

National Interest Frames and Public Opinion about World Affairs

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This study used an experiment to examine whether—and if so, how—national interest frames in media coverage influence public opinion about world affairs. Compared to participants in a control condition, those who read a news article framing China as a competitor to the United States held less favorable opinions regarding China. In contrast, participants who read an article about common Chinese and American interests held particularly favorable opinions regarding China. Compared to baseline participants, those who read about common Russian and American interests held more favorable opinions regarding Russia—as did participants who read about the possibility for mutually beneficial exchange between the United States and Russia. Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that national interest frames in media coverage resonate with ordinary citizens.

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Political leaders, the mass media, and ordinary citizens draw on a variety of frames—or story lines—to explain world affairs (see, e.g., Berinsky and Kinder forthcoming; Gamson 1992; Iyengar 1991). Some of these frames invite moral judgments by emphasizing emotionally charged symbols. For example, proponents of the Kosovo intervention often framed Yugoslavian leader Slobodan Milosevic as a villain in a fight between good and evil, and proponents of the Iraq war often framed Saddam Hussein in the same way. Other frames for world affairs invite strategic judgments by emphasizing national interests. For example, U.S. President Bill Clinton framed China as a “strategic partner,” whereas his successor, George W. Bush, framed that same country as a “strategic competitor” during his 2000 presidential campaign.¹

Such frames may have important consequences for foreign policy decision making in democratic nations. A large body of literature indicates that exposure to frames in media coverage can shape citizens’ beliefs and policy opinions (e.g.,

Entman 1993; Iyengar 1991; Nelson et al. 1997). Public opinion about world affairs, in turn, can shape voting behavior (Aldrich et al. 1989) and public policy (Page and Shapiro 1992; Powlick 1991; Russett 1990; Shapiro and Jacobs 2000; Wittkopf 1990). Research also suggests, however, that not all frames wield the same power to shape public opinion. "Some frames," argues Gamson (1992: 135), "have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with a broader political culture." In this study, I use experimental data to analyze the extent to which three types of national interest frames—conflicting interests frames, common interests frames, and reciprocal exchange frames—resonate with ordinary American citizens who encounter them in media coverage. I then consider what my findings tell us about the potential for public deliberation based on national interests.

National Interests, Framing, and Public Opinion

Scholars have long debated the extent to which ordinary Americans think about world affairs in terms of national interests. For many years, the conventional wisdom held that national interests play a minor role, if that, in shaping public opinion (for overviews, see Drezner 2006; Page and Shapiro 1992). For example, the "mood" theory endorsed by Almond (1950) and Lippmann (1922/1965) left little room for interest-based calculations in its account of a capricious public. Similarly, scholars who endorsed realism argued that "the statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers," whereas "the popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman's thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil" (Morgenthau and Thompson 1985: 165, quoted in Drezner 2006; see also Kennan 1984).

More recent studies have challenged this viewpoint, however. Drawing on aggregate-level analyses of public opinion data, Page and Shapiro (1992: xi) rejected the view that "only the use of vague, emotion-engaging symbols by hierarchical authorities produces a common will" regarding world affairs. Instead, they concluded that changes in collective opinion are typically predictable and understandable in terms of national interests as reported by the media. Looking at individual-level opinion, Herrmann et al. (1999) used experimental data to show that the presence or absence of a national interest influenced American participants' decisions about whether the United States should use military force.

These studies suggest that citizens can respond in reasonable ways to information about national interests. Research on the psychology of framing, in turn, suggests three mechanisms by which national interest frames in media coverage could affect public opinion. First, exposure to a national interest frame could make the frame available within citizens' memories, creating new

associations between national interests and a target of judgment (see, e.g., Chong 1993). Second, exposure to a national interest frame could affect the accessibility of national interests within citizens' memories, making it easier for them to recall such interests in making subsequent judgments (see, e.g., Zaller 1992). Third, exposure to a national interest frame could alter the importance that citizens attach to national interests, leading them to assign such interests greater weight in subsequent judgments (see, e.g., Nelson et al. 1997).²

In analyzing the impact of national interest frames, I focus on how citizens respond to frames that present a particular foreign country's interests as conflicting or coinciding with the national interest. Specifically, I consider the potential effects of such frames on citizens' images of foreign countries—which, in turn, can serve as bases for reasoning about world affairs (Hurwitz and Peffley 1990; Peffley and Hurwitz 1992)—and their opinions about foreign policy issues.

My first hypothesis concerns the conflicting interests frame. Compared to citizens who receive no frame, those who receive a frame that presents a particular foreign country's interests as conflicting with the national interest should, all else being equal, be less likely to trust that country and less likely to favor friendly policies toward it. For example, one would expect Americans to respond to media coverage framing China as a "strategic competitor" to U.S. interests by placing less trust in that country and by favoring a less cooperative posture toward it. This hypothesis is consistent with historical patterns in aggregate American public opinion (see Page and Shapiro 1992), as well as psychological research on intergroup behavior in competitive situations (e.g., Sherif 1956) and the logic of a simple zero-sum in which one side can gain only at the expense of the other.

My second hypothesis addresses the common interests frame. Compared to citizens who receive no frame, those who receive a frame that presents a particular country's interests as coinciding with the national interest, should—again, all else being equal—place more trust in that country and favor greater cooperation with it. For example, one would expect Americans to respond to media coverage that framed Russia as having common cause with the United States in fighting terrorism by placing more trust in that country and by favoring friendlier policies toward it. As with the first hypothesis, this hypothesis would help to account for historical patterns in public opinion (see Page and Shapiro 1992). Moreover, it follows from psychological research on intergroup cooperation (e.g., Sherif 1956) and the logic of a positive-sum game in which both sides can benefit from the same outcome.

A corollary to my second hypothesis is that citizens should respond in similar ways to two sorts of frames: frames that highlight common interests with another country and frames that highlight the potential for attaining distinct benefits through reciprocal exchange with that country. Though common interests

should induce trust and cooperation, the sharing of interests is not a necessary condition for a decision to trust and cooperate. Research indicates that trust and cooperation can also emerge when two actors learn that both can achieve better outcomes by making mutual concessions (e.g., Axelrod 1984). In the context at hand, for example, one might expect Americans to respond to media coverage framing Russia as a potential partner in mutually beneficial reciprocal exchange just as they should respond in the previous example: namely, by placing more trust in Russia and by favoring greater cooperation with that country.

At this point, I should note that the expectations outlined above do not capture the full range of how citizens may respond to national interest frames in media coverage. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive set of predictions regarding this topic; instead, it is to present an illustrative set of hypotheses that allow me to test the effects of such frames.³ I should also emphasize that I am not simply arguing that framing can influence public opinion about world affairs. Instead, my concern is whether a specific *sort* of frame for world affairs resonates with the public. I do not dispute that moralistic frames revolving around demonized and caricatured enemies or kindly and heroic allies can move opinion about world affairs; my question is whether national interest frames can do the same.⁴ With this in mind, I designed experimental treatments that are notable not only for what sort of information they included (information about national interests) but also for what sort of information they excluded (emotionally charged symbols of good and evil).

Data and Method

The experiment, which used a posttest-only design, revolved around how opinion among American citizens would respond to frames for two nations, China and Russia. In selecting China and Russia as target countries, I was guided not only by previous research (see, e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Peffley and Hurwitz 1992) but also by the continuing importance of these nations on the world stage in general and within U.S. foreign policy in particular.

Rather than recruiting college undergraduates—who may be unrepresentative of the general public in many ways (see Sears 1986)—I recruited 166 residents of a city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States to take part in the experiment. I used classified advertisements and flyers advertising a “media and politics” study to recruit these participants, each of whom was paid \$20. Though it was not perfectly representative of the American public in demographic terms, the sample captured a broad cross-section of that public. Of the participants, 54 percent were women. Forty-two percent identified themselves as white, 38 percent as African-American, 6 percent as Asian-American, and 2 percent as Hispanic; the remainder chose “other,” chose multiple categories, or did not identify their race or ethnicity. The median age was thirty-nine. Twenty percent

had a high school education or less, 26 percent had some post-high school education, 37 percent had a college degree, and 17 percent had postgraduate training. Mean placement on a 7-point party identification scale was 2.93, where 1 = *strong Democrat* and 7 = *strong Republican*; mean placement on a 7-point ideology scale was 3.81 where 1 = *extremely liberal* and 7 = *extremely conservative*. ANOVA analyses failed to reveal significant variation at the .05 level (using a two-tailed test) on any of these background measures across the experimental conditions described below, suggesting that the randomization succeeded in producing groups of equivalent composition except in terms of exposure to the experimental treatments.

The participants appeared to be highly representative in the extent to which they were informed about political affairs. Seventy-eight percent of them were able to identify the political office held by Dick Cheney, and 60 percent correctly identified the office held by Tony Blair. These proportions are nearly identical to those found in a telephone survey of the American public conducted in late 2001 (79 percent and 63 percent, respectively).⁵

Participants completed the experiment in early 2002. The procedure began with each participant reading three news articles, one of which I manipulated to produce the experimental treatments of interest.⁶ Participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. Thirty-one participants read an article titled "U.S., China Agree on Little beyond Fighting Terrorism" that framed China as a "strategic competitor" to the United States and emphasized conflicts between American and Chinese interests on a range of issues, including arms sales to Taiwan. Thirty-three read a different article about relations between the two countries; this one, titled "U.S., China Stress Common Interests," emphasized shared interests, particularly in fighting terrorism and forging economic ties. Thirty-seven read an article, titled "Putin Urges a 'New Level' of Trust with America," that framed Russia in a similar way, emphasizing common interests in fighting terrorism as well as other shared concerns. Thirty-one read an article, titled "Putin to Collect from U.S. for Being Mr. Nice Guy," that framed Russia as willing to exchange in mutually beneficial reciprocal exchange and detailed concessions that Russia had already made to the United States. The remaining thirty-four participants read an article on an unrelated topic (a monument to John Adams) and constituted the control group, providing a baseline for comparisons. To enhance the realism of the study, I used passages from actual newspaper articles to construct the treatments.⁷

To reiterate, the treatments did not frame the target nations in a favorable or unfavorable light using emotionally charged symbols. Indeed, one of the articles that I expected to foster more favorable opinions regarding Russia—the one that emphasized reciprocity—framed that nation in what one might describe as a mercenary light. It mentioned how "Kremlin insiders have drawn up a long bargaining list" and raised the possibility that cooperation between

the United States and Russia might be “a partnership of convenience only.” Nor did the article about conflicting Chinese and American interests portray China as malicious; rather, it framed that nation’s stances as being driven by “core” interests. Thus, the experiment tested whether participants would respond to frames that focused on national interests.⁸

After reading the articles, participants completed a posttest that asked questions about a range of topics, including international relations.⁹ Some of these questions measured trust in the target countries, China and Russia, as well as another nation not mentioned in any of the articles, Great Britain. One set of questions asked, “How much can the United States trust [country]?” Another asked, “How much can the United States count on [country] for help in times of crisis?” For both sets of questions, participants indicated their responses for each country on a scale from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*a great deal*). An additional battery of items measured opinions about country-specific foreign policy issues. Here, participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 5 (*strongly favor*) whether they favored or opposed “selling weapons to Taiwan so that it can defend itself against a possible Chinese invasion,” “increasing economic ties between the United States and China,” “giving financial assistance to Russia,” and “allowing Russia to join the NATO military alliance.”

Results

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and number of valid observations in each condition for each opinion measure.¹⁰ First, consider opinions regarding relations with China. Following my first hypothesis, I expected participants who read the article about conflicting Chinese and American interests to be less trusting of China and less supportive of cooperation with China than participants in the control condition. Indeed, the former participants were significantly less inclined than the latter to believe that their nation could count on China and to oppose selling weapons to Taiwan.¹¹ They were also less inclined to believe that their nation could trust China and less supportive of increased economic ties with China, though these differences were not statistically significant.

Following my second hypothesis, I expected the opposite pattern among participants who read the article about common Chinese and American interests: these participants should have been particularly trusting of China and supportive of cooperation with China. Again, the predicted pattern emerged. Compared to participants in the control condition, participants who read this article were significantly more inclined to believe that the United States could trust and count on China. They were also marginally more opposed to selling weapons to Taiwan. The one exception to the pattern involved support for increased economic ties with China, which did not vary significantly across conditions.

Table 1
Participants' opinions about world affairs, by condition

Dependent Variable	China: Conflicting Interests	China: Common Interests	Control: No China or Russia Article	Russia: Common Interests	Russia: Reciprocal Exchange
How much can the U.S. trust China? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	1.94 (0.89) N = 31	2.47*** (0.98) N = 32	2.06 (1.01) N = 34	2.19 (1.13) N = 37	2.10 (0.80) N = 30
How much can the U.S. count on China for help in times of crisis? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	1.94*** (0.89) N = 31	2.70** (1.10) N = 33	2.35 (1.01) N = 34	2.19 (1.13) N = 37	2.30 (0.84) N = 30
Sell weapons to Taiwan so that it can defend itself against a possible Chinese invasion (<i>strongly oppose</i> = 1; <i>strongly favor</i> = 5)	3.52*** (1.38) N = 23	2.41* (1.18) N = 29	2.81 (1.24) N = 27	2.58 (1.25) N = 33	2.81 (1.30) N = 27
Increasing economic ties between the United States and China (<i>strongly oppose</i> = 1; <i>strongly favor</i> = 5)	3.31 (1.14) N = 29	3.52 (1.34) N = 31	3.59 (1.18) N = 34	3.32 (0.98) N = 34	3.30 (1.09) N = 30
How much can the U.S. trust Russia? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	2.55 (1.12) N = 31	2.73 (1.10) N = 33	2.56 (1.21) N = 34	2.89** (1.07) N = 37	2.87* (0.97) N = 30
How much can the U.S. count on Russia for help in times of crisis? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	2.77 (1.02) N = 31	2.85 (1.09) N = 33	2.68 (0.94) N = 34	3.03** (0.83) N = 37	3.10*** (0.91) N = 31

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Dependent Variable	China: Conflicting Interests	China: Common Interests	Control: No China or Russia Article	Russia: Common Interests	Russia: Reciprocal Exchange
Give financial assistance to Russia (<i>strongly oppose</i> = 1; <i>strongly favor</i> = 5)	2.68 (1.42) N = 28	2.80 (1.13) N = 30	2.70 (1.19) N = 30	3.03* (1.03) N = 34	3.07* (1.05) N = 30
Allow Russia to join the NATO military alliance (<i>strongly oppose</i> = 1; <i>strongly favor</i> = 5)	3.15*** (1.35) N = 26	2.83 (1.24) N = 24	2.41 (1.20) N = 27	3.00*** (1.19) N = 35	2.61 (1.20) N = 28
How much can the U.S. trust Great Britain? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	4.15 (1.18) N = 33	4.23 (1.12) N = 31	4.29 (0.97) N = 34	4.38 (1.04) N = 37	4.26 (1.01) N = 31
How much can the U.S. count on Great Britain for help in times of crisis? (<i>very little</i> = 1; <i>a great deal</i> = 5)	4.42 (1.00) N = 33	4.39 (0.88) N = 31	4.41 (0.82) N = 34	4.43 (1.01) N = 37	4.26 (0.86) N = 31

Note: Table entries are means. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Significance levels are reported for one-tailed difference of means tests based on comparison to the mean among participants in the control group. Means in bold were hypothesized to differ from the corresponding means in the control condition.

* $p \leq .15$. ** $p \leq .10$. *** $p \leq .05$.

The effects of the frames for China are even clearer when one compares the opinions of the participants who read the conflicting interests China article to the opinions of those who read the common interests China article. For the "trust" item, the difference across these two conditions was significant at $p < .05$; for the "count on" and the "selling weapons" items, the differences were significant at $p < .01$. Again, the exception to the pattern was the "economic ties" item, for which opinion did not vary significantly across conditions.

Neither of the articles about Russia produced a statistically discernible effect on any of the four measures of opinion regarding China. The articles about Russia did appear to shape opinion regarding Russia, however. Moreover, they did so in ways that were consistent with expectations. Following my second hypothesis, I expected participants who read the article about common Russian and American interests to be more trusting of Russia and more supportive of cooperation with Russia than participants in the control condition. As anticipated, participants in the former condition were significantly more inclined than the latter to believe that the United States could trust and count on Russia. They were also significantly more supportive of allowing Russia to join the NATO military alliance and marginally more supportive of giving financial assistance to Russia.

The pattern of opinion among participants who read the article about Russia's willingness to engage in reciprocal concessions with the United States was largely similar to the pattern among participants who read the first article about Russia, providing support for the claim that public opinion should respond in similar ways to common interests frames and reciprocal exchange frames. Compared to participants in the control condition, those who read about reciprocal exchange between Russia and the United States were significantly more inclined to believe that the United States could count on Russia, as well as marginally more inclined to believe that their country could trust Russia and to favor financial assistance to Russia. The only noteworthy contrast between the effects of the two Russia articles revolved around the NATO membership item: Whereas participants who read about common Russian and American interests were significantly more supportive of NATO membership for Russia than were those in the control condition, participants who read about reciprocal exchange between Russia and the United States were more supportive than the baseline by only a negligible amount. Even this difference, however, is readily explainable in terms of the articles themselves: Whereas the common interests article explicitly cited Russian President Vladimir Putin's suggestion that "Russia could offer a great deal" to NATO, the reciprocal exchange article did not.

Neither article about China had a discernible impact on any of the items measuring opinion regarding Russia, with one exception: Participants who read about conflicting Chinese and American interests were significantly more inclined than participants in the control condition to favor NATO membership for Russia.¹² One possibility is that the information in the article prompted

participants who read it to view this course of action as a way to enhance national security in the case of conflict with China. I present such an explanation as speculation given that it does not follow from my theoretical account.

To be sure, one might argue that the differences across conditions that I observed were merely artifacts of failed randomization. This explanation seems implausible, however, given that none of the background variables differed significantly across conditions. Moreover, an analysis of participants' ratings of Great Britain failed to yield significant differences across conditions (see Table 1), rendering the notion of randomization failure even less plausible.

Conclusion

I found that when media coverage framed another nation as a competitor to the national interest, participants viewed that nation less favorably. I also found that when media coverage framed another nation as either sharing national interests or willing to contribute to the national interest through reciprocal exchange, participants viewed that nation more favorably. Note that these effects revolved around actual nations and issues of considerable importance, not fictional nations or hypothetical problems. Furthermore, the effects emerged among a diverse and not particularly well-informed sample of citizens rather than a student sample.¹³ Taken as a whole, the results indicate that national interest frames can resonate with ordinary American citizens. The findings also reinforce the argument that citizens may be capable of contributing to an interest-based foreign policy decision-making process.

Of course, this study has important limitations. To begin with, it involved only one exposure; thus, one cannot conclude from the evidence presented here that the effects observed would necessarily have been long lasting. If my findings are valid, however, then it seems plausible that repeated exposures to frames with consistent implications for the national interest could produce durable effects on public opinion.

Another potential limitation revolves around the generalizability of the results. Most obviously, my experiment used a narrow range of test cases and a sample of convenience placed in an artificial situation. One could also argue that the external validity of my experiment is suspect because each article that I constructed emphasized one frame whereas real-world public discourse often contains multiple frames. My purpose was to isolate the effects of specific frames, which necessitated the use of treatments that contained a dominant frame. Still, these treatments were not entirely lopsided; each contained at least some countervailing information. For example, the article about conflicting Chinese and American interests also briefly noted agreement between both sides on counterterrorism, and the article about common Chinese and American interests quoted Chinese President Jiang Zemin's acknowledgement of "certain disagreements between us."

An additional caveat to my conclusions is that I have not shown (nor did I intend to show) how much the public will weigh national interest frames when they conflict with more emotionally charged and symbolic frames. Thus, it might be useful to examine the effects of each sort of frame in competition with one another.

A final point to consider is that ordinary citizens will not always receive information about national interests—let alone accurate information about such interests—through the mass media (Shapiro and Page 1988: 244). Recent accounts suggest that the American public's attention to world affairs is sporadic at best (see, e.g., Kohut 2002); thus, it stands to reason that some of the participants in my experiment might not have encountered the frames that I provided to them if left to their own devices. Even when citizens do receive national interest frames, systematic gaps or biases in media coverage may lead the public to form opinions that are reasonable but nonetheless maladaptive (Page and Shapiro 1992). My theoretical framework suggests ways in which this could occur. For example, coverage that fails to recognize important common interests with another international actor could push the public toward rejecting beneficial efforts at cooperation. By the same logic, coverage that fails to recognize fundamentally conflicting interests could lead the public toward favoring costly efforts at cooperation that are likely to fail.

Particularly troubling, perhaps, is the prospect that political elites may manipulate media coverage of the national interest and, thus, public opinion. Page and Shapiro (1992) have described a number of historical instances in which elites engaged in misinformation to sway public opinion. Nor do concerns over this sort of manipulation seem likely to disappear anytime soon: Consider, for example, the ongoing controversy regarding the efforts of President George W. Bush's administration to present Iraq as a threat to American interests. If national interest frames can shape public opinion—and if public opinion about international relations, in turn, can shape election and policy outcomes—then scholars, journalists, and practitioners of foreign policy should pay close attention to the nature and quality of such frames.

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Notes

1. Of course, it is also possible to combine these two sorts of frames. Nor are these the only types of frames for world affairs that leaders, the media, and citizens use.

2. Recent research indicates that the presence or absence of framing effects can depend on a variety of conditions (see, e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003). Thus, the emergence of the framing effects described below may be contingent on such mediating factors.
3. Nor do I mean to imply that public opinion cannot be altruistic, given that the national interest can be—and often is—defined to include humanitarian values. Similarly, the national interest can be defined to include democratic values. The logic behind my hypotheses remains the same regardless of the national interest's content.
4. In posing this question, I do not mean to endorse what may be a false dichotomy between reason and emotion (see, e.g., Marcus et al. 2000).
5. The 1,235 respondents in the sample for this survey were chosen through random digit dialing.
6. The following instructions preceded the articles: "We would like you to read three articles dealing with issues that have appeared in the news during the past year. Please read the articles as you would if you were reading them in the morning newspaper." The other two articles dealt with topics unrelated to international relations.
7. The treatment and control articles are available from the author on request.
8. One could argue that the Russia treatments differed from the China treatments in that the former personalized the target nation (in the form of Russian president Vladimir Putin) more than the latter did. For my purposes, however, it should not matter whether national interests are personified or abstracted; instead, the crucial question is whether public opinion responds to information about such interests in either form.
9. The other two articles and the questions on other topics were included to distract participants from the purpose of the study.
10. "Don't know" responses and nonresponses were excluded from the analysis. Coding "don't know" and nonresponses at the midpoint of each scale had negligible effects on the results.
11. I used one-tailed hypotheses tests when my theoretical account specified the expected direction of the effect.
12. This was the case even in a two-tailed hypothesis test (appropriate here because I did not hypothesize an effect in either direction).
13. I found no consistent pattern as to whether the effects of the treatments varied with political knowledge (as measured by an index constructed from five factual questions; Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) or education.

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