

# Public Framing of the Mattox/Fisher Runoff and the 1994 Elections

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## Theoretical Background: Media Frames

Entman defined framing as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." (1) This definition is typically applied to the selection employed by organizational structures, such as media organs like newspapers and television. However, the definition also includes the ways in which individuals selectively choose aspects of a story and render them as most salient in their personal lives. Entman advocates the use of the framing paradigm by communication scholars, as well as scholars in other disciplines, stressing that this theoretical paradigm may lead us to a greater understanding of communication processes and phenomena. The framing concept would appear to be particularly relevant in an election campaign context. If we assume that the practice of framing in a media context has the capability of telling us how to think rather than merely what to think about, then its importance in elections cannot be underestimated because ultimately the media may have the power to affect how we think about candidates and the issues they represent. Consequently, members of the public may frame issues in a manner similar to the media. However, it cannot be assumed that the public will always passively ingest media messages about issues and frame them precisely as the media does. In cases where members of the public feel an issue to have a bearing on their personal lives or in cases where they may have particular personal experience with an issue, their public frame may deviate from that of the media frame. The evidence I gathered from my informal survey of four Texas voters suggests that the public do at times frame issues and election campaigns differently than the mainstream media.

The campaign involving the Texas Democratic Senatorial runoff is an excellent example of the Austin media framing a campaign race from the classic mud-slinging, horserace perspective. The Semetko et al. comparison study of the American and British media showed that the American media displayed high degrees of negative content ("deflating" commentary) pertaining to the candidates in the 1984 presidential election. The British media possessed a much lower concentration on negative material and a much higher emphasis on the issues actually being discussed by the candidates in the 1983 British election. Among the newspapers studied, the Indianapolis Star showed a total of 54.3% of deflating material and 31.4% of straight/descriptive stories and for the Louisville Courier-Journal the totals were 35.0% and 47.5% respectively. The British papers exhibited a dramatically different tone and content. The broadsheets contained only 4.6% deflating commentary and 93.0 straight/descriptive and the tabloid had only 14.1% deflating and 80.4% straight/descriptive. (2) In addition, the American papers showed a much higher emphasis on campaign news, which reinforces the findings of McCombs and Weaver. For instance, the subject "conduct of the campaign" ranked number one and number two on the respective press agendas of the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Indianapolis Star. "Candidates' qualities" ranked number one at the Star and number two at the Courier-Journal. "Horserace/polls" ranked number three at the Star and number four at the Courier-Journal. (3) These findings, combined with those of previous findings such as McCombs and Weaver, suggest that the media consistently rank campaign news, as opposed to issues, at or near the top of the media agenda. Consequently, it may be expected that despite the issues stressed by Jim Mattox and Richard Fisher, the media would focus on the runoff process itself and the political battles that make for compelling drama. We may also hypothesize that some segments of the public, without great personal interest or experience in a particular issue or set of issues, will frame the election from a similar point of view. It remains to be determined if the public frame is caused by influence from the mass media or from the "information" propagated by the campaigns through advertisements. Or is it possible instead that the public frame the election in terms of their personal concerns. Then we arrive at the classic chicken and egg question of which came first. Does the mass media define the public's personal concerns or do the public's personal concerns set the parameters of media coverage. It may be that they share a symbiotic relationship in that they constantly influence once another and are essentially intertwined.

## The Media Agenda

In my earlier informal study, it was determined that the articles immediately following the primary election on March 8, 1994 for the Democratic Senate race illustrate what McCombs and Shaw and Semetko et al. observed about American election coverage, namely a high concentration on the horserace aspect of the campaign and the charges leveled at one another by the candidates and little discussion of the actual issues in question. The lead headlines from the March 9, 1994 editions of the American-Statesman and the Daily Texan related to the Mattox/Fisher runoff, with far less attention paid to the Richards/Bush race. This clearly shows that presenting political campaigns as drama is part of the media agenda. Both Richards and Bush won their respective primaries by wide margins as was predicted before the election, Richards with 77% of the Democratic votes and Bush with 93% of the Republican. However, the race for U.S. Senator in the Democratic primary was

so close, Mattox got 40% and Fisher got 37%, that a runoff was scheduled for April 12, 1994. Given McCombs and Shaw's findings that "a considerable amount of campaign news was not devoted to the major political issues but rather to analysis of the campaign itself," (4) it is not surprising that the media frame of the Democratic primary would deal with the runoff and the resultant dramatic elements. Anthony Downs has a good explanation for the media's interest in problems/issues that have "intrinsically exciting qualities." He states that:

a problem must be dramatic and exciting to maintain public interest because news is 'consumed' by much of the American public (and by publics elsewhere) largely as a form of entertainment. As such, it competes with other types of entertainment for a share of each person's time. Every day, there is a fierce struggle for space in the highly limited universe of newsprint and television viewing time. Each issue vies not only with all other social problems and public events, but also with a multitude of 'non-news' items that are often far more pleasant to contemplate. (5)

Downs' notion of the media searching "intrinsically exciting qualities" applies perfectly in this case, at least for the Austin media. The newspapers stressed the Mattox/Fisher runoff more heavily after election day than they did the governor's race or any of the other races. Of course, another explanation apart from the inherent drama of this runoff election is that because a runoff was planned, the Mattox/Fisher "battles" were a continuing story. The primary governor's races were finished and, in fact, may have been finished from the beginning, given that Richards and Bush were never seriously challenged in their respective primaries.

### The Candidates' Agenda

It could be argued that the media enhanced the degree of "bloodletting" by prominently featuring negative quotes by each politician, to which the other politician felt he must respond. On the other hand, it could equally be argued that the media only reflected the tone and content of Mattox and Fisher's statements. Then to complicate the relationship, we have to wonder how the media and the candidates may have been reflecting the public's concerns, if at all. The obvious question remains: were the candidates talking about the issues and was this being ignored by the media in favor of more sensational material or were the candidates themselves actually ignoring the issues. Indeed, the tenor of the advertisements of both candidates was negative, accusatory, and devoid of discussion on their stands on issues. Mattox accused Fisher of being a Republican and Fisher accused Mattox of being a liar in his advertisements with the slogan "Who You Gonna Trust.". The negative tone reflected in these advertisements was reflected in the media coverage of the campaign. The March 10 Eskenazi article has the word "bloody" in the lead and also applies the terms "bitter," "bloodletting," and "muck" to the runoff campaign. The content of the article is basically comprised of the potshots fired back and forth by Mattox and Fisher and speculation about how Mattox will win back South Texas. In a similar vein, the front page headline on the March 10, 1994 edition of the Daily Texan reads "Mattox, Fisher waste no time in runoff battle." The author draws an allusion between the runoff campaign and a dirty boxing match by beginning the article with, "the gloves came off in the U.S. Senate runoff for the Democratic nomination Wednesday, as the two candidates kicked off their campaigns for the April 12 election by blasting one another in Austin." (6) This article, like the American-Statesman article from the same date, stresses the accusations and put-downs flung back and forth by the two politicians.

One reason for the lack of coverage concerning the candidates' debate over issues may be the media perception that all politicians are essentially cut from the same cloth, that there are no real fundamental ideological differences, and that politicians as a whole are out of touch with the concerns and problems of the public; this opinion seems to be reflected often in media presentations of public opinion.

Mary Louise Julian, a divorced mother of seven children in Youngstown, Ohio, speaks for American voters this fall...About politicians in Washington she says: 'They live in a different world there. They need to get out and talk to more people, maybe listen to them. In a normal American home, they have no idea what's going on.' (7)

The tendency to view politicians are essentially ideologically interchangeable is exacerbated by the fact that the candidates spent much of their time trading barbs on subjects that had nothing to do with ideology or issues. Instead, the foundation of the criticism they applied to one another is that of untrustworthiness. Since both candidates leveled virtually the same type of criticism at one another and presented little discussion of their stands on the issues, there were few clues as to any ideological differences. Consequently, the "drama" of the campaign appeared as a personal battle rather than a debate over issues or ideological differences. Corresponding to Downs' notion that the media seeks "intrinsically exciting qualities" in news issues, the media frame an election in a manner that provides the most entertainment and drama. The American-Statesman and the Daily Texan frame the runoff as a "bloody" "battle," but then the candidates issued a multitude of statements that would seem to justify this frame.

Mattox about Fisher:

"Richard Fisher, as best as I can tell, is a Republican in Democrat's clothing. He is someone who has posed as something he is not." (8) "He can promise anything because he stands for nothing. He has flip-flopped back and forth on all the issues and positions he has taken." (9)

Fisher about Mattox: Mattox is a

"gutter politician...he's the Jurassic Park candidate. It is time for the voters of Texas to put this dinosaur to rest" (10) "This guy [Mattox] represents slash-and-burn negative politics. He represents the politics of bile. (11) "Jim Mattox will tell any lie or insult the citizens in trying to mislead them into voting for him." (12)

## The Public Frame

Without the results of a formal study on the campaign, we can only theorize about the relationship between the media and candidate agendas. Specifically, these agendas appear to interact rather than just flow in a one way direction. Both the candidates and the media are stressing negative campaigning and exhibit little discussion of issues. Furthermore, just as Downs has shown the media's interest in dramatic topics, one can theorize that the candidates share the same interest because dramatic, attention-getting topics and comments may be useful in getting them elected. In Downs' terms, they recognize the public will read/watch the news at least partially as a form of entertainment and, as such, they structure their messages in a way that will first of all be attention-getting and dramatic and, second, to counter all similarly conceived messages by their opponents. This is clearly why one negative comment by a candidate starts a series of back-and-forth counter charges. The media then frame their coverage from this perspective because it too serves their needs of attracting reader/viewer attention and interest. However, the question that then arises is: does this type of media frame actually attract or repel viewer interest or does it only further serve to alienate and anger voters who may perceive that important issues are being ignored? Evidence I collected in an informal survey suggests that the public would prefer to see the political battles and other so-called "dramatic" aspects of the political process downplayed in favor of attention to issues such as health care, crime, and the economy. It is interesting that despite the heavy coverage of political battles and political process issues, the public claims little interest in these topics. This would seem to suggest that either the media is completely out of step with the needs and interests of the American public or that the respondents in polls are in fact "interested" in political battles, but just do not assign them a place in the "issues" category.

My discussion with four registered voters in an informal the survey also indicated that the public does not passively ingest mainstream media material at all and also that the public does manage to find alternative news sources when they feel the mainstream media ignores issues which are important to them personally. For example, respondent #4 said that National Public Radio was her primary news source. Two out of the four respondents also said that they do not even watch television news on a regular basis. However, all four respondents regularly read mainstream newspapers.

In general the survey showed that the public frame differed from that of the media frame. The voters expressed little interest in the dramatic aspects of the campaign, which as we have seen were stressed by the media. Judging from the analysis of local Austin newspapers' coverage of the runoff, the print media perceived the most important campaign issue to be the campaign itself. Not surprisingly, the public (at least those four individuals surveyed) had a different view.

Three of the four respondents listed "the environment" as an important issue to them in the election. Similarly, three respondents also cited health care as an important issue. For the most part, the respondents indicated that these were issues of special personal concern to them. In fact, the first issue mentioned by each respondent is the one that they were most "passionate" about and spoke about at the greatest length. Respondent #4 was extremely concerned about health care, but then specified that women's health and reproductive issues were particularly important to her. Respondent #1 was also concerned with women's issues, such as abortion rights, that affect her on a personal level. Respondent #2 named gun control as the single most important issue and stated that this issue determines who he votes for in each race. Respondent #3 was very concerned with "getting someone to beat Kay Bailey."

There is little correlation between what Mattox and Fisher said (both through media outlets and their campaign advertisements) and what the public felt was important. Similarly there is little correlation between what the media said about the runoff and how the public perceived important issues. However, media and campaign influence in general cannot be discarded as a possible explanation of how the public derived their frame of election issues. Given that this was an election year with many races including the race for Governor, the public could be framing the issues surrounding the election due to influence from media coverage of the these other races and the campaign advertisements placed by candidates other than Mattox and Fisher.

The combined messages from the media and campaign advertisements had an effect on how the respondents viewed both the individual candidates and the campaign. For instance, Respondent #1, reflecting Mattox's standard line about Fisher being a "Republican in Democrat's clothing," stated she was for Mattox because "he [Mattox] seemed like a real Democrat," while Fisher was "just a rich businessman." In this case, the campaign rhetoric has entered into how the respondent thought about each candidate and influenced the voting choice. The combined messages also seem to have played a role in the respondents' view that the race was largely devoid of issues and primarily consisted of a series of charges and counter-charges flying back and forth between the campaigns. For example respondent #2 said: "Mattox's ads tried to make Fisher look like a lying idiot. They said basically 'Fisher was a wuss.' Fisher's ads were the same. Both sides ads were all personal attacks."

While the media frame relative to issues does not correspond to the public frame in the case of the Mattox/Fisher runoff, we may nonetheless hypothesize that the stress placed on the Mattox/Fisher race in general over other races influenced the public's prioritizing of the importance of the various races. The results of this survey imply that the public have framed the senatorial campaign as the most important of the races. Three of the four respondents listed the senatorial race as the most important in this election season, with only one respondent listing the gubernatorial race as the most important.

Perhaps the media stress on political battles also contributed to distrust of the local media expressed by some of the respondents. Respondent #2 said: "Whoever the Statesman endorses, I vote the opposite." Respondent #4 says she reads editorial endorsements "with skepticism." However, to balance the scales somewhat, Respondent #3 says that when she doesn't "know who to vote for or [doesn't] know much about any of the candidates, [she] just go[es] with whoever the Statesman endorses."

Respondent reactions to candidate advertisements most strongly allude to the high degree of voter anger and cynicism in the 1994 election year. Respondent #3 said she thinks that candidate advertisements are "all lies and show lack of insincerity. They do have an impact on me. They make me view the candidates more negatively. When a candidate makes ads that just bash the other candidates, then I tend to dislike the one that made the ad more." Respondent #4 said she views them "with skepticism and annoyance." In general, it appears that the advertisements tend to play upon opinions already formed concerning the candidates and the issues they purport to represent. Respondent #2 says "it depends on how [he] previously viewed the candidates. If I already liked the candidate, then the ads are positive reinforcement, but the candidates I view negatively, the ads reinforce this." Advertisements tend to make their greatest impact, at least among these respondents, based upon their tone. For respondent #1, they function like editorial endorsements if she does not know much about a candidate. However, they function in terms of tone not ideology, in that she "tend[s] to like the candidate that has the most positive ads. Candidates who just make negative ads that criticize other candidates, I tend not to like."

### Conclusion

The bulk of this paper was researched and written before the national elections on November 4, 1994. The virtually unprecedented level of voter anger, which resulted in historic shifts of power at both the state and national level, was clearly already present in June 1994 when I first conducted my interviews. Further research into the phenomenon of voter cynicism/anger, which I witnessed to some degree in my initial interviews, may be quite illuminating in understanding the public's frames of the 1994 elections. It would be interesting to determine if voter anger derived partially from frustration with the political process, which may have been exacerbated by the media's stress on the political process (framing the election as a horse race and battle) or if the anger derived more from a belief that the issues the public felt were important were either not being dealt with or not being properly handled.

According to a U.S. News poll conducted before the November elections, "seventy percent disapprove of the way Congress is doing its job. Four out of five say government benefits special interests, not the people, and cares too much about foreign countries while ignoring needs at home. Sums up pollster Lake: 'They think that no matter who they send here, until they change this place or torch this place, nothing better will happen.'" (13) Lake's comment reflects my belief that the public does not discern ideological differences between candidates, both because candidates do not often engage in substantive debates on issues of concern to the public and because the media does not focus much of their attention on these same issues during an election campaign.

It would seem that the high degree of voter anger and cynicism is evidence in and of itself that the public frame differs from the media and candidate frames. Clearly, if the public, candidates, and media assigned the same import to the same issues, there would be a lesser degree of public distrust of politicians and the media. However, instead "the political world has been 'institutionalizing cynicism and alienation,' says politaker Bill Hamilton. A vicious cycle has taken over: Voters are unhappy with Washington, candidates run by trashing the institution they want to join, confidence in government spirals downward." (14)

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## Respondent Questionnaires

### RESPONDENT #1

Are you a Democrat, Republican, or Independent? *Democrat*

Did you vote in the runoff election? *Yes*

Why did or didn't you vote? *I wanted Mattox to beat Fisher, who is just a rich businessman.*

How did you vote? *For Mattox*

What do you feel most influenced your vote? *Mattox seemed like a real Democrat. I didn't like Fisher.*

If you voted, did editorial endorsements play any role in your choice? *No. I knew from the beginning who I wanted to support.*

In what way?

Do editorial endorsements generally play any role in your voting choice? *Sometimes*

In what way? *Only when I don't know anything about any of the candidates. I definitely pay attention to them in minor elections because usually I haven't heard of the candidates and don't know anything about their stands on the issues.*

If you voted, did political advertisements play any role in your choice? *Yes*

In what way? *Fisher's ads were so negative they just made me dislike him even more. Plus Mattox's ads showed me that Fisher was just a hypocrite.*

Do political advertisements generally play any role in your voting choice? *Sometimes*

In what way? *They are kind of like the endorsements. If I don't know anything about the candidates, I generally tend to like the candidate that has the most positive ads. Candidates who just make negative ads that criticize other candidates, I tend not to like.*

How do you generally view political advertisements? *I take them with a grain of salt.*

Do you vote in most elections? *Yes*

Why or why not? *Civic duty. Plus, I enjoy elections.*

What makes you support a candidate? *They have to be strong on women's issues and I have to generally agree with what they say. I don't care about 'character' issues generally. Like the Clinton womanizing scandals. I mean, if he's good at his job and can get a lot accomplished, then that other stuff is just irrelevant.*

What issues were most important in this election? *Women's issues, like abortion rights. Environmental issues. Bosnia.*

Did the media cover them enough? *No. All they ever talked about was the battling between Mattox and Fisher and Richards and Bush.*

What political races were most important in the April elections?

1. *Governor*
2. *U.S. Senate*

What do you think were the primary messages of the Mattox and Fisher ads? *Even though I like Mattox, it's true that he mainly attacked Fisher in his ads. I guess, mainly they said Fisher was a rich, out-of-touch businessman. And Fisher's ads were really terrible. Generally, they accused Mattox of criminal activities and never addressed any important issue.*

Did the ads address any of the issues you feel were most important? *No*

What newspapers and magazines do you read regularly? *New York Times, Time, Austin American-Statesman*

Do you watch TV news regularly? *Yes*

Local or national? *Both. I like ABC and CNN.*

## RESPONDENT #2

Are you a Democrat, Republican, or Independent? *Independent.*

Did you vote in the runoff election? *No.*

Why did or didn't you vote? *Indifference. I didn't care. Also, I'm not a registered Democrat.*

How did you vote? *N/A*

What do you feel most influenced your vote? *N/A*

If you voted, did editorial endorsements play any role in your choice? *N/A*

In what way? *N/A*

Do editorial endorsements generally play any role in your voting choice? *Yes.*

In what way? *Whoever the Statesman endorses, I vote the opposite.*

If you voted, did political advertisements play any role in your choice? *N/A*

In what way? *N/A*

Do political advertisements generally play any role in your voting choice? *No.*

In what way? *\_\_\_*

How do you generally view political advertisements? *With skepticism. It depends on how I previously viewed the candidates. If I already liked the candidate, then the ads are positive reinforcement, but candidates I view negatively, the ads reinforce this.*

Do you vote in most elections? *Yes. Major elections.*

Why or why not? *To have my say and participate in democracy. People who only complain about things, but then don't vote, are idiots. Voting gives me a right to complain. Civic duty.*

What makes you support a candidate? *I agree with their agenda. Also, their stance on gun control could affect my support.*

What issues were most important in this election? *Gun control. Health care. Environmental issues.*

Did the media cover them enough? *Yes.*

What political races were most important in the April elections?

1. *U.S. Senate*
2. *U.S. House*

Governor has no power so that race isn't important. If Ann Richards actually had any power, I might be inclined to go out and vote for George W.

What do you think were the primary messages of the Mattox and Fisher ads? *Mattox's ads tried to make Fisher look like a lying idiot. They said basically 'Fisher was a wuss.' Fisher's ads were the same. Both sides ads were all personal attacks.*

Did the ads address any of the issues you feel were most important? *Absolutely not.*

What newspapers and magazines do you read regularly? *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, Austin American-Statesman*

Do you watch TV news regularly? *Yes.*

Local or national? *CNN and CNN Headline News. Sometimes I watch just the first two or three minutes of local news just to see if anything important has happened in Austin. Then I turn it off.*

### RESPONDENT #3

Are you a Democrat, Republican, or Independent? *Independent.*

Did you vote in the runoff election? *No.*

Why did or didn't you vote? *I didn't care and figured Fisher would win.*

How did you vote? *N/A*

What do you feel most influenced your vote? *N/A*

If you voted, did editorial endorsements play any role in your choice? *N/A*

In what way? *N/A*

Do editorial endorsements generally play any role in your voting choice? *Yes.*

In what way? *If I don't know who to vote for or don't know much about any of the candidates, I just go with whoever the Statesman endorses. But if I already like a candidate, they don't make any difference to me.*

If you voted, did political advertisements play any role in your choice? *N/A*

In what way? *N/A*

Do political advertisements generally play any role in your voting choice? *No.*

In what way?

How do you generally view political advertisements? *I think they are all lies and show lack of sincerity. They do have an impact on me. They make me view the candidates more negatively. When a candidate makes ads that just bash the other candidates, then I tend to dislike the one that made the ad more.*

Do you vote in most elections? *Yes.*

Why or why not? *It's my duty. Also, I want to cancel out the votes of my friends.*

What makes you support a candidate? *I agree with their viewpoints.*

What issues were most important in this election? *Getting someone to beat Kay Bailey - although recently she has surprised me with some good votes. Health care. Crime.*

Did the media cover them enough? *Statesman doesn't, but other media does.*

What political races were most important in the April elections?

1. *U.S. Senate*
2. *Texas Governor*

What do you think were the primary messages of the Mattox and Fisher ads? *I don't remember them at all.*

Did the ads address any of the issues you feel were most important? *N/A*

What newspapers and magazines do you read regularly? *Time, Austin American-Statesman, Wall Street Journal*

Do you watch TV news regularly? *No.*

Local or national? *Sometimes I watch Headline News. I just don't have time to watch the news because I work a lot of hours and get home late.*

### RESPONDENT #4

Are you a Democrat, Republican, or Independent? *Democrat*

Did you vote in the runoff election? *No.*

Why did or didn't you vote? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you vote? *N/A*

What do you feel most influenced your vote? *N/A*

If you voted, did editorial endorsements play any role in your choice? \_\_\_\_

In what way?

Do editorial endorsements generally play any role in your voting choice? *Sometimes*

In what way? *If they have a good point, then they might influence my choice. Usually, I read them with skepticism.*

If you voted, did political advertisements play any role in your choice? *N/A*

In what way?

Do political advertisements generally play any role in your voting choice? *No.*

In what way? *I never see them.*

How do you generally view political advertisements? *With skepticism and annoyance.*

Do you vote in most elections? *Yes.*

Why or why not? *I vote because I care and also because it's my civic duty as a citizen in a democratic society.*

What makes you support a candidate? *Their views on a particular issue, not their character.*

What issues were most important in this election?

1. *Health care - specifically women's health and reproductive issues.*
2. *Society's militarism, for example gun control. I am also concerned about possible non-military types of intervention.*
3. *The environment.*

Did the media cover them enough? *The media I pay attention to does. I don't watch TV news so I don't know about that.*

What political races were most important in the April elections?

1. *Texas Governor*
2. *U.S. Senate*

What do you think were the primary messages of the Mattox and Fisher ads? *I didn't see them.*

Did the ads address any of the issues you feel were most important? *N/A*

What newspapers and magazines do you read regularly? *New York Times, New Yorker, Austin American-Statesman. Listening to National Public Radio is my main news source.*

Do you watch TV news regularly? *No.*

Local or national? *Neither.*

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