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Media Coverage of Voter Disenfranchisement: Political Communication Effects and Applied Theories

On November 6, 2018, Florida voters elected to pass Amendment 4, the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative, and granted 1.5 million formerly convicted felons the right to vote (Pirani, 2018). Since the ratification of this clause in the Florida constitution in 1868, ex-felon voting rights restoration efforts were in the hands of governors and state legislators. Amendment 4, however, was the first time this issue was determined by voters since the state was founded (Sherman, 2013).

It is quite difficult to secure a measure on the Florida ballot. Proponents of any given amendment must present 766,200 valid petition signatures to receive validity for their amendment to be placed on the ballot (Ballotpedia, 2018b). Floridians for a Fair Democracy, in partnership with the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, took on this task, and collected over 1.1 million signatures, enthusiastically exceeding the threshold for ballot cogency (Lopez, 2018). However, the path to reach 1.1 million was not easy. Placing any amendment on a general ballot required a rally of civic engagement, and the two grassroots organizations did just that. Their work started in 2014 when an “official ballot committee” was founded to draft the amendment that would change the course of voting rights in Florida. In 2016, their grassroots efforts rallied volunteers and organizations to submit more than 70,000 signatures to be a catalyst for review of the Florida Supreme court, who unanimously approved the draft’s language. Thus, Floridians for a Fair Democracy and the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition was cleared to seek petition

signatures (Floridians for a Fair Democracy, n.d.). Of course, all signatures were secured, and the amendment passed.

The advocacy efforts of the aforementioned special interest groups play a vital role in the framing of media coverage and building the public agenda. Since the placement of an amendment on a ballot requires a minimum of 766,200 voters to sign, then it inherently stokes civic engagement and civic socialization. To measure the impact of outside sources on media coverage, these activist groups use information subsidies as statistical and factual guidelines for coverage about their issue or cause. Information subsidies are pieces of information in the form of news releases, press conferences, interviews, social media campaigns, letters, etc. that special interest groups curate to communicate their message to the public and media (Kiousis et al., 2013).

Floridians for a Fair Democracy and Florida Rights Restoration Coalition are just two of the special interest advocacy group that contributed to the saturation of media coverage about Amendment 4 and restoration of felon voting rights in general. Let America Vote is a voting rights group advocating for disenfranchised citizens across the country, and they are experts at disseminating information subsidies. Perhaps one of their most effective tool was an interview Let America Vote founder and host of *Majority 54* podcast, Jason Kander, conducted with Desmond Meade, founder and president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition.

Meade is a former drug-addict, spent time in prison under felony charges, therefore at the time of Kander's interview, could not vote. The way Kander talks about Meade's situation is raw and looks past the "felon" stigma. Kander says about Meade, "He has a law degree, but he can't sit for the bar. He's active in his community and his wife ran for the state legislature, but he can't vote. But Desmond isn't discouraged. He's fighting back and he's inspiring a lot of people,

including me” (Kander, 2018). As will soon be discussed, Kander humanizing Meade as an activist uses a “human interest frame” that constructed a pattern of interpretation less likely to ostracize former felons.

Because this was the first time Florida voters had the power to change this issue, there was a stark contrast of its media coverage before and after this amendment earned its spot on the ballot. This novel angle caught the attention of journalists using certain frames to report this story, warranting further study of how framing influenced this historical milestone for voting rights. Special interest groups relentlessly working to civically engage so many voters lends itself to the agenda building theory.

The civic and political relevance of Amendment 4’s media coverage warrants discussion about past political communication research. The study of political communication effects explains how media influences voter decisions at the ballot box. This paper considers how media framing and agenda setting influenced voters’ decisions to pass the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative. McLeod et al. (2009) shows that political communication has individual-level cognitive effects that can be conceptualized with the framing, agenda setting, and agenda building theories. The following theoretical overviews present the aforementioned theories within the “political communications effects” lens.

Framing Theory

Rooted in the fields of psychology and sociology, the framing theory dictates that patterns of interpretation influence how people make sense of the world (Entman, 1993). It is a widely used theory of mass communication research that explains characteristics of media content and media effects, and these “framing effects” emerge when the exposition of a political issue engenders opinion formation (Matthes, 2009; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Chong and

Druckman (2007) posit that the major premise of framing theory is that "...an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations."

When applying the framing theory to communication, Tuchman (1978) says, "the news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality... [it] is an essential feature of news" (p. 193). However, new research hypothesizes that political media framing may have different impacts on different people (Valentino, Beckman, & Buhr, 2001). When applied directly to news coverage, framing theory research suggests stories are presented in "packages." Preferably, each package has a frame and is organized by "providing meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) and fostering "particular definitions and interpretations of political issues" (Shah et al. 2002).

Along with packages, framing effects are influenced by a myriad of factors. Shen and Edwards (2005) say that structural location and personal values are tangent to framing effects. They conducted a study that expanded framing research by analyzing the relationship between core values and news frame effects on an individual level. Participants read newspaper articles that framed welfare reform by highlighting the necessity for public aid and stringent work requirements. Shen and Edwards then tested the likelihood that respondents' thoughts were relevant to frames. Results yielded data that suggested a correlation between news frames and individual values, and that both have notable influence on opinion formation.

Framing effects are also contingent upon political identity. This "identity" could take the form of political involvement (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), political schema (Shen, 2004), and political knowledge (Zaller, 1992). Since the result of Florida's Amendment 4 can be credited to political involvement, it warrants a deeper dive into Valentino, Beckmann, and

Buhr's (2001) study on the way framing impacts consumers' confidence in their government. By compiling and deploying story elements that claim to further "public cynicism," respondents in the study were more likely to adopt opinions aligned with the frames in stories they read. This inclination favors the idea that news consumers rely on the media as a political information source and helps with processing new information about political issues.

Because readers were prone to adopt certain frames reporters use to write articles, the same could hold true for media framing of Amendment 4 prior to election day. Both the Valentine et al. and Shen and Edwards studies draw the conclusion that frame adoption is more likely when frames align with a consumer's opinion, especially when the frames correlate with humanitarian ideals. Much of the news coverage about Amendment 4 included profiles of ex-felons being involved in their communities and activist groups organizing to "right this wrong."

A similar line of thinking that connects these factors is that preceding framing research argues that frames prevalent in "elite" dialogues have forceful impact on individual perceptions and stances. For the purpose of this discussion, "elites" are conceptualized by any entity employing resources to influence the media, like policymakers and activists (Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Price et al., 1997).

Potential opinion formation is the effect most attractive to politicians and special interest groups lobbying for an election victory or legislative action because voters are mobilized by being encouraged to consider issues with particular frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This concept scratches the surface of two facets of the framing theory, *frame building* and *frame setting*. Framing building is how the news is framed and frame setting is how news frames affect audiences (Zhou & Moy, 2007).

Frame building happens in two ways. The first is when elites choose to present an issue or information with a certain frame, and the second is when media covers topics that align with popular culture (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2007). Of course, the influences on frame construction range from politicians, to journalists, to cultural icons or phenomena, and even activist groups. Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) defined four factors that influence how frames could be built: societal norms and values, the pressure and constraint of news organizations, professional routines, and the most evident regarding Amendment 4 media coverage, pressures from interest groups or policy makers.

A variety of activist groups can be credited with building frames for media coverage: Floridians for a Fair Democracy, Florida Rights Restoration Commission, Southern Poverty Law Center, Equal Justice Initiative, and perhaps the most prominent, Let America Vote. Let America Vote was founded by Jason Kander, the first millennial ever elected to statewide office as Missouri's Secretary of State. Kander started this campaign to fight laws that disproportionately affect people, and this mission is fulfilled through an aggressive, earned media strategy. On September 20, 2018, Let America Vote launched a digital ad campaign that is a call-to-action for voters to "consider politicians' record on voting rights when they go to the polls on Nov. 6." (LetAmericaVote.org, 2018). It is expected this paid exposure will help frame the voting rights conversation in a way conducive to those disenfranchised, further affirming Let America Vote's role in building frames for this issue.

Since research shows that culture has a significant impact on journalistic frames, and journalists are inherently part of the culture, then they cannot help but to use frames in their writing (Van Gorp, 2007). Some argue that culture's inevitable influence on journalists and frame building makes it impossible for journalists to be objective. Therefore, journalists must

work with framing theory scholars to create a systematic standard of accountability for their work (Davis & Kent, 2006). Journalists' inherent cultural involvement engendering automatic frame building means news consumers are impacted by those frames. This theoretical facet is called *frame setting*.

Brüggeman (2014) argues that the frame journalists decide to use on a story is up to their discretion, as they have the final say of their work. Because the frames journalists choose directly influences informational processing, this adds a complex layer of accountability and authority to journalists handling multifaceted issues. Framing contributes to specific information processing by consumers in regard to what concepts they choose to believe. In fact, if consumers are exposed to an issue for the first time, they will process and utilize that information with the frame with which it was presented (Bryant, Thompson, & Finklea, 2013, p. 101).

In a 1991 study, Entman articulated five angles or mechanisms used to frame news stories: *conflict* highlights the divisive nature of political parties and political activity, *consequences* usually focuses on ramifications of economic decisions but can expand on ramifications of a myriad of factors, *morality* covers stories in ways that check the transgressions of political figures or calls the morality of policy into question, *responsibility* assigns accountability for either a cause or a solution, and *human interest/personalization* introduces an emotional dimension to news coverage, and usually provides a story with a human face.

The human-interest frame was especially prevalent among Amendment 4 coverage. Frame setting exerts significant cognitive influence on the way consumers feel and think about an issue – specifically, if it is framed with a human-interest angle that evokes emotion (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). A simple Google search of “felon voting rights in Florida” returns thousands of articles, with the most timely ones utilizing humanistic frames to profile former

felons seeking restoration of their voting rights (Allen, 2018; Bazelon, 2018; FOX13news, 2018). Prior studies of media content using human-interest frames discussed that, “Human interest frame serves to create an emotional bond between the readers and the actors in the news” (International Communication Association, 2011). Other studies have explored human interest frames that led to policy discussions (Van Gorp, 2003). This knowledge warrants study of the correlation between media coverage using human interest-frames and voting patterns on state amendments.

If one explores Shoemaker and Reese’s hierarchy of influences on media content, it would explain how journalists construct individual frames. The center of the hierarchy is simply labeled “individual,” and is tantamount with influences and frames journalists subconsciously apply. Conceptualized, the “individual” level of Shoemaker and Reese’s model is the “selection of content [that] is influenced by individuals” (Keith, 2011).

In “Framing theory in communication research: Origins, development and current situation in Spain,” Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu articulates the line between the framing and agenda-setting theoretical models. While some scholars propose an emergence of framing, agenda-setting, and priming, Ardèvol-Abreu believes that posing framing as an extension of agenda setting proves futile. “Loosely defined concepts” and layers of complex research potential that has yet to be explored are why a merger would be in vain (2015). However, there is a correlation between the framing potential of Amendment 4 and the development of those frames onto the public agenda.

Agenda Setting Theory

A straightforward approach, agenda-setting, is the media telling consumers not what to think, but what to think about (Cohen, 1963). The media accentuate certain issues in their

political coverage by placing them more prominently in the newspaper or newscast. It should be no surprise that agenda-setting influences the salience of these issues among the audience (Kim et al., 2002).

The seminal research that laid the groundwork for the agenda setting theory is McCombs and Shaw's public opinion study about the 1968 presidential election. Using a sample of 100 voters from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, McCombs and Shaw wanted to compare voters' self-determination of key issues in the campaign to actual content of the news media to which they were exposed. They included undecided voters as they tend to be the "most susceptible," which would lend support to and supplement their hypothesis with credibility. Findings proposed that "among the major news stories presented in the media, much of the news about a presidential campaign has little to do with issues. A lot deals with the candidates themselves and assessments of who might win or lose" (Lowery, S. A. & DeFleur, M. L., 1995). McCombs and Shaw (1972) also discovered that the attention and emphasis afforded to certain issues impacted voters' attitudes, values, and conclusions as to the salience of the various campaign topics. Ultimately, they concluded that evidence for agenda setting existed in the media coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign. This is relevant because the relationship demonstrated between issue salience and public opinion could predict outcomes of ballot results.

However, in 2005, McCombs evaluated agenda-setting effects by considering internet as a medium and concluded that the saturation of information resulted in a "scattered" and diverse public agenda. News consumers have the power to pick and choose their news, now more than ever, because of the information overload engendered by the internet. This oscillation from the "highly redundant" media coverage of the past suggests that journalists' role in agenda setting may be diminishing.

Recent developments of agenda-setting have identified a second level of the theory that strongly resembles framing theory but is labeled as attribute agenda setting (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). Kim et al. (2002) contends that attribute agenda setting is “concerned with the salience of issue attributes” (McCombs, 2005). This means that the more frequent issues are mentioned by the media, the more front-of-mind they become, which could impact ballot measures and poll results. Studies exploring attribute agenda setting has provided scholars with several conclusions. Hester and Gibson concluded that negative news coverage is less likely to impact consumers’ attitudes on present conditions than future ones (2003). Kim and McCombs (2007) said that the candidate attributes media chose to highlight in their coverage impacted voters, but a later study argues the portrayal of candidates can be used as a predictor at the ballot box. However, both studies concede negative coverage is more impactful than positive coverage (Wu & Coleman, 2009).

The characteristics of attribute agenda setting and framing are almost parallel, so an exploration of the nuance is warranted. Along with a characterization, perspective, and pattern of interpretation, another aspect of a frame is “...an attribute of the object under consideration because it describes an object.” However, not all attributes are frames. Conceptually, frames are confined to “pervasive description” and a “characterization” of an issue or object. Attributes are not restrained to “perspective,” rather, attributes are vital to the structural integrity of an object or issue. Therefore, there are two distinct types of attributes – aspects and general themes. Aspects are very general. Central themes, however, are an enclosed class of attributes because they define the dominant perspective of an issue – which makes centrally thematic attributes “frames” (McCombs, 2005).

A question scholars often posit regarding the stages of agenda setting is, “If the media sets the public agenda, then who sets the media agenda?” From McCombs explanation, several subtle factors contribute to the formation of the media agenda. For one, norms and traditions of journalism sets the media agenda. For political representation of the news, those norms usually are objectivity and balance of an issue, the political responsibility to provide citizens with a recognizable degree of democratic culpability, and the economics of news business itself (McCombs, 2005; Bennett, 1996). Many of the other factors that set the media agenda are contingent upon a social environment. Interactions among news organizations, interactions among sources and journalists, and the inherent human need to seek validation from others in your field also contribute to the media agenda (McCombs, 2005).

Agenda Building Theory

Scholars not only question who builds the media agenda, but the public and policy agenda as well. The research seeking answers to this question often utilize the agenda building theory, which relates to both political science and mass communication studies. The difference between agenda setting and agenda building is purely one of attention: agenda setting explores the impact of the media in setting the public agenda through issue salience, and agenda building focuses on a reciprocal relationship between the media and policymakers, special interest groups, or political actors (Lee, 2016).

In agenda building theory’s early years, it was narrowly defined as “the relationships between information sources and the media agenda.” The application to media effects argues that instead of media being the sole agenda influence, they are also influenced by outside sources that have subtle social control. Much of the mass communication research for agenda building is empirical, therefore bolstering its validity (Lee, 2016). In 2013, Kiouisis et al. conducted a study

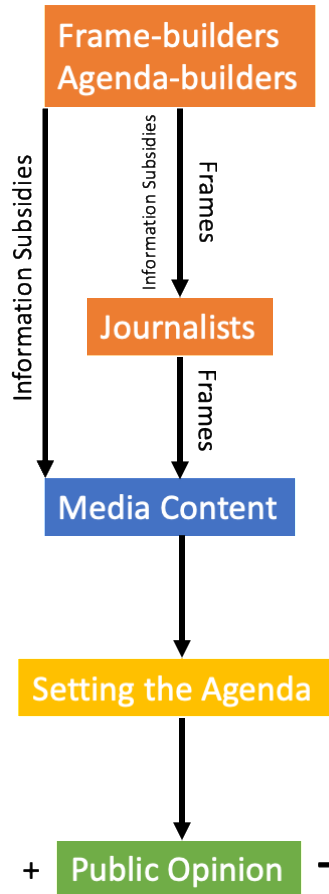
that “examined relationships among information subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activities” regarding healthcare reform during the inaugural year of the Obama administration. Looking through the lens of the agenda building theory, they took the interplay of source, media, and public agendas as a principal concern. Just as the aforementioned voting rights activist groups have done, the researchers recognize that groups use “information subsidies” to construct and deliver a message. These “information subsidies” come in many forms: news releases, press conferences, speeches, interviews, newsletters, emails, and website landing pages. Through a content analysis that tested the salience of information studies and attributes of nine months’ worth of coverage and policymaking activity regarding healthcare reform in 2009, Kiouisis’ et al. findings “offered empirical support for their predicted agenda-building relationships among informational subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activities.” Ultimately, data suggested that information subsidies play a significant role in molding media coverage and policymaking (2013).

Concluding theoretical discussion, McCombs contends that framing and agenda setting research analyzes the perceptions of communicators (or the media) and their audiences, how they perceive issues in the news, and the impact frames have in the content of a message (2005). Agenda building differs from agenda setting because it focuses on a reciprocal relationship with its sources, and these sources significantly impact coverage and policymaking because they have mastered the art of “information subsidies.”

Framing, agenda setting, and agenda building are all theories that explain effects from political communication. The coverage of placing Amendment 4 on the ballot, and disseminating stories to discern this amendment from the dozen others written with archaic language, to equip voters with the awareness to pass this amendment, and to frame this issue to humanize this group

of felons, who battle dehumanizing disenfranchisement applies all three of the discussed theories to create patterns of interpretation and dictate what issues voters should consider.

Conceptual Model



Using the context of media’s coverage of Amendment 4, the above conceptual model demonstrates the relationship among *journalists*, *frame builders* and *agenda builders*, and the *public opinion*.

The *frame builders* and *agenda builders* are the societal norms and values, the pressure and constraint of news organizations, professional routines, and the pressures from interest groups or policy makers (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). For frames of Florida’s Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative, special interest groups are the main frame and agenda builders.

Journalists are the individuals constructing the content, and they have inherent factors constructing their own frames (Van Gorp 2007). They draw on the frame repository in their given environment, and it represents what issue frames are “culturally and cognitively available” (Brüggeman, 2014). Donsbach (2004) argues that journalists build their own frames in two ways: (a) a requisite for social affirmation for their views and (b) a requisite to be steadfast in their values, beliefs, and opinions. This could take the form of using “big time” journalists at “big time” publications as a work standard, organizational norms and practices, company culture, and even journalist morality. The aforementioned factors impact the way journalists build frames for their stories, and sometimes, it is subconscious. When applied to the context of Amendment 4, journalists who have personal experience or vested interest in the voting rights of ex-felons could impact the way they covered the Amendment’s progress. Regardless, story structure is up to the journalists’ discretion, so they contribute important frames to the media coverage of a certain issue.

The *public opinion* can be conceptualized in a variety of ways: voter turnout, interpersonal communication, civic engagement, civic participation, and civic socialization (McLeod et al., 2009). Over 5.1 million Floridians voted for the passage of Amendment 4, which was 64% of the votes, surpassing the required 60% majority (Ballotpedia, 2018b). To even place the amendment on the ballot, Floridians for a Fair Democracy needed at least 766,200 valid signatures (Ballotpedia, 2018a). This was even the first time the fate of former felons’ voting rights in Florida were not decided by a governor, clemency board, or a state legislature. Theoretically, this outpour of civic engagement and voter turnout can be credited to the human interest frames built by journalists and special interest groups to impact the outcome of this amendment.

The model encapsulates framing, agenda setting, and agenda building processes. The *media coverage* is influenced by human interest frames built by *journalists*, *frame builders*, and *agenda builders*. The *frame builders* and *agenda builders* use “information subsidies” that influence how the voting rights issue is covered. Because this story is the largest voting rights restoration act in the history of the country, the magnitude was attractive to journalists, and engendered a high saturation of coverage. The frequency and saturation of coverage *set the agenda* for news consumers to think about ex-felon voting rights with a human-interest frame. Since human interest frames evoke emotional responses from voters, the public opinion was strongly “pro” restoration of former felon voting rights (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; McLeod et al., 2009).

Hypothetical Discussion

To test the above conceptual model, it is necessary to implement three hypotheses that encapsulate all three theories:

H1: The more frequently special interest groups use agenda-building information subsidies with a human-interest frame, the more likely the media will frame respective issues with a human-interest frame.

H2A: Journalists framing stories with human-interest frames will increase the prominence of issues on the public agenda.

H2B: Frame builders framing stories with human-interest frames will increase the prominence of issues on the public agenda.

H3: The more frequently the media uses human-interest frames to cover an issue, public opinion will be more likely to shift in favor of that issue.

Each hypothesis builds on the previous in order to form a complete theoretical process. With “information subsidies using a human-interest frame” being the independent variable and media content being the dependent variable in **H1**, this hypothesis utilizes framing and agenda building theories to test the impact information subsidies has on the media.

For **H2A** and **H2B**, “stories with human-interest frames” is the independent variable and issue prominence on the public agenda is the dependent variable. Stories with human-interest frames often evoke emotion and make readers responsive to the story’s content. This hypothesis suggests that framing Amendment 4 coverage with a less emotionally provocative frame would detract prominence, therefore nullifying the application of the agenda setting theory.

H3 employs the framing theory and its effects on public opinion. With the independent variable once again being “human-interest frames” and the dependent being “public opinion,” this hypothesis lends itself to the notion that human-interest framing is a useful tool for political communication.

Conclusion

When deliberating the interplay of framing, agenda setting, and agenda building theories, consider that a large portion of political communication effects is about knowledge gain. Coverage is information about issues, therefore people learn from any type of coverage. Since voting rights restoration of former felons is somewhat a uniquely sequestered issue, its traction and magnitude relied on effective media coverage.

The passage of Amendment 4 is the largest voting rights restoration act in the history of our country (Vietor, et al., 2018). It is predicted that the million-plus former felons will change the political course of the state, which absolutely warrants future monitoring. The potential party flip has a range of novel theoretical implications as well. Will frames change as political

majorities change? How will the media set the agenda, and how will that agenda shape public opinion? The results of this amendment will also have national implications. Does the media coverage of Florida's Amendment 4 set the precedent for media coverage of voting rights issues in other states? On the flipside, how will opposing activist groups cultivate their "information subsidies" to influence media frames and agendas to be constructed in their favor?

Indeed, this novel policy created a new dimension of political communication effects that should intrigue researchers, as this pertains to civic action about policy arbitrating civic action. Past research suggests positive correlations between the media and framing, agenda building, and agenda setting effects – especially regarding political communication. The perpetual process of political actors and special interest groups enticing communities with the end results of: (a) prompting voters to show up at the ballot box and (b) persuading them to vote in their favor creates a persistent environment of various media influences.

If nothing else, the press functioning as a public informant gives valid reason for theoretical study on influences and effects as a way to check the influential media machine. The historical passage of Amendment 4 indicates just how powerful strategic press coverage can be.

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