

Review #1

Hello,

Here is my review. I do not support publication... I think it is a well down and interesting paper but it is a bit narrow and I have concerns about the causal relationships that the authors claim to show.... My review is below:

American Journal of Political Science Review of "Issue-Definition and Policy Change: Capital Punishment and the Rise of the "Innocence Frame," 1960-2003 (32394). Reviewer 510.

The authors explore the impact of media framing on public policy. Specifically, they investigate how the framing of capital punishment has changed over time and how these changes affected the number of death sentences. The paper makes a number of contributions. First, it serves as an intriguing case study about capital punishment and how media coverage of the issue has evolved. Indeed, the content analysis is carefully done and interesting. Second, the authors employ a fairly novel methodological approach for connecting framing to public policy. They also use a well-justified dependent variable. Finally, they add to the political communication literature by showing that media might influence public policy in this case; as the authors note, this builds on Jones and Baumgartner; however, it also extends Jones and Baumgartner by incorporating a more nuanced measure of media coverage. The paper is nicely written and presented.

All of that said, I do not support publication in the AJPS. My main reason is that I do not think the paper, taken as a whole, offers a substantial enough theoretical advance. As the authors acknowledge, there is extant evidence that media coverage might affect public policy so their finding is interesting for the case of capital punishment, but is not a new revelation in general. The authors also suggest their methods are novel; however, I have some non-trivial questions about the results. The authors contend that changes in media framing causes changes in public policy. Yet, there are many other variables that might be at work including such things as interest groups, altering political regimes in states (e.g., from Republican to Democratic legislatures), protect the innocent projects, and deeper shifts in public opinion. All of these factors may be behind both the trends in the media and public policy. Also, the control for homicides is helpful but ignores some dynamics that have been shown to affect death sentences such as the race of the perpetrator and victim. In the end, I am not sure that the authors have actually shown a causal connection. This strikes me as the most significant drawback of the paper.

Another issue concerns the content analysis. As mentioned, it is interesting and very detailed, but the authors need to provide substantially more details on coding reliability. The check with the Readers' Guide is nice, but what about reliability of the actual coding? How was direction coding? Also, where did the 57 arguments come from? How were they derived? In the first few figures, are the effects statistically significant? A small aside, the authors cite Woolley in footnote 1 as a reference for using the New York Times; however, my reading of that article is that he is critical of just using the Times.

In sum, the authors offer a nice case study and the paper will be of

interest to specialized audiences that focus on public policy and/or political communication. I think it is a bit narrow however for the more general AJPS audience (even putting aside my concerns about the causal relationship). I encourage the authors to submit to a more specialized journal.