked off by the state of the union address.<sup>3</sup> Second, the sampling frame represents a period of normal legislative activity. While there were certainly political issues that dominated the agenda, such as the national economy and the threat of bird flu, there were also much less notable legislative debates surrounding national service, budgetary concerns and educational reform. Likewise, this period overlapped with a period of legislative and Supreme Court activity. This allows us to view executive leadership within a larger context of interdependent political institutions.

Presidential statements were collected from the Public Papers of the President collected by American Presidency Project at the University of California Santa Barbara.<sup>4</sup> The American Presidency Project archives and catalogs all public messages made by the president during his term of office including messages, statements, executive orders, news conferences and other similar documents published in the Federal Register. This study utilizes all public pronouncements by the president during the study time. It excludes presidential statements read by the press secretary or issued by the White House through press releases, signing statements and executive orders.

These documents were coded using manual coding techniques. Two coders read each document and coded them independently. The coders then met to compare frames identified through the coding process. All frames were discussed, and those frames with unanimous agreement were included in the study. Given that inclusion required unanimous agreement, the intercoder reliability factor is 1. However, to illustrate the conceptual integrity of the framing method, the original coding of the frames resulted in a Krippendorff's alpha of .662. While only moderately acceptable by conventional standards, this is to be expected given the emergent nature of framing (Krippendorff 1980).

As frames were identified from the text, they were entered into a database. This database became a reference for identifying future frames and electronic searching for frames after manual coding was complete. The database also serves as a codebook to enable other researchers to examine the findings in greater depth or for replication. Upon completion of manual coding, electronic text searches were conducted of the documents in order to ensure that identified codes were included in each occurrence. The findings of the electronic searches were then evaluated by the coders. The study did not begin with electronic coding techniques that identifies

frames without human assistance because computers have not yet been able to identify emerging text without human assistance. The lack of clear a priori frames limits the applicability of electronic methods (Grimmer and King 2009).

The frames were coded on a number of variables, including: the document, the item's placement within the document, the date, document type (e.g., news conference), document title, frame, example text, a code for the policy domain as defined by the Policy Agenda Project, a dummy variable to indicate whether the frame was part of a prepared speech or a response to public or media questioning.<sup>5</sup> Each frame was coded only once per speech. This served to reduce the coding ambiguity associated with determining when a sample of text represents a repetition of a frame or a continuation of a longer frame. Giving the ubiquitousness of framing suggested by this study's findings, this strategy does not appear to significantly undercount frames.

### **Defining a Frame**

In order to be included in the subsequent analysis, the frame needed to fit within four criteria. First, it needed to be stated by the president. Second, it needed to be recognized by both coders. Third, the study chose to focus on domestic policy issues. While both domestic and international frames are of interest to policy scholars, this data set began out of larger study of American media and thus data collection focused on domestic policy as the brunt of American media coverage. This excluded a number of frames that would otherwise have met the study criteria. Most prominently, this excluded a set of frames that symbolically structured relationships among nations. For example, a speech in South Korea that suggests that our "friendship has only grown stronger" fits our framing criteria in that it makes some aspect of the United States/South Korea relationship more relevant. However, it primarily addresses foreign policy issues and thus is excluded from the study. The other major groupings of excluded frames are those that are foreign policy and military in nature. Given the prominence of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars during the study period, many speeches addressed military action. Most of the frames that focused on the military and military action were excluded. The exceptions were those military frames that were focused on domestic security, such as "A democracy as resilient as ours must reject the false choice between our security and our ideals," and those that focused on U.S. views of the military, such as "I spoke about what it means for America to see our best and brightest, our finest young men and women serve us."

Fourth, the text must represent a frame as opposed to a policy statement or an issue. For example, consider the policy domain of economic recovery. At one point in the study period, President Obama states "My administration will begin distributing more than \$15 billion in Federal assistance under the Recovery Act to help you cover the costs of your Medicaid programs." This represents a factual statement about an ongoing policy. In the same speech, President Obama proclaims, "We recognized that we needed to act boldly, decisively and quickly, and that's

precisely what we did.” This statement, while concerned with the same underlying policy, expresses opinion and provides listeners with a way to interpret the current economic debate. This expression of opinion and direction of attention to particular elements of the debate are necessary for framing (Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

Likewise, any particular policy issue may serve as an umbrella for a range of frames. Consider the issue of macroeconomic policy. This was a major policy issue for framing and featured many frames including:

- When a community is struck by a natural disaster, the nation responds to put it back on its feet. While the storm that has hit our auto towns is not a tornado . . . the damage is clear, and we likewise respond (3/30/2009 Remarks on the American Auto Industry).
- As a consequence of some excellent work by Ben and some coordinated activities between the various agencies, what we’ve seen is the mortgage interest rates go down to historic lows. . . (4/10/2009 Meeting with Senior Economic Advisors)
- So you’ve got a lot of Republican economists who agree that we had to do a stimulus package, and we had to do something about the banks. (4/29/2009 Arnold Town Hall Meeting)

Each of these frames were coded under a common policy domain, but were coded as separate frames because they serve to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text” (Entman 1993, 52). The first frame suggests that economic downturns are disasters and should be responded to in a similar fashion. The second frame highlights the benefits of action to suggest that government coordination of the markets is beneficial. The third frame focuses on presumed widespread support for a particular economic policy. Since each frame highlights different aspects of the debate, each is coded as a distinct frame. So while the frames are united under a common theme or policy issue, there are coded as separate frames to emphasize how the issue is discussed.

In addition, this study adopted a strategy of identifying frames at the narrowest unit. Scholars of framing have recognized that frames exist on a spectrum from micro to macro frames (Scheufele 1999; Zhongdan and McLeod 1991). Macro level frames include broad categories of frames such problem frames, solution frames, or value frames. Macro frames are largely policy absent and thus while useful for studying framing in general, are of little use for understanding how policy entrepreneurs shape political communication. Meso frames have policy content such as the pro-life and pro-choice frame, but do not provide specific linguistic information. Micro level frames like those used in this study provide policy content and understanding into the language choices of policy entrepreneurs. One might consider how the meso frame for capital punishment of “innocence” encompasses several micro frames such as “the risk of executing the wrong person is too great” or “too many capital cases have been tried without the DNA evidence necessary

to prove guilt.” Using micro level frames allows more detailed analysis but also inflates the presences of frames relative to other studies.

### **Distinguishing Frames**

While there is inherently some subjectivity associated with determining where one frame stops and another frame begins, the method of this study is to rely on agreement among scholars as a basis for distinguishing frames. While difficult to quantify and more difficult to replicate, this was the best option with an inductive approach to framing. To minimize this limitation, a replication data set is available upon request.

Frames are coded based upon the cue that was highlighted during the framing attempt and not on the word choice of the text. Consequently, frames did not have to utilize the same words, but did have to attempt to stimulate the same consideration. For example, the following three samples of text were all coded as “Benefits of Action” because they attempted to make salient the positive outcomes of government action even though they used distinctive linguistic patterns:

- And because we did, all across America you’ve got teachers who are still teaching and police officers who are still on the beat; you’ve got construction workers that are breaking ground on the infrastructure that will guide us to the future. Because of that plan, 95 percent of working families are going to have a tax cut in their paycheck in a few weeks. . . .(3/25/2009 Remarks to the Democratic National Committee Fundraiser 2).
- And already, we’re beginning to see this change take hold. In Jefferson City, more than 2,500 jobs will be created on Missouri’s largest wind farm, so that American workers are harnessing clean, American energy. Across the State, roughly 20,000 transportation jobs will be supported by the Recovery Act, so that Missourians are rebuilding your roads, your bridges, your rails (4/29/2009 Arnold Town Hall Meeting).
- And because of what we did together, this plan will save at least 3.5 million jobs in every State across the country (2/23/2009 Remarks to the National Governors).

Alternatively, the following two samples of text both focus on the budget and were coded under the macroeconomic policy domain. However, they are coded as separate frames since they attempt to activate different considerations.

- The budget I submitted to Congress will build our economic recovery on a stronger foundation so that we don’t face another crisis like this 10 or 20 years from now. (3/24/2009 News Conference)
- The budget also reflects the stark reality that we’ve inherited, a trillion dollar deficit, a financial crisis, and a costly recession (2/28/2009 Weekly Address)

The first frame focuses attention on the budget as an investment for the future. The second uses the budget to foster a sense of crisis with regard to the economy. In this way, listeners are prompted to attend to two distinctly different elements of the budgeting process and potentially form different policy opinions.

## RESULTS

This process resulted in the identification of 1,530 frames in 144 presidential speeches. Most of these frames, or 407 of the 610, were used by President Obama only once. These numbers point to the first major finding of this study, which is the widespread prevalence of frames in political communication. While it has long been recognized that political communication uses frames to attempt to move public opinion, the tendency of framing studies to focus on one policy area has masked the actual proliferation of frames in presidential speeches in every policy area. Out of 144 speeches that met the studies inclusion criteria, only eighteen contained no frames. These tended to be shorter and often symbolic in nature. Given President Obama's emphasis on change and the need to redefine the public discourse, frames have an important role to play.

Reflecting Entman's (1993) earlier research, frames were used to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, suggest remedies and perform a wide range of additional political functions. Table 1 identifies the most common frames included in the study. By far, the most common frame was the "economy in crisis" frame, which was found in almost half of all speeches. Between 10 and 20% of speeches contained frames addressing the benefits of action, cooperation, inherited problems, President Obama's war on waste, the potential for triumph over adversity, the responsibility to act and the identification of problems and solutions. The definition of problems and the suggestion of solutions was a particularly common method of framing, reflecting approximately 25% of the total frames when considering all proposed problems and solutions.

Given that the use of frames to identify problems and solutions represents one of the classic uses of political framing, a peak of 25% of problem/solution frames may be unexpected (Figure 1). Yet, many of the other framing techniques utilized by President Obama serve to bolster problem and solution frames. "More to do" frames (occurring in 10.4% of speeches), "responsibility to act" frames (11.8% of speeches) and "triumph over adversity" frames (15.3% of speeches) served to motivate public opinion to advocate for policy change. Likewise, "inherited problems" frames (18.8% of speeches) and "mandate for change" (7.6% of speeches) served to structure the political environment to benefit President Obama's agenda. In this way, the majority of frames serve a policy relevant goal.

Interestingly, most of these frames were idiosyncratic. Of the 610 unique frames identified, 407 of these were used only once and 137 of them were used between two and five times (Figure 2). President Obama's use of political frames tended to be structured around a diversity of frames, thus disconfirming hypothesis

TABLE 1. High Volume Frames as a Percentage of Speeches Appeared and as a Percentage of All Frames Coded

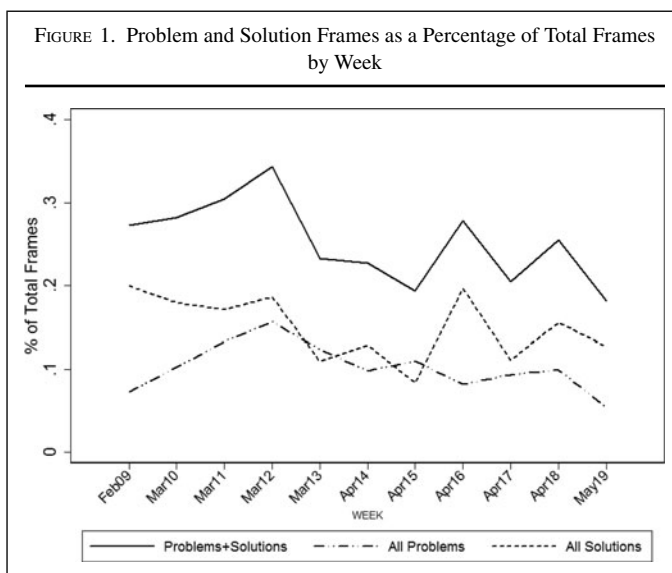
Frame	16+ Mentions			11 – 15 Mentions			
	<i>n</i>	% (speeches)	% (frames)	Frame	<i>n</i>	% (speeches)	% (frames)
Economy in Crisis	67	46.5	4.38	There is more to do	15	10.4	0.98
Benefits of Action (Recovery & Reinvestment Act)	31	21.5	2.03	Solution: Education Investment & Reform	15	10.4	0.98
Cooperation: Int'l	28	19.4	1.83	Long-term Economic Problems	15	10.4	0.98
Inherited Problems	27	18.8	1.76	Solution: Freeing Up Credit (TARP)	14	9.7	0.92
War on Waste	24	16.7	1.57	Long-term Economic Solutions	13	9	0.85
Triumph over Adversity	22	15.3	1.44	Extraordinary Circumstances	13	9	0.85
Solution: H.C. Reform	19	13.2	1.24	Solution: Green Energy	12	8.3	0.78
Problem: Reckless Speculation & Spending	19	13.2	1.24	Mandate for Change	11	7.6	0.72
Solution: Govt. Regulation of Financial Markets	18	12.5	1.18	Problem: Energy Dependence	11	7.6	0.72
Problem: H.C. Costs	18	12.5	1.18	Unprecedented Action	11	7.6	0.72
Responsibility to Act	17	11.8	1.11	Admin. can address multiple problems at once	11	7.6	0.72
Time to Act	16	11.1	1.05				

Note 1:  $n = 144$  for speeches and  $n = 1,530$  for frames.

Note 2: 18 of the 144 speeches, approx 12.5%, met the inclusion criteria but contained no frame.

one. As such, for President Obama, the conventional wisdom that message discipline is important did not play out with a concise set of political frames.

The Policy Agenda Project uses a method of coding policies into distinct policy domains. Using the policy domains identified by the policy agenda project, the frames identified in our research were coded into every policy area from the use of public lands to macroeconomic policy. Coding for policy domain enables the identification of patterns in framing around policy-specific areas. We find a



wide range of frames depending on the event, timing, and political needs of the president (Table 2). Given just one policy area, health care, Obama links health care to private sector financial health, national budget deficits, improving Medicare and Medicaid and moral necessity. Likewise, he suggests that it is a problem where there is universal agreement but also the need to set aside any sacred cows. These messages are tailored to the audience to whom he is addressing. Investments in

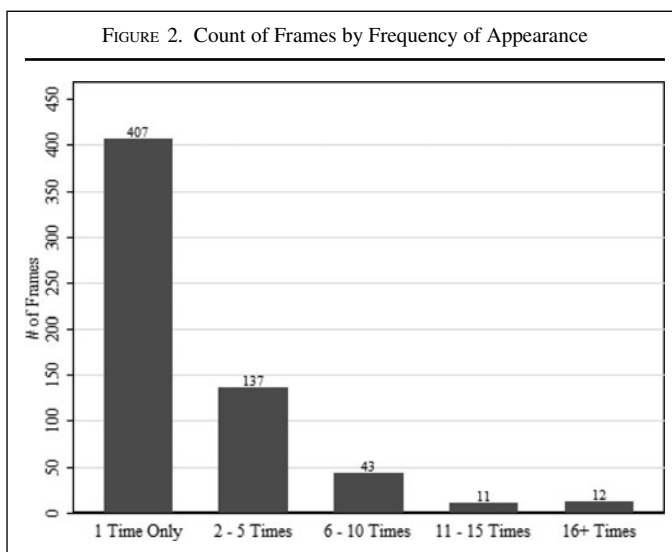


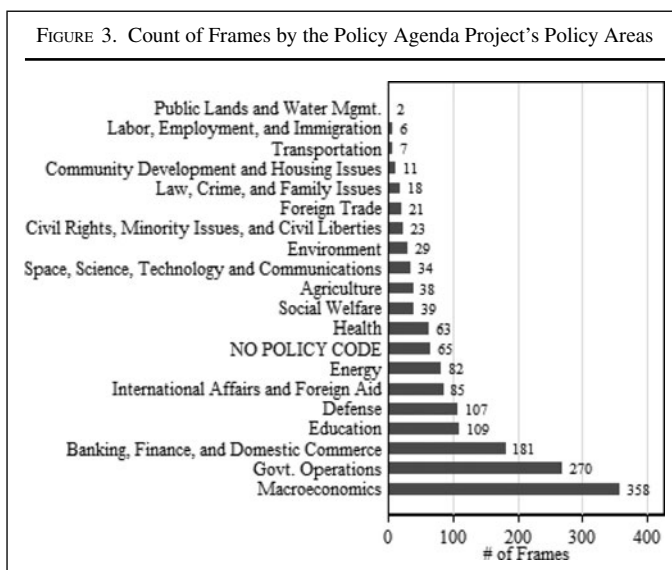


TABLE 2. Selected Sample Frames and Text for Health Care.

DATE	SPEECH	FRAME	SUPPORTING TEXT
3/5/2009	White House Forum on Health Reform—Closing Session	Agreement on Problem: Health care	. . . a clear consensus that the need for health care reform is now. . .
3/5/2009	Remarks to White House Forum on Health Reform	Need for compromise	There should be no sacred cows. Each of us must accept that none of us will get everything that we want, and that no proposal for reform will be perfect.
3/9/2009	Remarks on overturning ban on funding to stem cell research	Benefits of action (medical research)	But that potential will not reveal itself on its own. Medical miracles do not happen simply by accident. They result from painstaking and costly research, from years of lonely trial and error, much of which never bears fruit, and from a Government willing to support that work.
3/12/2009	Remarks w/ Business Roundtable	H.C. is moral issue	So I think there's a powerful moral element to health care.
3/24/2009	Presidential News Conference	Agreement on problem: Health care costs key to deficit	What we have to do is bend the curve on these deficit projections. And the best way for us to do that is to reduce health care costs. That's not just my opinion; that's the opinion of almost every single person who has looked at our long-term fiscal situation.
3/24/2009	Presidential News Conference	Biggest problem (Medicare & Medicaid)	The biggest problem we have long term is Medicare and Medicaid
3/26/2009	Virtual Town Hall meeting and Q&A	H.C. reform instrumentalism	And so what evolved in America was an employer-based system. It may not be the best system if we were designing it from scratch, but that's what everybody is accustomed to; that's what everybody is used to. It works for a lot of Americans. And so I don't think the best way to fix our health care system is to suddenly completely scrap what everybody is accustomed to and the vast majority of people already have. Rather, what I think we should do is to build on the system that we have and fill some of these gaps.

basic research are targeted at scientists and the impact on jobs is the core of the town hall presentation.

Nevertheless, the results of hypothesis two were much more positive. While political frames took on a wide range of forms and addressed a spectrum of public policy, certain domains were more prominent than others (Figure 3). Reflecting the economic decline of 2009 and the significant attention paid to the banking



sector as a result, the macroeconomic policy domain and the banking, finance and domestic commerce policy domain dominated the political discourse. What was more unexpected was the importance of framing within the government operations policy domain. President Obama used framing to set expectations about business in Washington and to educate the public about how the political process operates or should operate. For example, at an April news conference President Obama states, “If, on the other hand, the definition is that we’re open to each other’s ideas, there are going to be some differences, the majority will probably be determinative when it comes to resolving just hard-core differences that we can’t resolve, but there’s a whole host of other areas where we can work together, then I think we can make progress.” This perspective on partisanship in the political process serves to set expectations about the nature of the legislative process. Frames from the government operations domain were the second most common after macroeconomic policy concerns. Other policy domains including those concerned with public lands, labor and immigration and transportation were much less common, reflecting a minor fraction of presidential frames.

While it is certainly not surprising that the president would dedicate greater attention to some policy areas over others, confirmation of hypothesis two serves two purposes. First, it highlights the novelty of rejecting hypothesis one. While there is policy discipline in presidential framing, this discipline does not translate into the frame utilized. Second, the findings point to some interesting patterns in the policy domains on which the president chooses to focus. Economic and commerce frames would be expected given the economic challenges of the time, but the emphasis on government operations is hardly a dominant policy concern.

TABLE 3. Correlation between Frame Usage and Most Important Problem

	Count of Frames	% of Total Frames/Week
Economy	0.2131	0.9874
Health Care	0.4698	0.2158
Education	0.194	0.0657
Defense	0.1519	0.7655

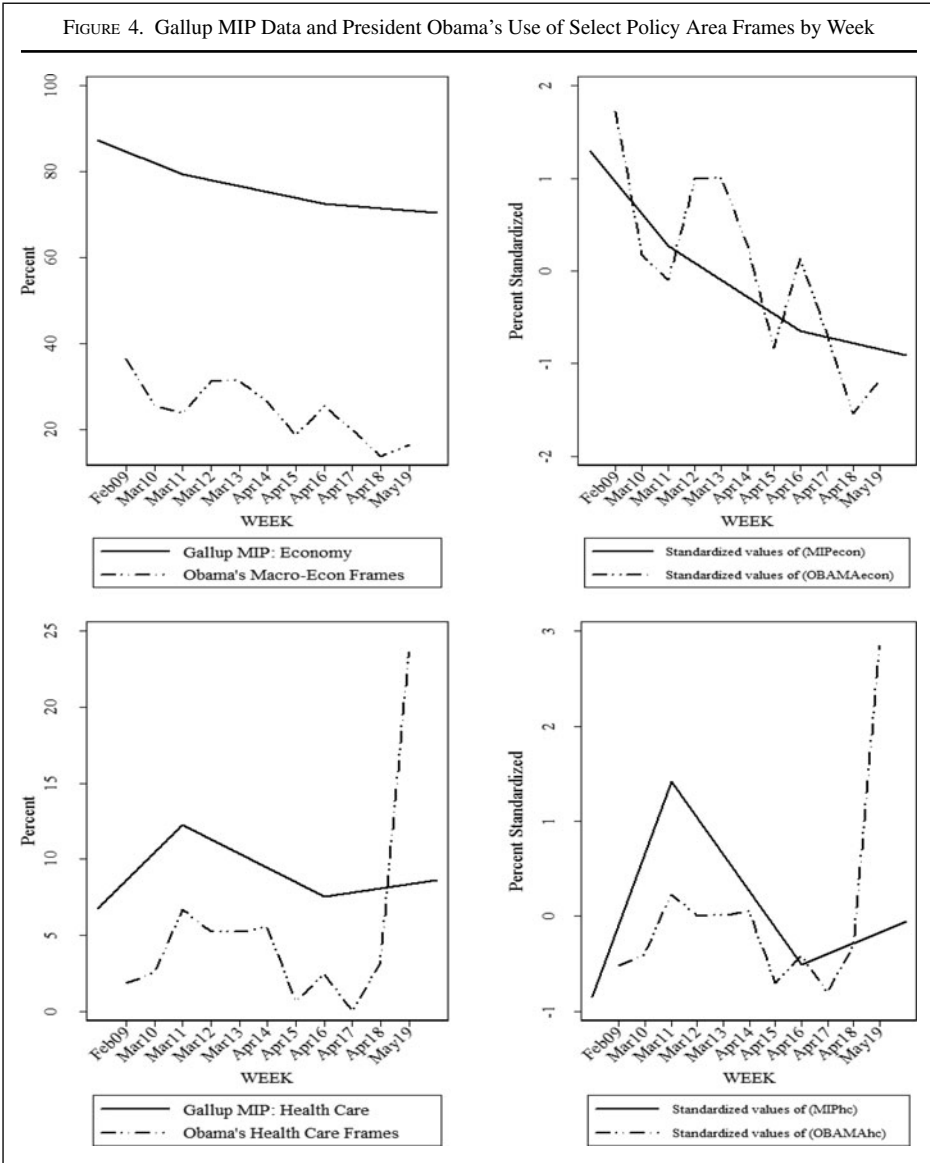
Hypothesis three, that the frequency of presidential frames reflects the priority assigned to them by mass audiences, is partially confirmed (Table 3). What makes this finding interesting is that the relationship between frame use and public concern is moderated by the strength of the concern (Table 4). For the dominant public priorities, economy and defense, the correlation between the public rating of the issues as the most important problem and the percent of presidential frames is a robust 98% and 76% respectively. By contrast, the correlation between health care frames and education frames were a much lower 20% and 6%. Given that the percent of the public concern about these issues never rises above 10% of the population considering them American's most important issue, their public emphasis fails to live up to the attention that they receive by President Obama during different points of the study.

Similarly, by comparing these patterns over time, we notice that, with the exception of education, presidential attention to a policy domain and public concern about that domain tend to rise and fall together. For example, as one compares macroeconomic frames to the general economic concerns identified by Gallup, both variables peak at the beginning of the study and reach a low during the tenth week (Figure 4). What is unique about macroeconomic frames and their consistency with public opinion is that the percentage of the population that considers economic concerns to be America's most important problem is significantly higher than the attention provided to it among President Obama's frames. While at times, over 85% of the public ranked macroeconomic concerns as the nation's most important problem, the prevalence of macroeconomic frames never exceeded 40% of total frames. Were President Obama's communication to identically mirror public interest, he would talk about little more than the economy.

TABLE 4. Frame Counts for the Top Most Important Problem Responses

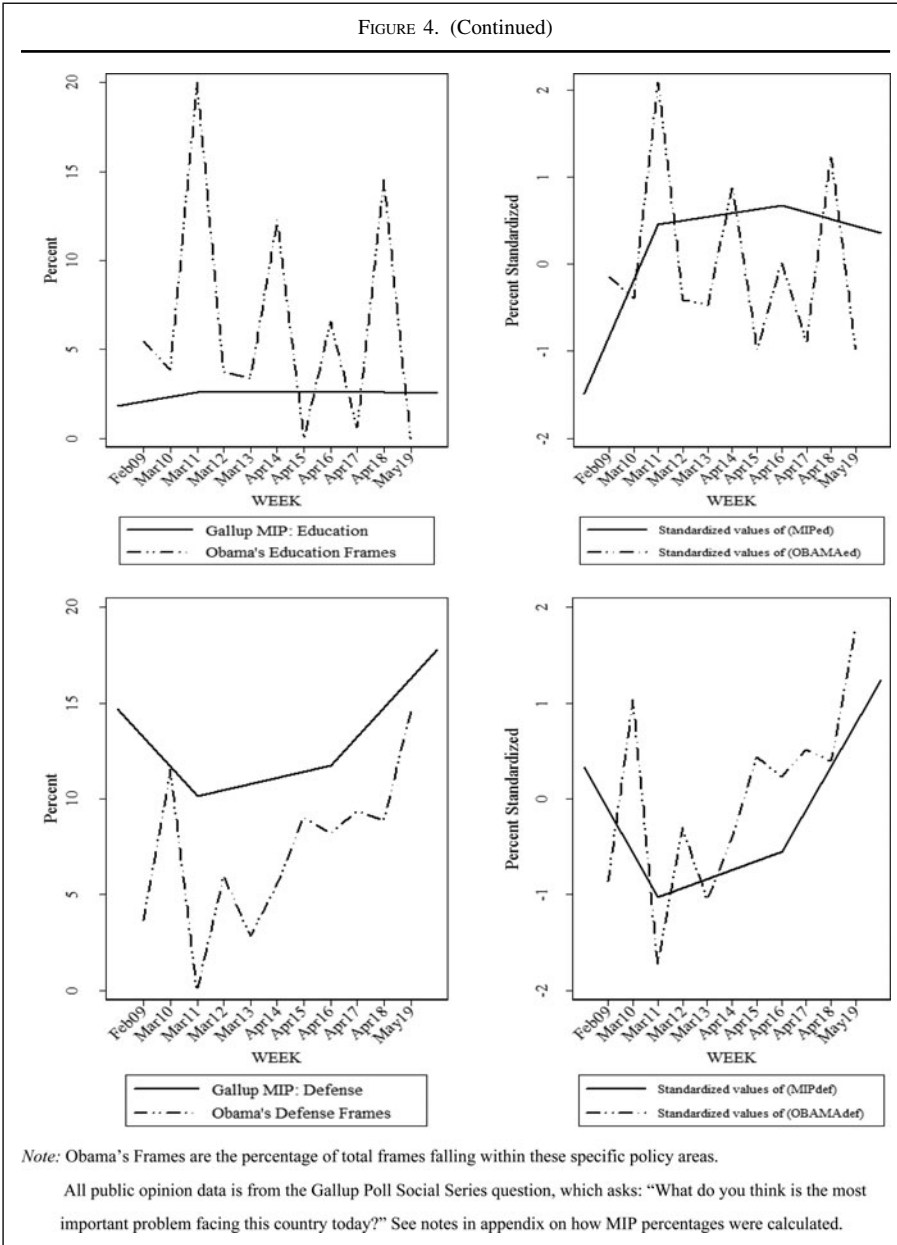
	Count of Frames	Average MIP Response (%)
Economy	358	77.44
Defense	107	13.58
Education	109	2.4
Health Care	63	8.79

FIGURE 4. Gallup MIP Data and President Obama's Use of Select Policy Area Frames by Week



Health care and defense frames follow similar patterns rising and falling with public concern. The coverage of the issues mirror but slightly under represent their occurrence in public opinion. This gap between framing and public opinion is made up by a limited number of policy areas that are framed in a disproportionate volume to the public concerns they represent. First among these is education. It is the only high frequency policy domain in which President Obama exerts more attention than

FIGURE 4. (Continued)



that demanded by the public. While public concern for education as America's most important problem never breaks 5%, some weeks it represents almost 20% of all frames. Moreover, it doesn't tend to follow the pattern of public opinion reflected in economic, health care and defense concerns. Rather, it tends to peak and valley rather sporadically during the study period.

Lastly, Obama's attention to policy does pay heed to public concern if through no other mechanism than linking policies together. A pattern of framing links noneconomic frames to economic concerns. Respondents to Gallup's most important problem question overwhelmingly identify economic problems as paramount (Table 4). As a result, it is not surprising that many of the frames used in Obama's communications attempt to link policy priorities to economic concerns. A common pattern of framing is to raise economic concerns and connect them with health care, education, energy, defense spending and other policy priorities through framing. For example, at the Arnold Town hall meeting, President Obama suggests, "We can't rest until we harness the renewable energy that can create millions of new jobs and new industries." In his virtual town hall meeting, he proclaims "the reason [health care reform] is so important is that the high costs of health care are a huge drag on our economy." This allows President Obama to increase attention to his policy priorities by linking them with the concerns of most Americans. Past research suggests that selectively highlighting one aspect of an issue increases the likelihood that that particular consideration influences attitude formation (e.g., Nelson et al. 1997; Zaller 1992). While policy elites may consider health care or defense spending to be economically relevant, this is often not the perspective of mass audiences. Framing policy priorities around economic matters may help generate mass support for these concerns in public policy debates.

Finally, as to the question of whether frames emerging as a result of ad hoc communication are more representative of public concern than frames emerging from prepared remarks (hypothesis four), the results are somewhat nuanced. One important deviation between prepared and ad hoc frames is the inclusion of foreign affairs frames among ad hoc communication. This is likely the product of the significant amount of international travel conducted during the study frame. While the primary focus of this study is domestic policy, some frames were coded as foreign affairs if they attempted to show the impact of international relations on domestic policy. This pattern of framing is found more often among ad hoc communication. Otherwise, both the policy area examined and the frames used showed a tremendous amount of convergence when comparing prepared and ad hoc remarks (Table 5). Macroeconomics, government operations, banking and commerce, and defense were all among the top four policy areas addressed in both prepared and ad hoc comments. While macroeconomics is the top policy domain among prepared remarks, reflecting approximately 25% of prepared frames, government operations is the top policy domain reflecting approximately 20% of ad hoc frames.

This focus on government operations likely reflects the need to educate the non-elite audiences often found in town hall meetings or the desire to educate wider audiences through the press. Consider how President Obama's March 11, 2009, remarks attempt to explain the value of the often-demonized concept of earmarks. He states, "Done right, earmarks have given legislators the opportunity to direct Federal money to worthy projects that benefit people in their districts, and that's why I have opposed their outright elimination." Alternatively, his March 26,

TABLE 5. Count and Percent of Prepared and Adhoc Frames by the Policy Agenda Project's Policy Areas

Policy Agenda Project Policy Areas	Prepared		Adhoc	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>% of Total Prepared (n = 1,146)</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>% of Total Adhoc (n = 402)</i>
Public Lands and Water Mgmt.	2	0.17	0	—
Labor, Employment, and Immigration	3	0.26	3	0.75
Transportation	6	0.52	1	0.25
Community Development and Housing Issues	9	0.79	2	0.5
Law, Crime, and Family Issues	10	0.87	8	1.99
Foreign Trade	15	1.31	6	1.49
Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties	17	1.48	6	1.49
Environment	19	1.66	10	2.49
Social Welfare	29	2.53	10	2.49
Agriculture	30	2.61	8	1.99
Space, Science, Technology, and Communications	30	3.61	4	1.0
Health	39	3.4	24	5.97
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	51	4.45	34	8.48
NO POLICY CODE	55	4.8	10	2.49
Energy	72	6.28	10	2.49
Defense	74	6.46	33	8.21
Education	81	7.07	28	6.97
Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	126	10.99	55	13.68
Govt. Operations	186	16.23	84	20.9
Macroeconomic	292	25.48	66	16.42

2009 comments to a town hall meeting notes that “Here in Washington, politics all too often is treated like a game. There’s a lot of point scoring, a lot of talk about who’s up and who’s down, a lot of time and energy spent on whether the president is winning or losing on this particular day or at this particular hour. But this isn’t about me.” Helping citizens understand the dynamics of Washington politics benefits the president by helping him lower expectations and to claim success even in the face of rather moderate policy change, given that constituents are more aware of the political challenges that he faces.

If one narrows the discussion of frame frequency to those four frames which are considered to be the most important problems among public opinion, the results

TABLE 6. Most Important Problem Correlations with Prepared and Ad Hoc Frames

	Prepared Count	Adhoc Count
MIP: Economy	0.6894	-0.4083
MIP: Health Care	0.1499	0.9087
MIP: Education	0.2912	0.4214
MIP: Defense	0.1957	-0.3658

are not unlike their relationship among all frames. The high priority policy domains of the economy and defense exhibit a different pattern than other issues of public concern such as education and health care (Table 6). Hypothesis four suggested that frames generated during question and answer periods are more closely tied to public opinion than frames introduced during prepared remarks. This hypothesis comes about as a result of the president's inability to control the agenda during open sessions. As opposed to prepared remarks, where the president can control the policy focus of the speech, question and answer periods offer mass audiences the opportunity to discuss policy concerns as they see relevant. This is partially confirmed as the correlation between ad hoc frames and public opinion is only higher for those policies with the least public concern suggesting that the president is trying to raise the profile of policy issues held by specific constituents or interests. For those policy domains that are seen as most important by the general population (education and defense), there is a higher correlation between prepared remarks and public opinion than ad hoc remarks and public opinion, suggesting that the frames are part of a larger political agenda designed to either influence public opinion or tactically address policies of widespread interest.

## IMPLICATIONS

This study has important implications for an understanding of political framing. Past studies have generally been of two types. Either they have been policy specific studies that examined the use of a frame or a set of frames over time but were limited in the scope of communication that was included; or they focused on a wide range of policies but constrained their research to major political speeches such as the State of the Union and other televised addresses. The first method is limited in that past studies have failed to grasp the breadth and depth of political framing. Focusing on one problem or policy area does not tell us much about political communication because presidents tackle many issues at once and thus there is competition for attention among frames. The second method, concentrating on the president's attempts to "go public," misses the idea that much of presidential framing is continuous and occasionally contradictory. Frames occur not only in



major speeches but in a continuous barrage of public pronouncements directed at the mass public, political elites and major media outlets. To consider framing to be exclusively the domain of mass public persuasion is to miss the majority of attempts to construct public understanding. As has been found previously, there is not a lot of consistency in presidential communication and if anything, this study finds more policy discipline than past studies (Benoit et al. 2011).

This study has attempted to chart a course between these methods by including all frames in all domestic presidential speeches but constraining the study by time. Consequently, we are able to not only show that political frames are commonplace but that their pattern of use does not always subscribe to the expected pattern. The president does use frames to consistently advance a policy agenda, but these frames are rather inconsistent in the relevant characteristics that they attempt to raise. As a result, the message discipline advocated by political consultants and communication directors appears to be policy discipline with a more dispersed message designed to appeal to a wide range of audiences and to evoke differing emotions rather than reinforcing a consistent perspective.

This, additionally, has implication for electoral politics. As Wagner (2007) shows, the ability to stay on message in frame adoption is an important determinant in the electorate's ability to determine differences between parties and candidates. Given that many Americans believe that there is no real difference among politicians, the lack of frame discipline could continue to alienate citizens from the political process. This inability to stay on message may be the result of strategic framing choices made by political actors to trespass on an opponent's issues or address issues of pressing public concern at the time (Sides 2006).

During a recent political science convention, a number of noted framing scholars remarked that the number of frames for any policy debate settles around two (Slothus et al. 2011). This is in direct contrast with the findings of this study. While the number of frames is influenced by the choice of analysis of micro frames, the conventional wisdom that there should be a limited number of frames should not be expected for three reasons. First, the timing of this study has important implications for its findings. This study represents the first few months of a new presidency during which this president enjoys high public approval, a unified government and a more muted domestic opposition. As such, one might expect framing to be more prolific during the early months of a presidency as policy makers attempt to define a yet unspecified debate.

Second, the past couple of decades have seen not only media fragmentation but also social fragmentation (Webster 1986). As social identities multiply and media outlets increase, the communicative messages have become tailored to their audience. The advantage of this change is that more sophisticated media consumers receive messages tailored to their level of expertise (Napoli 1999). This, however, creates a challenge for political communication in that a wide range of messages must be developed to meet an increasingly fragmented audience.

Third, framing in political communication and in news media coverage are related but distinct concepts. The news media do not simply reflect elite debate about domestic policy but instead focus on a limited number of issues or events that meet institutional criteria of newsworthiness (Edelman 1988; Gans 1979). Further, media coverage of political elites, especially during campaigns, is criticized for focusing too much on political gamesmanship (i.e., who's winning and who's losing) rather than substantive policy issues (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). As the press constructs the news, it may winnow out those frames not deemed newsworthy or those that do not fit established narratives about politics. We should expect then that some but not all frames used by political elites, like the president, will be covered in the news media. This would explain why this study finds that President Obama uses numerous frames when talking about domestic policy, but other scholars have found that policy debates tend to settle around fewer dominant frames.

Given these three reasons, we would expect this study to yield different results from past studies. For example, consider Jennifer Jerit's (2008) thought-provoking study of framing strategies in the health care policy debates. Her study focuses on 10 months of analysis of health care frames. Like this study, she uses emerging coding of textual analysis. However, her method differs in that she uses macro frames that group together related but distinct concepts and she focuses her attention on media (AP) sources rather than policy entrepreneurs. Consequently, her study suggests much more message discipline than when there is greater distinction in the frames and they are not filtered through the media.

While one can certainly debate whether micro frames are truly distinct, we have attempted to use examples to illustrate how micro frames do activate different cognitive cues. Analysis that utilizes micro-frames enables greater nuance when examining rhetorical methods and has the potential to track the winnowing of frames over time. Frames are not as focused as sometimes suggested (Slothuus et al. 2011) and this micro-level analysis suggests that elite framing might be better thought of as an evolutionary process where frames are tested and refined with different audiences.

One should always be cautious in generalizing results from a study of just over three months, especially when the study is largely descriptive. However, by using the labor-intensive methods adopted by the researchers, this study is able to make a substantive as well as methodological contribution. No previous study has attempted to document all frames during a study period and this process demonstrates some unique findings. Although the study focuses on only one politician and is not able to demonstrate a causal direction between public opinion and presidential communication, it does present a greater understanding of political communication and insight into how a multiplicity of frames is used to target a broad audience for changes to policy priorities. Likewise, the inductive discovery of frames will always be open to subjectivity. The fact that the frames are not known a priori means that a reasonable scholar could disagree with the frames found. As a result, this study has tended to focus on results for which the evidence is overwhelming.

Given these limitations, there are a number of important areas for future research. The degree to which these frames are taken up by the media or mass public opinion is the ultimate measure of political influence. Future research should link presidential communication to media reporting to examine how and which frames are communicated to mass audiences. Likewise, this study's focus on the early days of a single presidency limits the ability to understand how presidential style and social constraints moderate framing and frame adoption. Future research should utilize comparative analysis.

Another area for future research would address how a president makes oppositional emphasis framing choices (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010). This study is only able to show that Obama significantly addresses the economy, the most pressing public concern during the time period of the study. The literature on framing strategy suggests that "riding the wave" is part of issue trespass and that a political actor will attempt to frame issues of public concern in a way that is consonant with their own political ideology or refute arguments made by political opponents (Hanggli and Kreisi 2010; Jerit 2008; Sides 2006). This study does not have data on political communication from the president's opposition during the time period under investigation and therefore cannot assess to what extent President Obama was trespassing on Republican issues using frames that are consonant with his party's ideology or attempting to engage with Republicans on contentious issues. Issue trespassing and engagement may help explain some of the idiosyncratic nature of presidential framing found in the study. While it would be difficult to do, an analysis similar to this one that considers the frames utilized by the president's chief opponents would be able to assess the dynamic relationship and strategic framing choices made by a president and his opponents.

Lastly, there was a surprising lack of traditional welfare or populist frames. Very few frames dealt with traditional Democratic Party issues such as labor or entitlement programs. Were the president more liberal, would this be reflected in his framing strategy? Alternatively, were the president more conservative, might one expect to find greater framing around social and moral issues such as abortion or family values? Future research should replicate the study during different political periods and with different presidents to identify person and context specific differences.

Yet despite the need to extend this study, it does present a number of important insights into political framing. First, presidential speech is presidential framing. The president rarely addresses the public without attempting to shape conceptualizations through frames. Second, the president does tend to focus on a set of priority policy areas. However, these policy areas are subject to a never-ending variety of frames as the president seeks to reach new audiences and alter public opinion. Third, with exceptions, presidential attention does tend to focus on the issues of greatest public concern as measured in survey data. Consequently, the study of frames will remain important for understanding how individuals understand the work of government and in how politicians attempt to achieve policy consensus.

## NOTES

1. There has been a significant amount of research on the impact of framing (Niven 1996; Nelson et al. 1997) and recently more on the contingency of this effect (Chong and Druckman 1997a,b,c; Druckman et al. 2013; Slothuus 2010). However, given that this study is on frame creation, rather than impact, this literature has been excluded from the review.
2. We do wish to emphasize that this is a contested area within the literature. While Edwards' work casts doubt on the president's ability to lead public opinion (2003, 2006, and 2009), there is credible empirical evidence that in some circumstances and under some conditions, presidents are indeed able to lead public opinion.
3. Though as one anonymous reviewer remarked, it might also be possible that one would not expect message discipline so early in an administrative period. Given the use of the campaign period to formulate a coherent message, we have opted to hypothesize a large degree of message discipline.
4. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters (2010), *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA.
5. The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant number SBR 9320922, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin and/or the Department of Political Science at Penn State University. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

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## APPENDIX

To construct the MIP percentages used in Graph 4, we used data from the Gallup Poll Social Series from the dates listed in the first table below. Responses within broad policy subcategories were aggregated together using the Policy Agenda Project's policy coding scheme, which also uses Gallup MIP data. The second table contains how responses were grouped together.

Gallup Poll Date	Economy	Health Care	Education	Defense
February 9–12, 2009	87.29%	6.72%	1.83%	14.69%
March 5–8, 2009	79.5%	12.23%	2.57%	10.13%
April 6–9, 2009	72.47%	7.54%	2.65	11.73%
May 7–10, 2009	70.5%	8.65%	2.53	17.78%

Because of survey methodology, totals may add up to be greater than 100%.

Gallup MIP:	Responses Include:
Economy	Economy (general), Unemployment/Job, Federal Budget Deficit/Federal Debt, Cost of Living, Recession and Gap Between Rich and Poor
Health Care	Poor Health Care/Hospitals and Cost Associated w/Health Insurance
Education	Education includes Access/Poor Education and Education
Defense	International Problems, Lack of Military Defense, National Security, Fear of War, Terrorism, War w/Iraq, The Situation w/N. Korea, and War/Conflict in Middle East.