

## Framing the Poor: Media Coverage and US Poverty Policy, 1960-2008

This article offers a twofold empirical analysis that creates several helpful measures of poverty and policy responsiveness to poverty overtime and then offers a content analysis of the frames that dominated poverty politics in the NYTimes. The empirical analysis indicates that frames surrounding poverty shifted dramatically away from those that support increased governmental commitment to anti-poverty programs and that policy followed suit – though a ten year lag occurs. While the authors demonstrate precision in most of their measures (especially the first half of the paper), and the time lagged correlation between discourse and policy outcomes is interesting, I can not recommend publication. Journal space is limited and this paper simply does not offer enough new material to warrant publication in the current form. It does not contribute to the literature in a meaningful fashion—little new comes through. Numerous studies have documented the changes in poverty discourse (Schram, Gans, Hancock etc) and the content analysis offered here, for the most part, adds little to previously published work is (Gilens and Clawson and Trice). For the most part, it is a technically proficient paper that fails to capture the reader with what the major contribution is beyond existing conclusions in the literature.

### Places for Improvement in the Existing Paper:

- Literature. The paper cuts a wide path through the development of poverty policy in the modern era without sufficient nuance and citation. Turns in poverty policy are provided in ways that oversimplify and are presented as self-evident. Given that much of the analysis is rooted in uncovering policy change, this is problematic.
- Methods. The first empirical section of the paper is strong and the GGI is a compelling measure. The extension of the poverty gap is also compelling. Indeed, though they are buried in the presentation, I think these are the major contributions of the paper. The second section loses some empirical steam though. While the authors take substantial care to assess the representativeness of the NYTimes against other papers, intercoder reliability scores are never offered. The authors note reading 20 articles in various years at the beginning/end of the year to assure whether their search terms are actually uncovering poverty articles but the actual coding of frames in the articles and the level of agreement between coders for both article inclusion and article frame need to be reported. In this version, the reader can conclude that there was only one primary coder and this would obviously be problematic from a validity standpoint.
- Conceptualization, Operationalization, and Measurement. The five frames uncovered in

the content analysis are cheat, lazy, barriers, disorder, and underclass. The authors argue that barriers, disorder, and underclass are the three frames that suggest the expansion of spending on the poor – push for generosity. I am not convinced. Both the “underclass” and “disorder” frames could easily point in different directions. The authors describe the underclass frame as “the poor constitute a separate society living in urban slums” and the social disorder frame as “the poor commit crimes or riot in the streets, causing policymakers to focus on the dangers of failure to address the concerns of the poor.” It is just as possible, and in keeping with Beckett and Western (2001), that the “social disorder” frame lead individuals and/or policymakers to endorse/craft “get tough on crime” legislation not expanded means-tested programs for the poor. The “underclass” frame depends on structural (barriers) or cultural (laziness and dysfunction) explanations to see how the frame could influence poverty opinion and/or policy. In short, the connection between the framing analysis and the GGI described in the final empirical section relies on grouping two of the main frames (underclass and social disorder) in a fashion that requires substantially more justification.

#### Smaller issues

- The authors take care to justify not including medical spending for the poor and while some may quibble with that their reasoning strikes me as sound. However, there is little contextual sense of what is going on with other policy arenas with the GGI. The measure does not take into account things like recessions, arms race, etc. overtime. It would be helpful then for readers to have, for instance, a chart showing percent of government spending in other areas (social insurance, defense, etc.) over the same timeframe. The literature indicates that the means-tested programs have had a unique shift over this timeframe but the paper in the current form does not show this. Clearly this chart would not include the severity of the problem for poverty but a sense of (a) if social insurance programs are getting funded in differential ways and (b) spending trends in other policy areas would be a meaningful addition to the paper. It would help the reader to know what is going on in other policy arenas overtime.
- Elements of the paper are redundant and some sections shift too dramatically. A solid round of editing to avoid awkward constructions would help.

In short, my take is that this is a paper steeped in substantial analysis but that it is unsure of its major contribution. Is it the new measures? Is it the connection between the frames and policy outputs (though, as noted above, this relies on a questionable operationalization of what constitutes a generous frame)? Elements of the analyses conducted in this article can and should appear in print but the issues outlined above remain too unsettled for me to recommend publication at this time. I suggest breaking it into two papers. The first is the measurement

paper that provides the critique of existing measures and what your new measures are, why they are efficacious, how they were constructed, and what they show. The second is the paper about framing and how the frames came to be reflected in policy. It would simply use your new measures rather than spend so much time on their development.