Forum section

The Two Faces of Framing

Individual-Level Framing and Collective Issue Definition in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Policy decisions are greatly affected by the way issues are understood collectively by policy-makers and the public. Naturally, advocates attempt to affect these dynamics by drawing attention to one dimension or another. Lobbyists outside government, such as political leaders and civil servants within governing institutions, try to spin or frame the issues on which they work. Research on framing is difficult, however, because of a methodological complication: no individual actor single-handedly determines how issues are defined collectively. The collective dynamics of agenda-setting and framing are subject to strong competitive forces, maintaining a stable equilibrium at most times, but also to threshold effects that can occasionally lead to rapid shifts in issue definitions. Research strategies used to study one face of framing (at the individual level) are ill suited to study the second face of framing (aggregate shifts in collective issue definitions). We discuss the two faces of framing as they relate to recent literature on policy-making in the European Union and we suggest some avenues for future research.

Framing at the individual and the collective levels

Public policy advocates hope to see debates defined in a manner favorable to their position, and with their allies they work to achieve this. No public policy is substantively one-dimensional; even the simplest policy proposals involve questions of cost and the scope of the regulatory state in addition to whatever substantive impact they may be addressing. A proposal to regulate the transportation of live animals is simultaneously an animal welfare issue, a transportation concern, a public health issue, one concerning competitive-ness, and possibly one relating to the jurisdiction of the European Union (EU) versus national governments. Because all policies are multi-dimensional, different policy actors focus their attention on different aspects of the policy as they seek to build support for their positions. However, since no single advocate determines how an issue is framed, the linkage between individual studies of framing and collective studies of issue definition is not clear. Indi-vidual policy advocates may well select arguments on a given dimension rather than another, but they are constrained in their choices by the actions of other policy actors, who are typically just as conversant as they are in the many dimensions of debate that *could* be brought into discussion. Which dimensions manage to dominate the collective policy debate at any given time is partly determined endogenously through the efforts of individual lobbyists, but also exogenously through stochastic events, crises, scientific advance and new discoveries, as well as through social cascade effects within policy communities. Studying the process of framing only at the individual level has little chance of elucidating collective-level changes in framing. At the same time, researchers focusing only on aggregate-level framing will be unable to understand the forces that led to the collective frame without recognizing the micro-level forces that are at play.

The controversy surrounding the Bolkestein Directive provides a case in point. This directive addressed many issues, but most importantly the completing of the internal market in services came to be defined as some-thing wholly different as critics focused their attention on the idea that 'Polish plumbers' and other cheap laborers would invade the original 15 member states. Why did this particular frame manage to dominate? Why did *any* single frame gain such weight, considering the myriad different implications of the proposal? How an issue comes to be perceived by the broad political or policy community is of course fundamental to public acceptance; contro-versies over the Bolkenstein Directive were related to the French 'No' in the 2005 EU Treaty referendum – news reports noted that French citizens would not support an EU that led to a loss of French jobs to cheap laborers. But can we say that the collective dynamics by which attention came to focus almost

exclusively on one aspect of a complex proposal were the result of individual strategies of framing and spinning? If lobbyists were that effective, there would be little structure in politics.

Framing and argumentation are fundamental to advocacy and EU lobbyists engage in creative framing every day, but EU researchers have yet to develop large-scale projects to study these dynamics. This article discusses the importance of the two faces of framing in lobbying, drawing largely from the agenda-setting, policy change and lobbying literature in the USA and the EU. We focus on the methodological issues related to the difference between individual and collective behavior and present a research agenda that shows that the systematic study of framing and issue definition is within reach. These designs may be significantly larger in scope than previous studies by taking advantage of research opportunities created by the availability of systematic data on EU policy processes through the Policy Agendas Project, computer-assisted textual coding methodologies now being developed, and with the support of traditional interview-based fieldwork, possibly within larger cooperative networks.

The first face of framing

How common is it for EU lobbyists to frame their arguments in order to gain political support for their positions? And if they are doing it, what are their framing patterns? Do they select just one frame and stick to it? Or, do they emphasize different frames with different actors, in an attempt to maximize support? Preliminary analysis of interviews with 82 EU lobbyists about their argumentation strategies provides some insight.

Mahoney interviewed a random sample of advocates active in the EU, using a sampling frame comprising the 2004 CONECCS database, the European Parliament's register of lobbyists and the 2004 *European Public Affairs Directory.* Advocates were interviewed about the issue they had most recently worked on and were asked to identify other advocates working on the same issue, who were then also interviewed, resulting in a total of 82 interviews. All advocates were asked to describe the arguments they were using to gain support for their position. They were asked if they used different arguments for different targets and, if so, were probed about how those arguments differed. (This research forms the basis for Mahoney, 2008, but the particular results discussed here were not reported in the book.)

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of advocates engaging in framing: 34% of advocates reported manipulating their argumentation depending on the target at hand, whereas 66% described argumentation

Table 1   Percentage of EU Lobbyists manipulating their Argumentation depending on Target

	Frequency	Percent
No Targeted Argumentation	54	66%
Targeted Argumentation Used	28	34%
Total	82	100%

strategies where the same dimensions were used regardless of the target. So, roughly one-third of EU advocates framed the issue in different ways to expand their supporting coalition by linking the dimensions at stake to the interests of their target.

Why do such a large proportion of EU lobbyists stick with the same message rather than nuance their argumentation to gain political support? The interviews seem to suggest two main answers. First, the context of the issue is crucial: if there is only one venue in charge of a dossier, or the lobbyist is targeting only one venue, then this registers in Table 1 as not targeting arguments. This same advocate may use a very sophisticated argumentation strategy on a larger, more complex issue on which multiple institutional units have jurisdiction. But most issues and most lobbying situations are not so complex. This simple fact is often lost in the literature on framing, which, owing to its case-study orientation, has found framing effects virtually every time it has searched for them (see Druckman, 2001: 1061).

Second, the low levels of targeted framing may come from advocates' fear of being seen as 'manipulative.' A number of advocates explicitly discussed why they do not frame their arguments depending on the target, alluding to the fact that they have one message and they stick by it so as not to appear to be dissembling. For example, a business organization lobbying on an environmental issue on Integrated Product Policy (IPP) was somewhat defensive, the lobbyist insisting that his group does not manipulate the dimensions of debate:

> 'No, we always go with the same message, we are totally transparent, and when the Communication was about to come out we did two or three letters and those were copied to both DG ENVI and DG Enterprise and to the main Commissioners interested in IPP. So to both DG Internal Market and the Consumer Commissioner as well we give the same position.'

A similar concern was voiced by a citizen group lobbying on the Services Directive: 'The message is always the same, we have nothing to hide, it is quite transparent.'

A third explanation could be that the advocate is attempting to shape the collective debate and this might be better done by repeatedly hammering a single frame rather than raising a number of different dimensions with different targets. If advocates see a long-term advantage in promoting 'safe labor standards' or 'corporate transparency' and these themes are fundamental to their organizational missions, they may push the same theme at every opportunity. George Lakoff (2004) suggests that repetition matters.

Whether advocates have only one target, feel that, ethically, they should not be putting forward multiple arguments or are consciously trying to shape the issue-wide debate, two-thirds of this sample did not spin. Results from a comparable US-based study similarly found that lobbyists are often constrained in the arguments they make. Although they might *like* to see the entire policy community shift focus to their preferred dimension of debate, they are constrained by the actions of those around them (see Berry et al., 2007). Spinning by a single advocate on a single issue may be somewhat less ubiquitous than is sometimes assumed.

One-third of Mahoney's lobbyists did present their issue differently depending on the target, emphasizing the dimension of the issue that would resonate most strongly. Table 2 reports the number and percentage of advocates manipulating their framing by venue, institution or political group.

The data show that, if advocates are targeting their argumentation, they are most likely to frame their position differently depending on the Directorate-General (DG) or the institution they are approaching, if they are simultaneously lobbying multiple institutions – e.g. the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament (EP). Lobbyists described different types of argument for the different institutions, rather than different dimensions of the debate. Specifically, lobbyists found simpler arguments to be more effective in the more political Parliament and more technical arguments were

Table 2 Percentage of EU Lobbyists Manipulating their Argumentation by Party and Institution

	Frequency	*Percent*
No Argumentation Framing	54	65%
By DG in Commission	8	10%
By Institution (e.g. Parliament, Commission, Council)	8	10%
Both by Institutions and within the Commission by DG	7	9%
By Party Group in the EP	5	6%
Total	82	100%

possible with the specialists of the Commission. A business association lobbying on the Service Directive noted that:

> 'In the EP they have to be less technical, bigger arguments; they are never going to understand the complexity of this Directive. Someone, a big player needs to bring the big messages forward; this can't be a technical debate, because it is too technical to understand. These MEPs are ultimately going to vote on a big clear political argument associated with it.'

A consultancy lobbyist echoed this sentiment: 'In the Commission it can be more technical, more pan-European. In the Parliament it needs to be shorter, less technical, needs to be more potent with a local hook.'

However, when it comes to the Commission, advocates did describe true framing behavior, where arguments were used that fit the audience. An industry representative lobbying on the Clean Air for Europe issue noted that advocates do 'focus on different things in different DGs', but they ensure that they 'always cc both, so both get all our arguments', so no one is suspicious.

An Information Technology (IT) industry representative lobbying on a proposal by the Council to require IT companies to store telecommunications data as a means to combat crime described his strategy:

> 'Yes, if I am talking to the people at the Perm Reps [Permanent Representation], you spin it different ways if you are talking to the Telecoms guy versus the Justice guy. The Telecoms guy is interested in helping the telecoms because there is a lot of jobs and money in the industry; there can be a more frank discussion with them and they have more knowledge about the sector. When I talk to the Justice guy I try to simulate my helplessness – "we don't have any idea how to do this and we are the technical experts." What they are proposing is technically infeasible . . ..'

Lobbyists frame their arguments differently when lobbying in Parliament to make issues relevant to MEPs of certain political groups, as well as from certain member states. A trade association lobbying on the REACH Chemicals regulations noted:

> 'You do have to adapt it to the kind of person you are talking to; it is marketing really, you better know who you are talking to. When we talk to the Greens, we talk from their point of view and explain how we don't need to be testing salt when we could be testing the more dangerous substances. We highlight the debate about prioritization. They don't like risk, they like the idea of: if it's dangerous, replace it. They want zero risk, but that isn't possible. We talk about slow replacement, replacement that takes technical feasibility and market feasibility into account, and how a chemical can be replaced when the economic factors allow for that. If I go to the Left I can talk about jobs, and how there are 2 million European jobs directly linked to the chemicals industry.'

An environmental group lobbying on the other side of the same issue was making use of the same types of sophisticated argumentation strategy:

> 'Yes, definitely if we are talking to the PSE – the socialists – we bring figures of occupational health from trade unions and occupational health institutions. Some MEPs are more concerned about consumers, some more interested in "right to know".'

A trade association representative lobbying on the liberalization of the aviation industry painted a similar picture in the tweaking of their arguments:

> 'We try to take into account the political position, especially the MEPs, so if you are talking to someone from the Liberal Group you make it about a free market issue – saying while the goal of course is a free market in aviation, given the immaturity of these airlines, they need some adjustment time. If we are talking to the Social Democrats, we make it about people, employers – saying the free market is the goal, but the people at these smaller airlines need time for their employees and workers to adapt.'

This short review is suggestive of a few things. First, the *possibility* of framing is often present, as is the *motivation* to frame. Advocates recognize that different audiences respond to different dimensions of an issue, and a strategic advocate will emphasize different frames depending on the target in order to gain their support. For one-third of Mahoney's cases, lobbyists were actively focusing on different dimensions when they spoke with different audiences. Similarly, in the US project, different advocates used a wide array of different arguments. Moreover, an advocate may frame strategically not just to gain the support of individual policy-makers but with the aim of inducing issue-wide redefinition. Although particular policy proposals may be firmly entrenched within a given institutional venue, with a strong shared understanding of the relevant dimensions of debate, this can change.

Second, framing is *not* everywhere. Individual advocates often focus on only one dimension – possibly the one they believe in most, the one that is most relevant for their constituency or organizational mission, or the one they think will gain the most support or keep a coalition of allies together. Furthermore, advocates may wish to use issue-framing strategically but be constrained by the context of the issue. Some issues are simply not ripe for a new spin to be introduced.

Finally, regardless of how many and which dimensions one actor is focusing on, other actors on that same issue are likely to be focusing on other dimensions (e.g. the aspect that is most important for their constituency; the most effective frame for their position on the debate), although policy debate at any given point tends to focus on only a few of them. So there is a

difference between the underlying multidimensionality of the substance of public policy matters and the actual degree of diversity in any given debate at any given time and place. Some debates are actually highly structured with little room for framing.

The decisions that advocates make about the use of strategic framing blend with the characteristics of their political context in order to determine which frames come to dominate the collective debate.

The second face of framing

Scholars have studied collective issue definition many times, tracing individual cases by using either qualitative or quantitative approaches, but larger-scale projects have been rare.[1] Baumgartner and Jones (1993) note that 'policy images' interact with shifting 'policy venues' so that an initial shift in the collective issue definition associated with a policy may lead different governmental institutions to become interested in the question. Because different institutions typically focus on different elements of the same question (e.g. DG Environment has different concerns than DG Competition), shifts in venues can reinforce shifts in images (see also Mazey and Richardson, 1993; Guiraudon, 2000).

Ringe (2005) has shown that the choice of a new 'focal point' in a legislative debate could cause voters of different ideological predispositions to react to the issue in systematically different ways. Looking at the European Parliament's debates on cross-border corporate takeover bids, he shows that a collective shift from the 'single market' frame to frames of 'workers' rights' and 'level playing field' could be documented and related to different voting patterns among the MEPs. Aggregate-level voting patterns may remain highly structured with low dimensionality (see Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Hix, 1999; Gabel and Hix, 2002), even if the nature of the debate itself shifts over time. The key point is the choice of a new focal point – an element in the debate that comes to structure how political leaders and parties respond.

William Riker, of course, pioneered this type of analysis and showed the power of focusing attention on one element of the debate rather than another. His analysis of the campaign to ratify the US Constitution is largely focused on a painstaking empirical study of how often various arguments for and against ratification appeared in public debates (1996). Riker and Ringe together clearly show the importance of the focus of attention, and how this can shift.

The dynamics of shifting attention can result in rapid shifts in the collective issue definition associated with a given policy, even if most policies

most of the time are stable (and even if many individual lobbyists do not change their behaviors). When policy-makers see that others around them are focusing attention on an aspect of the issue that they had previously ignored, they are more likely to do so themselves. The key insight here is that in a social network, in which every individual's action is largely dependent on how he/she expects those around him/her to behave (rather than only on their own preferences), collective actions are principally determined by the communications networks among the whole, more than by the preferences of any single actor. Dennis Chong (1991) applied such models to the question of why American civil rights activists were successful in mobilizing supporters in the 1960s but not, for example, in the 1940s.[2] Lohman's (1994) discussion of the fall of the East German Government makes a similar point: where all expect the government and its repressive apparatus to remain in place, few will challenge it, but when a collective expectation takes hold that the regime may collapse, greater numbers will voice their opposition. Individual attitudes don't need to change as much as one's expectation about the behavior of others. Incentives matter.

What is the application of these collective action theories to the study of issue definition? The key is that knowing all we can possibly know about individual efforts to affect collective issue definitions takes us only part of the way. We also have to understand the collective dynamics, and this requires a different approach.

An issue that provides a good example of this individual-level framing is lobbying by citizen groups and non-governmental organizations for international humanitarian intervention in Darfur, Sudan. The Darfur crisis incorporates a massive array of dimensions, and advocates can manipulate these dimensions depending on the target. The primary dimension justifying intervention is a humanitarian one: genocide is being committed and the international community must intervene to stop the killing. A second dimension is one of 'not going back on one's word': after the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, the international community swore it would never again allow genocide to be committed 'on our watch'; the international community must honor this commitment. A third dimension is a spillover argument: instability in Darfur destabilizes the entire region. Further, there is an anti-terrorism frame: since instability is a breeding ground for terrorists and members of al Qaeda have found refuge in the Sudan in the past, if the genocide continues it would allow space for further al Qaeda development. The final significant frame is an economic one, related to the spillover frame: the cost to the international community of quelling a war in all of East Africa would be greater than ending the instability in Darfur before it spreads. As advocates of intervention target politicians of different perspectives, they may

emphasize one of these frames more than another, depending on the concerns of the target.

Scholars of framing and issue definition study two distinct but related questions. The first is whether different advocates attempt to frame the issue they are working on to be about one dimension rather than another and whether they tailor their arguments to the target – spinning the issue in different ways to gain political support. Mahoney's work discussed in the previous section makes clear that individual lobbyists do indeed make these efforts, at least in cases where they think they may have some success. Political psychologists often focus on this aspect of framing, by studying the cognitive response of individuals to arguments couched in different terms (see Kahneman and Tversky, 1985; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988).

The second question concerns measuring the overall mix of frames used, collectively over the entire issue debate, and seeing how this may change over time. Studying the collective issue definition over time can be done on the basis of documentary sources, but these must be available over time or across institutions. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) used such issue-level content analysis in their study of nine different policy issues, often covering 50 years or more of policy history. A more recent example comes from Baumgartner et al.'s (2008) study of media attention to capital punishment in the USA. Using simple but extensive content analysis techniques, they traced the nature of the media coverage of capital punishment issues from 1960 to 2005, reviewing about 4000 newspaper articles. These data clearly demonstrated the shifting collective attention to various elements of the debate over time: morality, constitutionality and, more recently, the dramatic rise of the 'innocence' frame that currently dominates discussion of the death penalty in the USA (this is the idea that DNA and other evidence point to an unacceptable 'error rate', with innocents wrongly convicted and sentenced to death). Further, with these measures systematically available over time, Baumgartner et al. were able to use them in a time-series model to show the impact of the issue definition on the actual policy output, in this case the annual number of death sentences, with appropriate controls for public opinion, the crime rate and other factors.

One thing the literature has poorly addressed so far is the demonstration of the limits to individual efforts in reframing debates successfully. William Riker (1984, 1986, 1996) brought our attention to the possibility that brilliant policy-making entrepreneurs could destabilize entire public policies through crafty rhetoric, and Ringe (2005) makes it clear that these dynamics occur in the EU context. Despite these insights, we have virtually no systematic evidence about what percentage of such strategic reframing efforts might be successful. It appears that reframing may be rare. Berry et al. (2007)

interviewed over 300 advocates involved in a random sample of 98 policy issues in Washington, and systematically noted the differential use of various types of argument. They found that a process of competition and mutual monitoring within communities of professionals keeps policy communities in a collective equilibrium most of the time. Individual policy actors fight to change this, and they seek to take advantage of windows of opportunity when these open up. However, most issues, most of the time, are collectively defined in a stable manner. Further, this stability is induced not only by institutional procedures but also by the collective policy knowledge and expertise that are common to all members of the policy community.

Toward a synthesis

We believe that the two literatures on the individual and collective dynamics of framing can be integrated. The key elements of the solution imply the creation of a collaborative international network of scholars working within a framework of cooperation and data-sharing and greater use of computer-assisted text analysis tools allowing research projects of much larger scope to be envisaged.

Understanding the policy process requires fieldwork and interviews. But how many interviews can a single person do, and what is the professional norm of what we do with these interviews? Typically, we conduct too few interviews, focus them in only a single policy area, pick a small number of cases in a non-random manner, work as individuals rather than in teams, and design our interviews to be unique rather than directly comparable with other high-quality work being done by colleagues. Long-standing professional norms encourage these behaviors, but each of these norms has important costs. At a minimum, interview-based research can be done in a way that provides information that is directly comparable to that collected by others. Further, in our recent study, the Advocacy and Public Policymaking Project, we studied the interest group activity of hundreds of lobbyists on 100 policy issues and we found that virtually every important actor in a sample of policy debates had information publicly available on their websites.[3] There is no reason such a project could not be done on a larger and international scale.

Mahoney's (2008) study of advocacy in the USA and the EU employed an identical research approach in both cases. Although EU-based organizations may post fewer documents to their websites, official documents abound and the main limitation to their use has so far been gaining electronic access and knowing how to analyze them. Electronic access to contemporary documents is no longer a problem, and even historical records

are increasingly being digitized. Methodological advances in computer science now allow much greater use of complex analytic schemes, assisted by computer technologies (not driven by them) to measure the relative use of different frames by different actors in the process, not just for one issue but for the entire panoply of government activity. Further, research of sufficient scope would allow scholars to trace the use of targeted arguments (e.g. the relative use of various frames by organizations making their case before one DG as opposed to another, or the relative use of different frames in the official documents of one DG, parliamentary study group or any other official body) and the development of arguments in each venue over time. Cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches can be combined.

Administrative and legislative agencies provide a wealth of documents related to current and recent policy debates. Computer science applications have advanced so that, with close supervision by the researcher, millions of documents can be read, categorized by issue and further classified by valence (e.g. support for or opposition to the proposed policy) and by dimensional focus.[4] The key in these 'supervised learning' algorithms is to have human coders prepare learning data sets consisting of several thousand observations, coded according to whatever classification system the researcher chooses or devises, and then allow the computer to recognize the patterns of use of language that correspond to the different classification categories. With multiple iterations, moving between automated and human-controlled coding, highly accurate and enormous data sets can be created. Making use of such technological aids can allow us to envision research projects larger in scope by several orders of magnitude than what has been typically done in the literature.

The US-based Policy Agendas Project[5] provides one example of how such tools have been useful in the study of public policy in the USA, and it is now being replicated in many countries across Europe and for the EU itself. When the Policy Agendas Project started, the full text of the various government documents was not typically available, so the project directors (Baumgartner and Jones) relied on printed abstracts of most documents to begin the research. As increasing amounts of information have become available, including for example the full text of every bill introduced in the US Congress, automated coding techniques have proved invaluable. In a recent French application, we were able to download every written and oral question in the National Assembly over more than two decades, amounting to several hundred thousand observations; these data suggest the large scope of electronic information that is or will soon be available in the EU, in the member states and for other political systems. Databases of such scope suggest opportunities to analyze the issue definitions associated with given

public policies over time, across nations and from institution to institution and to integrate the two faces of framing, because individual strategies could finally be connected in a systematic manner to collective outcomes.

If collective issue-framing is a social process and subject to information cascades and threshold effects, and if individual efforts to spin issues can be more effective in some environments than in others, the scholarly communities that have studied these two faces of framing must take up the challenge and develop new research methodologies based on newly developing techniques of computer-assisted content analysis. With a mass of media records, official documents, organizational statements, web logs and other sources of information about hundreds of policy proposals increasingly available, a new approach to the study of framing integrated with the study of issue definition is feasible. This work can be integrated with traditional interview-based fieldwork if we can create larger cooperative international networks of scholars so that our collective efforts are cumulative rather than designed to be particularistic.

Notes

1   This literature is too voluminous to review, but see Stone (1989) and Schneider and Ingram (1993) on the qualitative side and Baumgartner and Jones (1993) for a more quantitative example; Daviter (2007) provides a recent review of the EU literature on the topic.
2   See also Granovetter (1978), Watts (2003) and Barabasi (2005) for classic works and overviews.
3   See also http://lobby.la.psu.edu.
4   See e.g. Purpura and Hillard (2006), who have coded hundreds of thousands of US laws and categorized them into the Policy Agendas Project classification of 226 policy subtopics with over 80% accuracy; Callan (2007) and Hovy (2007) provide more general overviews of recent approaches in computer science.
5   See http://www.policyagendas.org.

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