

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How to Evaluate It: The Role of Story-Evaluative Tone in Agenda Setting and Priming

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The main contribution of this study to the understanding of agenda-setting and priming effects is its focus on the role of evaluative tone in all stages of the agenda setting/priming process. First, the public's evaluation of issue importance, which is the dependent variable in most agenda-setting studies, is influenced by the issue saliency in the news and by the evaluative tone of media coverage (positive, negative, or neutral). This evaluative tone or affective attribute attached to the issue is part of the second-level agenda setting. Second, these affective attributes that people attach to issues further play an important role in the process of priming, on which they have both indirect and direct impacts. Priming, therefore, carries with it an affective component: It is a combination of message strength and direction. Third, the political judgments of individuals are also directly influenced by media-affective attributes. All of the arguments are supported by the empirical analyses.

doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00327.x

How to evaluate it: The role of story-evaluative tone in agenda setting and priming

This research aims to show that the evaluative tone of media coverage, the *affective attributes* attached to objects (candidates, issues, events), plays an important role in the agenda-setting and priming processes, and consequently affects the political judgment of voters. While current agenda-setting and priming models are based on message salience, or strength, the argument developed here is that both models include an affective component: They are a combination of message *strength* and *direction*.

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Agenda setting

According to the agenda-setting hypothesis (first-level agenda setting), the media influence public opinion by emphasizing certain issues over others. The amount of media attention, or the media salience, devoted to certain issues increases their accessibility and consequently influences the degree of public concern for these issues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The empirical analysis in this study focuses on the issue of the economy in Israel, and the first-level agenda-setting hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1 (first-level agenda setting): An increase in the level of media coverage of the economy will be associated with an increase in the proportion of survey respondents naming this issue as the country's most important problem.

Indeed, because the economy is such an obtrusive issue, because people may have many channels of information about this issue, the influence of real-world indicators and direct experience may provide an alternate explanation for the agenda-setting hypothesis. Therefore, any test of the hypothesis must control for this alternative explanation.

Evaluative tone in first- and second-level agenda setting: The role of affective compelling arguments

In the last few years, the focus of many agenda-setting analyses has shifted from first to second level, sometimes called attribute agenda setting. It is a shift from a focus on the media's role in telling us "what to think about" to their function of telling us "how to think about" objects. According to McCombs (2004), each of the objects on the agenda "has numerous *attributes*, those characteristics and properties that fill out the picture of each object. Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object" (p. 70). The major hypothesis that is associated with second-level agenda-setting (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2003) states that the attributes of the object emphasized by the news media affect the saliency of those attributes in the public's mind. For example, the media coverage of a political candidate may include attributes such as the candidate's issue positions and qualifications. Media emphasis on such attributes is expected to affect the saliency of the attributes in the public's mind and leads to certain evaluations. This hypothesis is generally supported by several empirical studies (see, e.g., Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; King, 1997; Kioussis, 2005; Kioussis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

The focus in this study, though, is on a rather neglected part of second-level agenda setting, the *compelling arguments* hypothesis (see Figure 1).

According to the compelling-arguments hypothesis (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2003), some object attributes emphasized by the news media affect the accessibility of that object (and not of the attribute) to the public, *regardless of the frequency of their appearance in the media message*. This is the impact of the second-level on first-level agenda setting. According to McCombs

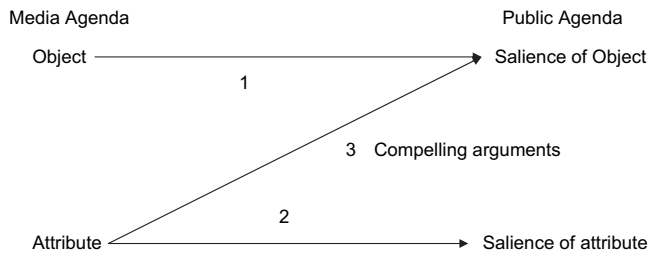


Figure 1 Compelling arguments. Taken from McCombs (2004, p. 92).

Note: (1) Traditional agenda setting (first-level effects); (2) attribute agenda setting (second-level effects); (3) compelling arguments (attribute effects on object salience).

(2004), “compelling arguments are frames ... that enjoy high success among the public” (p. 92).

McCombs (McCombs & Ghanem, 2003; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000) presents two general groups of attributes at the second level: cognitive (or substantive) attributes and affective attributes. Cognitive attributes deal with the definition of issues (or objects in general) in the media, whereas affective attributes deal with the tone of media presentation, with *evaluation* of issues (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral). The empirical distinction between the two types is not always clear. Consider, for example, the empirical variable tested in this study. Each front-page newspaper item that discusses the economy was coded as presenting the economy in a positive, negative, or neutral way. An item was coded as positive (or negative) if it presents the economy as improving (or declining). Such an operationalization no doubt captures the item tone or evaluation. But other cognitive attributes that define an improving (or declining) economy may be presented as well. Nevertheless, the focus in this study is on the affective component of presentation.

The effect of *affective* compelling arguments (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral media presentation of objects) is hardly studied in empirical analyses. An exception is a study by Schoenbach and Semetko (1992), who found that the positive tone with which a certain issue was covered in the news (i.e., positive attribute) reduced the salience of that issue on the public agenda.

I would argue that there are at least two sound explanations for the influence of affective attributes, and specifically of negative affective attributes, on perceived issue importance. The first is a theoretical explanation: Information about negative developments captures our attention far more than information about positive developments. This hypothesis is quite extensively discussed and supported in other fields of research (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Lau, 1985; Marcus, Neuman, & Makuen, 2000; Mutz, 1998; Schul & Schiff, 1993). A negative object attribute is, therefore, expected to increase object importance and accessibility on the public agenda. A positive tone, on the other hand, is not expected to have such an effect. In fact, as noted, Schoenbach and Semetko (1992) found that positive coverage decreased the perceived issue importance.

The second explanation is based on the common operational definition of public agenda. This variable is usually measured by the survey question, "what is the most important problem facing this country today?" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 17). Note that this question has two important ingredients. The first is a question of issue importance. But in the second part of the question people are asked to evaluate the most severe *problem*, or *negative development* in their environment. This is an affective-evaluative question that has a clear, one-sided valence (i.e., a *negative* valence or tone). Consequently, this wording may direct the attention of respondents to a combination of importance and negative valence, just as in the affective compelling arguments explanation.

This leads to the second hypothesis. It is presented as unidirectional because the theoretical discussion deals only with the impact of negative information, not of positive information (recall that the empirical analysis focuses on the state of the economy):

Hypothesis 2 (affective compelling arguments): (a) The higher the salience of media coverage of the economy *and* the more negative the media presentation of the economy, the greater will be the increase in the proportion of survey respondents naming this issue as the country's most important problem; (b) this effect is expected to be stronger than the effect of media salience alone.

Affective prepriming, priming, and political evaluations

Affective attributes may also play a central role in the next stage of the extended agenda-setting process, media priming. The priming hypothesis states that the media agenda affects the criteria people use to evaluate the performance of political actors. Individuals use those issues that are most salient and accessible in their memory to evaluate the performance of political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). If, for example, the issue of the economy was primed, it would become the basis for evaluating the president's performance (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). Using the example of the economy, the evaluation of the president's economic performance is the independent variable in priming analyses, and the evaluation of the president's overall performance is the dependent variable. Media-affective attributes, or evaluative tone, may affect the priming process in direct and indirect ways. The indirect effect is discussed here and the direct effect in the next section.

Voters' evaluations of the incumbent's economic performance may be affected by the way the media present the state of the economy. Negative media presentation of the state of the economy is likely to lead to a very different evaluation of the economic performance of the incumbent compared with a positive media presentation of the economy. This is an *affective prepriming effect* that has an indirect effect on priming because it affects a fundamental component of priming. In other words, it affects the independent variable in priming (i.e., evaluation of the incumbent's economic performance), which is the dependent variable in the affective prepriming effect. Accordingly, the third hypothesis is

Hypothesis 3 (affective prepriming): The more positive is the media presentation of the economy, the more positive are the evaluations individuals will assign to the economic performance of the incumbent party.

The fourth hypothesis presents the original priming effect. Until now, most media-priming research has focused on evaluations of the president's performance (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). However, there is no reason to limit the research on priming effects in natural settings mostly to leaders and not to political parties as well:

Hypothesis 4 (priming): The more individuals are exposed to media coverage of the economy, the more weight they assign to the economic domain when they evaluate the overall performance of the incumbent party.

It is important to note that in a field study such as this one, which covers a set of election campaigns, testing such a hypothesis requires controlling for two variables: first, the general salience of the economy in the information environment in each period, and second, the media exposure of individuals. Two individuals with a similar media exposure but in different periods, one in which the media accorded a lot of salience to the economy and another in which a much lesser salience was accorded, are not exposed to the same levels of economic information and therefore are expected to assign different weights to the economy in their evaluation of the incumbent party. The same can be said of two individuals in the same period but with different levels of media exposure. Previous priming field studies usually controlled for a single variable. For example, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) and Iyengar and Simon (1993) controlled for the information environment (the salience of an issue in the media) but not for the media exposure of individuals. The current study aims to control for personal media exposure as well.

Affective attributes, affective media priming, and political evaluations

However, how can we predict whether the priming effect on the evaluation of the president or the incumbent party would be positive or negative? This question is not fully answered by the theory. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) explain that if the news media prime the prospects of nuclear annihilation, "then citizens would judge the president primarily by his success, as they see it, in reducing the risk of war" (p. 63). But *how* can people assess the success of the president in this task? How can we predict whether, following a media priming of this issue, the electoral fortunes of the president will improve or decline? There is a paradox in media research regarding this question. On the one hand, scholars argue that voters are miserly in expending cognitive efforts when processing political information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Popkin, 1994). Therefore, voters are evaluating the president based on the most accessible issue in their memory as an information shortcut. But on the other hand, voters are expected to invest a lot of cognitive effort to assess the *success* of the president in handling this problem. This rationale doesn't make sense. A better

explanation, I would argue, can be found to a large extent in the affective attributes of objects.

Indeed, some ideological and highly controversial issues are likely to have rather expected electoral effects simply by being on the agenda. For example, if the social welfare policy is emphasized by the media and becomes the basis for evaluation, it is expected that conservatives will evaluate a conservative president in a positive way (Zaller, 1992). Other issues are “owned” by certain parties, and these parties enjoy electoral gains when they are primed (Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003; Sheafer and Weimann, 2005; Simon, 2002).

Yet, many other issues do not naturally lend themselves to such clear evaluations. Economic growth is one example. My argument is that the electoral consequences of these issues being primed is a result of the fact that people attach affective attributes to these issues (see Just, Crigler & Neuman, 1996, and Willnat, 1997, for quite a similar argument). Actually, according to the “hot cognition” psychological hypothesis, all sociopolitical concepts a person has evaluated become affectively charged, positively or negatively, strongly or weakly (Morris, Squires, Taber, & Lodge, 2003). Therefore, when economic growth is primed, people will evaluate the president or the incumbent party based on the affective evaluation (positive or negative) they attach to economic growth (for instance, is it growing and positive or declining and negative). I, therefore, refer to this kind of priming as *affective priming*.¹ Affective priming is the affective-evaluative component that is inseparable from priming. This concept, therefore, does not replace priming; it only adds to it an affective dimension.

The media influence affective priming through the affective compelling arguments effect, in which they attach an evaluative tone (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral) to objects or issues. In other words, the media help people in assigning affective attributes to these issues. For example, the media may present the economy as growing (positive attribute) or declining (negative attribute), thus affecting individuals’ evaluations of this issue. It appears, therefore, that priming has a built-in affective component, and media attributes activate or prime a specific political judgment (for related arguments see Entman, 2004; Ju, 2006; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 2003; Snyderman, Brody & Tetlock, 1991).

In effect, we can find that in most empirical analyses of priming, subjects were exposed to affectively charged media messages. For example, in Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) original priming experiments, subjects viewed newscasts that either emphasized a *problem* in a certain area (i.e., a negative evaluative tone) or not. Following that, they were asked to evaluate the president. In Kim et al.’s (2002) field study, subjects were exposed to *pro and con* attributes of a certain commercial development project (a positive or negative evaluative tone). Indeed, Willnat (1997) argues that “especially missing from the current literature are analyses of how positive and negative news coverage of political issues influences the ... priming effect” (p. 62).

Such affective attributes have political consequences, probably mainly through the process of voters’ attribution of responsibility to the incumbent party. Two

political-science hypotheses that discuss the effects of such attribution of responsibility are retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981) and economic voting (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). For example, according to the economic-voting hypothesis, people reward or punish the incumbent based on the state of the economy, be it the actual state (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000) or the state of the economy presented by the media (Hetherington, 1996; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1999). Therefore, when the affective priming is negatively valenced, the incumbent is generally expected to lose support.

As noted, this process may work both indirectly and directly. It works indirectly, as discussed in the previous section, by affecting evaluations of the incumbent's performance in the primed area (the affective prepriming effect). This process may also work more directly alongside the "regular" priming effect. It is possible to hypothesize that the level of the evaluative tone—the *strength of the direction*—matters, as well. This is the direct effect of affective attributes on the general performance evaluations of the incumbent party:

Hypothesis 5 (affective attributes): The more positive is the media presentation of the economy, the more positive are the evaluations that individuals will assign to the general performance of the incumbent party (and not only to its economic performance).

Methods

The analyses are based on data from five Israeli elections for the Knesset (1988–2003). These are all the elections that are relevant for the analyses conducted here because the survey question of media exposure was not asked in Israel before 1988.

The media agenda

The focus here is only on news stories about the economy. The media's coverage of the economy was measured through a content analysis of the media coverage of 16 election years in Israel (1949–2003). For the current study, only the data regarding the last five elections are used. For a period of a year prior to each election (but only up to approximately 3 weeks before Election Day, just before the election surveys were held),² I first sampled every third day, and then selected for analysis all economy-related front-page articles³ in two of the leading Israeli daily newspapers, *Yediot Aharonot* and *Ha'aretz*.⁴ Overall, 3,019 items were analyzed in the last five election years. As discussed above, the political effects of affective attributes may require that voters will hold the incumbent party responsible for the state of the economy. Therefore, the analyses of priming and affective priming are based on news items that include references to the government, the incumbent party, or one of its members. Items without such references are excluded from these analyses because they do not attribute responsibility to these actors. There are 803 such items in the last five elections. Selecting only these items is rather unusual, but it is based on theoretical reasoning. Nevertheless, the Pearson correlation of the tone of coverage

(media economic valence) between all items and the government items is rather high ($r = .78$; $p < .01$).

The media salience of the economy is defined as the number of news items about the economy. This is the common way to measure this variable (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 18). The operational definition of the tone of media coverage of the economy (media economic valence) is the total balance (positive minus negative) of all the economy-related items. An item was coded as positive (or negative) if it presents the economy as improving (or declining). For example, any claim that the government's economic plan failed, or that the economy is going in the wrong direction, was coded as negative. Each article was assigned to a positive, negative, or neutral category only. Articles with mixed messages were coded as neutral. The total balance variable was created later by subtracting the negative items from the positive ones ($M = -8.85$; $SD = 6.73$). Two trained graduate students conducted the content analysis. The intercoder reliability (using Scott's pi), tested on 100 coding items, was .90.⁵

The public agenda

"The public agenda is usually measured by public-opinion surveys in which a sample of individuals is asked ... 'what is the most important problem facing this country today?'" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 17). Such a question is regularly asked in Israel, in a single survey conducted during the last month of each campaign. All are representative polls conducted as part of the Israeli National Elections Surveys project.⁶ All economic and other related domestic issues were collapsed into the category of the economy, in a similar manner to the one done by Sheafer and Weimann (2005).

Performance evaluations of the incumbent party

Evaluation of the economic performance of the incumbent party is studied through the survey question, "Which team is expected to perform better economically, the Likud or the Labor team?" The results were then recoded as 1 for the incumbent party (i.e., the party of the Prime Minister)⁷ and zero for the other party (incumbent party = 34.4%). Evaluation of the general performance of the incumbent party is assessed through the question, "How did the government handle the most important problems facing the nation?" (1 = *not well at all* through 4 = *very well*; $M = 2.92$, $SD = .82$).

Media exposure

Individuals' media exposure is measured by the survey question, "How frequently do you read a daily newspaper?" (1 = *rarely* through 5 = *almost every day*; $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.27$). As noted above, however, two individuals with a similar media exposure but in different elections, one in which the media accorded a lot of salience to the economy and another in which a much lesser salience was accorded, are not exposed to the same levels of economic information. Therefore, I have created a variable

named Prime Exposure, which is the interaction of individual media exposure and media economic salience ($M = 133.50$, $SD = 49.91$).⁸

Economic and noneconomic control variables

As noted above, because the economy is such a major issue in most societies, the influence of real-world economic indicators must be controlled. All analyses include two controls for the national economy and one control for personal economy. The national-level objective economic indicators are the annual growth rates in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the year preceding the election ($M = .486$, $SD = 2.14$) and the average rate of unemployment in the year preceding the election ($M = .94$, $SD = .09$).⁹ Data on these indicators were obtained from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. The personal-level economic variable is studied through the survey question, "What is the level of your family's monthly expenditure compared with the average, which is ... Israeli NIS?" (1 = *much below average* through 5 = *much above average*; $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.19$).

There are also four other control variables: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) education, and (d) party identification. Because the Israeli surveys do not include direct questions of party identification, I used instead the respondent's party vote in the previous elections, dividing the respondents into those who voted in the previous elections for the political block of the incumbent, or for a party from another block (1 = *incumbent block* [37.7%], 0 = *other*).

Analytic strategy

In order to conduct the statistical analyses, I used a pooled cross-section strategy to examine the consequences of longitudinal changes in the media coverage of the economy, and cross-sectional, cross-time variations in vote intentions. To do that, I built a single data set of all five elections. This strategy allows understanding "individual choice, but across electoral contexts" (Markus, 1988, p. 142), and it is used in several agenda-setting and other studies (Bartels, 2002; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Markus 1988; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). It should be noted that the media coverage of the economy in this model is not a "true" individual-level variable. All respondents in each survey (or each election year) received the same values taken from the content analysis. The main comparison is, therefore, between different media environments or information environments. Zaller (1992), Mutz (1994), and Sanders, Marsh, and Ward (1993), among others, used the same rationale. The individual comparison is added when controlling for personal variables, such as media exposure and personal economics.

Results

First-level agenda setting

According to the first hypothesis, an increase in the level of media coverage of the economy will be associated with an increase in the proportion of survey respondents

naming this issue as the country's most important problem, and vice versa. This hypothesis is supported (see the column "model 1" in Table 1). As expected, the influence of the prominence of media coverage of the economy on naming the economy as the most important problem is positive and significant, even after controlling for all the national and personal economic indicators and the other control variables. Note that this analysis also controls for individual media exposure (newspaper reading). There is no theoretical reason not to control for media exposure in agenda-setting analyses; actually, such a control only strengthens our confidence in the agenda-setting effects.

Evaluative tone in first- and second-level agenda setting: the role of affective compelling arguments

The second hypothesis states that the higher the saliency of media coverage of the economy and the more negative the media presentation of the economy, the greater will be the increase in the proportion of survey respondents naming this issue as the country's most important problem. This affective-compelling-arguments hypothesis is also supported (see the second column in Table 1). Although media salience continues to positively affect the likelihood of respondents to name the economy as the most important problem, the effect of media-evaluative tone (media economic valence) is negative, demonstrating that the more negative the presentation of the economy, the more respondents tend to name the economy as the most important *problem*. According to the second part of the hypothesis, the combined effect of affective compelling arguments and media salience is expected to be stronger than

Table 1 The Impact of Media-Issue Salience and of Media-Issue Valence on Naming the Economy as the Most Important Problem

	Model 1, <i>b</i> (SE)	Model 2, <i>b</i> (SE)
Media economic salience	.08*** (.01)	.09*** (.01)
Media economic valence		-.23*** (.01)
Newspaper reading	-.05† (.03)	-.06* (.03)
GDP change per capita	-.17*** (.02)	.60*** (.05)
National unemployment	1.30** (.45)	6.07*** (.57)
Personal economics	-.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)
Party identification	-.14* (.07)	-.13† (.07)
Gender	.18** (.06)	.17* (.07)
Age	.02* (.01)	.03* (.01)
Education	-.02 (.06)	.04 (.06)
Constant	-3.31*** (.49)	-10.45*** (.65)
Nagelkerke R^2	.13	.23
Model χ^2	429.49***	807.46***
Cases included	4,346	4,346

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients.

† $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

the effect of media salience alone. This part of the hypothesis is also supported. Note that the R^2 in the second column is much larger than the R^2 in the first column.

Affective prepriming, priming, and political evaluations

According to the third hypothesis, the more positive is the media presentation of the economy, the more positive are the evaluations individuals will assign to the economic performance of the incumbent party. As can be seen in Table 2, this affective prepriming hypothesis is supported. The control variables are entered in the first model, and the two media variables are added in the second model. The effect of media economic salience is negative and significant, and the effect of the tone of media coverage (media economic valence) is positive and significant. The more coverage the media assign to the economy and the more negative is this coverage, the more negative are the evaluations of the economic performance of the incumbent party. This is evidence of the indirect effect of issue affective attributes on the priming process; it shows that the media are not only priming issues but also shaping the performance evaluations of the parties in specific domains, in this case in the economic domain. That is, the media are shaping the evaluations of the main independent variable in the priming hypothesis (economic performance evaluations of the incumbent party). Affective attributes, therefore, appear to be part of the priming effect, although here only indirectly.

According to the fourth hypothesis, the more individuals are exposed to media coverage of the economy, the more weight they assign to the economic domain when they evaluate the overall performance of the incumbent party. As discussed above,

Table 2 The Impact of Media Coverage of the Economy on Economic Performance Ratings of the Incumbent Party

	Model 1, <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model 2, <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Media economic salience		-.08*** (.01)
Media economic valence		.07*** (.02)
Newspaper reading	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)
GDP change per capita	.08*** (.02)	.11* (.06)
National unemployment	-1.48*** (.43)	.46 (.88)
Personal economics	-.02 (.03)	-.03 (.03)
Party identification	.02 (.06)	.02 (.07)
Gender	.02 (.06)	.01 (.06)
Age	.02† (.01)	.02† (.011)
Education	-.09† (.05)	-.12* (.05)
Constant	.87† (.47)	2.35*** (.597)
Nagelkerke R^2	.03	.03
Model χ^2	96.20***	115.75***
Cases included	4,769	4,769

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients.

† $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$.

the analyses of priming control for the Prime Exposure, which is the interaction of two variables—the level of media economic coverage and the level of individual media exposure.

The first step in a priming analysis requires finding out whether the economic evaluations of the incumbent party vary with the level of media exposure to economic news. This is analyzed via an interaction of both variables. That interaction (Prime Exposure \times Incumbent Economic Evaluations) is presented in the left column (Model 1) of Table 3. As can be seen, the interaction is positive and significant, suggesting that the impact of incumbent party economic evaluations varies significantly with the level of exposure to economic news.

The second step is comparing the impact of the main independent variable (economic evaluations of the incumbent party) in different levels of exposure to economic news (prime exposure). This standard priming analysis is presented in Table 4 and supports the fourth hypothesis. As expected, according to the priming hypothesis, the coefficient for evaluations of the incumbent party in “Primed” is larger than the one in the first baseline model, showing that the primed individuals assigned more weight to the economic domain when they have evaluated the overall

Table 3 The Impact of Media Coverage of the Economy and of Economic Performance Ratings on Incumbent-General-Performance Ratings

	Model 1, <i>b</i> (SE)	Model 2 <i>b</i> (SE)
Media economic salience	-.00 (.00)	-.04*** (.01)
Media economic valence		.08** (.03)
Newspaper reading	.10* (.04)	-.22† (.12)
Incumbent-party economic evaluations	.31*** (.07)	.31*** (.07)
Prime exposure	-.00*** (.00)	.00 (.00)
Prime Exposure \times Incumbent Economic Evaluations	.00*** (.00)	.00*** (.00)
Valenced prime exposure		-.01* (.00)
Constant	-2.55*** (.17)	.50 (.55)
Adjusted R^2	.19	.19
R^2 change		.00
F change for R^2 change		5.00**
Cases included	4,703	4,703

Note: Entries are ordinary least square regression coefficients. The analyses also control for the following variables: party ID, gender, age, education, GDP change per capita, national unemployment, and personal economics. Prime Exposure is an interaction of Media Economic Salience \times Newspaper Reading. Valenced Prime Exposure is an interaction of Media Economic Valence \times Newspaper Reading. The meaning of the significant interaction of the Prime Exposure and the Incumbent Party Economic Evaluations is that the impact of the latter on the dependent variable varies significantly with the levels of Prime Exposure. This is further explored in Table 4.

† $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

performance of the incumbent party. The difference between the two coefficients is significant (this is the significance of the interaction in Table 3).

Affective attributes, affective media priming, and political evaluations

Model 2 in Table 3 provides a test for the fifth hypothesis: the direct effect of affective attributes or media-evaluative tone on the general performance evaluations of the incumbent party. It states that the more positive the media presentation of the economy, the more positive are the evaluations individuals assign to the general performance of the incumbent party. This hypothesis is supported because the effect of media economic valence is positive. Given that all values of media economic valence are negative (i.e., the presentation of the economy is always negative), the meaning of this finding is that the more negative is the media coverage of the economy, the lower are the evaluations of the general performance of the incumbent.

This analysis also includes an interaction between media-evaluative tone and media exposure (Media Economic Valence \times Newspaper Reading). This variable, valenced prime exposure ($M = -39.00$, $SD = 27.58$), is conceptually similar to the prime exposure variable (Media Economic Salience \times Newspaper Reading). The impact of valenced prime exposure is negative and significant, meaning that the combination of an increasing negative tone in the presentation of the economy with an increase in media exposure decreases the evaluation of the incumbent's general performance. This finding makes sense: The more individuals are exposed to a negative media presentation of the economy, the lower is their evaluation of the incumbent. Yet, these two variables, media economic valence and valenced prime exposure, contribute very weakly—although significantly—to the explanatory power of the model (note the R and F change).

Note also the negative and significant impact of media economic salience in the right column of Table 3. It suggests that the higher the salience of media coverage of the economy, the more the *general direction* or valence (i.e., positive or negative) of the media coverage affects the *direction* of evaluations individuals assign to the incumbent party. Because in all the years analyzed here the direction of economic coverage is negative, the overall effect of this variable is negative.

Discussion

The main contribution of this study to the understanding of agenda-setting and priming effects is its focus on the role of the evaluative tone, or affective attributes (negative or positive) in all stages of the agenda setting/priming process. In the past, such an analysis did not receive much attention in empirical second-level agenda-setting studies, and certainly not in first-level agenda-setting and priming analyses.

It was demonstrated here that the effect of affective compelling arguments, and especially the effect of negative issue attributes, on the public agenda cannot be ignored. Actually, my argument is more inclusive: Because negative information

captures our attention much more than positive information and because the common operational definition of the public agenda (“what is the most important *problem* facing the nation”) focuses respondents’ attention on negative information, the effect of affective compelling arguments is unintentionally assimilated in most empirical first-level agenda-setting studies. Agenda setting, therefore, appears to be based not only on message salience but on a combination of message salience and direction or valence.

Because the issue considered by the public to be the most important—the primed issue—is also affectively charged (mostly negatively), the process of priming is also indirectly affectively charged. The “regular” priming hypothesis ignores this affective component and therefore does not fully explain *how* people use the primed issue when evaluating political actors and making electoral decisions. According to this “regular” priming hypothesis, people evaluate leaders based on the leaders’ performance regarding the most accessible (or important) issue. People rely on this most important issue because they are cognitive misers; they attempt to reduce information gathering costs. As such, it is illogical to expect that they will invest a lot of effort in trying to assess whether the performance of the leader in this certain area is good (and therefore enhances a positive evaluation) or bad (and therefore enhances a negative evaluation). That is, the priming hypothesis only explains the weight of a certain issue (like the economy) in the general evaluation of the incumbent (see Table 4). But it says nothing about whether the effect of priming on the general evaluation of

Table 4 The Impact of Economic Performance Ratings on General Performance Ratings as a Function of the Level of Prime Exposure

	Low Prime Exposure (Baseline), <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	High Prime Exposure (Primed), <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Primed Minus Baseline
Incumbent party economic evaluations	.44*** (.04)	.76*** (.03)	.32***
Adjusted R^2	.11	.26	
Cases included	2,365	2,385	

Note: Entries are ordinary least square regression coefficients. The analyses also control for the two components of the interaction (i.e., Media Economic Salience and Newspaper Reading) and for the other control variables: party ID, GDP change per capita, national unemployment, personal economics, gender, age, and education. The priming variable of Prime Exposure (Media Economic Salience \times Personal Media Exposure [newspaper reading]) was recoded 0 for levels lower than the mean and 1 for levels higher than the mean. The significance of the difference in the impact of the Incumbent Party Economic Evaluations variable is the significance of the interaction of this variable with the original (not recoded) priming variable of Prime Exposure in a single analysis that includes all the above variables (see Model 1 in Table 3). Other priming studies conduct similar tests (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 67; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

*** $p \leq .001$.

the incumbent will be positive or negative. In the electoral competition, this latter point is the decisive one. The priming hypothesis carries with it a hidden assumption that if the economy, for example, is primed, people will invest resources to learn about the state of the economy and consequently will decide *how* to evaluate the incumbent. This, of course, does not usually happen and therefore many priming studies have a missing link for which the priming hypothesis does not fully account.

The argument raised in this study is that by focusing on the affective component in the agenda-setting and priming process, this missing link can be found. In the process of affective priming, people use issue attributes (positive or negative) as another information shortcut that assists them in making political evaluations and decisions. They punish or reward the incumbent at least to some extent based on the state of the economy, as this is presented in the media. The role of the evaluative tone in the media is, therefore, central in this process. The analysis in the right column of Table 3 shows three important findings in this regard. First, the more negative is the media coverage of the economy, the lower are the evaluations of the general performance of the incumbent. Second, there is an interaction of media tone and media exposure: The more individuals are exposed to a more negative media presentation of the economy, the lower is their evaluation of the incumbent. Third, the more the economy appears in the news (i.e., the higher is the salience), the more the general direction, or the evaluative tone, of the presentation of the economy (a negative presentation in our case) affects the direction of the general evaluations of the incumbent party (i.e., increases a negative evaluation). The fact that an increased *salience* of a certain issue in the media signals voters about the *direction* of the evaluation of the incumbent's performance is evidence regarding the affective component of the priming effect. Priming, therefore, carries with it an affective component: It is a combination of message strength and message direction or valence.

Naturally, there are several limitations to this study. Theoretically, it completely skips the debate regarding similarities and differences of issue attributes and media frames, and of second-level agenda-setting and framing effects (e.g., Scheufele, 2000). These debates are directly related to this study, but they are beyond its scope. There are several empirical limitations as well. The most serious of these is a result of the pooled cross-section strategy used here. The effects of media content may confound with other elements that may differ between elections. Indeed, although the analyses control for many variables, it is impossible to determine whether there are other variables that coincide with news content that may serve to produce the results. The small number of elections (five) increases the threat of a unique election-related variable that had an impact on the results. Yet, agenda-setting analyses that are based on 10 elections (not shown here) produced results rather similar to those presented above. This increases our confidence in the validity of the findings. There are some other methodological limitations. Newspaper reading is a rather limited measure of media exposure. The content analysis only covers newspapers, and only the front

pages of the news section. Furthermore, the priming variable of economic-performance evaluations of the incumbent is dichotomous and somewhat prospective, not retrospective (“will the incumbent team perform better economically?”). These are, nevertheless, the best tools available for scholars attempting to analyze these issues in Israel.

Acknowledging these limitations and the fact that many of the analyses presented here are highly unexplored, more study is required to increase our confidence in the validity of the findings. Future research may also contribute by replacing the dependent variable in priming studies, from the current evaluation of incumbent’s performance to voting intentions for the incumbent. Because many priming analyses are focused on politics and elections, this extension of priming is required. Few earlier analyses that took that course (e.g., Sheafer & Weimann, 2005), show that it is worth further exploration.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this project was provided by the Israel Foundations Trustees. I thank the following scholars for help, comments, and advice on earlier versions of this article: Guy Golan, Lilach Nir, Yariv Tsfati, Gadi Wolfsfeld, and the editors of this special issue.

Notes

- 1 Moy, Scheufele, Eveland, and McCleod (2001) also use the concept of affective priming but in a different way. Their affective priming is the process in which the order of the questions in surveys affects respondents’ likelihood of reporting more affective than rational arguments.
- 2 This is a long, but not unusual, time frame for the transfer of agenda from the media to the public. An analysis of only 3 months produced quite similar results.
- 3 An analysis of front-page items is quite common (see, e.g., Zaller, 1992). Security-related items were analyzed as well, but these are not included in the current study.
- 4 These two newspapers always enjoyed a significant share of the Israeli readership. The first is a popular newspaper, and the second is a broadsheet.
- 5 The reliability test included news items on the economy and on security matters from 16 elections.
- 6 Sample sizes were 1,315 in 1969; 530 in 1973; 485 in 1977; 1,237 in 1981; 1,259 in 1984; 416 in 1988; 1,192 in 1992; 1,168 in 1996; 1,225 in 1999; and 1,234 in 2003. The surveys are available through the Israel Social Science Data Archive, the Hebrew University (<http://ssda.huji.ac.il/>).
- 7 In 1988, both Likud and Labor served in a national unity government. The Likud, however, was selected as the incumbent party because the Prime Minister, Shamir, was the leader of the Likud.
- 8 I thank David Tewksbury for suggesting this option.
- 9 This variable went through a linear logarithmic transformation (log base 10).

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