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Health Care Reform Debate:**  
A Content Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **Media Framing of the 2009-2010 United States Health Care Reform Debate:**

## **A Content Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage**

**Christina Brown**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the extent to which the United States print media framed the 2009 U.S. health care reform debate that culminated on March 23, 2010 with President Barack Obama signing the historic Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act into law. Framing theory is applied to the context of the U.S. health care debate, specifically using a content analysis to uncover the presence of frames in newspaper articles from *The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Washington Post* (WP). The quantitative content analysis and empirical data will add to the literature on the media framing of public policy debates in a non-electoral context, specifically on health care reform. Applying the framework of Entman's theory that frames 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text' (1993: 52) and Jamieson's (1998) and Lawrence's (2000) work on the media framing of public policy debates, five frames will be analyzed: game frame, conflict frame, value frame, material frame, and issue frame. To operationalize the main research question, the content analysis will look at the frequency of the variables to highlight the occurrence of the frames; the association between the economy and material frame; the prevalence of the conflict frame and its association with the government role and public option; and finally the changes in the frames over the 13-month time period. The content analysis and discussion find that NYT and WP heavily relied on the game frame to report the health care debate, followed by the value frame, the material frame, the conflict frame, and lastly the issue frame. This study empirically concludes that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* packaged the health care reform debate according to the game frame as it was found to be the most salient in the coverage of the health care reform debate.

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## INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama ran a historic presidential campaign on the promise of hope, exciting a generation with his rhetoric and his passion for change. That passion was crucial to the success of his domestic policy priority, passing comprehensive health care reform that would provide health insurance for millions of uninsured Americans and stop the spiraling medical costs in the United States. One of the most divisive issues of Obama's presidency is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA). No matter how debated or criticized, President Obama has succeeded at reform that has evaded presidents for the past seventy-five years. Health care reform, although a perilous political move and policy initiative, is imperative when 'hurting, sickness, and death are an unavoidable part of the human condition, and our system for coping with these universal sorrows is in critical condition' (Blumenthal, 2009: 419). Health care is a personal issue that affects every individual, family, and business in the entire nation. In 2009, the time came for this impassioned issue to come to the forefront of American politics.

The PPACA is an historic law that will shape President Obama's legacy and change a significant part of American life. The PPACA is complex. The process to the final bill was long and infused with arguments and negotiations. In a trying political landscape, reeling from an economic recession and in the midst of two wars, President Obama and Congress were trying to pass legislation to fix the broken health care system. The President was in constant communication with Congressional leaders and both the Democrats and Republicans were fiercely negotiating the contents of this bill. At different stages throughout the year, it looked as if President Obama's main policy goal, and a piece of legislation the U.S. desperately needed was going to fail. The public's opinion was at the forefront of this debate as citizens made their voices especially clear during the Congressional August recess where they came face to face with their Congressmen.

The media play a crucial role in the communication of information to the public. The media does not just transfer information; it also takes part in forming the construct of politics and public policy. When a policy outcome will reshape the health care system of the nation, how does the media cover such a monumental event? In what manner will the media cover the events during the policy making process? Will the media choose to focus on specific aspects of the debate or legislation over others, framing the policy to a certain degree? These questions drove the start of the research and led to the desire to examine framing theory.

The media can engage in framing. Framing is a powerful tool that allows the news media to call attention to certain aspects of issues or events while excluding other features (Entman, 1993). Framing theory asserts that the media select and highlight certain items of an event or issue over others, in effect, elevating them in importance to the audience (Entman, 1993; Chong, 2007). It is widely studied and noted that the media often tend to cover political events and election campaigns with a focus on the winners and losers, and tactics employed by opposing parties, rather than the substantive matters. However, the attention to strategy and conflict can also ‘crowd out or delay substantive coverage of those issues’ (Lawrence, 2000: 109).

This dissertation is grounded in contemporary political communication and framing theory. To examine how the print media portrayed the health care bill that ignited fierce debate in Washington, DC and across the nation, analyzing the frames used to communicate the bill is imperative. As such, this project will examine the extent to which the print media framed the 2009-2010 health care debate that culminated in President Obama signing the PPACA on March 23, 2010. Examining the dominant frames used in the coverage of the health care bill will demonstrate how two elite U.S. newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* defined the debate in the press.

This dissertation is separated into different sections to thoroughly examine this topic and answer the research question. The first chapter reviews the literature that provides a theoretical basis for this study, which includes the application of framing theory to health care reform. It also examines the political context in which the health care bill was debated. A framework for analysis and research objectives will then be given linking the theoretical chapter to the research. The second section will justify the use of content analysis and detail the sampling process. Finally, the findings and statistical evidence will be given to support the sub-research questions. These results will be discussed to answer the research question.

## THEORETICAL CHAPTER

### Theory: Framing

Literature on framing theory is extensive (Norris, 1995; Entman, 1993; Callaghan, 2005; Chong, 2007; Gamson, 1992; Gamson, 1989; Kuypers, 2002). Framing is the way in which a story is told by the news. Framing theory asserts that frames give readers a way to interpret and to evaluate new information by separating it into recognized categories (Norris, 1995: 357). A news frame ‘refers to an interpretative structure that sets particular events within a broader context’ (Norris, 1995: 357). Journalists place ‘figurative picture frames around the ever-moving target of events and actions, thereby focusing our attention on particular issues, ideas, and individuals while obscuring what lies outside the frame’ (Boykoff, 2011: 345). News frames are interesting as ‘they constitute an exercise (intentional or, quite often, unintentional) of journalistic power; frames can draw attention toward and confer legitimacy upon particular aspects of reality while marginalizing other aspects’ (Lawrence, 2000: 93). The construction of frames is generally understood as the result of the framing process.

Framing aids the study of how media coverage of events is formulated and established (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1989; Matthes, 2011). Framing ‘refers to an active process of creating, selecting, and shaping the frames’ (Matthes, 2011: 251). Gamson includes frames in a larger concept of ‘media packages’ (1989: 3). The main organizing structure is the frame and ‘condensing symbols’ that make the package possible to display in total with a slogan or other symbolic tool (Gamson, 1989: 3). Framing is a large concept that is explained and defined differently. A widely used and accepted definition of framing is that which Entman defines:

Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described (1993: 52, emphasis in original).

Entman’s leading and acknowledged definition of framing is the guiding principle in this research.

Salience is key to the definition of frames. Frames highlight some information about an item that is the subject of communication; therefore, increasing the issue’s importance or making it the dominant feature. Texts can make ‘information more salient by placement or

repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols' (Entman, 1993: 53). Individual's schemata, the existing way of organizing their belief system, influences their ability to retain or interpret an issue or idea emphasized in a text (Entman, 1993: 53). For a frame to be successful it must provoke existing elements of schemas that were stored in the past (Entman, 2010: 391).

The media might attempt to set the frames, however, frames alone cannot fully drive public opinion. Framing is distinguishable from other communication because of its 'diachronic nature and cultural resonance' (Entman, 2010: 391). Frames draw on cultural understandings that already exist in the public's mind. Also, although the media can sometimes actively set frames (Scheufele, 1999: 105) the information from which the journalists choose to present often comes from political elites (Entman 2010: 401). Kuypers asserts, 'Facts remain neutral until framed; thus, how the press frames an issue or event will affect public understanding of that issue or event' (2002: 7). Through framing, political elites and the media can establish boundaries within which a public policy issue will be discussed (Callaghan, 2005: xi). Framing includes the practice 'by which all political players, including the media, use linguistic cues to define and give meaning to issues and connect them to a larger political environment' (Callaghan, 2005: 2). News framing has been researched in regards to many types of news coverage, including political campaigns, terrorist attacks, international events, and domestic policy issues (Norris, 1995: 358).

Framing can be researched further when examining the reporting of public policy issues. Frames that are commonly found in policy debates include: game or strategy frame, material frame, issue frame, and value frame (Lawrence, 2000; Lee, 2008; Jamieson, 1998; Semetko, 2000). The game frame places political actors into a framework of winners and losers, focusing on the strategies employed by the key players to influence the outcome of the policy debate. The game frame also 'reflects American journalist's tendency to 'personalize' the news by treating politics as a series of discrete conflicts among individual politicians or parties' (Lawrence, 2000: 95). The material frame focuses on the economical and financial aspects of the policy. This frame will address the costs of the policy initiative, the economic consequences, and how the government will finance the new policy (Lee, 2008: 696).

The issue frame will address the substantive matters of the policy, such as what will be included in the legislation, the logic behind the policy, rational alternatives, politicians' stances on the issue, or the general implications of the proposed legislation (Lee, 2008: 696; Lawrence, 2000: 100). The value frame will include the discussion of non-substantive issues

relating to the policy. The policy will be presented as a clash of values or basic moral principles or in terms of differing ideologies (Lee, 2008: 696).

The conflict frame, a fifth frame was added for greater clarification to the game frame and to reflect the increasing political polarization of the U.S. A conflict frame 'emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audiences attention' (Semetko, 2000: 95). The presence of this frame often reduces the attention to substantive content (Semetko, 2000: 95).

The normative implications must also be reviewed. Although this study will empirically examine the frames employed by the print media, one must question the inevitability of framing or whether it reflects specific interests or agendas. Framing can be seen as a 'strategy to manipulate and deceive individuals, or it can refer more neutrally to a learning process in which people acquire common beliefs, as in the coordination of people around a social norm' (Chong, 2007: 120). However, Druckman asserts, 'framing effects may be evidence of citizens seeking guidance from credible elites,' not just the demonstration of the negative connotation of framing as manipulation (2001: 1061). Yet, if the media rely on the game frame then many scholars and media critics argue that the framing, particularly the use of this frame, 'marginalizes the substance of political conflicts, undercuts the ability of politicians to communicate their policy positions to the public, and encourages the public to view all politics as self-interested calculations and cynical manipulation' (Lawrence, 2000: 100).

### **Media Framing of Health Care Reform**

Framing theory is often applied to particular studies and the application of this theory to different cases is established in the literature. However, literature on media framing of policy-making in a non-electoral context, specifically, health care reform is limited. Jamieson and Cappella offer a comprehensive study on the role of the press in the U.S. health care reform of 1993-1994, which examines the news frames, interpretation, and public opinion change (1998: 110).

Jamieson and Cappella assert that the media covered the debate regarding the conflict and strategies of the political battles rather than the actual content of the health care reform bill (Graber, 1998: 5). The trends that they found in the framing of the debate that culminated in the failure of the health care legislation include: inconsistent use of labels for the alternative health care plans; emphasis on conflict; scandal over issue; opposing strategies versus



substance of the plan; and news coverage rewarding attack advertisements rather than advocacy advertisements (Jamieson, 1998: 129).

Content analysis of the news was not Jamieson and Cappella's main objective and they do not offer significant details as to how they reached their findings (Jamieson, 1998; Lawrence, 2000). Also, the study does not demonstrate the degree to which game-framed news has become the standard in coverage of policy-making (Lawrence, 2000). To fill this gap in the study, Lawrence further developed the game frame theory, or the strategy frame, in relation to policy issues in her content analysis on the print media framing of the 1996 welfare reform debate (2000).

The framing of the 1993-94 debate was conditioned by the circumstances of the time. Those years saw the 'changing nature of the presidency and the Congress, interest groups gorged with money from a bloated health system, a skittish public, and a conservative tide in American politics' (Blumenthal, 2009: 346). President Clinton also lost political capital due to the amount of time it took to get the health care bill to Congress and the Whitewater scandal that clouded the health care debate, and dominated its news coverage (Blumenthal, 2009: 411; Jamieson, 1998).

A frame in communication can only 'be defined in relation to a specific issue, event or political actor' (Chong, 2007: 106). Frames not only vary from issue to issue, but also will fluctuate in different years. The political landscape was drastically different in 2009-2010 than it was sixteen years ago during the Clinton health care reform. Although President Obama had the ripe opportunity to succeed in health care reform within the first few weeks and months of his presidency, he had to fight through an intense political environment. The United States was still in the midst of two wars and suffering from the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression (Starr, 2011: 195).

### **The Political Landscape: 2009-2010**

The political context during the debate of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is important to understand the complexity of the discussion regarding the bill and the events that shaped its news coverage. Candidate Obama promised health care reform immediately. At the outset of the health care debate, Obama not only benefited from being a newly elected president, but also from the larger consensus that the current health care system was drastically broken. If the pre-PPACA health care system were to remain intact, the health

care spending which in 2009 was 16% of the nation's economy, would more than double to 37% in 2050 (Page, 2009).

The national divide regarding the extent to which a government should be involved in social issues added to the contentious environment (Daschle, 2010: 15). The worsening economy intensified the political landscape. As the president began his case for health care reform, the U.S. was suffering from an economic recession, rising unemployment, and struggling businesses across the country (Blumenthal, 2009; Nagourney, 2009). Unemployment was at the highest since 1983 and Congress was also wary about passing any bill that could increase the deficit and was not focused on creating jobs or economic recovery (Nagourney, 2009).

The summer of 2009 was filled with intense protests regarding the health care bill. As the annual Congressional August recess started, Congressmen's local offices and town hall meetings that are normally calm were often sites of heated protests and meetings full of angry citizens (Daschle, 2010: 2). The contentious month of August was brought to a close by the death of Senator Ted Kennedy, life long advocate and champion for health care reform, on August 25, 2009 (Starr, 2011: 220). Re-election concerns among Democrats rose when Republican Scott Brown won Senator Kennedy's senate seat during an election in January 2010 (Starr, 2011: 2).

### **Context: The United States and Health Care Reform**

The United States has had a long and tumultuous relationship with the issues of health care policy and reform. Building a complete health care system that provides coverage and care to all Americans has been and still is a difficult process for the U.S. (Daschle, 2010: 10). The U.S. has the most expensive health care system in the world, spending approximately twice as much per capita for health care as other industrialized countries. The U.S. ranks low on health outcomes and preventable mortality (Connors, 2010: 2521). Health care policy has always been central to domestic policy and the call for health care reform is almost a constant fixture in U.S. politics. Health care is a deeply personal and important issue to all people. Health care reaches deep into the ideological divide amongst the Democratic and Republican Parties drawing on the stark views of the role of government in its citizens' lives.

Many U.S. Presidents have attempted some reform to the health care system. To generate extensive public support for this policy initiative, the President, Congress, and interest groups need to communicate information to the public. Most political players compete for media coverage allowing the journalists to choose from different frames (Callaghan, 2005:

11). As frames highlight certain aspects of an issue over others, audiences might be led to have different reactions. Politicians seeking support, in this case for or against the passage of the health care bill, are pressured to compete for news frames (Entman, 1993: 55). As such, framing ‘plays a major role in the exertion of political power, and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text’ (Entman, 1993: 55). The clash of political parties and interest groups along with a complex set of policy goals outlined in the health care debate created a range of contexts for the *NYT* and *WP* to report.

The strategies adopted by both parties in Congress generated controversy and interest, such as the suggested use of reconciliation in the Senate to avoid a Republican filibuster. The price of the health care bill and the method of paying for the overhaul was another source of contention in Congress and among the public. President Obama promised that reforming health care would not add to the deficit and would reduce the deficit. Also, the issue of financing the legislation through increasing taxes raised opposition from Republicans and also the moderate-to-conservative Democratic Blue Dog Caucus (Starr, 2011: 208).

Providing affordable guaranteed coverage to all Americans is a complex goal. How to ensure access to all Americans, including those who cannot afford insurance faces intense negotiations. The public option, the most highly criticized component of the bill, would have created a government insurance option to compete with the private insurers. Opponents of the public option argued that the free market could ensure that health insurance was affordable and that the government’s presence in the market would force out private insurers. The health care debate ended in the successful passage of the PPACA.

### **The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA)**

The PPACA carries serious implications for all Americans and ‘is expected to expand health insurance coverage to 32 million individuals by 2019 through a variety of measures’ (Connors, 2010: 2521). It aims to eliminate insurance discrimination for people with pre-existing medical conditions. This change alone represents a monumental moment in U.S. social and health policy (Connors, 2010: 2521). Taking effect immediately, young adults up to age 26 are able to remain on their parent’s health insurance plan. Omitted from the final bill, however, was the government run public option.

## **Timeliness of This Study**

Health care reform has divided the United States drastically. Advocates for and against the reform fiercely protested throughout the health care bill debate and continue today. The debate also triggered the rise of the anti-establishment Tea Party movement (Boykoff, 2011: 342). The Tea Party movement, or Taxed Enough Already, is an assemblage of grassroots groups that organized in 2009 due to their belief in the 'perceived progressivism of the Obama administration' (Boykoff, 2011: 342). One of the Tea Party's major protests was against 'Obamacare.' They saw the health care bill as a 'fiscally irresponsible federal government overreach' (Boykoff, 2011: 343).

After fighting a difficult policy campaign battle, on and off Capitol Hill, and a year of rewriting the bill to ensure its passage in Congress, President Obama signed the PPACA into law on March 23, 2010. The constitutionality of the law has been challenged and has seen its time in front of the U.S. Supreme Court beginning in March 2012. The opponents of the bill argue that the law is unconstitutional because it requires citizens to purchase health insurance (Baker, 2012). The entire country was on edge waiting for the fate of this historic bill. However, on June 28, 2012, the Supreme Court upheld the PPACA. The health care battle is far from over as it is a centerpiece in the 2012 Presidential Campaign. The Republican nominee, Mitt Romney has promised to overturn the legislation if he is elected president (Gabbatt, 2012). The PPACA will be one of the defining moments of President Obama's legacy and the reactions by the public, and the media's coverage will also take their place in history.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Frames can be separated into two larger categories: frames of communication and frames of thought (Callaghan, 2005: 3). This project will not seek to examine frames of thought and audience effects, as that requires research and time beyond the limitations of this dissertation as to measure the effects of framing on an audience one has to interact with the audience through interviews, surveys or experiments. Rather, this project will use content analysis to examine the extent to which the print media framed the 2009-2010 health care debate.

This research applies the deductive approach by examining the theory and existing literature to predetermine individual frames as analytical variables (Semetko, 2000: 94). The research is guided by the theory that news frames operate to make certain information more salient, or

distinct, than others in a text (Entman, 1993; Kuypers, 2002: 18). The preceding literature guides the conceptual framework in pursuing the research on framing in print media, applied to the context of the 2009-2010 health care reform debate. Specifically, this dissertation will empirically examine the existence of the following frames: game, conflict, issue, value, and material. This dissertation further examines news frames in non-electoral policy making as researched by Jamieson and Cappella (1998) and Lawrence (2000). By researching the five news frames found in reporting on policy making, the quantitative content analysis seeks to demonstrate how the U.S. print media, specifically the *NYT* and *WP* framed the health care reform debate, which frames were the most dominant, and the circumstances under which the frames were exercised.

Framing is 'best conceptualized as a process that evolves over time' (Chong, 2007: 108). As time continued, the debate intensified and with it did the news frames change or strengthen? Examining the trends in news frames of the health care debate will uncover whether the focus of the highest circulated newspapers in the country was on the politics of health care reform rather than the policy.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this research is to content analyze the press coverage of the 2009-2010 health care reform debate and contribute to the literature of the application of framing theory to non-electoral public policy debates. As Lawrence argues, 'the empirical record regarding news coverage of other political contexts, such as policy-making, is more limited' (2000: 94). By empirically analyzing framing theory and the presence of news frames, this research attempts to fill the gap in the literature on news framing of health care reform policy. This research will also add to this gap by providing further empirical data to support the theory that the game frame is prevalent in the print media's reporting of non-electoral policy debates.

Through a content analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* this research will quantify and describe their coverage of the health care debate. After a critical review of the literature and defining the conceptual framework, the following research question was developed for study:

**RQ: To what extent did the U.S. print media frame the 2009-2010 health care reform debate that culminated in President Obama signing into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010?**

The research question is operationalized through a further evaluation of the following questions:

Q1: Which frame did *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* employ the most when reporting on the health care reform debate?

Q2: Is the inclusion of the economy associated with a focus on the cost of the health care reform bill?

H<sub>1</sub>: The inclusion of the economy is associated to the focus on the cost of the health care reform.

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistical association between the economy and focus on the cost of the health care reform.

Q3 (a): If the role of the government was mentioned, was the health care debate portrayed according to the conflict frame?

H<sub>1</sub>: There is an association between the inclusion of the role of the government and the conflict frame.

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no association between the role of the government and the conflict frame.

Q3 (b): If the public option was referred to, was the health care debate portrayed according to the conflict frame?

H<sub>1</sub>: There is an association between the discussion of the public option and the conflict frame.

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no association between the public option and the conflict frame.

Q4: To what extent did the frames change over the time period selected?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Research Design: Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a research method that is defined as a ‘technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’ (Berelson, 1952: 18). This quantitative method’s function is to identify and count the occurrence of certain characteristics and salient features of texts (Deacon, 1999: 116). The researcher should be able to explain the meanings or representations of the texts and their larger social significance through this quantification (Hansen, 1998: 95). To further analyze the text, statistics are used ‘to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation’ (Deacon, 1999: 116). Content analysis ‘is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful material) to the contexts of their use’ (Krippendorff, 2004: 18).

Content analysis has many advantages; mainly it is systematic and replicable (Hansen, 1998: 95). Content analysis is an efficient method of examining patterns and trends, can handle a large body of texts, and allows the researcher to understand and analyze the grander landscape (Krippendorff, 2004; Hansen, 1998). This research seeks to examine the extent to which the news framed the 2009 U.S. health care reform bill, which frames were the most dominant, and to what extent the frames changed over the selected time period. Therefore, content analysis is the appropriate research method as it is used for the systematic analysis of a large body of communications content and to examine trends over a large period of time, in this case thirteen months (Hansen, 1998). A quantitative content analysis of political communications, such as the newspapers examined in this study, can answer interesting questions about politics (Callaghan, 2005: 4).

Every method has its limitations. The objectivity requirement is often criticized in content analysis. Content analysis outlines certain aspects of a text for analysis rather than analyzing everything in a text. Through the content analysis the researcher has to make a subjective choice. However, the theoretical framework that guides the research should inform such decisions (Hansen, 1998: 95). Coding instructions should be specific and extensively detailed allowing for a systematic replication of the study in order to decrease the possibility for a subjective study (Hansen, 1998: 116, 121).

The other limitations of content analysis come from the practice of counting the ‘frequency of symbols and defining countable units of text’ (Hansen, 1998: 98). Although content analysis separates the text initially, this method reconnects these parts at the analysis and interpretation stage to examine which pieces ‘co-occur in which contexts, for what purposes, and with what implications’ (Hansen, 1998: 98). A theoretical framework must ground the frequency and counting in content analysis in order to explain the significance and meaning of what is being counted (Hansen, 1995: 96). Another concern of content analysis is to avoid making causative statements or commenting on audience effects.

There have been many studies examining media framing of a specific political campaign, public policy issue, or event that have employed content analysis (Semetko, 2000; Entman, 2010; Jamieson, 1998; Matthes, 2011; Boykoff, 2011). This tradition aided in determining that content analysis was the optimal methodology to answer the research questions. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), an in-depth qualitative method, could have also been employed (Paltridge, 2006). However, the desired time period to analyze is too large to use CDA and the goal of this dissertation does not warrant CDA. Also, given the reasonably confined scope of this study, content analysis is the only method. Content analysis is the most suitable for

this dissertation as it allows for establishing ‘the frequency with which certain kinds of stories occur in the press’ and enables the ‘expansive panoramic view of the phenomena’ to be studied (Deacon, 1999: 114).

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE**

### **Selection of Media**

This research is cited in the realm of print media as the importance of the press is still paramount and newspapers also remain dominant agenda setters. Also, many studies that apply content analysis to examine media framing use newspapers as their media source (Boykoff, 2011; Entman, 2010; Lawrence, 2000; Semetko, 2000; Gamson, 1989; Chong, 2007).

### **Selection of Newspapers**

*The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Washington Post* (WP) were chosen to analyze, as they are the prestige newspapers in the United States and are also two of the most influential newspapers in national politics (Entman, 2010: 390). The NYT and WP were selected for their agenda setting effect inter-media (Benoit 2005; McCombs 2004). The agenda setting influence of *The New York Times* ‘was greater than that of the local newspaper, which, in turn, was greater than that of the national television news’ (McCombs 2004 in Benoit, 2005: 361). The NYT and WP consistently stand at the top U.S. newspapers in circulation, including during the health care debate in 2009-2010<sup>1</sup> (Shea, 2010).

### **Time Period**

The time period begins on February 24, 2009, President Obama’s first speech to a joint session of Congress where he detailed the need for health care reform passionately stating ‘So let there be no doubt: health care reform cannot wait, it must not wait, and it will not wait another year’ (Obama, 2009). The time period ends on March 23, 2010 when Obama signed the PPACA into law. The time period is also divided into three time waves to aid in the analysis of how the frames changed over time. The first wave of time, February 24, 2009 – August 1, 2009, includes the beginning of the health care debate and the initial negotiations for the bill. The second wave, August 1, 2009 – December 24, 2009, includes the annual

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<sup>1</sup> Circulation of *The New York Times*: 951,063; *Washington Post*: 578,482 (Shea, 2010)



Congressional August recess, when Members return home to their districts to speak with constituents and hold town-hall style meetings, and ends with the passage of the Senate health care bill on December 24 (Finance, 2010). The third wave of time is December 24, 2009 - March 23, 2010. This includes the Massachusetts special election and the final deliberations leading up to the day this historic bill was signed into law. Although these waves of time are unequal in duration, they are designated to represent the major events that occurred throughout the debate.

## **Sampling**

The articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were retrieved from the NexisUK database. The unit of analysis is each news article. Framing theory involves the overall character of texts. As such, it is advantageous to examine a full article, rather than an individual word or paragraph (Entman, 1993). The sample must be representative and a systematically selected part of the whole the researcher wants to analyze and discuss (Deacon, 1999: 118).

To generate the newspaper articles for coding, the researcher used the search term 'health care reform.' To narrow the search, 'health care reform' had to appear as 'major mention.' To get the desired sample size of  $n=300$ , a systematic sampling technique was employed (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002). Every 5<sup>th</sup> article from the *NYT* and *WP* were selected. The interval of five was chosen as it does not correspond with any natural cycle, such as seven or any multiple of seven would produce the same day of the week throughout the sample (Hansen, 1998: 104). To have a standardized sample, 150 articles from each newspaper were coded.

## **Coding**

The coding book contains a list of the variables that are to be coded and the values or coding options associated with each variable (Hansen, 1998: 116). The variables in the coding book were designed to measure the extent to which the five frames; strategy, conflict, issue, material, and value were present in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

The pilot study conducted on a small sample of 30 articles was successful. The research used the coding frame with a few changes and adjustments to strengthen the coding book (Deacon, 1999: 124). Guided by the literature on news frames and on the politics and policy of health care, the subsequent coding book was designed with analytical categories in place to help

answer the research questions. The categories must be exhaustive and mutually exclusive (Krippendorff, 2004: 132). The coding book can be found in Appendix A and an extended coding book offering the full description and the rationale behind each variable used can be found in Appendix B.

The analysis started off broadly with the coding book; however, to offer a more focused argument and presentation, the analysis will not address all variables. To best examine the five frames (issue, value, material, game, and conflict), the following variables will be analyzed and tested: PPACA, non-substantive, cost and economy, game, and conflict. Although the government role and public option do not fit into one of the pre-determined frames, from the literature review and an understanding of the political landscape during the debate, these variables also must be tested to prove their significance.

### **Inter-coder reliability**

Inter-coder reliability (ICR) testing is necessary to ensure the repeatability and strength of the coding book (Deacon, 1999: 128). The coding frame was tested in the pilot study after which adjustments to the coding book were made. The coding book was tested again with the full sample to ensure reliability. A second coder was fully trained and asked to code 10% of the full sample or the 30 articles.

The two coders disagreed on two variables, tone and subject.<sup>2</sup> Tone was removed from the coding book after the ICR was conducted as it was problematic in the pilot study and proved too subjective and eventually unnecessary for this study. The directions and definitions for subject were improved to strengthen the variable. The formula:  $r = a/(a+d)$  (the ratio of agreed/total coding decisions), is used to check the ICR for each variable by calculating the percentage of agreed coding decisions (Hansen, 1998: 121). The ICR for this study is:  $r = 28/(2+28) = .93$  or 93%. This reliability test resulted in inter-coder reliability above 80 per cent, which is desired in content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). This score demonstrates that the coding book was thoroughly defined and the validity is strong enough to be replicated (Decillia, 2009; Krippendorff, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix C for the ICR of each variable

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### Results

This section presents the content analysis results of 300 articles. The content analysis was designed to examine the news framing of the health care reform debate. The data was compiled and analyzed in SPSS for frequency, percentages, and Chi-square<sup>3</sup>. Most data proved highly significant at the  $p < .001$  level; however, the chi-square test for the association of the public option and the conflict frame is significant at the  $p < .05$  level. The difference in significance levels shows the range of results, not just what results were highly significant. However, as this value is larger, there might be a need to use greater caution when defining the association between these variables (Field, 2005: 691). Pertinent newspapers article extracts are also included to give greater significance to the findings and analysis.

Themes are important in framing theory and in examining which frames are present in the news (Callaghan, 2005: 6). When the articles were categorized by its main theme (Figure 1), approximately 40% dealt with the legislative aspects of the health care reform debate, such as the political process of the bill, where the bill was in Congress, on the floor of the House or the Senate, or how many votes were needed for the successful vote. The medical theme, which included health care and health insurance, had the second highest frequency at 26.67%.

The following sub-questions are examined and analyzed in order to answer the overall research question: *To what extent did the U.S. print media frame the 2009 health care reform debate that culminated in President Obama signing into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010?*

*Question 1: Which frame did The New York Times and The Washington Post employ the most when reporting on the health care reform debate?*

After conducting a frequency analysis in SPSS, the game frame was found the most, occurring in 74% of the total articles (222/300). The conflict frame was found in 45.3% of the articles (136/300). The substantive contents of the legislation (PPACA) appeared in 41% (123/300). Access to health care before the PPACA was found in 25% (75/300) and beneficiaries or those who would benefit from the overhaul were mentioned in 36% (108/300). The cost of the

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<sup>3</sup> The SPSS output for the results and discussion section are detailed in Appendix D

health care overhaul appeared in 47.7% (143/300) of the articles. Discussion of the economy was uncovered in 38.7% (116/300) and the financial costs of the pre-PPACA health care system totaled 24.7% (74/300). Non-substantive issues were discussed in 50.3% (151/300) of the sample. The role of the government was found in 17.3% (52/300) of the articles. The quandary over whether the final legislation would include the public option appeared in 27.3% (82/300) of the articles. The variables for alternative, inequalities, and morals occurred the least at 9.3% (28), 8.7% (26), and 4.3% (13) respectively.

This frequency analysis demonstrates the *NYT* and *WP* framed the debate in terms of: game (74%), non-substantive (50.3%), cost (47.7 %), conflict (45.3 %), and PPACA (41%).

*Question 2: Was the reporting of the economy associated with a focus on the cost of the health care overhaul?*

H<sub>1</sub>: The inclusion of the economy is associated with the focus on the cost of health care reform.

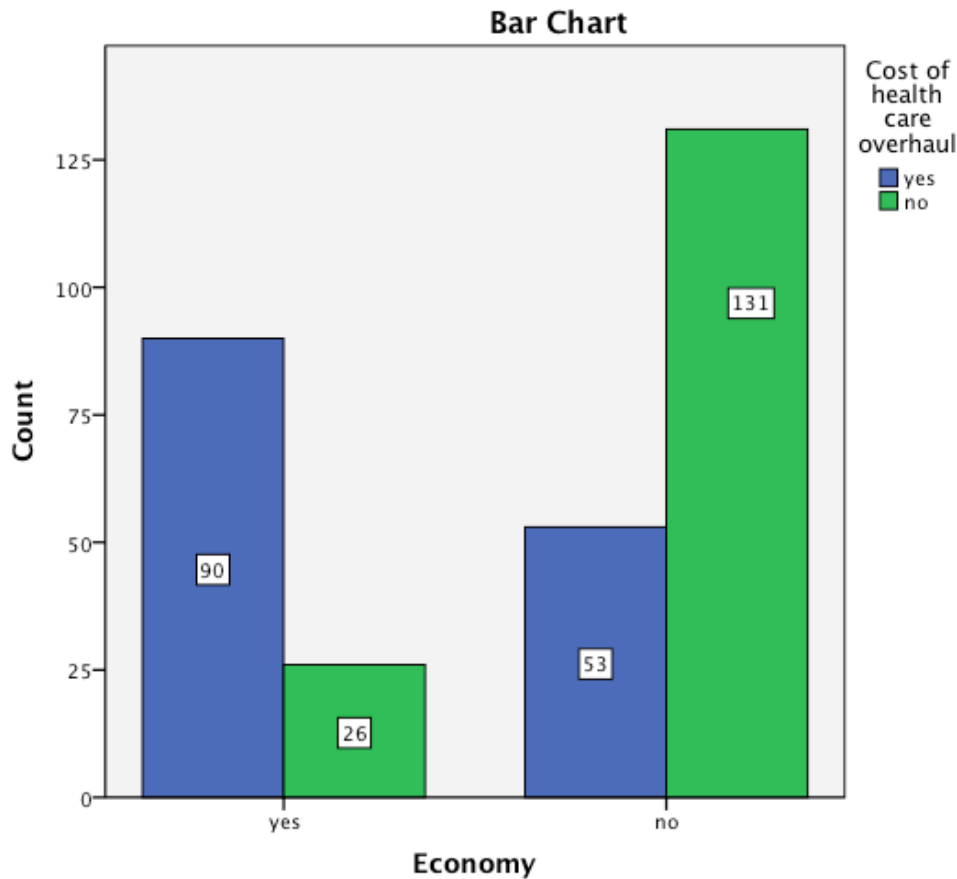
H<sub>0</sub>: There is no association between the economy and the focus on the cost of health care reform.

A cross-tabulation and chi-square test of the variables economy and cost were carried out to test the hypothesis. The null hypothesis can be rejected, as there is a strong association (Chi-square p-value < .001) between the discussion of the economy and the cost of the health care overhaul<sup>4</sup>. Although the economy was only mentioned in 116 articles (38.7%) it was largely associated with cost of reform. When the economy is mentioned, the material frame, defined by the cost variable, is present 77.6% of the time. When the economy is not referred to, the cost variable is noticeably absent. The bar chart (Figure 2) provides a visualization of the results obtained from the cross-tabulation and chi-square test.

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<sup>4</sup> The chi-square statistic is 67.87 and the corresponding p-value is .000 less than .001, therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis.

**Figure 2 – Association Between Economy and Cost**



*Question 3 (a): If the role of the government was mentioned was the health care debate portrayed according to the conflict frame?*

$H_1$ : There is an association between the role of the government the conflict frame.

$H_0$ : There is no association between the role of the government and the conflict frame.

A cross-tabulation and chi-square test was carried out for the variables government role and conflict. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected and there is no significant association between government role and the conflict frame (chi-square p-value > .05).<sup>5</sup>

*Question 3 (b): If the public option was referred to, was the health care debate portrayed according to the conflict frame?*

$H_1$ : There is an association between the public option and the conflict frame.

$H_0$ : There is no association between the public option and the conflict frame.

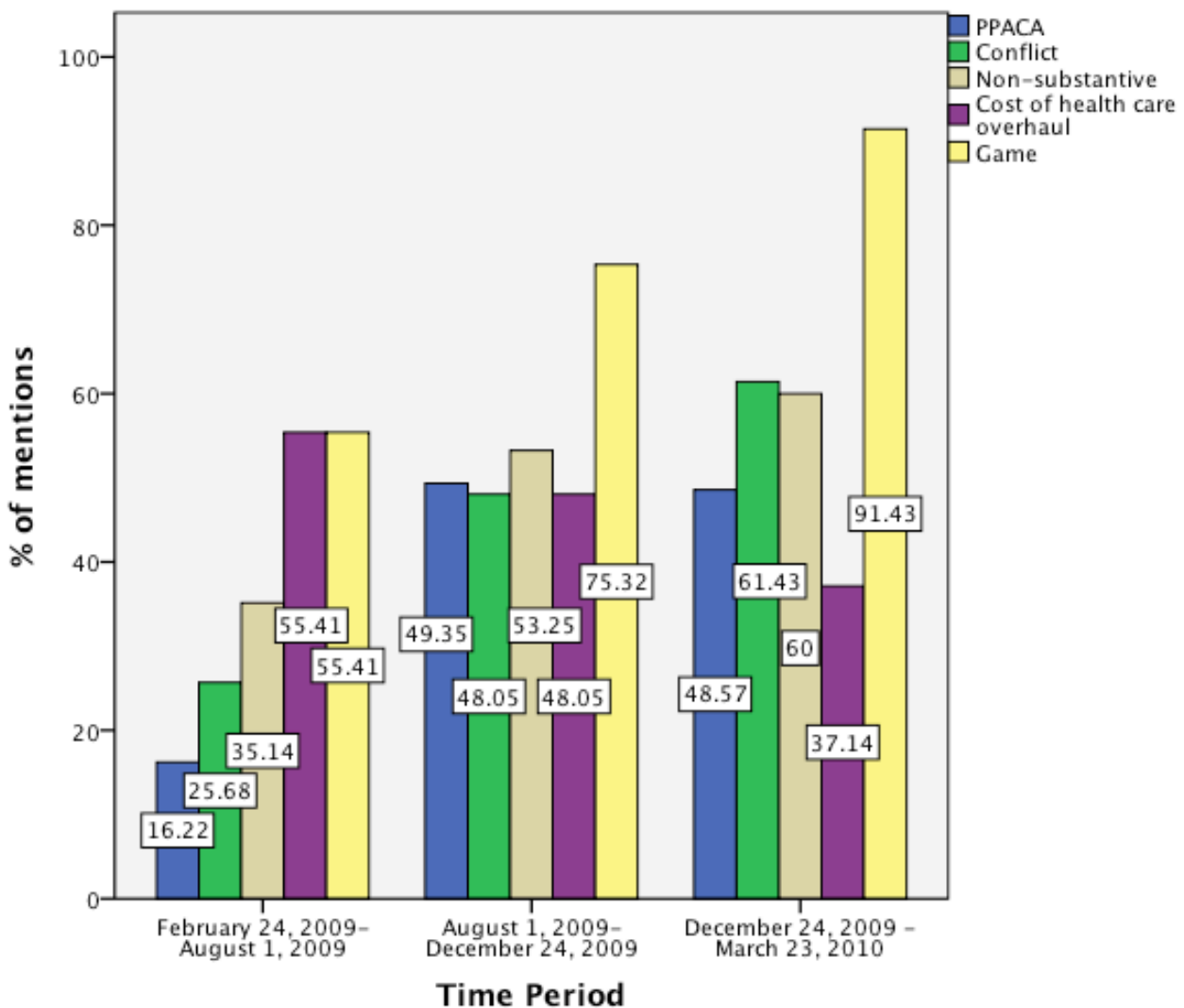
<sup>5</sup> The chi-square statistic is 3.701 and the corresponding p-value is .054, greater than .05, therefore, we cannot reject the null hypothesis.

A cross-tabulation and chi-square test was carried out on the public option and conflict variables. The null hypothesis can be rejected as there is a statistically significant association between the public option and the conflict frame (chi-square p-value < .05)<sup>6</sup>.

*Question 4: To what extent did the frames change over the time period?*

The bar chart (Figure 3) demonstrates the changes in news frames over the 13-month time period. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the time frame was divided into three waves of time to demonstrate the fluctuation of frames during the coverage of the health care debate. The bar chart displays frames in terms of percentages of mentions per articles in each time period. For example, PPACA in time wave one (T1) is found in approximately 16% of the articles, or 12 articles out of the 75 articles published in T1.

**Figure 3 - Percentage of Mentions of Frames Over Time**



As one article could have exhibited certain aspects of each frame there will be overlap in the use of the frames; however, the bar graph still clearly displays that the media's message on the health care debate changed over the time period. This result also demonstrates a dominant and increasing use of the game frame. The game frame increased from 55% (T1) of the articles to 75% (T2) and reached its highest usage of 91% in time wave three (T3) leading up to the passage of the bill. The conflict frame also increased over the time period, reaching its peak during T3, appearing in 61% of the articles. The issue frame (PPACA) increased significantly between T1 and T2, from only 16% to 49% then remained almost equal (48%) in T3. The value frame (non-substantive) was mentioned in more articles, gradually increasing from T1 (35%) to T2 (53%) to T3 (60%). The only frame to decrease over the time period was the material frame (cost). In T1 it was used equally as the game frame in 55% of the coverage. Cost decreased in T2 to 48% and in T3 cost was only found in 37% of the articles.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion section will address the major findings from the content analysis results in consideration of the overall research question. The findings discussed in this section answer the sub-questions designed to operationalize the main research question.

The following key findings will be addressed:

- (1) Dominant use of the game frame.
- (2) The economy is associated with the material frame.
- (3a) The government role is not associated with the use of the conflict frame.
- (3b) The public option did correspond with the conflict frame.
- (4) The frames changed over the time period and fluctuated with the three time intervals.

**Finding #1:** The *NYT* and *WP* portrayed the health care reform debate through the dominant use of the game frame.

The game frame was the most prevalent out of the five frames. This finding supports the theory that the print media often covers policy campaigns in the same manner as election campaigns, with a dominant focus on attack over advocacy, tactics over issues, and scandal over substance (Jamieson, 1998: 110). This finding adds greater conclusive empirical data to the theory of the prevalence of the game frame in politics, specifically in the press's coverage of health care policy. In 74% of the total articles (222/300), the health care debate was

largely discussed in terms of which political party was winning or losing and which tactics they were employing to advance their position in the debate. This frame includes reports on strategy from both sides of the aisle, vote counting amongst the members of Congress, the concessions one party might have to make to see the success of the health care bill. As frames elevate certain subjects of communication in salience, the news effectively makes that piece of information more noticeable and memorable to audiences (Entman, 1993: 53). As such, the heavy use of the game frame suggests that the audience received more information about the strategies being used by opposing parties in Congress, the tactical meetings by Congressional leadership or the President, or the money and influence of interest groups in the legislative process.

The game frame organizes a policy conflict ‘as a clash of political interests and competing strategies, typically highlighting political machinations of the contending parties, related to their objectives, strategies, and tactics’ (Lee, 2008: 700). These articles would often cover and treat the policy in terms of concessions being made by party members ‘as means to political ends’, and party leaders, such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi or Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid ‘courting a particular voting block’ (Lee, 2008: 701).

At the outset of the debate, the health care bill looked like it would face a greater struggle in the Senate than the House as the Democrats did not have the ‘60 –vote threshold’ to break a Senate filibuster (Starr, 2011: 201). To ensure that the Democrats would not be defeated by a filibuster, they contemplated using a procedural maneuver known as reconciliation ‘that gave them the option of enacting health-care reform through budget reconciliation process, which requires only a simple majority’ (Starr, 2011: 202). Both parties criticized reconciliation and many articles employing the game frame, included the discussion on this procedural move. Many Congressmen argued that it was not right to pass a bill that overhauled the national health care system without bipartisan support. If the Democrats went through with this decision they would face intense backlash by the Republicans who might equate the use of reconciliation with ‘parliamentary trickery’ (Pear a., 2010).

A heavy focus in the media’s portrayal of the health care reform in the game frame involved reconciliation and the potential political ramifications. One such example is found in a *New York Times* article written on August 2, 2009,

They [the Democrats] are talking reluctantly because using the tactic, officially known as reconciliation, would present a variety of serious procedural and substantive obstacles that could result in a piecemeal health bill. And they are whispering because the mere mention of



reconciliation touches partisan nerves and could be viewed as a threat by the three Republicans still engaged in the delicate talks, causing them to collapse (Hulse, 2009).

The complexity of coalition building and hard bargaining within the House and Senate was covered throughout the reporting of the debate and added to the prevalence of the game frame.

One of the most evident demonstrations of the game frame in terms of which party was winning or losing came in the aftermath of the Massachusetts special election. Republican Scott Brown won the stronghold Democratic seat held by the late Senator Ted Kennedy, one of the greatest champions of health care reform. This G.O.P. win was reported in the *NYT* and *WP* in terms of success for the Republicans and a positive step in their fight to kill the proposed health care legislation. Many of the articles discussed the Republican's victory in the following manner,

The gear shifting by Democrats underscored how the health care effort had been derailed by the Republican victory in the Massachusetts special election for the Senate last week, which effectively denied Democrats the 60th vote they need to overcome a Republican filibuster in the Senate (Pear, b., 2010).

The health care reform bill would affect the lives of all Americans and the policy implications of the bill should have been of primary importance in the news and to all citizens. However, as demonstrated by many studies on framing and the media's presentation of political news, the news often focuses on the tactics, rather than reporting the substance of the policy (Entman, 2010; Lawrence, 2000; Lee, 2008; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Chong, 2007). The data, demonstrated by the issue frame, supports this theory. The issue frame, represented by the variable PPACA, was only found in 40.3% or 123 articles. The 2009 health care debate proved similar to other political and policy debates, 'As in previous conflicts, fear and facts would go to war with each other, and a debate that began with the hope of compromise would end in anger and division' (Starr, 2011: 194). In this case, the game frame was in direct competition with the issue frame, and the urge for journalists to report on the winners and losers and tactical strategies employed by different parties surpassed the duty to report the policy implications of the health care legislation.

Salience is key to frames, as frames feature certain items while marginalizing or omitting others. While the game frame was highly salient, framing is as much about what is included as excluded from the article (Entman, 1993: 52). Therefore, it is interesting to briefly examine the variables that were found the least in the sample: inequalities and morality.

President Obama's priority was to provide health coverage for the millions of uninsured Americans. Another aim was to end health insurance denial based on pre-existing conditions. By the definition of the legislation's goal, there is an understanding that there are inequalities in the U.S.'s current health care system. However, there were almost no articles detailing the lack of universal health coverage or the inequalities amongst different demographic groups in regards to health insurance.

The morality variable looked for mention of every person possessing a right to health care regardless of socio-economic status or medical condition. The occurrence of statements and quotes regarding the moral duty to protect the poor and deliver health care were scant. For example, quotes such as the following were difficult to find,

Obama said he received a letter from Kennedy, delivered after his death, in which the senator wrote, "What we face is above all a moral issue; at stake are not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country" (Shear, 2009: np).

The omission of these arguments coupled with the lower frequency of the issue frame enhanced the salience of the game frame, creating a narrative of political contest around the health care legislation.

**Finding #2:** The material frame, defined by the cost variable, is associated with mention of the economy

Often found in the reporting of policy issues, is the material frame. To add clarification to this broad frame, which includes the financial consequences of a policy, the economy and cost were defined as two separate variables of analysis (Lee, 2008: 697; Semetko, 2000: 96). Health care reform requires changes in the system to pay for the new policy and 'getting health care to large populations is expensive' (Blumenthal, 2009: 413). Also, a main component of the 2009-2010 health care reform was cutting health care spending costs; however the success of this goal is not always certain (Blumenthal, 2009: 414).

The cost and economic consequences of health care reform are a major concern for the public; as such the *NYT* and *WP* paid significant attention to this as demonstrated by the content analysis. The economy was reported in relation to the health care debate in 38.7% (116/300) of the sample. The cost of the health care overhaul in terms of increasing taxes, cutting government spending in other sectors, including existing medical programs, received coverage 47.7% (143/300) of the news articles. Economic concerns, including the recession,

unemployment, and the national deficit were significantly associated with the costs of the overhaul.

The strong association (chi-square  $p$ -value < .001) between the discussion of the economy and the reporting of the health care debate in the material frame supports the theory that news coverage of public policy issues often frames new policy in terms of cost (Lee, 2008). This relationship demonstrated by the statistical evidence also reflects the political landscape of the time period and the difficulties President Obama faced in passing reform.

The economy is a central focus in health care reform and the President's economists and the Congressional Budget Office played a large role in the formation of the legislation (Blumenthal, 2009: 414). As such, it is not surprising that the articles focused on the cost of the health care overhaul, as many people were wary about the potential of adding to the deficit during difficult financial times. For example, an article from *The New York Times* on June 26, 2009 that was coded for the economy and costs of the health care overhaul, states in the first sentence,

It has become the trillion-dollar question: can President Obama find that much in spending cuts and tax increases to keep his campaign promise to overhaul the health care system, without adding to already huge deficits? (Calmes, 2009).

Although the Congressional Budget Office produced reports detailing the long-term cost and deficit reducing benefits of the health care reform, the price of the overhaul was highly salient.

**Finding #3:** The use of the conflict frame is not associated with the discussion of the government role; however, the mention of the public option did correspond with the use of the conflict frame.

The conflict frame was found in 45.3% of the sample or 136 articles. The conflict frame focused on the actual conflict between two or more parties on the health care bill, such as between Democrats and Republicans, President Obama and Congress, interest groups or the insurance industry and the Obama administration, or even inter-party. This variable looked for the uses of words and phrases including 'fight' 'battle' and 'attack.' The conflict frame was also analyzed to examine whether the increased political polarization in the U.S. played out in the news coverage of the debate.

At the beginning of the health care negotiations, the insurance industry was in communication with the administration and was considered a friend not foe. However, as the debate lagged on and the provisions in the legislation changed, the rift between President Obama and the insurance industry became evident. The following excerpt from an article in *The Washington Post* demonstrates the continuous struggle between the Obama administration and the insurance industry. Goldstein writes in a front-page article,

The White House is mounting a stinging, sustained broadside against health insurance rate increases as President Obama and his aides enter what they hope will be the final stretch of a year-long political war over health-care reform (Goldstein, 2010).

Historically, the health insurance industry has been at odds with the President and government attempting to pass reforms that would potentially reduce its profits and change the manner in which the insurance industry operates. No President to date, attempting health care reform, has escaped the influence and strength of opposition from the insurance industry (Jamieson, 1998).

Another source of conflict was the ideological debate on the role of the government in social issues. The fiercely contrasting beliefs about health care reform have become 'a symbol of the deep divide in American's feelings about the role government should play in solving our social problems' (Daschle, 2010: 10). This dispute was a constant backdrop in the battle for reform. However, the results of the cross-tabulation and chi-square test on the conflict frame and the government role are interesting and surprising due to the political context. There is not a statistically significant relationship between the *NYT* and *WP*'s reference to the government role in health care and the conflict frame.

The discussion on the government's involvement continued with the controversial public option. The cross-tabulation and chi-square test demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between the public option and conflict frame. The following excerpt from *The New York Times* on October 28, 2009 article demonstrates the public option in the conflict frame,

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, said he would vote to start debate and then join Republicans to fight the public option, which he said would become "another entitlement program that will end up increasing the national debt (Pear, 2009).

The heated attacks between party members grew as the political debate continued. The description of the health care reform in terms of fighting also became more apparent as will be demonstrated by the finding that the occurrence of frames varies over time.

**Finding #4:** The frames changed over the time period.

After analyzing which frames were predominant, and whether the print media's inclusion of certain variables were associated to the frame employed, it is important to examine at what point during the time period were the frames the most apparent (Lawrence, 2000: 106). The bar chart (Figure 3) demonstrates that the first time wave, during which the health care legislation was just beginning to take shape, saw the least amount of reporting according to the issue frame represented by the PPACA. There was only reference to the contents of the legislation in 16.22% of the articles during that time wave. The *NYT* and *WP* discussed the new health care bill equally in terms of the game frame and material frame. President Obama and Congress were still enjoying wide support and the president's power for passing difficult and sweeping reform is at 'its height while the vote count is still warm' (Blumenthal, 2009: 411). As such, the data supports that while the news employed the game frame, it did not immensely surpass the use of other frames, thus giving attention to multiple aspects of the debate from February 24 2009 to August 1, 2009.

As the debate continued, the second time wave shows that the game frame increased, as did the appearance of the other variables. The game frame and value frame (non-substantive) were most apparent out of the five frames during the second wave of time. One of the unique aspects of framing is that it reflects cultural resonance (Entman, 2010: 391), demonstrated by the increase in reporting, specifically in the non-substantive frame, during the time that covered the contentious month of August. The right-wing tea party was in full force during the summer of 2009, mainly rounding up troops to protest Congressmen at town hall meetings (Starr, 2011; Boykoff, 2011).

The shock of the rallying cries from the public during the August recess and the counter-attack from the right wing 'took the Democrats by surprise, and for a time, it dominated the news and eroded support for reform' (Starr, 2011: 212). Many news articles paid attention to individual Congressmen who were under extreme pressure from their constituents and experienced the full heat of the August recess at their town hall meetings. For example, this statement from a front-page article in *The Washington Post* on August 15, 2009 discusses the backlash Senator Cardin (D-MD) experienced during his normally quiet routine visit to his home state and congressional district,

Despite being verbally attacked at the town hall meetings, he might be more secure than other Democrats. A cardboard cutout of freshman Rep. Frank M. Kratovil Jr. (D-Md.) from the right-leaning Eastern Shore, for example, was hanged in effigy last month during a protest outside his office...Still, Cardin said, the town halls were 'pretty intense.' He was a little surprised that his traditional recess meetings with constituents turned out the way they did (Davis, 2009).

The attack from the right wing also fueled a response among Progressives who were ready to move on support of the PPACA (Starr, 2011: 212). As framing is a dialectical theory, every theme that emerges in public policy debate is met by a counter theme (Callaghan, 2005: 6). The Democrats, with the help of Organizing for America<sup>7</sup>, led a rapid response to the right-wing attacks at August town halls and began to increase their rallying support of health care reform (Starr, 2011: 215). However, they were too late and 'the storyline had already been established in the media' (Starr, 2011: 216). The August meetings were generating extensive news coverage that the Democrats did not want and they were 'frustrated that when they had quiet, civil conversations with constituents, it wasn't news' (Starr, 2011: 216).

The last time wave, December 24, 2009 to March 23, 2010, experienced the highest frequency of the game frame with approximately 93% of articles exhibiting the use of strategies and political maneuvers being executed by Democrats and Republicans, the President, and interest groups. As the final health care vote was rapidly approaching, the news focused more on the strategic angles of the debate. The bill was expected to pass by March 2010, but the refocused attention turned to how the Democrats were going to pass the bill, by what tactics, strategies, and concessions. Vote counting was still taking place three days before the final vote set for Sunday, March 22. As the bill passed without any Republican support, the focus shifted not to what the final legislation would contain, but rather to the ramifications the Democrats would face at the mid-term elections.

This example from the *NYT* published on March 22, 2010 demonstrates the focus on political games, conflicts, gains and concessions made by each team for the legislation.

Despite the protests, despite the months of cable television denunciations, despite their warnings that Democrats would be massacred at the polls in November, despite their concerted effort to attack the measure from nearly every conceivable angle, Republicans ultimately found themselves powerless to stop it (Hulse, 2010).

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<sup>7</sup> Organizing for America is the grass roots organization created for Obama's presidential campaign.

Although the game frame and the value frame were dominant until the bill passed, certain articles focused greater attention to the changes that would come from the law. For example, a front-page article in the *WP* on March 22, 2010, the day the House passed the final health care bill, gave information on the changes to health insurance coverage, with information such as ‘That measure devotes \$875 billion over the next decade to expanding insurance coverage, with the major changes coming in 2014’ and ‘An estimated 24 million people who lack access to affordable coverage through the workplace will be eligible for tax credits to buy insurance on new state-based exchanges’ (Montgomery, 2010).

As the frames changed with the chronology of the health care debate, strategic concerns took precedence over substantive matters, particularly at times of significant consequence in the legislative stage. This finding demonstrates that there can be a significant connection between conflict among political elites and the newsworthiness of a particular part of the policy making process (Lawrence, 2000: 109). This conclusion also supports the theory that framing is an imprint of power from the political elites and the media (Entman, 1993: 55).

The four main findings discussed demonstrate that *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* employed a distinct set of frames in their coverage of the health care debate. The content analysis and the subsequent quantification and statistical analysis of the main theme and frames demonstrate that the *NYT* and *WP* heavily reported the legislative procedures and the game frame (74%). The news included the exciting strategies by the President and opposing parties in their narrative of the health care debate, while obscuring other aspects of the health care bill outside the frame (Boykoff, 2011).

The second finding demonstrates that the cost of the health care bill shaped and created the material frame. Although the material frame consumed under half of the articles (47.7%), it is significantly associated with the economy reflecting the salience of the political and cultural context within the print media’s portrayal of the health care debate. The findings empirically show that the *NYT* and *WP* elevated the exciting and tactical moves in politics, but also those frames reflect the political landscape.

The analysis also supports the theory that framing is best conceptualized over time (Chong, 2007: 108) as finding four shows the changes in the presence of the competing frames. As it is more exciting for the audience to read about public policy issues as a game rather than just in terms of the details of the legislation which can be technical and uneventful, the print media often refrain from reporting the substantive news until the majority of the political action has played out in Washington (Lawrence, 2000). The data shows that the issue frame,

or the PPACA variable, increased with the time period and reached its peak at almost equal percentages in the last two time waves. However, the game, conflict, and value frames still proved to be employed the most by the *NYT* and *WP* until the passage of the health care bill.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has a few limitations. In regards to the design of the method, the desired addition of *USA Today* proved both interesting and problematic. *USA Today* did not publish nearly as many articles covering the health care reform debate as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. This created an unequal amount of articles from each newspaper and *USA Today* was omitted for standardization purposes. This did not stifle the findings because the researcher's goal was not to compare the newspapers. However, for future research in comparing the newspapers, the sampling technique would have to be changed and more newspapers should be included. The coding book could also be redefined to streamline the variables for analysis. Another limitation stems from analyzing only newspaper texts.

This dissertation focused only on the extent to which the print media framed the health care reform debate. In future works, it would be interesting to examine other media, including news broadcasts, but also new media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. As Starr writes,

In a media-drenched society, people can be counted on to perform for the cameras. And with YouTube, they didn't even need the news media to show up; a video showing a besieged and flummoxed Democratic congressman could go viral and serve the same purpose (Starr, 2011: 216).

As the battle for health care reform will continue and the legacy of the PPACA will be shaped in part by the 2012 Presidential Election, there is further research to be conducted on this topic. The decades old endeavor 'for a remedy to America's problems in health care has turned into a peculiarly arduous struggle – peculiar in its duration, its rancor and its salience and centrality in national politics' (Starr, 2011: 279). Future research should investigate the framing over a longer period of time, perhaps beginning with President Obama's election through the 2012 presidential election. Also, it would be interesting to examine the effect framing has on individuals when they are exposed to such frames for a longer duration and whether the competing frames in a political context affect their opinion on health care reform (Chong, 2007).



## CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation explored the news framing of the 2009-2010 health care reform debate in two elite U.S. newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. An extensive body of literature in the field, including framing theory, media framing applied to health care reform, and the context of health care reform in the United States, was surveyed to establish the analytic framework and generate the research questions. The research employed a content analysis of the print media's coverage of the health care reform during a 13-month period of fierce arguments and negotiating. The time period follows two cornerstone events of the health care bill; February 24, 2009 when President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress and stressed the need for immediate reform of the health care system to March 23, 2010 when history was made and the PPACA was signed into law. The goal of this dissertation was to examine the extent to which the print media framed the health care reform debate and which frame, if any, would be the most prevalent.

This research found the dominant presence of the game frame in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post's* coverage of the 2009-2010 health care reform debate. This conclusion adds to and strengthens the literature on the prevalence of the game frame in non-electoral public policy contexts. The data also demonstrates the print media frame public policy debates to organize a complex policy proposal and debate into a digestible and interesting narrative. The game frame dominated the *NYT* and *WP's* portrayal of the health care debate, followed by the value frame, the material frame, the conflict frame, and finally the issue frame. This finding exemplifies the stark difference between news frames focusing on the political game versus giving attention to the concrete and real-world implications and changes from the new policy.

Health care policy in the United States is challenging, and President Obama accomplished an extraordinary measure by passing the PPACA. The long and arduous debate over health care reform involved all sectors of the nation and was clearly a focal point of the print media's political news coverage. This dissertation illuminated *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post's* predominant use of the game frame in their coverage of the 2009-2010 United States health care reform debate.

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