

Review of MS 32394, "Issue-Definition and Policy Change: Capital Punishment and the Ride of the "Innocence Frame," 1960-2003."

Reviewer number 1532

This manuscript argues that the media's portrayal of the death penalty issue has changed in important ways over the past 40 years and that those changes correlate with the number of people sentenced to death each year in this country. More specifically, it suggests that an "innocence frame," emphasizing the possibility of errors in the sentencing process, has become prevalent in media coverage of capital punishment since the late 1990s and that this frame is responsible for the dramatic reduction in death sentences over the past decade.

I am ambivalent concerning the future of this MS. Initially, I would suggest that it be rejected because it does not make a large enough contribution to our theoretical understanding of issue definition or media framing. The work has many positive attributes, which I will review in a moment, but at the end of the day it offers two very straight forward conclusions: 1) media frames of policy issues change over time and 2) those frames influence policy outcomes. The problem is that we already knew both of these things both generally and in the context of criminal justice (see Beckett, Gordon, Scheingold, etc...). The authors themselves concede that their work simply "offers statistical evidence in the case of the death penalty that supports...earlier findings and ideas"(2). Because the authors do not identify and address inconsistencies or omissions in the existing literature on framing and issue-definition, I do not believe that the MS is suitable for publication in the AJPS.

With that said, however, I would be willing to suggest an R&R if the other reviewers saw merit in doing so. I add this caveat because there are some very interesting ideas and approaches in this manuscript. For instance, the use of the evolutionary factor analysis to uncover the "resonance" and "staying power" of different death penalty frames is intriguing and, as the authors note, potentially allow for more "systematic," "dynamic," and "multidimensional" studies of the relationship between framing, issue-definition, and policy. Additionally, the subject of the death penalty is timely and important in its own right and the authors make a convincing argument that findings from this area might be generalized to other policy areas. Finally, the MS is carefully researched and quite well written.

Thus, I would be willing to support an R&R if other reviewers felt that the MS could be reworked in a way that offered a substantive contribution. Personally, were the authors to be invited to resubmit, I would want them to use the unique and extensive data that they have collected on media frames of the death penalty to challenge/augment our understanding of issue framing. For instance, they might use that data to say something specific about the applicability/tractability of the attention shifting model recently offered by Jones and Baumgartner. Alternatively, they might emphasize the differences between their findings regarding the death sentence equilibrium and the conception of policy equilibrium typically used in the literature. That conception suggests that substantial perturbations cause an equilibrium shift, while these authors argue for a decay function

back to the long-run equilibrium. Whether they adopt one of these approaches or not, a revised manuscript needs to center on a research question that is more novel than: does framing correlate with outcomes? To quote the authors, "Framing matters,"(26) and they need to pick a question that allows them to frame this work as a real contribution to the literature.

Whether the MS is offered an R&R or repackaged for another outlet, there are some additional minor things that I think the authors should address.

- First, the discussion of specific news stories and topics on pages 8-11 is a little drawn out and could probably be shortened.
- Second, the authors need to spend some more time crafting a causal story around the interpretation of the equilibrium findings on pages 21-22. Though the notion of a decaying disequilibrium state in death penalty sentencing after a media "shock" makes sense in the context of an error correction model, the logic is a little attenuated from a "real life" perspective. For example, why would an innocence frame in media coverage of the death penalty in year t , still be influencing the decision making of juries two, three, or even twelve years later? I think the authors can make a compelling argument in this regard, but they need to explicitly address the issue with something more satisfying than calculations based on the ECM.
- Third, the authors need to at least address some potential endogeneity problems in their model. For example, is it possible that less punitive juries create an environment in which media speculate on the reasons for not choosing the death penalty and, thus, the causal relationship might be reversed? A less troublesome relationship might be the one in which fewer homicides reduce public fear of murder, which in turn influences the media's portrayal of the death penalty and death penalty cases, which finally, as the authors suggest, influences sentencing decisions. I am not particularly worried about endogeneity in this work, but the potential for it nonetheless exists and the authors should let the reader know that they have thought about it.