

**Media Discourse, Public Policy and Democracy:
A Preliminary Case Study of the Reagan Tax and Budget Plans of 1981**

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I. Introduction: Democratic Communications and U.S. Public Policy

Understanding how citizens might come to know and to express their interests is a central concern in democratic politics. How can people expect to induce policymakers to protect and to advance their interests if they do not or cannot know their interests and thus, do not or cannot articulate them? How can one justify arrangements that give citizens real influence if they do not or cannot know the expected consequences of alternative choices for themselves and for society? How can one's vote for a candidate, her signature on a petition or on a letter to a representative, her words and action at a rally or demonstration be considered meaningful political expressions when the relationship between public issues and her authentic needs, desires, goals and values is concealed, obscured or distorted?

In contemporary societies, mass media is the primary mechanism for providing the information and interpretations that citizens use to form the policy perceptions and preferences that bear so centrally on the quality of democracy. However, serious power and resource inequalities raise the troubling possibility that political elites and privileged groups could use their communications access and skill strategically to distort public opinion and deflect it from citizens' individual and collective interests. These circumstances also open up serious questions regarding the institutional and structural forces that shape the quality of mass communications in societies that aspire to fulfill democratic values. Thus, in order to understand the extent to which citizens can form authentic preferences, it is crucial to explore the media messages they receive during key public policy debates. Do news outlets offer enough accurate and substantive information, and a sufficiently diverse range of ideological perspectives and interpretations, to allow citizens to make autonomous policy choices? And how might this media coverage affect the poll results that most political actors treat as "the voice of the people?"

American politics has undergone a significant ideological shift over the last 25 to 30 years. This "right turn" has included a number of high-profile --- if unevenly successful --- attempts to roll back economic regulatory and social welfare policy. These efforts to redefine the longstanding role of the federal government in shaping private markets and in mitigating the consequences of capitalism have included notable changes in policy outcomes, agendas and public discourse. Indeed, some go so far as to characterize the period as comprising a significant dismantling --- or at least a major retrenchment --- of the welfare state (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b). However, there is much disagreement about the nature and extent of mass public support for the recent rightward shift. Some scholars point to an apparently growing disconnect between citizens' basic policy commitments, on the one hand, and elite policy agendas and outcomes, on the other. (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) But

few have systematically investigated the role of mass communications in generating popular “consent” for these far-reaching changes in the relationship between the state and the market in the contemporary United States.

My dissertation is aimed at helping to illuminate the sources of this recent rightward shift --- and thus, to engage larger theoretical issues of communications power and democracy --- by focusing on a phenomenon that scholars have labeled “elite manipulation (or domination) of public opinion:” “A situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis.” (Zaller 1992: 313) My conceptual framework combines social scientific approaches to communications and political psychology that examine media content, and, in turn, how audiences process messages and form attitudes, with critical theory perspectives that explore how ideational power operates through the construction and circulation of discourses.

My research questions are threefold: 1) To what extent has mass communications content during contemporary economic and social welfare policy debates approximated the “best available information and analysis”? 2) Following from this, what are the *contextual conditions* --- in other words, the political-institutional and macro-structural factors --- that determine the extent to which this news content approximates the best available information and analysis? 3) What *individual-level characteristics* might make such media messages more or less likely to affect citizens’ policy preferences? I engage my theoretical and substantive concerns through a two-part, mixed-method research design: 1) A comparative case study of media and elite communications in three key policy debate episodes --- a) President Ronald Reagan’s 1981 tax and budget plans. b) The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (aka “welfare reform”), and c) President George W. Bush’s Social Security privatization plan (c. 2005). 2) A laboratory experiment to investigate the psychological mechanisms through which elite manipulation may operate, and the individual characteristics that may subvert or facilitate such communications effects.

This paper presents preliminary empirical results from my first case study, focused on network television news coverage. I have three major findings: 1) First, coverage of institutional procedure, internal process, and political strategy and tactics overwhelmed substantive policy content during the 1981 tax and budget debates along a variety of conceptual dimensions and empirical measures. 2) To the extent that TV news carried content about the substance of these policy debates, it significantly favored Reagan administration, Republican and conservative perspectives and positions. 3) Official government sources dominated the news to an extent that appears unusual in domestic policy debates. Thus, my study offers much initial evidence at the level of media discourse for potential elite

manipulation --- in other words, a mass media environment not characterized by the “best information and analysis.” Generally, my findings in this case confirm those of a prominent journalistic account:

The press ended up functioning more as accomplice than as adversary in the selling of Reagan’s economic program...The single greatest political liability of the Reagan program --- the fact that it deprived the many while subsidizing the few --- escaped serious and sustained scrutiny by the nation’s major news organizations. For television in particular, the story in the summer of 1981 was not Rich vs. Poor but Gipper Sweeps Congress. The fixation on the sport of it all was such that an observation David Stockman made concerning Congress applied equally well to most of the press: ‘The real issues that the Reagan Revolution posed...had never been seriously debated.’” (Hertsgaard 1988: 131)

I proceed in the following stages. First, I sketch my theoretical framework, showing how this project fits into literature on mass media content during public policy debates, the dynamics of discursive power in contemporary political contexts, and the mechanisms through which such messages can affect public opinion. Then I describe my data and research design, before turning to a discussion of initial empirical findings. Here, I cover the topics that TV news focused on in this case, the sources who appeared, the ideological and policy frames that audiences were exposed to, and the overall favorability of network news toward Reagan administration plans and perspectives. I conclude by exploring the implications of these findings and laying out the additional research I will conduct as part of this dissertation.

II. Media Discourse and Political Power

Much research and theorizing in recent decades has examined the contours of news content on public policy issues and the forces that shape that coverage. Among the most prominent conceptual models is the indexing hypothesis, which suggests that major U.S. media tend to reflect the range of policy debate among national elites of the two main parties, and also emphasize these perspectives and multiply the voices that communicate them through the selection of sympathetic nongovernmental sources (Bennett 1990, 1996; Hallin 1994: 40-57). Related to this work is a substantial literature on organizational routines and professional norms and practices that explores how and why journalists tend to rely heavily on official government sources for information and policy perspectives (Sigal 1973, Gans 1979, Shoemaker 1991, Cook 1998, Bennett 2009 [1983]). Scholars have also argued that coverage of interest groups, social movement organizations and other civil society actors tends to favor the largest and wealthiest lobbies, and to cover protest groups and demonstrations sparsely and negatively, sidelining substantive policy demands and political perspectives (Thrall 2006, Gitlin 1980, McLeod and Hertog 1992).

More generally, U.S. mainstream media content --- especially television --- has been found to focus on internal procedural narratives and strategic jockeying, as opposed to policy substance (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, Lawrence 2000); to depict social problems in ways that place responsibility on individuals and de-emphasize larger structural, institutional and policy-based causes and remedies (Iyengar 1991); and to abide by implicit codes of dramatization, personalization, fragmentation and normalization that amplify these coverage tendencies in ways that usually favor status quo social and political relations (Bennett 2009 [1983]). Finally, many studies offer evidence that control of U.S. media by large corporations --- and especially the increasing conglomeration and commercialization of recent decades --- at once reproduces, exacerbates and justifies these content patterns (Smythe 2002 [1979]; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parenti 1993; McChesney 1999, 2004; Bagdikian 2004). Thus, scholarship from a number of theoretical and empirical perspectives suggests a contemporary mass-mediated “public sphere” (Habermas 1989 [1962]) that may present an ideologically cramped and information-poor policy discourse.

But despite these impressive bodies of scholarship, empirical research on media content during public policy debates is significantly underdeveloped. First, a large majority of studies that either support or challenge indexing examine U.S. foreign policy issues. Thus, our understanding of the extent of reliance on official sources and the consequent level of diversity and substantive nature of ideological perspectives in news coverage during domestic policy debates remains murky. In addition, our accumulated insights into the contours of such coverage, while compelling and important, have not been connected in ways that can generate comprehensive depictions of policy debates. In other words, few scholars have engaged in theoretically grounded case studies that employ the systematic and thorough content analyses necessary to map media-discursive landscapes in ways that build on what we know about the forces that shape news coverage, thus enabling plausible comparative inferences about the conditions that impinge on the quality of mass communications in contemporary politics.

At the same time, political psychologists and communications scholars in recent decades have amassed a considerable body of work elaborating the mechanisms through which media messages can shape audiences’ perceptions and opinions. Central to this exploration of cognitive and affective pathways and conditions of attitude change or reinforcement have been studies of framing and priming (McLeod et al. 2002; Kinder 2003; Entman 1993, 2007); the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty et al. 2002); and the amount, nature and distribution of citizens’ public affairs knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996; Zaller 1992; Kuklinksi et al. 2000; Gilens 2001; Jerit et al. 2006). Theorizing and research in these areas has greatly enriched understanding of the processes by which

mass communications can affect political attitudes and perceptions. However, social scientists pursuing these subjects generally have neglected to explore how their findings may be implicated in broader dynamics of power and the relationship between policymakers and citizens in contemporary politics.¹

Page and Shapiro (1992) engage in a provocative discussion of the distinction between elite “education” and “manipulation” of public opinion that sets forth a promising analytical platform for conducting the thorough and rigorous public policy debate case studies that are needed. Education, broadly understood, is when elites and relevant institutions --- such as news outlets --- provide a quantity of accurate information, and a wide spectrum of views, commentary and interpretations, likely to help the public approach the policy choices “it would make if it were fully and completely informed.” Conversely, manipulation is when people encounter incorrect or deceptively selective information, and misleading or ideologically narrow interpretations, which encourage opinions that diverge from those they would hold if they were aware of all relevant information and analysis.² These ideas can form the basis for a conceptual architecture that integrates social scientific theories of media content and attitude-formation while foregrounding crucial questions of power usually left to explicitly normative theorists and social critics. However, few scholars have taken up Page and Shapiro’s call for further study by building on insights from critical theory and combining them with social scientific analysis and empirical research to better understand how discursive power operates in concrete political settings.³

Working in a very different intellectual context, several such critical theorists and political philosophers have conceptualized and examined phenomena similar to elite manipulation. Among the most prominent of such theories is Lukes’s (2005 [1974]) “third dimension” of power; in elaborating this concept, he notes especially the importance of various modes of communication in shaping people’s preferences to serve elite interests. Allied concepts include Habermas’s notion of “distorted communication” in the degraded contemporary public sphere (Habermas 1989 [1962]; Calhoun 1992, Baynes 1994); Edelman’s (1967, 1977, 1988, 2001) social constructionist theory of symbolic politics, centered on the maintenance of power relations and dominant ideologies through mediated “spectacles” and rituals that foster quiescence and reinforce privilege for the wealthy and well-

¹ For notable exceptions, see Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), Bennett (1990, 1996, 2009 [1983]), Entman (1998, 2007), Page (1996) and Margolis and Mauser (1989) as examples of scientifically inclined scholars who show a deep interest in how empirical communications findings relate to such fundamental normative issues.

² From my perspective, manipulation is not always --- and perhaps not typically --- the outcome of intentional and conscious efforts by political elites, commentators or other communicative agents. Thus, my definitions focus not on the goals or intentions of communicators, but rather on the nature and outcomes of messages.

³ As Van Dijk (2006) notes, many scholars of political discourse and communication have used the term “manipulation” impressionistically --- and occasionally sloppily --- but there have been few attempts at theoretical refinement and systematic empirical analysis.

organized; Lindblom's (1977, 2001) ideas of the "preference circularity" and "assault on the mind" occasioned by elites' projection of ideational power through media and other civil society organizations; and Gramsci's (2005 [1971]) elaboration of "hegemony," or the patterned and relatively durable --- but far from unchallenged or incontestable --- reproduction of ideas and language forms that facilitate popular "consent" to power arrangements that sustain and promote elite interests. As Gramsci understood it, mass media is one crucial site on which political hegemony is simultaneously constructed, fortified and challenged. However, because these processes are historically contingent and open-ended, their particular shape is an empirical question that can only be answered through rigorous analysis.⁴

Unfortunately, few such studies have been conducted. Especially needed is work that acknowledge the virtues of both interpretive and social scientific perspectives, and that employs a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. In their critique of framing research, Carragee and Roefs (2004) argue that most recent analyses ignore the implications of this psychological-communications mechanism for the exercise of political and social power. Entman (2007) also calls for studies that link framing and priming mechanisms to power relations in democratic politics, and suggests that such a research program offers fertile analytical ground for bridging social scientific and critical-cultural scholarship in mass communications.⁵ I aim to fill one space in this research agenda, by explicating and searching for possible evidence of elite manipulation through mass media during domestic policy battles. I suggest that the messages abroad in the public sphere set the major ideological parameters of discourse, and constitute a large part of the information and ideas --- the raw materials, as it were --- that in any given debate are available to interact with audience psychology to produce poll results that political actors use to help generate or frustrate concrete policy outcomes.

With that theoretical context in mind, in this preliminary case study I ask: 1) To what extent did the mass communications environment during debate over the 1981 Reagan tax and budget plans approximate the "best available information and analysis" on these issues? In other words, was news

⁴ In Hallin's (1994: 12) words, Gramscian theories of hegemony in the context of communications propose that "cultural institutions like the media are part of a process by which a world-view compatible with the existing structure of power in society is reproduced, a process which is decentralized, open to contradiction and conflict, but generally very effective."

See also Mansbridge (1980: 25) and Connolly (1993 [1974]: 64) for analogous notions of the role of information in helping citizens understand their interests and make autonomous political choices free of ideational coercion and manipulation.

⁵ Reese (2001) and Tankard (2001) also call for scholars to connect rigorous empirical analysis of framing to the dynamics of political power and ideology. See Lewis (2001) for an excellent example of such bridge-building, focused on the depiction of opinion polls in news stories as a mechanism through which the appearance of broad mass public support for center-right socioeconomic and foreign policies is maintained.

content in this episode relatively closer to potential elite “manipulation” or “education” of public opinion? 2) Thus, what broad topics relevant to these policy debates did network TV news focus on? Which sources appeared in these news reports? What ideological or policy perspectives and interpretations --- i.e. frames --- did they offer viewers, and what concrete information about these proposed policy changes did the news provide? And generally how favorably or unfavorably did evening news programs depict the Reagan administration’s tax and budget plans during this crucial period?

III. Data and Research Design

In order to answer these questions, I am conducting a systematic content analysis of network TV coverage from the start of Reagan’s first term through the policy debate on the administration’s initial budget and tax plans. I analyze coverage on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs from January 1, 1981, through August 13, 1981, the day the tax legislation was signed. I obtained DVD copies from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive of every network news report that addressed the budget and tax debates during the period of my analysis.⁶ When my work on this policy case is complete, I will have analyzed the entire plausible universe of stories on these issues that appeared on the three news programs for a period of approximately seven-and-a-half months.

For each report, I coded for eight major elements: 1) primary topical focus, 2) secondary topical focus, 3) identity of each source,⁷ 4) source category, such as Bush administration official, Democratic Party official, conservative and progressive interest group/social movement source and so on, 5) frame employed in each source’s statement, 6) frame employed in any unattributed statement made by a journalist, 7) factual information about the budget or tax plans included in the report, and 8) directional thrust of the story as a whole. I address some major coding procedures and criteria here. Lists and descriptions of story focus, source, frame and information designation codes are in the Appendix.

To conduct the framing analyses, I consulted secondary academic and journalistic literature and contemporary primary sources --- such as political speeches and news stories --- to make an initial list of possible frames related to the 1981 tax and budget issues. As I conducted my TV content analysis, I gradually added items to this list, ending with 12 possible frames, plus a sparsely populated miscellaneous category for “other.” Each source (named or unnamed) that appeared in the news and

⁶ My sample for this paper contains 128 TV news stories. Before completing the analysis of this case for my dissertation, I will obtain from the archive a number of relevant media reports that were missing from my initial batch of data.

⁷ I coded both named and anonymous sources who were quoted directly and indirectly.

made any statement relevant to the tax and budget policy issues received a frame code. I view these frames as distinct interpretations of the policy proposals, the political dynamics surrounding them and related matters that operate to select and emphasize certain aspects of an issue, thus explicitly asserting or implicitly suggesting that audiences should take particular stances. Most frames for this case study are focused on the purported effects of the policies --- e.g. the Reagan tax plan will boost the national economy⁸ --- or the proper role of government in socioeconomic affairs --- e.g. domestic social programs are too expensive, wasteful and/or damaging to the work ethic of low-income people.⁹

In determining the directional thrust of each story, I selected from one of five possible codes, ranging from very favorable to very unfavorable. This code was designed to capture the likely overall effect on the opinion toward the Reagan budget and tax plans of the typical American viewing the news report. I combined three main factors in identifying the directional thrust of each story, using neutral as the presumed starting point: 1) The overall balance of source frames included in the story. Thus, if a report contained more statements positive toward Reagan administration policy than statements that were negative, this would tend to push the story's directional thrust in the favorable direction. 2) The likely effects of essentially neutral information contained in the news report. In other words, aside from the direction of source frames, I asked in what direction the information or events contained in the report would likely push the typical news viewer's opinion toward the tax and budget issues. Thus, if a story was based largely on a report from a progressive interest group criticizing the administration's proposed cuts in social welfare programs, this would push the story's directional thrust in the unfavorable direction. 3) The overall "tone" of the report. This criterion was intended to capture more nuanced elements of the story ---beyond the balance of favorable and unfavorable sources, and beyond the presumably factual information provided --- that might influence viewers' opinions. These elements included the implicit assumptions upon which the story appeared to be based and the tone of the language used by anchors and reporters. For example, when journalists themselves suggested --- without polling evidence --- that "public opinion" was on the president's side, this would tend to push the directional thrust of the story in the favorable direction.

⁸ I designate this frame "macroeconomic stimulus (pro)."

⁹ I tag this frame "government programs (con)."

I should emphasize that my categorization below of framed statements into either essentially pro- or anti-administration perspectives does not imply that anti-administration statements necessarily expressed fundamental or vehement criticism of the Reagan plans or the ideological positions on which these policies were based. Instead, I considered as valenced against the Reagan perspective any statement that expressed a modicum of substantive skepticism or criticism of administration positions within the appropriate frame. This coding strategy is deliberately intended to be "liberal," in the sense that it is aimed at capturing even faint signals of dissent.

While these criteria unavoidably involve elements of human interpretation, I chose this coding scheme in order to capture a large number of distinct and potentially important elements of news stories that are not likely reachable through computerized content analysis programs. I do not claim to be comprehensive in my approach to analyzing the content of TV news coverage during these social and economic policy debates, only more comprehensive and more systematic than any previous studies I am aware of. My approach is unusual in two ways. First, I coded the full content of essentially every TV news report on these policy issues over a several months' long period of public debate, rather than following the typical practices of sampling stories and coding just headlines, abstracts or lead paragraphs. Second, I collected data on a large and diverse set of media content elements that might be important in shaping public opinion, rather than, for example, simply coding at the story level for overall favorability.¹⁰ While labor intensive, my strategy is optimal when aiming to provide a foundation for understanding the extent to which news coverage on public policy issues approaches potential elite manipulation or education of public opinion.

IV. Issue Attention

Before presenting evidence on the sources who appeared on the evening news, the ideological frames they employed and the overall favorability of coverage toward the Reagan administration's policy proposals, it is useful to briefly sketch the topics that these programs focused on during the months of my analysis. Figure 1 graphs the percentage of total media coverage that was focused on one of four topical categories during the 1981 tax and budget debates.¹¹

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The major pattern that emerges here is a heavy news emphasis on procedural and/or strategic dimensions. A solid majority (53.6 percent) of coverage focused on matters of policymaking or institutional procedure, external political strategy or internal partisan jockeying. Of the three possible substantive categories, the class implications of the budget and tax plans was most prevalent, although fiscal implications and macroeconomics were not far off.

¹⁰ See Althaus (2003) for a notable exception to common limited media content coding practices.

¹¹ This graph includes both primary and secondary foci, aggregated together. In other words, the length of the bars indicates the total percentages of possible foci that fall into each category. Each story could have up to two foci (and I coded the vast majority as having two), and the figure indicates the proportion of total foci devoted to each of the categories.

Disaggregating primary and secondary foci provides additional evidence for this pattern of strategic and procedural coverage. Nearly two-thirds (65.9 percent) of the news reports had an essentially non-substantive *primary* focus. The three substantive categories each took up a similar proportion of primary foci, but the collective emphasis on class implications (11.6 percent), macroeconomic issues (11.6 percent) and fiscal implications (9.3 percent) here was decidedly marginal compared to procedural/strategic dimensions. Turning to secondary foci, 38.8 percent of stories emphasized non-substantive angles. Class implications (19.4 percent) was the second-largest category, followed by fiscal implications (17.8 percent) and macroeconomics (15.5 percent). Thus, while political strategy and procedure constituted a smaller proportion of secondary foci than primary foci, essentially non-substantive angles generally had a decided advantage over other possible emphases during the debate over the tax and budget plans. It should be noted that many stories with a substantive secondary focus had a procedural/strategic primary focus, so even in these reports news content dealing with policy substance garnered a fairly small proportion of airtime.

Breaking coverage down into time periods offers a further level of nuance about the topics covered by TV news in this policy case. I divided my analysis into three main phases: 1) What media scholars typically call the “establishing phase,” when the policy issue first receives major news attention and the overall terms of the coming political debates are set in place (January and February 1981 in this case), 2) The institutional debate over the Reagan budget plan (March, April and May), and 3) The institutional debate over the tax plan (June and July).¹² Here I find that while procedural and strategic angles made up the largest category of foci in each of the periods, these topics were relatively less central in the establishing phase than during the institutional debate phases. Aggregating primary and secondary foci, more than 37 percent of the coverage during the initial period was essentially non-substantive; class implications (7.8 percent) made up the smallest category.¹³ During the budget debate phase, nearly 60 percent of TV coverage was focused on non-substantive themes.¹⁴ The tax debate period followed essentially this same pattern, with almost 60 percent of content emphasizing non-

¹² I chose January and February as the establishing phase because it coincides with the beginning of the Reagan presidency, when news of the administration’s domestic policy plans became more frequent but before legislative debate on his budget and tax proposals started. Most formal institutional debate over the budget plan took place over the next three months (the plan was approved by Congress just before the Memorial Day recess), and most debate over the tax plan occurred in June and July (the final version of that plan passed both chambers on Aug. 4).

¹³ Fiscal implications constituted the second-largest category, at 31.4 percent; macroeconomics (21.6 percent) was next.

¹⁴ Fiscal implications was second at 15.5 percent, followed by class implications at 13.6 percent, and macroeconomics at 11.7 percent.

substantive themes, class implications coming in second at 23.7 percent, macroeconomics next at 12.9 percent, and fiscal implications nearly absent at just 3.2 percent.¹⁵

These findings are unsurprising in that we should expect procedure and strategy to be relatively more prominent in news content during the institutional debate periods than during the establishing phase. Mainstream journalists tend to follow implicit norms of newsworthiness that privilege content that bears on the outcome of institutional battles, and place a declining value on content related to policy substance that they perceive as already having been reported --- in other words, “old news.” However, despite the relatively larger share of substantive coverage in general during the early period of 1981, my findings also show that among possible substantive themes, audiences during the establishing phase heard and saw relatively little TV news that focused on class dimensions of the plans. Thus, during the period when the news is most powerful in signaling the overall parameters and themes of policy debates and the important topics for citizens to focus on, content related to the implications of the Reagan budget and tax plans for various income or social class groupings was sparse.

In sum, ABC, CBS and NBC network news audiences in the first seven-and-a-half months of 1981 were exposed to significantly more content about the status of the budget and tax plans in the legislative process --- and the internal and external political strategies deployed by various actors --- than content about the merits of the plans, their implications for public policy, the economy and citizens in general, or the substantive positions of political elites, interest groups and other sources. Audiences heard and saw a great deal about the prospects that one or another policy plan would successfully navigate various points in the legislative gauntlet, accusations of failure to consult and compromise made by warring political elites, and the lobbying and public relations strategies and tactics used by the Reagan administration in rounding up votes for its policies and shaping a favorable climate of public opinion. Relatively little coverage was focused on the actual shape and impact of these major policy proposals, or the ideological stances --- for example, about the role of government in ensuring social welfare or the best way to stimulate the economy --- espoused by different sides in the debate. My findings square broadly with previous studies showing that mainstream U.S. mass media content is heavily focused on procedural and strategic dimensions. While some coverage of this type is arguably essential for citizens aiming to evaluate the claims of political actors, the fact that such a small percentage of content on the 1981 budget and tax plans emphasized substantive issues is an initial bit of evidence that audiences were not offered an approximation of the “best available information and

¹⁵ This last finding is curious, given the elite and academic debate around that time over supply-side economic theories --- aka “Reaganomics” --- which maintain that large tax cuts aimed at spurring investment by corporations and affluent individuals actually lead to increased government revenues.

analysis” in this case that would allow them to coherently link their underlying interests and values to policy preferences.

V. Sources

Having sketched the general contours of TV news content on the 1981 tax and budget plans, showing that coverage heavily emphasized procedure and strategy over policy substance, I turn now to analyses of which sources appeared in mass media during the debate. Figure 2 shows the total percentage of (named and unnamed) sources from different categories on the network news during the entire period of my analysis.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Reagan administration sources --- including the president himself, White House chief of staff James Baker, Treasury Secretary Donald Regan, Budget Director David Stockman and others --- made up a majority (52.9 percent) of the total 1,028 sources who appeared on the evening news. Moreover, administration sources were afforded the “first word” in nearly 65 percent of news reports, giving them particular power in framing the substance of these stories in the minds of viewers. In addition, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of total sources may be classified as essentially pro-administration, compared to 31.1 percent who may plausibly be termed anti-administration.¹⁶ Moreover, analyzing the patterns of inclusion and exclusion of those sources who carried a partisan tag, I found that GOP voices made up 63.7 percent of such sources, compared to 29.7 percent for Democrats. In terms of specific named sources, President Reagan --- unsurprisingly --- was the single most-frequently quoted source, appearing a total of 279 times during the period of my analysis, and making up 33.3 percent of the total. Furthermore, the president himself was given the first word more often than any other named source, comprising nearly half of all named first sources.

More than 95 percent of the total sources quoted on evening TV news during these policy debates may be classified as official sources.¹⁷ In stark contrast, interest groups or social movement

¹⁶ Pro-administration sources were administration sources, Republican Party sources and sources from conservative interest groups or social movement organizations. Anti-administration sources were Democratic Party sources and sources from progressive or liberal interest groups or social movement organizations. This last category is slightly inflated, in that a number of conservative Democrats (typically so-called “boll weevils” from the South) who were quoted on the news actually espoused pro-administration positions. This pattern will become clearer in my analysis below of the specific frames that appeared in news stories.

¹⁷ Official sources were administration sources, Republican Party sources, Democratic Party sources, state/local government sources who did not carry a partisan identification and sources from the federal bureaucracy. Non-

organizations (SMOs) of any political stripe combined to make up just 3.1 percent of the total. While much previous research theorizes on and demonstrates the prevalence of official sources on mainstream U.S. news outlets, my findings stand out for the magnitude of official dominance of the policy debate. No similar studies that I am aware of have documented a proportion of official sources this large; for example, an analysis of the pre-invasion debate over the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 showed that official sources made up 79 percent of the total (Hayes and Guardino 2008).

Breaking down news sourcing patterns into the three time periods described above, I find that anti-administration and Democratic Party sources were especially marginalized on TV news during the establishing phase. Pro-administration sources comprised more than 69 percent of the total during this period; for sources who carried a clear partisan identification, Republican voices (67.1 percent) overwhelmed Democratic sources (10.2 percent); and again, official sources in general (93 percent) were dominant. These findings suggest that government sources, Republican Party actors and the Reagan administration in particular were the most powerful forces in setting the policy agenda and debate parameters as they appeared to mass media audiences. Unsurprisingly, during the institutional debate phases, Democratic voices (26.7 percent during the budget period and 37.4 percent during the tax debate period) and anti-administration sources in general (29.3 percent and 38.1 percent, respectively) were relatively more prominent. Still, the skew toward the Republican Party, conservative sources and especially the Reagan administration was quite significant even during these periods. Two specific findings stand out here: 1) The debate over the tax plan produced news coverage that was the most balanced in terms of partisan identification and position with respect to the administration's preferred policies and 2) At the same time, official voices in general were especially dominant during this period, making up a full 96.3 percent of all sources quoted. The first finding is somewhat odd, in that a substantial scholarly literature backs up popular conceptions that the Republican Party "owns" the issue of taxes, which means that news coverage on this topic tends to favor the GOP because of perceptions that it has historically handled this issue better than have Democrats. (see, e.g., Hayes 2008) The second finding may in part be explained by the possibility that there were hardly any nationally prominent and journalistically credible interest groups or SMOs in 1981 that advocated for a more progressive or left leaning tax system.¹⁸

official sources were conservative or progressive interest group/SMO sources, sources from research organizations or academia, and ordinary citizens.

¹⁸ Citizens for Tax Justice, probably the most prominent of such organizations today, was founded in 1979 but was a fledgling operation during the 1981 debates. See <http://www.ctj.org/html/ctjdesc.htm>. Just three liberal or progressive interest group/SMO sources (.7 percent of the total) appeared on network TV news during the two-month tax debate phase, all of them labor union officials. Following conventional usage in

Overall, network TV news audiences during the debate over the 1981 Reagan budget and tax proposals were exposed to a communications environment dominated by official voices, and one in which pro-administration, Republican and conservative-leaning sources had a decided edge over their ideological opponents. The voices of ostensibly neutral outside experts (.6 percent of the total), non-governmental policy advocates of any ideological flavor (3.1 percent) and ordinary citizens (1.2 percent) barely appeared at all. Thus, citizens were offered an extremely limited set of voices that heavily favored official government perspectives in general, and Republican Party/Reagan administration interpretations in particular. My findings on sourcing patterns offer more evidence that mass media did not present an approximation of the “best available information and analysis” during this policy case.

VI. Frames

Turning from the question of which kinds of political actors appeared in mass media during the 1981 Reagan tax and budget debates, I present analyses of what specifically these voices were telling ABC, CBS and NBC news audiences about the policy proposals. Figure 3 graphs the percentage of each of 13 frame categories that appeared on network news over the entire period of my analysis.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

In general, my findings on this dimension again show a heavy emphasis on procedure/strategy as opposed to policy substance, and a decided tilt toward Reagan administration, Republican Party and conservative perspectives and interpretations. Non-substantive frames made up the largest category (44.5 percent); followed by statements that criticized domestic social programs (10.4 percent); statements that generally advocated tax cuts --- or the Reagan plan in particular --- without offering or implying reasons why (9.6 percent); and statements that claimed that the administration’s tax plan would boost the national economy (7.9 percent). Of frame categories that I can clearly identify as valenced --- i.e. either tending to support or tending to oppose the administration’s tax and budget policy agenda --- nearly two-thirds were favorable.

Breaking down the frame distributions into the three main time periods of my analysis, I find that while procedural/strategic interpretations were the largest category in each phase, these frames

U.S. institutional politics, I coded union sources as liberal/progressive, although some labor officials quoted on TV news during the debates over the Reagan budget and tax plans used frames that were favorable to the administration.

became significantly more prevalent in the institutional debate phases, when news about legislative strategy and maneuvering became a larger part of the story.¹⁹ While pro-administration frames dominated during all three phases, the margin between them and anti-administration frames became somewhat smaller during the budget debate period (62.2 percent of clearly valenced frames), before widening again in the tax debate phase (71.6 percent pro-administration). During the budget debate period, frames that advocated or implied cuts in domestic programs (13.8 percent) outnumbered those that suggested the need to preserve or increase these programs (8.8 percent). And during the tax debate phase, frames asserting or suggesting that the Reagan plan would stimulate the national economy (7.4 percent of the total) beat those that questioned or disputed this interpretation (1 percent) by a huge margin. Thus, it appears that broadly conservative perspectives dominated the sub-debates over the status of domestic programs and the question of tax policies-as-economic-stimulus.²⁰ Overall, the results of my framing analysis suggest again that procedural/strategic dimensions tended to trump substantive policy concerns in TV coverage of the 1981 Reagan budget and tax plans, and that broadly conservative or pro-administration perspectives constituted a very large share of the substantive issue framing. Such paucity of substance and limited ideological diversity constitutes yet more evidence that the mass communications environment in this case did not present news viewers with something approaching “best available information and analysis.”

VII. Coverage Favorability

Finally, I turn to analyses of the directional thrust of evening news stories on the 1981 Reagan tax and budget plans. As I note above, this measure is intended to operationalize an overall evaluation of the extent to which media reports would tend to push audiences’ opinions on the policy issues either toward the administration’s position or away from it. Directional thrust is aimed at capturing a number of distinct story elements that contribute to the valence of a news report, including the ideological balance of sources and frames contained in the story, any ostensibly neutral information in the report, the implicit premises on which the story is based, and the tone of reporters and anchors. Figure 4 depicts the distribution of directional thrust over the more than seven-month period of my analysis.

¹⁹ Procedural/strategic interpretations increased from 29.3 percent of all frames in the establishing phase, to 45.3 percent in the budget debate period, to 51.3 percent during the tax debate phase.

²⁰ At the same time, fiscal implications frames comprised a miniscule .5 percent of the total during the tax debate phase, despite the elite and academic controversy over supply-side theories. See note 15 above.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Two main findings stand out from this initial look at the data. First, a plurality of stories (43.4 percent) falls into the “neutral category.” This is unsurprising for an analysis of major network evening news content, especially during the media industry era I focus on in this case study. Scholars and commentators have written extensively of the longstanding professional codes of “balance” and “objectivity,” which impel journalists to couple statements in support of an ideological position or policy idea with those against it, and to refrain as much as possible from inserting their own interpretive assertions that appear to stray from a neutral, disinterested stance. While I do not suggest that the news reports that fall into the “neutral” category in my analysis were in any sense completely “objective” (I do not think this is possible, in principle), it seems that the plurality of stories in this period did more or less approximate a disinterested rendering of the news as it relates to the tax and budget debates of the time. Moreover, while these journalistic norms have been a part of U.S. mainstream media for at least 80 years --- and continue to exert considerable power, at least in terms of news workers’ self perceptions --- there is also good reason to believe that they were more influential during the early 1980s than today. Many analysts argue that the image and mission of journalists as neutral protectors and promoters of the public interest was at its zenith from the late Vietnam era into the 1980s, but that it has since weakened considerably as a result of commercial pressures from the growth of sensationalistic and interpretive cable news and the Internet, a softening of the proverbial walls of separation between news and editorial departments --- and between news/editorial departments, on the one hand, and advertising, marketing and financial operations, on the other --- and the increasing consolidation and corporatization of news. Another reason for the plurality of neutral stories in my analysis is likely due to the fact that, as I detail above, a large proportion of the content in these reports was procedural/strategic, rather than substantive. While in some instances procedural and strategic content can imply a pro- or con- position, most of these elements are best understood as simply devoid of ideological or policy substance, thus contributing to the overall neutral presentation of the stories.

Second, while the neutral category contains the largest number of reports, almost as many (40.3 percent) fell into the “somewhat favorable” column. In fact, nearly half (49.6 percent) of the news reports were either “somewhat” or “very” favorable toward the Reagan administration’s positions on tax and budget policy in 1981. This compares to just 6.2 percent of stories coded as either somewhat or very unfavorable. And the proportion of coverage that was very favorable toward Reagan administration’s positions (9.3 percent of the total) was more than double the share that was even

somewhat unfavorable (3.9 percent). Additional content analysis and archival work I plan to conduct should shed further light on the reasons behind these directional thrust findings, but for now it seems clear that the heavy advantages enjoyed by administration, GOP and generally conservative perspectives as operationalized by the source and frame distributions detailed above contributed to a decided tilt in that direction in terms of overall story favorability. This preliminary finding is curious from the perspective of the indexing model, which predicts that mainstream news coverage of public policy will tend to reflect the range of voices and perspectives at play in official institutional debate. While a Republican administration was in power at the time, the House of Representatives remained in firm Democratic control and the GOP held just a slim partisan margin in the Senate during 1981. Furthermore, the vast majority of Democrats in both chambers ultimately voted against the final Reagan budget and tax plans. This suggests that journalists may have had ample recourse to critical perspectives even among official institutional sources, but that --- contrary to what indexing theory would predict --- they failed to take full advantage of these voices. These findings clearly deserve further theoretical and empirical scrutiny, but at this point it seems that the overall ideological perspective presented by network evening news during the 1981 tax and budget policy debates was essentially center-right.

Breaking down the directional thrust analysis into time periods, I find that Reagan administration perspectives held the strongest advantage during the key establishing phase of the policy debates, when nearly 63 percent of stories were either somewhat or very favorable, compared to 7.4 percent somewhat unfavorable, and no news reports at all that were very unfavorable. Balance and objectivity norms appeared to be most closely approximated during the budget debate phase, when a majority (54.7 percent) of stories was neutral, although even here a small proportion of reports (7.6 percent) were either somewhat or very unfavorable, compared to 37.7 percent coded as somewhat or very favorable. During the tax debate period, while a significant proportion of stories (39.6 percent) fell into the neutral category, coverage generally tilted back toward Reagan administration positions, as a full 56.3 percent of news reports were either somewhat or very favorable, compared to just 4.2 percent somewhat or very unfavorable.

As a final cut at the directional thrust data, I broke the distributions down into the period before President Reagan was shot in an assassination attempt (March 30, 1981), and after this incident. Some secondary literature and commentary (e.g. Hertsgaard 1988) suggests that the mainstream news media --- especially television --- became especially favorable toward the administration's perspectives in the wake of the assassination attempt, and I found some interesting suggestive evidence confirming this interpretation. While the distributions of somewhat and very favorable stories changed little before and

after March 30, my analysis shows that somewhat (1.2 percent) and very (1.2 percent) unfavorable stories virtually disappeared from evening news accounts of the budget and tax issues after the president's dramatic brush with death. Although I make no claim to a direct causal connection, these findings are nonetheless interesting and may be interpreted from a number of angles related to TV journalists' perceptions of their audience, Reagan's high job approval ratings at the time, the symbolic role of the president in U.S. political culture and other factors that can impinge on media coverage.

In general, my directional thrust analyses further confirm the picture that emerges from this case study of a mass communications environment that does not approximate the "best available information and analysis" on the 1981 Reagan tax and budget plans. Again, administration ideological and policy perspectives had a significant advantage over alternative or dissenting views, especially during the key early phases. Moreover, while it may be argued that a situation in which all news stories fell into the neutral directional thrust category most closely approximates the best available information and analysis, I suggest that the lack of policy substance that characterized these "neutral" reports makes them less than desirable from the standpoint of democratic discourse and communications that can further the education --- rather than manipulation --- of public opinion.

VIII. Discussion and Conclusion

This preliminary analysis of the tax and budget policy debates of 1981 offers evidence that mass media did not provide citizens an approximation of the "best available information and analysis" on these issues. In other words, network evening TV news coverage --- the major source of Americans' information and interpretations regarding politics and public affairs²¹ --- can reasonably be characterized as a potential engine of elite manipulation (as opposed to education) of public opinion. Media discourse in this policy case heavily emphasized political strategy and tactics, policymaking procedure and process, and the internal politicking of a few major national institutional elites. Content that focused on policy substance and related ideological stances --- for example, the implications of the tax and budget plans for economic inequality, national prosperity or government finances --- was decidedly marginalized.

²¹ Despite the increasing availability of cable TV, print and online sources, the significant leadership in audience share for network evening news continues even today (Graber 2005). In 1981, the so-called Big Three news programs were inarguably dominant, as not only the Internet but cable news was virtually nonexistent. CNN debuted later in 1981, but offered extremely sparse news coverage at the time. Fox News and MSNBC were still more than a decade away. And in this period before the widespread penetration of cable channels of any stripe, viewers had few programming options in the 6 to 7 p.m. time slot, thus further boosting the ABC, CBS and NBC news audience (Prior 2007).

When TV news did offer substantive coverage, it was significantly tilted toward Reagan administration, GOP and broadly conservative voices and ideological perspectives. And official government sources dominated the evening news to an extent that appears unusual based on previous studies.²² Critical social theorists, political philosophers and some media and public opinion scholars have long emphasized the essential role of accurate substantive information and wide-ranging political discourse in allowing citizens to sensibly link their underlying values and interests to policy preferences that enable them to exercise some democratic control. My findings raise questions about the extent to which anything like this could have occurred during an unquestionably historic episode of policy change, and one that is often interpreted unproblematically as an instance of elite responsiveness to an apparently more conservative “public mood,” as captured in polls of the time. Moreover, the substantive importance of the 1981 debates for the continuing rightward trend in economic and social welfare policy agendas and discourse should not be understated. In this context, the role of mass media in shaping public opinion and generating “consent” for this new trajectory in American political economy remains ripe for further exploration.²³

Much research remains to be done in order to build a more comprehensive depiction of media discourse as a site for potential elite education or manipulation of public opinion over the last three decades. My next empirical step is to conduct similar content analysis on national mass market print coverage of the 1981 budget and tax debates.²⁴ There may be significant differences in content based on media format --- in particular, there is some reason to believe that newspaper coverage may afford relatively less potential for elite manipulation than does television. And because of its formal differences

²² The overwhelming proportion of official sources is particularly striking given the fact that this was a domestic policy issue. Conventional scholarly and popular wisdom --- though rarely subjected to empirical analysis --- has generally maintained that the range of ideological perspectives and journalistic sources should be relatively wider in such contexts, as compared to foreign policy and national security cases, which are characterized by tighter state control of information, appeals to patriotism and a firmer elite ideological consensus.

²³ Until the George W. Bush plan of 2001, the Reagan plan was the largest federal tax cut in American history: “With Reagan increasingly perceived as a leader one dared not challenge, the rightward shift in the premises underlying U.S. public policy that began in the late 1970s sharply accelerated, ensuring a more hospitable reception for other items on the Reagan agenda as well. In this sense, the successes of the first six months of 1981 were perhaps the most crucial of the entire Reagan presidency. For not only did they include the administration’s single most important domestic policy achievement, the tax and budget cuts, they also laid the foundation for Ronald Reagan’s continued domination of American political thought and action for years to come.” (Hertsgaard 1988: 105-6)

²⁴ For this policy case, I will probably analyze Associated Press wire reports as the closest approximation to national mass market print news coverage in 1981. *USA Today* was not yet in circulation, while the so-called prestige press (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*) reaches an extremely small, generally affluent and highly educated, and socially powerful readership.

and somewhat different audience, print content may have divergent implications for possible effects on public opinion.²⁵

I will also identify and analyze a reasonable sample of “raw” discourse from political elites, interest groups and social movement organizations, policy experts and related actors in the form of presidential speeches, the Congressional Record, press conference transcripts, advocacy pamphlets and brochures, position papers and so on. My goal here is to step back from media discourse itself to determine what policy information, frames and ideological perspectives were plausibly available to journalists. Evaluating the extent to which news outlets offered the “best available information and analysis” requires some reasonable determination of the information and discourse they could have disseminated to citizens but did not. And, of course, I will repeat these same analyses in my other policy cases in order to assess the extent to which different contexts of partisan control, news industry organization, interest group/SMO configurations and issue substance may have impacted media coverage in ways that bear on potential elite manipulation or education of public opinion.²⁶

Finally, I will conduct an exploratory investigation of the possibility that the kinds of media discourse in my case studies may actually affect public opinion. I engage this question through a randomized laboratory experiment during which subjects will be exposed to various realistic media portrayals of an economic or social welfare issue and answer survey questions designed to capture possible “educative” and “manipulative” effects on policy preferences, as well as to gauge the psychological mechanisms through which such effects may occur, and the factors that may facilitate or inhibit these communications processes.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that the social scientific and critical theory perspectives I draw on all suggest in their own ways that the phenomenon I term elite manipulation will never be totalistic or inevitable; individual and group differences, as well as some variation in the communications to which people are regularly exposed, should always play important roles.²⁷ Those who value democratic discourse and autonomous political thought and action should be cheered by the notion that aspects of human psychology, contemporary social life, and the landscape of constitutional

²⁵ See Bennett 2009 [1983], Iyengar (1991), Gray (1995), Cappella and Jamieson (1997), Shanahan (1999), Messaris and Abraham (2001), Gerbner et al. (2002), Petty et al. (2002).

²⁶ For example, was mass media as reliant on official sources and as dominated by administration perspectives when Democrat Bill Clinton was president and faced a hostile conservative Congress? Did the peculiar position in American political culture of the highly popular Social Security program make it relatively more difficult for the Bush administration to get its pro-privatization perspectives into the news?

²⁷ From the former scholarly perspective, see, e.g., Zaller (1992), Chong and Druckman (2007), and from the latter, Gramsci's (2005 [1971]) understanding of the incomplete and contested nature of hegemony and Hall's (1980) discussion of “preferred,” “negotiated” and “oppositional” readings, or “decoding positions.”

protections and representative governing institutions that characterize the United States today make it highly unlikely that full ideological indoctrination --- or even numerically massive shifts in aggregate poll results as a result of communications distortions --- would ever occur. At the same time, it is probable that nothing like that level of thought control is necessary to generate significant patterns in apparent public opinion --- and perhaps voting behavior --- that elite actors and powerful interests may use to legitimate policies that undermine social equality, citizens' material life chances and democracy itself.

Figure 1: TV News Foci Distribution, As Percentage of All Story Foci

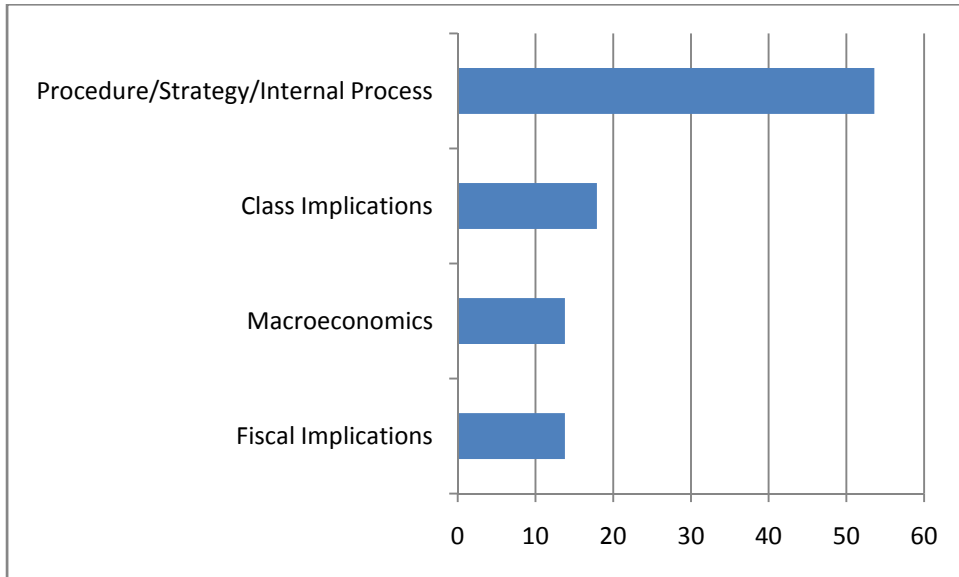


Figure 2: TV News Source Category Distribution, as Percentage of all Sources

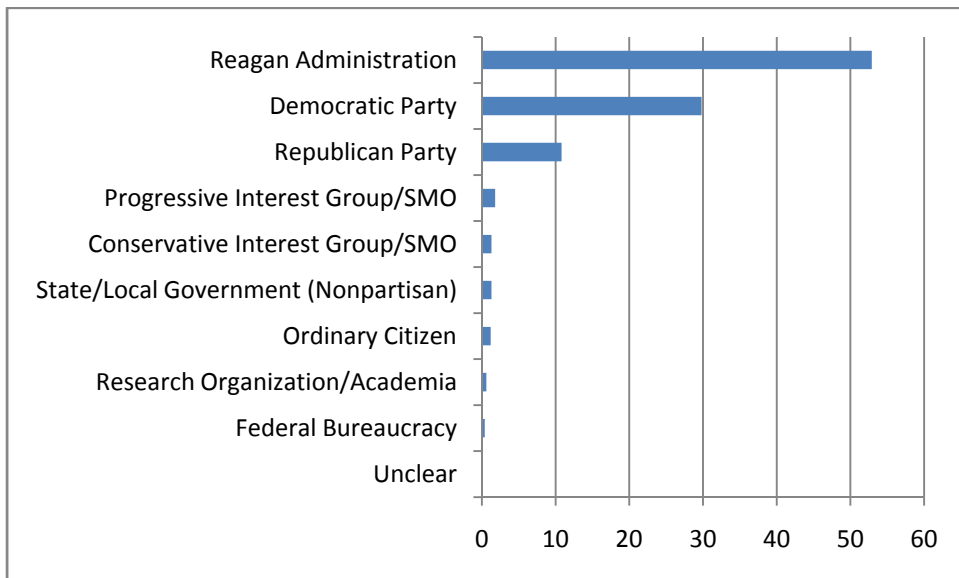


Figure 3: TV News Source Frame Distribution, as Percentage of all Frames

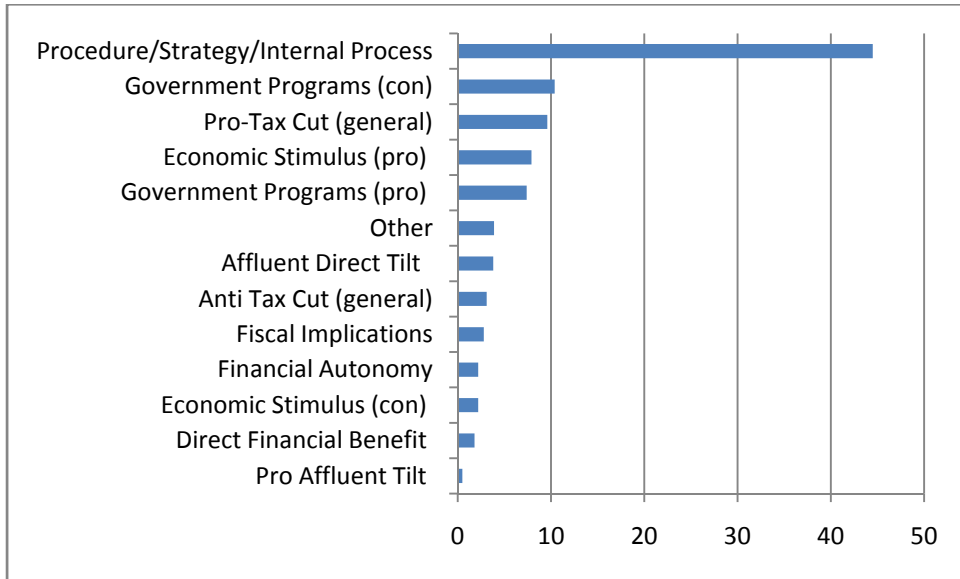
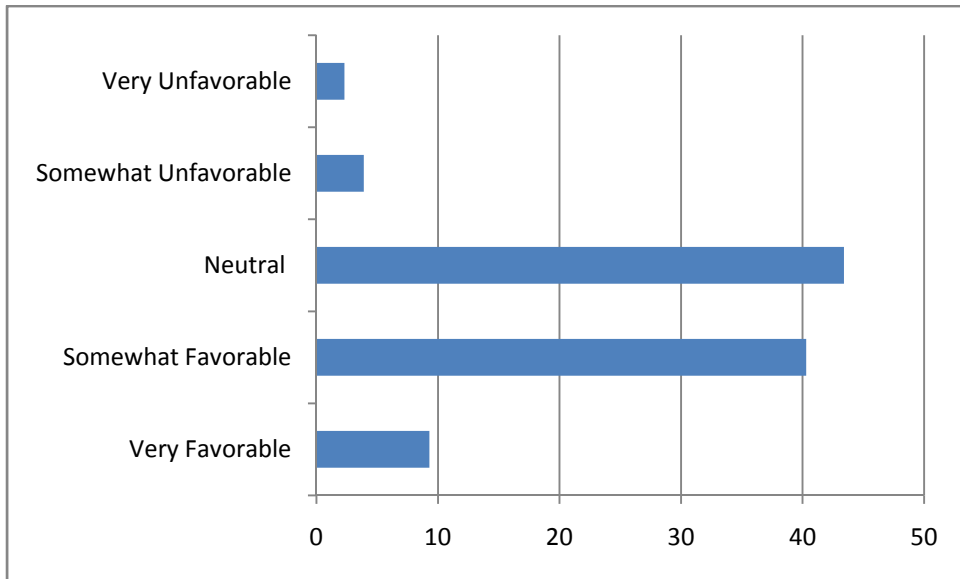


Figure 4: TV News Story Directional Thrust Distribution, as Percentage of all Stories



Appendix

Story Focus Codes:

Class Implications (impact on/implications for various income/socioeconomic class groupings)

Macroeconomics (effects on/implications for broader economy of tax/budget plans)

([mostly] internal and external political jockeying/calculations)

Procedure/Strategy /Domestic Politics (internal legislative procedure/process; internal political jockeying/strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

Fiscal Implications (effects on/implications for federal deficit/debt/revenue of tax/budget plans)

Source ID Codes:

Administration

Republican Party

Democratic Party

Conservative Interest Group/SMO

Progressive Interest Group/SMO

Research Organization/Academia

State/Local Government (nonpartisan)

Federal Bureaucracy

Ordinary Citizen

Frame Codes:

Direct Financial Benefit (*tax plan provides direct monetary benefits to low-/mid-income people*)

Economic Stimulus (pro) (*tax/budget plan will boost broader economy*)

Economic Stimulus (con) (*tax/budget plan will not boost broader economy*)

Affluent Direct Tilt (*tax plan unjustly favors the wealthy/affluent, is unfair to low-mid-income people*)

Government Programs (pro) (*domestic social/regulatory programs presented in a favorable light; need to preserve or increase funding for them*)

Government Programs (con) (*domestic social/regulatory programs presented in an unfavorable light; we need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them*)

Fiscal Implications (*tax budget plan will either improve/damage government fiscal health*)

Procedure/Strategy/Internal Political Process (*internal legislative procedure/process; internal political jockeying/strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations*)

Pro-Tax Cut (general) (*tax cuts --- or Reagan plan in particular -- are generally good*)

Pro-Affluent Tilt (*tax plan's tilt toward upper-income people is beneficial or fair*)

Anti-Tax Cut (general) (*tax cuts --- or Reagan plan in particular --- are generally bad*)

Financial Autonomy (*government unfairly siphons money from private individuals/businesses*)

Information Designation Codes:

Citizen Benefits (*any information breaking down tax plan benefits by income group*)

Business Benefits (*any specific mention of tax breaks/benefits/incentives for businesses*)

Payroll Taxes (*any information on how payroll [Social Security/Medicare] taxes fit into the issues*)

Budget Cuts (*any information on specific proposed budget cuts*)

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