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## Investigating Frame Strength: The Case of Episodic and Thematic Frames

LENE AARØE

*An impressive body of research shows that the framing of an issue affects citizens' attitudes, but also that some frames are more influential than others. Yet, we have surprisingly limited knowledge of the factors that affect the strength of a frame, that is, the frame's capacity to influence citizens' opinions. Therefore, this study investigates the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames to argue that our understanding of the dynamics of frame strength can be advanced through a better incorporation of citizens' emotional reactions. Based on experimental data, I demonstrate that the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames depends on the intensity of citizens' emotional reactions. When there are no or weak emotional reactions, thematic frames are stronger than episodic frames, whereas the relative strength is increasingly reversed when intense emotional reactions are inflamed in the audience. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings.*

**Keywords** frame strength, episodic, emotions, opinion formation, appraisal theory

Framing is a fundamental part of political communication and news reporting (Chong & Druckman, 2007c, p. 100). Specifically, frames “shape individual understanding and opinion concerning an issue by stressing specific elements or features of the broader controversy, reducing a usually complex issue down to one or two central aspects” (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997, p. 568). Frames are carried in rhetorical devices including catchphrases, metaphors, caricatures, quotes, and visual images (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 568). Thus, by framing a political issue through selection of information and rhetorical devices, the sender of a communication may define the relevant policy problem and designate potential solutions (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

The first generation of framing research convincingly demonstrated that frames *can* affect citizens' opinions on a diverse range of issues (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Nelson et al., 1997; Zaller, 1992), but also that some frames have a stronger effect on public opinion than others (Chong & Druckman, 2007a, p. 651). However, past research provides limited insight into the question of the factors affecting *the strength of a frame*—that is, the frame's

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capacity to influence citizens' opinions. Chong and Druckman (2007b) accordingly point out that a "challenge for future work concerns the identification of factors that make a frame strong" (p. 116). Hence, though an impressive body of research has investigated framing effects, we still only have very limited knowledge of the factors that shape frame strength.

The current study investigates episodic and thematic frames to argue that if we are to understand frame strength, we need to clarify the underlying psychological mechanisms. Specifically, our knowledge may be advanced if the role of citizens' emotional reactions in explaining frame strength is better incorporated: Prior research that discusses frame strength at all seems to suggest that strength is either an inherent property of the frame or a product of individual perceptions (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007c; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001) and resonance with shared cultural values (Chong, 2000; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). In contrast, emotions seem to have been almost absent from the study of frame strength. Therefore, the current study extends past research by examining how frame strength also depends on the emotional state of the receiver.

In previous content analyses, episodic and thematic frames have been identified as essential types of political news reporting (Iyengar, 1991), and effect studies have shown that these frames influence citizens' attributions of responsibility, their policy views (Iyengar, 1991), and the intensity of their emotional reactions (Gross, 2008, p. 169). Yet, the question of the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames remains surprisingly underexplored, just as investigations of the dynamics between these types of frames and citizens' emotional reactions have been very limited (Gross, 2008). In particular, no prior study has investigated whether the intensity of citizens' emotional reactions moderates the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence opinions.

In this study, I extend Gross' (2008) first synthesizing of insights from appraisal theory into extant theory on framing to generate predictions about the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames across different intensities of emotional reactions. Specifically, I use this theoretical foundation to argue that episodic frames should not only be expected to elicit stronger emotional reactions than thematic frames (Gross, 2008), but also to be more effective in directing the impact of the emotional reactions into support for the policy direction implied by the frame because episodic frames provide specific characters at which the receivers may direct their emotional reactions. Consequently, episodic frames should be expected to gain more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the emotional reactions of the receivers intensify.

I test these expectations using data from an experiment. The findings support that the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames depends on the intensity of citizens' emotional reactions. When there are no or weak emotional reactions, thematic frames are stronger than episodic frames, whereas the relative strength of the two types of frame rhetoric is increasingly reversed when intense emotions are inflamed in the audience. Thus, my results accentuate the merits of incorporating emotional processes to advance knowledge of frame strength.

## **Thematic and Episodic Framing in Communication**

Framing is a vibrant research field within the social sciences, but the concept is used in different ways across subfields (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 2010; Scheufele, 1999). Overall, extant definitions emphasize that the central dimensions of a frame are "the selection, organization and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others" (de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001, p. 108). Specifically, a frame can be defined as "a central organizing idea or story line" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143) that "shape[s] individual

understanding and opinion concerning an issue by stressing specific elements or features of the broader controversy” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 568) “in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Thus, a frame “generally implies a policy direction” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143), but importantly the frame provides more than a simple position or argument about an issue because the frame also “spell[s] out the essence of the problem,” gives meaning to the issue, and suggests how the issue should be thought about and understood (Nelson & Kinder, 1996, p. 1057; see also Sniderman & Theriault, 2004, p. 136; Slothuus, 2008, p. 3).

Within this general conceptualization of framing, episodic and thematic frames can be identified as two fundamental types of frames that appear across issues, time, and space in political news communication (Gross, 2008, p. 171; Iyengar, 1991, p. 2; de Vreese et al., 2001, p. 109). Specifically, thematic frames focus on political issues and events in a broader context and present collective, abstract, and general evidence (Iyengar, 1990, p. 22; Iyengar, 1991, pp. 2, 14). A news story about cuts in government welfare expenditures substantiated by statistical figures is an empirical example of a thematic framing. In contrast, episodic frames describe concrete events and particular cases that illuminate the issue (Iyengar, 1990, p. 22; Iyengar, 1991, pp. 2, 14). A news story about an elderly disabled woman unable to get public home care is an empirical example of episodic framing.

In a content analysis of news reports aired by ABC, CBS, and NBC on five contemporary political issues between 1981 and 1986, Iyengar (1991, p. 164) showed that the typical news story was clearly directed either toward episodic framing or thematic framing. Yet, in the literature, the question of the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames remains surprisingly open. Hence, Gross (2008) summarizes: “Whether the use of episodic framing would enhance or diminish the effect of a persuasive appeal relative to a thematic frame is somewhat less clear from prior literature” (p. 173). Thus, though episodic and thematic framing are fundamental types of political news communication, knowledge of their relative strength, paradoxically, remains limited.

Extant research on the interplay between episodic and thematic frames and citizens’ policy evaluations has mainly focused on the underlying *cognitive* processes (Gross, 2008, p. 173). Iyengar (1990, 1991) found that these frames influence people’s attribution of causal and treatment responsibility, which, in turn, affects their policy evaluations. However, the impact of alternative frames on the participants’ attribution of responsibility diverged across the various issues investigated (Iyengar, 1991, p. 128). In this respect, prior cognitively oriented studies have only partly shed light on the effect of episodic and thematic frames on citizens’ attitudes and the psychological processes underlying the impact.

However, recently scholars have begun to draw on emotional reactions to understand information processing (e.g., Bargh, 1988, p. 26; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) and framing (e.g., Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004; Nabi, 2003). Gross (2008) specifically incorporated emotions in the study of episodic and thematic framing effects. In an experiment including one thematic and two episodic opinion columns against mandatory minimum sentencing, Gross showed that participants who read one of the episodic opinion columns expressed significantly more intense aversive and empathic emotional reactions than participants in the thematic condition. Moreover, the intensity of the participants’ emotional reactions affected their views on mandatory minimum sentencing. Specifically, more intense empathic reactions increased opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing. Thus, Gross’ results supported that the effect of frames on citizens’ attitudes also may work through an indirect affective track in addition to the cognitive track (pp. 181–182).

Yet, while Gross' results accentuate the merits of incorporating emotional reactions into our understanding of the processes underlying framing effects, her study does not touch the question of emotions as a moderator of the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames. It remains an open question whether the relative strength of distinct types of frame rhetoric changes according to the intensity of the emotional reactions elicited in the audience. Therefore, current findings stipulate further research that can clarify whether and how the emotional reactions of respondents can moderate frame strength.

### **Predicting the Strength of Episodic and Thematic Frames from Emotional Arousal**

Classical theory of appraisal perceives emotions as individual occurrences shaped by the way individuals experience and interpret events (Clore & Ortony, 2008, p. 630; Lazarus, 1991, p. 19; Parkinson & Manstead, 1993, p. 317; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985, p. 836). According to appraisal theory, people assess the event they face, and the resulting appraisal governs their emotional reactions (Lazarus, 1991, p. 19; Scherer, 2003, p. 564). In such a view, the distinctiveness of an emotion "lie[s] in the nature of the situation it represents" (Clore & Ortony, 2008, p. 632). Incorporating these insights from appraisal theory into the discussion of how frames should be expected to affect emotions, Gross (2008) summarizes that "if frames alter the information and considerations subjects have at hand, cognitive appraisal models would predict that emotional output should differ" (p. 172).

In this account, episodic and thematic frames constitute two intellectually distinct appraisal contexts that should be expected to generate different emotional reactions (Gross, 2008, p. 172). Specifically, episodic frames carry human interest details (Baum, 2003, p. 37) that are expected to be more emotionalizing and personalizing than the pale statistics of a thematic frame (Gross, 2008, p. 172; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999, p. 551). The human interest details presented in an episodic frame put a real and specific "face" on the presentation of a political problem (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95) and provide specific characters at which the receivers can direct their emotional reactions. Conversely, thematic frames carry abstract information presenting policy problems as impersonal figures and do not provide specific "lots" or characters at which the receivers may direct their emotional reactions. Therefore, the focal point of the receivers' emotional reactions should be more diffuse and external to the specific content of the thematic frame itself. *Ceteris paribus*, we can thus expect thematic frames to be relatively less successful in eliciting intense emotional reactions (Gross, 2008, p. 172) and to direct the impact of the emotions into support for the policy direction implied by the frame. Consequently, episodic frames should be expected to gain more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the receivers' emotional reactions intensify.

However, the insights of appraisal theory also lead us to expect that the specific discrete emotions triggered by the frames will depend on the details of the particular story. Appraisal theory emphasizes the situated and context-specific nature of affective responses (Clore & Ortony, 2008, p. 628; Scherer, 2003, p. 564). Gross (2008) accordingly states that in order to build expectations about specific emotions, "one must consider the details of the particular story used" (p. 172).

In the current study, subjects were exposed to frames about the "24-year rule" (see Appendix). The 24-year rule is a contested Danish law according to which a Danish citizen who marries a foreigner is prohibited to reside in Denmark before both parties reach the age of 24. Population data from Statistics Denmark and the Rockwool Foundation document that less than 2% of young people aged 18–23 in Denmark are married (Schultz-Nielsen &

Tranæs, 2009, p. 15). Nevertheless, the 24-year rule was implemented in 2002 to strengthen integration of people with non-Western immigrant backgrounds into Danish society and to limit immigration (Kristensen, 2007, pp. 55–56; Siim & Skjeie, 2008, p. 335).

All of the frames selected for the study focused on the topic of the 24-year rule and immigrants' marriage patterns. Specifically, I chose an episodic and a thematic frame from the political camps favoring the 24-year rule (the "pro" camp) and an episodic and a thematic frame from the political camps opposing the 24-year rule (the "con" camp). Prior research categorizes "pro" and "con" frames as frames that make particular aspects of an issue salient to imply distinct positional directions (Druckman, 2010, p. 103). Thus, pro frames make salient aspects of the broader controversy that typically imply an evaluation in favor of a given policy. Likewise, con frames make salient aspects of the broader controversy that typically imply opposition to a given policy (see, for example, Chong & Druckman, 2007a, pp. 641–642).<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, in the current study, both the episodic and the thematic frame derived from the pro camp favoring the 24-year rule stressed that the 24-year rule is about changing immigrants' outdated, involuntary marriage patterns. From a specific and a general perspective, respectively, the pro frames used the emphasis on this aspect of the controversy as a basis for implying support for the policy: Thus, the episodic pro frame featured a specific desperate immigrant woman who had been promised in marriage to her cousin before she was born and whose family refused to accept her resistance to marriage. Correspondingly, the thematic pro frame presented statistics supporting that the 24-year rule had generated a clear change in young immigrants' marriage patterns, which formerly had been highly oriented toward spouses from the original home country of the family.

From a specific and a general perspective, respectively, both the episodic and the thematic frames derived from the camp opposing the 24-year rule stressed that the 24-year rule represents an injustice against innocent young people who already now choose their spouse themselves. From a specific and a general perspective, respectively, the con frames used the emphasis on this aspect of the controversy as a basis for implying opposition to the policy: Thus, the episodic con frame presented the story of a happily-in-love mixed Danish-immigrant couple who had been forced to live isolated from family and friends in Sweden because of the 24-year rule. Correspondingly, the thematic con frame presented statistics supporting that the law, originally implemented to prevent arranged marriages, missed its mark since young immigrants already choose their own partner themselves.

Thus, as can be observed from the presentation of the four frames, both the pro and the con frames selected for the study pointed out clear "innocent victims" in relation to the 24-year rule—either young people with immigrant backgrounds whom the law was implemented to protect or well-functioning young people who have been wrongfully constrained by the law. Correspondingly, both the pro and the con frames also indirectly designated the agents responsible for the situation of the "victims"—either people in the immigrants' network sustaining enforced marriages or the Danish authorities sustaining the 24-year rule.

Given these specific details of the frames in the study, I expect that compassion and pity directed toward the "victims" will be central emotional reactions among the receivers because previous research has established that compassion "is elicited by the perception of suffering or sorrow in another person" (Haidt, 2003, p. 862). Correspondingly, I also expect that anger and disgust directed toward the blameworthy agency responsible for the victims' situation will be central emotional reactions triggered by the frames because, as seen in previous studies, anger and disgust occur as a response to infringements (Clore & Ortony, 2008, p. 630; Haidt, 2003, pp. 856–857; Scherer, 2003, p. 563) and anger is especially



likely to be elicited when the negative situation is caused and controlled by a blameworthy agent (Clore & Centerbar, 2004, p. 139; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985, pp. 818–819; Scherer, 2003, p. 563).

Thus, synthesizing the general expectations about the impact of episodic and thematic frames on emotions and opinions into the discussion of the specific emotions that the frames can be expected to elicit, we may construct the *emotional arousal hypothesis* predicting that the episodic frames selected for the study should trigger stronger pity, compassion, anger, and disgust than thematic frames<sup>2</sup> because episodic frames put specific “faces” and focal points of reaction on policy problems instead of the facelessness of thematic frames.

Furthermore, we may also make predictions about the relative capacity of the episodic and thematic frames to influence opinion. Because episodic frames provide the receiver with a specific focal point of reaction, they can be expected to have a stronger capacity than thematic frames to direct the effect of the emotional reactions into support for the policy evaluation argued by the frame. Consequently, I expect episodic frames to gain more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the emotional reaction elicited in the receivers intensify. This will be referred to as the *persuasiveness hypothesis*.

Finally, the above discussion also allows me to make predictions about the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames in situations where only a low level or no emotional reaction is elicited in the audience. The preceding discussion emphasizes that emotional reactions are the conditioning force shaping the persuasive power of episodic frames. Consequently, when no emotional reaction is instilled in the audience, we should expect episodic frames to have a relatively low capacity to influence citizens’ opinions. In contrast, thematic frames should be expected to better preserve their strength: Following the line of reasoning of classical theories of heuristics and cue taking, norms of rational decision making and logical proof should be expected to function as heuristics favoring the persuasiveness of claims based on aggregate reports and statistics over evaluations based on a single case or personal example (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994, p. 584). In their study of statistical heuristics in everyday reasoning, Nisbett, Krantz, Jepson, and Kunda (1983) accordingly summarize: “People understand, at least in some contexts, that the law of large numbers must be taken into account” (pp. 342–343). Synthesizing the arguments of Baesler and Burgoon (1994, p. 584) and Nisbett et al. (pp. 342–343) into the predictions of this study, we should expect the persuasiveness of the thematic frames to be relatively stronger than the episodic frames when no emotional reaction is elicited in the audience. This expectation will be referred to as the *non-emotion persuasiveness hypothesis*.

## Method

As introduced in the previous section, I conducted an experimental study of opinions on the 24-year rule to investigate the hypotheses. I selected the 24-year rule as the issue context for the empirical investigation of my hypotheses about the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence citizens’ opinions because the popular debate has been characterized by a series of statistical studies and investigations as well as by a number of highly emotional stories of individual citizens’ “miserable” lots. Prior studies in the field have focused on crime stories (e.g., Gross, 2008; Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004) that belong to the group of issues where episodic framing is very dominant (Iyengar, 1991, p. 164). The 24-year rule is a more balanced case that makes it possible to construct the experimental stimuli for both the thematic and the episodic frame in a realistic way, enhancing external validity. As a part of the heated popular debate over immigration and integration of

Muslims into Danish society, the 24-year rule has been a highly salient issue in Denmark (Siim & Skjeie, 2008, pp. 336–337). Likewise, the 24-year rule has also been a central point in the strategic alliances between the political parties, which have turned the issue into a major conflict point—most recently in the 2007 election campaign (Bille, 2008, p. 958). The choice of a “real” and salient issue that has actually been a central part of public debate (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001, pp. 523, 538) and thus “echo[es] ongoing contemporary discussions” (Chong & Druckman, 2007a, p. 641) also increases the realism of the experiment. This aspect of the design enhances external validity as well.

Having selected the issue context for the experiment, it was essential for the empirical investigation of the hypotheses about the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames that the procedures for the construction of the experimental stimuli ensured that observed differences in the impact of episodic and thematic frames were not mere products of a biased selection of stimulus material in the form of high-quality frames (of one type of rhetoric) and low-quality frames (of another type of rhetoric). Therefore, the main experiment in the study only included frames that participants in a distinct pretest *subjectively perceived* as equally strong. This research design where answers from a distinct pretest function to select frames of perceived equal strength optimizes that observed differences in the effect of episodic and thematic frames in the main experiment can be assigned to the rhetorical variation and are not simple reflections of differences in the argument quality or artifacts of the operationalization. Moreover, this design also provides for a conservative test of the hypotheses since it is plausible to assume that part of the difference in the persuasive effect of the frames on opinions is mediated by citizens’ subjective perception of argument quality. Hence, if we observe differences in the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence the participants’ attitudes in the main experiment, it can be perceived as robust evidence in support of the hypotheses.

Thus, following the procedures and measures developed by Chong and Druckman (2007a, p. 641), I implemented a distinct pretest in which participants were asked to rate the strength of nine frames that represented different sides and aspects of the controversy about the 24-year rule. The participants in the pretest had demographic and political characteristics that were highly similar to the respondents who took part in the main experiment. In the pretest, the participants rated the strength of the nine frames by answering the following question after reading each of the frames: “How strong would you say this argument is?” Answers were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *not strong at all* to *very strong*.

In line with the procedures of Gross (2008, pp. 175, 185–188), who exposed her participants to opinion columns on “The Case Against Mandatory Minimum Sentencing,” I presented the episodic and thematic frames in the pretest as “extracts from the debate” about the 24-year rule. All nine frames rated in the pretest were of equal length (between 100 and 114 words), and “pro” and “con” frames, respectively, were similar in their policy recommendation in the headline and the concluding sentence. Hence, all pro frames had “keep the 24-year rule” in their headline, and all con frames had “abolish the 24-year rule” in their headline (see Appendix).

Based on the results from the pretest, I selected two pro and two con frames (each with one episodic and one thematic frame) that did not differ in terms of the participants’ subjective perception of their strength for the main experiment (pro episodic mean strength = .62, pro thematic mean = .62, mean difference = .005,  $p = .803$ ; con episodic mean strength = .59, con thematic mean = .54, mean difference = .05,  $p = .134$ ; two-sided tests).<sup>3</sup>

As explained previously, in terms of content all frames that were selected for the main experiment focused on the general topic of immigrants’ marriage patterns and the 24-year



rule. Frames that focused on implications of the law for education and the labor market were dropped. This selection criterion allowed me to retain general topical similarity in the different framings in the experimental conditions, enhancing internal validity.

### *Procedure and Measures*

In the main experiment, participants in the treatment groups read a short factual introduction followed by one of the four frames (see Appendix). Participants in the control group only read the factual introduction. Hence, the main experiment included four treatment groups and a control group as a baseline of comparison. The experiment followed a between-subjects design, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions through block randomization.

*Dependent Variable.* The dependent opinion variable was measured with the following question: “Do you think that the 24-year rule should be abolished or preserved?” Answers were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from  $-3$  (*strongly oppose*) to  $3$  (*strongly support*) and recoded to range from 0 to 1 for the purpose of the analyses.

*Participants’ Emotional Reactions.* Following my theoretical expectations about the particular emotional responses that the frames about the 24-year rule should be expected to elicit, the participants were asked how much compassion, pity, anger, and disgust they felt when reading the frame. Answers were measured on 7-point scales ( $0 = \textit{nothing at all}$ ,  $6 = \textit{very strong}$ ) and recoded to range from 0 to 1. This approach has also been applied successfully in past research on the relationship between emotions and episodic and thematic framing (e.g., Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004, p. 7; Gross, 2008, p. 175).

### *Participants*

The experiment was conducted in March and April 2008. A diverse group of students in upper secondary education (high schools and business schools) were recruited. Seven education centers located in different geographical areas with varying degrees of urbanization and varying political preferences were chosen to maximize variation in the students’ attitudinal characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

The participants’ average age was 18. Studies have not shown differences in susceptibility between student and nonstudent samples (Miller & Krosnick, 2000, p. 313) or across age (Mayhorn, Fisk, & Wittle, 2002, p. 520). Yet, as Gross (2008, p. 176) emphasizes, using a student sample still requires some extra caution in generalizing from the results (Sears, 1986). I will therefore bring this up in the concluding discussion. Though the student sample was not representative of the Danish population, the participants’ attitudinal characteristics and other background traits displayed good variation. Of the 605 participants in the main experiment, 54% were female, 6.7% had no interest in politics, 33.3% had low interest, 41.6% had some interest, and 18.4% had high interest. Approximately 47% voted for the center-right parties, 40% for the center-left parties, and 13.1% did not express a party preference. This distribution of party preferences was very similar to the distribution in the Danish electorate at the time of the experiment, where 45.8% voted for the center-right parties, 40.1% for the center-left parties, and 14.1% did not express a party preference (2007 National Election Survey data).

## Findings

Before the empirical test of the hypotheses, a preliminary step was to check whether the frames, basically, were able to influence the participants' attitudes toward the highly salient issue of the 24-year rule.<sup>5</sup> The results showed that in the control group, support for the 24-year rule reached an average of .50 on a 0–1 scale, higher values indicating stronger support. Among participants reading one of the pro frames, support for the policy rose to .70, whereas support decreased to .45 among participants who read one of the con frames. Though support for the 24-year rule among participants reading a con frame did not differ significantly from the control group, the effect had the expected direction. Moreover, participants in the con condition were significantly less in favor of the 24-year rule than participants reading a pro frame (mean difference = .25,  $p < .001$ , two-sided test). This significant framing effect was stable and consistent among the participants who read the episodic frames (mean difference = .26,  $p < .001$ ) and among the participants who received the thematic frames (mean difference = .24,  $p < .001$ ). While the pro frames are more influential than the con frames, the central tendency in the preliminary analyses is that, basically, the participants are moderately susceptible to framing effects on the issue.<sup>6</sup> Hence, any insignificant later findings in the study are not due to simple use of inefficient frames.

The first hypothesis to be tested is whether the episodic frames trigger more intense emotional reactions of compassion, pity, anger, and disgust than the thematic frames. The left side of Table 1 shows the average intensity of the participants' emotional reactions while reading the stimuli, by condition (episodic, thematic, and baseline). Values range from 0–1; higher values indicate more intense emotional reaction, and 0 indicates no emotional reaction. The right side of Table 1 reports differences in the group means.

As can be seen from Table 1, there are quite clear emotional reactions, especially on compassion and pity but also on anger and disgust, in the episodic, thematic, and baseline

**Table 1**  
Average intensity of participants' self-reported emotional reactions  
by experimental condition

	Experimental condition			Differences between group means		
	Episodic frame	Thematic frame	Control group	Episodic–Thematic	Episodic–Control	Thematic–Control
Compassion	.64 (.29)	.38 (.29)	.45 (.31)	.26***	.19***	–.07
Pity	.63 (.27)	.36 (.29)	.43 (.30)	.27***	.20***	–.07
Anger	.45 (.30)	.19 (.23)	.27 (.29)	.27***	.18***	–.08*
Disgust	.45 (.31)	.23 (.26)	.27 (.27)	.22***	.19***	–.04
Lowest valid <i>n</i> in subgroup	239	242	121			

*Note.* Entries on the left side are group reaction means. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Values range from 0–1, with higher values indicating more intense emotional reactions and 0 indicating no emotional reaction. Entries on the right side are differences between the group means in the episodic vs. the thematic condition, in the episodic condition vs. the control group, and in the thematic condition vs. the control group, respectively.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-sided test with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons).

conditions. Overall, this result is consistent with extant research emphasizing the importance of affective systems in attitude formation (e.g., Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Marcus et al., 2000; Nabi, 2003).

Furthermore, the results in Table 1 show that participants who read an episodic frame (either pro or con) expressed significantly stronger compassion, pity, anger, and disgust than participants who read a thematic frame or participants in the baseline condition. The results in Table 1 also indicate that the emotional reactions of the participants who read a thematic frame were either of the same intensity as in the baseline condition or even weaker. Hence, participants who received the thematic frame scored lower on compassion, pity, anger, and disgust than participants in the baseline condition. However, only the difference in the intensity of anger felt by the participants reaches statistical significance.

In sum, the results in Table 1 clearly support the emotional arousal hypothesis and confirm the pattern of response observed by Gross (2008) on a crime issue. Specifically, the episodic frames in the current study generated stronger compassion, pity, anger, and disgust than the thematic frames and the baseline condition. Moreover, my results also suggest that the use of thematic frames could possibly lower people's emotional involvement compared to a situation where no frame is provided. Accordingly, the rhetoric in a frame apparently makes a substantial difference for the emotional state of the receivers.

This conclusion leads us to the question of the implications of these findings for the impact of episodic and thematic frames on citizens' opinions. What is the linkage between episodic and thematic framing in news communication, the emotional reactions elicited in citizens, and ultimately their opinions on political issues?

According to the persuasiveness hypothesis, episodic frames are more effective than thematic frames in directing the effect of emotional reactions into support for the policy evaluation argued by the frame. In terms of persuasiveness, episodic frames should therefore gain more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the receivers' emotional reactions intensify.

To test this expectation, the results in Table 2 unfold the effect of the direction of the frame and each emotion on the participants' support for the 24-year rule in the episodic and the thematic condition. Frame direction is coded 0–1, where 1 represents a pro frame and 0 a con frame. The emotions are coded to range from 0–1, with higher values indicating more intense emotional reactions. Finally, the dependent variable, support for the 24-year rule, is coded to range from 0–1, higher values indicating stronger support.

The results in Table 2 support the persuasiveness hypothesis: In the thematic condition, the results in the bivariate column show that both the direction of the frame and the intensity of the four emotional reactions are significant and substantial predictors of the participants' attitudes toward the 24-year rule. Yet, in the thematic condition, the findings in the interaction model reveal no significant moderating effect of the direction of the frame on the impact of the emotional response items. Thus, in the thematic condition, the effect of the respondents' compassion, pity, anger, and disgust on support for the 24-year rule is not directed by the direction of the frame.

Turning to the results for the episodic condition, the findings indicate that the effect of the participants' emotional reactions on their support for the 24-year rule is highly conditioned by the direction of the frame they received. Hence, in the interaction model, all of the interaction terms between frame direction and the emotional reaction items are clearly significant ( $p \leq .001$ , two-sided tests). Moreover, the combination of the negative sign of the emotional reaction coefficients and the positive sign of the interaction terms indicates that

**Table 2**  
Effect of frame direction and emotional reactions on support for the 24-year rule

	Episodic		Thematic	
	Bivariate	Interaction model	Bivariate	Interaction model
<b>Anger</b>				
Constant		.62***		.48***
Frame direction (pro = 1)	.26***	.05	.25***	.27***
Anger	-.06	-.40***	-.42***	-.22*
Frame Direction × Anger		.52***		-.29#
Lowest <i>n</i>		239		242
<b>Disgust</b>				
Constant		.59***		.53***
Frame direction (pro = 1)	.26***	-.07	.25***	.24***
Disgust	.04	-.39***	-.49***	-.35***
Frame Direction × Disgust		.49***		-.12
Lowest <i>n</i>		238		242
<b>Compassion</b>				
Constant		.75***		.65***
Frame direction (pro = 1)	.26***	-.08	.25***	.13*
Compassion	-.12	-.49***	-.47***	-.51***
Frame Direction × Compassion		.57***		.18
Lowest <i>n</i>		239		243
<b>Pity</b>				
Constant		.77***		.62***
Frame direction (pro = 1)	.26***	-.17#	.25***	.16**
Pity	-.12	-.53***	-.43***	-.44***
Frame Direction × Pity		.72***		.13
Lowest <i>n</i>		238		242

*Note.* Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Frame direction is coded 0–1, where 1 = pro frame and 0 = con frame. All emotional reaction items are coded on a 0–1 scale, with higher values indicating more intense emotional reactions.

# $p < .1$ ; \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (two-sided tests).

the effect of the intensity of emotional reactions on the participants' attitudes toward the 24-year rule follows the policy evaluations argued by the pro and con frames.

In sum, the preliminary findings in Table 2 support the persuasiveness hypothesis: Apparently, episodic frames not only trigger more intense emotional reactions than thematic frames; they also seem to be more effective in directing the effect of the receivers' emotional reactions into support for the policy evaluation they argue.

To test whether these substantial differences in the pattern of effects in Table 2 are statistically significant and to further unfold their implications for the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence opinions, I estimate full three-way ordinary least squares (OLS) interaction models between type of frame (episodic = 1, thematic = 0), frame direction (pro = 1, con = 0), and the intensity of the emotional reaction (coded 0–1, interval) for all four emotions included in the study. The results are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
Effect of frame rhetoric, frame direction, and receivers' emotional reaction  
by type of emotion

	Pity	Compassion	Disgust	Anger
Constant	.62***	.65***	.53***	.48***
Frame direction	.16**	.13*	.24***	.27***
Frame rhetoric	.15*	.09	.06	.14*
Emotional reaction	-.44***	-.51***	-.35***	-.22*
Frame Direction × Frame Rhetoric	-.34**	-.22	-.16	-.22**
Frame Direction × Emotional Reaction	.13	.18	-.12	-.29
Frame Rhetoric × Emotional Reaction	-.09	.01	-.04	-.19
Frame Rhetoric × Emotional Reaction × Direction	.59**	.39*	.61**	.80***
Adjusted $R^2$	.26	.26	.23	.22
$n$	480	482	480	481

*Note.* Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Frame direction is coded 0–1, where 1 = pro frame and 0 = con frame. Frame rhetoric is coded 0–1, where 1 = episodic framing and 0 = thematic framing. All emotional reaction items range from 0–1, with higher values indicating more intense emotional reactions.

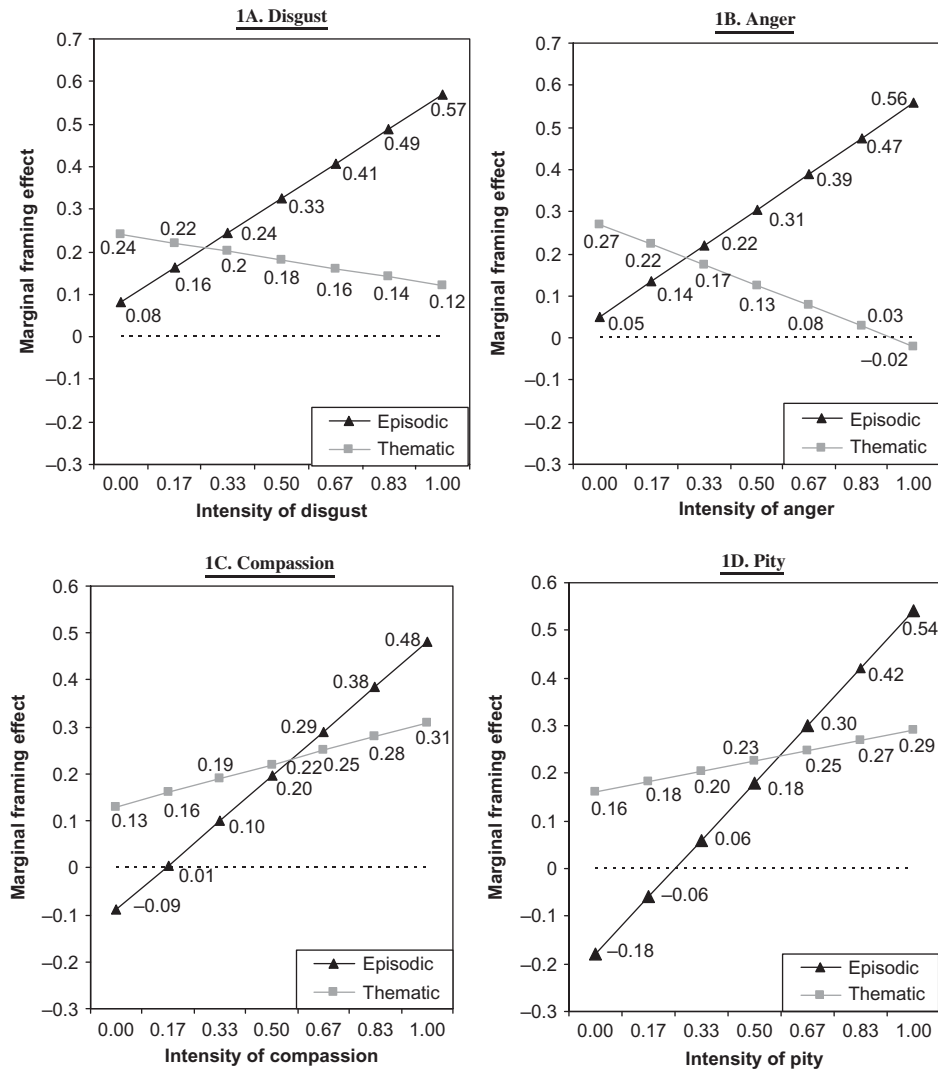
\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (two-sided tests).

Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Higher scores on the dependent variable indicate stronger support for the 24-year rule.

The results in Table 3 consistently show significant three-way interaction terms between frame rhetoric (episodic/thematic), frame direction (pro/con), and each emotional reaction item (all  $p$  values < .05 or less, two-sided tests). This finding indicates that the effect of the frame on receivers' support for the 24-year rule differs significantly between the episodic and the thematic conditions as the intensity of the receivers' emotional reactions changes. Apparently, emotions moderate the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames.<sup>7,8</sup>

To further clarify the substantial implications of these findings for the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence participants' attitudes toward the 24-year rule, I proceed from the findings in Table 3 and calculate the marginal effect of receiving a pro frame relative to a con frame across the levels of intensity of the participants' emotional reactions for the episodic and thematic conditions. The results are displayed in Figure 1 for each emotion. The black and the gray solid lines denote the marginal effect of receiving a pro frame relative to a con frame in the episodic and thematic conditions, respectively. The dotted horizontal line refers to 0.

The response pattern for disgust and anger in Panels A and B of Figure 1 supports the persuasiveness hypothesis: In the episodic condition, the marginal framing effect increases substantially when the participants' emotional reactions intensify. In contrast, in the thematic condition, the effect of the frames remains fairly constant, and the slope representing the change in the thematic framing effect as emotional reactions intensify is insignificant



**Figure 1.** Framing effects by participants’ emotional reaction and frame rhetoric. Y-axis: marginal framing effect = support for the 24-year rule after reading a pro frame subtracted from support for the rule after reading a con frame. X-axis: intensity of participants’ emotional reaction (anger, disgust, compassion, and pity, respectively).

for both disgust and anger (this can be verified from the insignificant interaction terms between frame direction and emotional reaction in the model for disgust and anger in Table 3). Hence, the central tendencies in Panels A and B of Figure 1 support that episodic frames gain more in capacity to influence opinions about the 24-year rule than thematic frames when the respondents become more emotional.

Equally, for the empathic feelings of compassion and pity in Panels C and D of Figure 1, the response pattern supports the prediction. Hence, the black solid line representing the marginal framing effect in the episodic condition is clearly steeper than the gray line representing the marginal framing effect in the thematic condition. Moreover,



just as in Panels A and B of Figure 1, the change in the effect of the thematic frames as the respondents' emotional reactions intensify is statistically insignificant in Panels C and D (this can be verified from the insignificant interaction term between frame direction and emotional reaction in the model for compassion and pity in Table 3).

Thus, the central tendencies in the response patterns in Figure 1 consistently support the persuasiveness hypothesis. As expected, episodic frames gained more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the compassion, pity, anger, or disgust elicited in the receivers intensified. This conclusion leads us to the question of the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames when citizens' emotional reactions are minimal. The non-emotion persuasiveness hypothesis predicts that in situations when no emotional reaction is elicited, we should expect thematic frames to have the relatively strongest capacity to influence opinions.

In Figure 1, the response patterns across all four emotions consistently indicate that when participants express no emotional reaction, the marginal framing effect in the thematic condition exceeds the effect in the episodic condition. Moreover, in Table 3 the results for the interaction term between frame direction and frame rhetoric tell us that this difference in the impact of episodic and thematic frames is significant for the models estimated with pity and anger, respectively ( $p < .01$ , two-sided tests), and marginally significant for the model estimated with compassion ( $p = .051$ , two-sided tests).

Finally, by comparing the coefficients and statistical significance for the effect of the frame direction in the two interaction models in Table 2, we may even further sharpen this conclusion. Thus, the coefficients and their statistical significance indicate that when participants' emotional reactions are zero, episodic frames are not only weaker than thematic frames, but they seem to completely lose their capacity to influence citizens' attitudes and might even produce contrast effects where support for the policy evaluation argued by the frame is decreased. As a result, in the interaction model in Table 2 in the episodic condition, the effect of the direction of the frame on attitudes toward the 24-year rule turns insignificant across the analyses estimated for anger, disgust, and compassion and marginally significant (in a contrast direction) in the analysis estimated for pity. Conversely, in the thematic condition, the effect of the direction of the frame remains positive and highly statistically significant when the participants' emotional reactions are zero. Hence, the response pattern supports the non-emotion persuasiveness hypothesis. When no emotional reaction is elicited, thematic frames generally seem to be stronger than episodic frames.

## Discussion

Based on an investigation of the case of episodic and thematic frames, this study has examined the role of emotions in explaining frame strength. My findings consistently support that the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames depends on the intensity of the emotional reactions elicited in the audience. As expected from the emotional intensity hypothesis, the empirical results show that the episodic frames triggered more intense compassion, pity, anger, and disgust than the thematic frames. These findings are consistent with prior studies emphasizing that the type of rhetoric in a frame affects citizens' emotional reactions (e.g., Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Gross, 2008; Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004).

Moreover, consistent with the persuasiveness hypothesis, the findings indicated that episodic frames seem to have greater capacity to direct the effect of the receivers' emotional reactions into support for the policy position argued by the frame. The intensity of the receivers' emotions was a significant moderator of the effect of the episodic frames, but

not the thematic frames. In direct line with these results, the findings also demonstrated that emotional arousal moderated the relative strength of episodic and thematic frames so that episodic frames gained relatively more in capacity to influence opinions than thematic frames when the compassion, anger, or disgust elicited in receivers intensified.

Finally, the investigation of the non-emotion persuasiveness hypothesis showed that in situations when no emotional reaction is elicited, thematic frames generally retained the strongest ability to influence opinions. These results are consistent with Gross' (2008, pp. 181–182) findings: On the issue of mandatory minimum sentencing, she showed that when controlling for emotional reactions, the partial effect of the episodic frame weakened the persuasive impact on respondents' attitudes relative to the thematic frame. Taken together, these findings consistently support that without emotion in the audience, episodic frames tend to fail compared to thematic frames.

The findings of the current study have important implications for the study of frame strength and, more generally, for research on persuasiveness: The study demonstrates that we may extend our knowledge of frame strength by clarifying the underlying psychological processes. More specifically, my findings advance our understanding of frame strength by demonstrating that the strength of a frame is not exclusively shaped by its effectiveness in changing the importance of cognitive considerations or resonating with individually and culturally shared values (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Chong, 1996; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001), but also by the frame's capacity to trigger and direct emotional reactions into support for the argued policy position. This contribution is central because emotions seem to have been almost absent in prior work on frame strength.

However, a cautionary note is that the conclusions in the current study are based on results for one issue and a limited number of episodic and thematic frames. Previous literature suggests that the effect of frames and emotions on particular outcomes may vary by context and issue (Druckman & McDermott, 2008, p. 317). This study only investigated the effects of one set of episodic and thematic frames. Therefore, it is important to be careful when generalizing from the findings. It is plausible that emotions and policy evaluations may be more closely connected in some episodic frames than others, depending on the consistency and quality of the frame as well as the specific information provided to the receiver. The results of my pretest showed that both of the applied episodic frames in the main study were perceived to be of relatively strong quality.<sup>9</sup> Work needs to be done to examine the strength of the connection between emotion and opinions on episodic frames of lower quality or featuring more ambiguous human interest details. Cognition and emotion might be more disconnected for this subcategory of episodic frames.

Equally, future studies should look into potential variations in the emotional appeal of thematic frames. In the current study, I provided the respondents with moderate statistical information. Yet, in political communication we also sometimes observe thematic frames carrying highly extreme statistical distributions with "shock effect." Such thematic frames might have a stronger emotional impact, which might strengthen the persuasiveness of these frames. Thus, more work needs to be done to theorize and test the strength and underlying psychological processes of particular subcategories of episodic and thematic frames.

Moreover, the current study focused on the emotions of compassion, pity, anger, and disgust because of the particular details of the frames applied in the study. My findings indicate that these emotions had similar effects on frame strength. Anger and disgust belong to the family of other condemning emotions, and pity and compassion belong to the family of other suffering emotions, which both have direct prosocial action tendencies (Haidt, 2003, pp. 856–857, 862). Other emotions have different action tendencies. For example, shame

has withdrawal and reduction of social presence as its central action tendencies (Eisenberg, Losoya, & Spinrad, 2003, p. 792; Haidt, 2003, p. 860). Thus, a venue for future work is to investigate the impact of other emotions such as shame or sadness on frame strength because appraisal theory predicts that different types of emotions have different properties and different attitudinal consequences.

Finally, when generalizing from this study, it is also important to consider the use of a salient issue and a student sample carefully. The 24-year rule has been a salient issue in the public debate in Denmark. Though the issue has mainly been discussed in popular debate as an immigration policy, the mere congruence between the age of the student sample and the target group of the 24-year rule might have increased some students' involvement with the issue. Specifically, a caution concerning the generalizability of the findings is that the differences in the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to influence opinion may be less clear on low-salient and disengaging issues because emotional arousal may generally be more limited. A path for future research will therefore also be to investigate the relative capacity of episodic and thematic frames to trigger emotional reactions and influence opinion in contexts with varying issue salience and issue relevance.

Yet, based on the results derived from testing the hypotheses on an issue that is real and salient in public debate, the current study overall supports the promising potential of integrating extant knowledge of frame rhetoric with new research on the role of emotions in citizens' attitude formation to increase our general understanding of the factors that influence frame strength and, hence, constitute a central criterion for political success in modern democracy.

## Notes

1. Thus, pro and con frames provide more than a single argument or position on an issue because they also provide meaning to an issue and suggest how to understand and think about it. In this respect, the characteristics of pro and con frames are consistent with the general characteristics of frames as specified by Nelson and Kinder (1996), who with respect to the general notion of framing emphasize that "frames are more than simply positions or arguments about an issue. Frames are *constructions* of the issue: they spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about, and may go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done" (p. 1057; for parallel arguments, see Slothuus, 2008, p. 3, and Sniderman & Theriault, 2004, p. 136).

2. See Gross (2008, p. 172) for a parallel prediction.

3. The results from the pretest were replicated in the data from the main experiment. The findings in these data also demonstrated that the two pro and the two con frames did not differ in terms of the participants' subjective perception of their strength.

4. Compare Petersen (2010) for a similar selection criterion.

5. As a preliminary step, a randomization check was conducted. No evidence of systematic differences was found across conditions on the demographic and attitudinal background measures.

6. In their study of support for the EU, Vliegenthart, Schuck, Boomgarden, and de Vreese (2008, p. 431) also found that pro frames (a benefit frame specifically) worked better than con frames.

7. To further investigate the robustness of these results when controlling for variables identified by past research as influential moderators of framing effects (e.g., Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Zaller, 1992), the analyses in Table 3 were replicated controlling for (a) full three-way interactions between frame direction (pro/con), frame rhetoric (episodic/thematic), and the partisanship of the respondent (voters of center-right parties/center-left parties) and (b) full three-way interactions between frame direction (pro/con), frame rhetoric (episodic/thematic), and the political awareness of the respondents (high/low political awareness). In both of these tests of robustness, all three-way interaction terms between frame rhetoric (episodic/thematic), frame direction (pro/con), and each emotional reaction item remained significant (all  $p$ s < .05 or less, two-sided tests). This is consistent

with the findings of Druckman and McDermott (2008, pp. 309–310) that emotions maintain statistical significance as moderators of framing effects when controlling for the moderating effect of these classical individual predispositions.

8. I also checked for complex four-way interaction effects between discrete negative and positive emotions and the direction of the frame and the rhetoric of the frame. All results were statistically insignificant.

9. The mean strength ratings of the episodic frames were .62 and .59, respectively.

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## Appendix: Experimental Stimuli in the Five Conditions

### *Common Introduction and Control Group Condition*

The 24-year rule implies that a Danish citizen who marries a foreigner cannot settle with his/her spouse in Denmark before both parties reach the age of 24. The rule was implemented in 2002. Since then, the 24-year rule has been much debated. In a debate article, the following *point of view* appeared:

#### *Pro Frames*

##### *Episodic Frame*

*“The Danish society will not accept coercion: Keep the 24-year rule.”*

“They are planning my wedding and my life. I cannot bear it. All this pressure is too much for me.” These were the words from a Pakistani-born woman on television the other day. She had been promised in marriage to a cousin before she was born. Many times, she had tried to tell her family that she was against the marriage, but they would not listen. The woman’s story is one among many others which shows the importance of the Danish society clearly signaling that we do not accept forced marriages. The 24-year rule is a protective measure supporting young people who try to break free from outdated marriage traditions. Therefore, it is necessary that Denmark keeps the 24-year rule.

##### *Thematic Frame*

*“New studies substantiate: Keep the 24-year rule.”*

New studies indicate that the 24-year rule has improved integration effectively. Figures from StatBank Denmark show that in 2001, 67% of young immigrants from non-Western countries found their spouse outside Denmark. Typically, the spouse came from the family’s original home country. After the implementation of the 24-year rule, this number has dropped to 37%. Today, 63% of young immigrants from non-Western countries marry a Danish man or woman, which is a clear change in their marriage patterns. Thus, the new studies indicate that the 24-year rule works and improves integration into the Danish society. Therefore, Denmark should keep the rule.



### **Con Frames**

#### *Episodic Frame*

*“Breaking up innocent families: Abolish the 24-year rule.”*

The other day, TV showed an item about Mette and her Palestinian husband, Ahmed, who have been forced to live in “love asylum” in Sweden by the Danish immigration laws. The young couple met when Mette did a 5-month internship as a kindergarten teacher in Palestine. Today, they live in a small, half-empty apartment in Malmø far away from their family and friends. Because of the 24-year rule, they cannot live together in Denmark. The couple’s situation shows how the 24-year rule prevents our own citizens from returning to their home if the love of their life happens to have a foreign passport. People should be allowed to fall in love. The 24-year rule should therefore be abolished.

#### *Thematic Frame*

*“New studies substantiate: Abolish the 24-year rule.”*

New studies indicate that the 24-year rule is inappropriate because it misses its mark. The 24-year rule was implemented to prevent arranged marriages. However, a new study shows that among ethnic minorities only 4% of the young were not involved in the choice of their spouse. In 80% of the marriages, the young people themselves chose their partner. The remaining 16% of the marriages were contracted after negotiations between the parents and the young people. The new figures substantiate that the 24-year rule is based on wrong conditions. The fact is that young people decide themselves. Therefore, the rational solution for our politicians is to abolish the 24-year rule.